



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru  
The National Assembly for Wales**

**Yr Is-bwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig  
The Rural Development Sub-committee**

**Dydd Llun, 25 Ionawr 2010  
Monday, 25 January 2010**

**Cynnwys**  
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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal,  
cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee.  
In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

**Aelodau'r is-bwyllgor yn bresennol**  
**Sub-committee members in attendance**

Mick Bates	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Rhodri Glyn Thomas	Plaid Cymru (Cadeirydd yr Is-bwyllgor) The Party of Wales (Sub-committee Chair)
Brynle Williams	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives

**Eraill yn bresennol**  
**Others in attendance**

Jason Aldiss	Cymdeithas Iechyd Cyhoeddus Milfeddygol, Cymdeithas Milfeddygon Prydain Veterinary Public Health Association, British Veterinary Association
Graham Cross	Cydgynullydd y Gwasanaeth Hylendid Cig, Unsain Meat Hygiene Service Convenor, Unison
Kevin Lewis	Cymdeithas yr Archwilwyr Cig Association of Meat Inspectors
Steve McGrath	Prif Weithredwr, y Gwasanaeth Hylendid Cig Chief Executive, Meat Hygiene Service
Rhian Parry	Ysgrifennydd Rhanbarthol y De Orllewin, Cymdeithas yr Archwilwyr Cig South West Divisional Secretary, Association of Meat Inspectors
Ron Spellman	Cydgynullydd Cenedlaethol y Gwasanaeth Hylendid Cig, Unsain National Meat Hygiene Service Convenor, Unison
Simon Watson	Swyddog Cenedlaethol dros Archwilwyr Cig, Unsain National Officer for Meat Inspectors, Unison
Steve Wearne	Cyfarwyddwr, Asiantaeth Safonau Bwyd Cymru Director, Food Standards Agency Wales
Collin Willson	Rheolwr Busnes, y Gwasanaeth Hylendid Cig Business Manager, Meat Hygiene Service

**Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol**  
**National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance**

Aled Elwyn Jones	Clerc Clerk
Meriel Singleton	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk

*Cynhaliwyd y cyfarfod yn y Ganolfan Blant Integredig, Pentrebach, Merthyr Tudful.  
The meeting was held in the Integrated Children's Centre, Pentrebach, Merthyr Tydfil.*

*Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 1.58 p.m.  
The meeting began at 1.58 p.m.*

### **Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon, Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions**

[1] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Prynawn da i chi i gyd a chroeso i'r cyfarfod hwn o'r Isbwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig. Yr ydym yn parhau gyda'n hymchwiliad i hylendid cig a lles anifeiliaid. **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Good afternoon to you all and welcome to this meeting of the Rural Development Sub-Committee. We are continuing with our inquiry into animal welfare and meat hygiene.

[2] Perhaps I should, first of all, point out that translation equipment is available. The headsets should be on the right channel, so if you just put them to your ears, you should be able to hear the translation. The volume is on your right hand side, and you can adjust it. Does anyone have any difficulty with the translation equipment?

2.00 p.m

[3] A yw pawb yn clywed y cyfieithiad yn iawn drwy'r offer? Gwelaf eich bod. Soniaf am rai rheolau i ddechrau. Nid ydym yn disgwyl ymarfer tân y prynawn yma, felly os bydd unrhyw argyfwng, ewch allan drwy'r allanfeydd tân a dilynwch gyfarwyddiadau'r tywyswyr. A allwch sicrhau bod unrhyw offer technegol, boed yn ffonau, BlackBerrys neu *paggers*, wedi'u diffodd gan eu bod yn gallu effeithio ar yr offer? Mae'r Cynulliad Cenedlaethol yn gweithredu drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg a'r Saesneg, ac mae clustffonau ar gael i dderbyn gwasanaeth cyfieithu ar y pryd o'r Gymraeg i'r Saesneg. Maent hefyd yn chwyddleisio'r sain os ydych yn cael trafferth clywed. Peidiwch â chyffwrdd â'r meicroffonau gan y gallai hynny greu trafferthion gyda'r system. Yr unig ymddiheuriad yr wyf wedi'i dderbyn yw gan Joyce Watson. Is everyone hearing the translation properly through the equipment? I see that you are. I will mention some housekeeping rules to start. We are not expecting a fire drill this afternoon, therefore, in the event of an emergency, please use the fire exits and follow the instructions of the ushers. Will you please ensure that any technical equipment, be they phones, BlackBerrys or pagers, are switched off as they can interfere with the equipment? The National Assembly operates through the medium of Welsh and English, and headphones are available for interpretation from Welsh to English. They can also be used for amplification of sound if you have difficulty in hearing the proceedings. Please do not touch the microphones as that can create problems with the system. The only apology I have received is from Joyce Watson.

2.01 p.m.

### **Ymchwiliad i Les Anifeiliaid a Hylendid Cig: Sesiwn Dystiolaeth—Cymdeithas Milfeddygon Prydain Inquiry into Animal Welfare and Meat Hygiene: Evidence Session—British Veterinary Association**

[4] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Croesawaf Jason Aldiss o Gymdeithas Milfeddygon Prydain. Fe'ch gwahoddaf i wneud sylwadau agoriadol gweddol fyr—oddeutu tri munud. **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** I welcome Jason Aldiss from the British Veterinary Association. I invite you to make relatively brief opening remarks—around three

Yna, caiff aelodau'r is-bwyllgor gyfle i'ch minutes. Members of the sub-committee will then have an opportunity to ask questions of you.

[5] **Mr Aldiss:** First, I thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of the British Veterinary Association this afternoon. The British Veterinary Association welcomes any initiative that results in improvement in animal welfare and public health controls that lead to an overall improvement in public health protective measures. We believe that any change, and all controls, should be risk-based, proportionate and measured. These controls should be based on a stable-to-table approach to the delivery of official controls. It is firmly the responsibility of food business operators to deliver safe food under animal welfare friendly conditions, and the duty of the Government to provide the necessary assurances to the consumer that those controls are in place, and to provide the satisfactory level of protection. Any changes that emerge as a result of this inquiry, which are subsequently introduced in Wales, must be mindful of the impact upon the bordering countries. We work and operate in a global village, and this is no truer than in the meat industry. The movement of livestock and meat products across the various borders is relevant in this situation, and one must be mindful not to distort the markets and introduce inefficiencies.

[6] Furthermore, we all work to one set of European regulations, so it is important that we keep that in mind. All change must be scientifically based. We hear much opinion, conjecture and strongly made assertions. We insist that any change that is subsequently made must be done on the basis of fact and scientific evidence.

[7] The current delivery of animal welfare and hygiene controls in Wales differs to some degree to the delivery in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. This variation is based upon the variants in industry characteristics, the size of the country, market particularities and individuals concerned. We believe that the delivery in Wales is an extremely good example, when one takes the UK perspective into consideration. In general terms, we believe that the problems experienced in Wales recently must be put into perspective. Millions of animals are slaughtered on a daily basis in Wales and good, safe and wholesome food is produced. Any change that is made as a result of the problems that we have experienced must bear that salient point in mind.

[8] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Diolch yn fawr iawn. Gofynnaf i Brynle Williams ddechrau gyda chwestiynau ar strwythurau'r broses. **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Thank you very much. I ask Brynle Williams to start with questions on the structures of the process.

[9] **Brynle Williams:** Good afternoon, Mr Aldiss. Do you believe that there is a case for further self-regulation in the meat industry and animal welfare standards, for example, with regard to the food operators who carry out their own day-to-day inspections and official vets taking the role of auditing and enforcing?

[10] **Mr Aldiss:** I definitely believe that there is an opportunity to move towards a more risk-based approach to the delivery of official controls. We believe that, in some circumstances, the so-called self-regulation of the industry is possible. However, that must be based upon food business operators taking full responsibility for the delivery of safe food, and this is not applicable to all premises. It is true that every premise is different and every operation is different. Therefore, it would be possible in some premises on some occasions. We believe that there is room for further improvement on a risk-based delivery of official controls, which is a roundabout way of saying 'yes, in parts.'

[11] **Brynle Williams:** Thank you for that answer. Evidence submitted to the committee suggests that the current system in operation by the Meat Hygiene Service favours the

employment of the least experienced veterinarians for the maximum number of hours. To what extent do you agree with that view?

[12] **Mr Aldiss:** I believe that the system delivers the correct person at the correct point. Considerable thought is given to choosing individuals; we have veterinarians with a range of experience working across the industry in the delivery of official controls. In some circumstances, those individuals might require more experience, but in other circumstances, that is not the case. However, experience is not necessarily the key point. The key point is capability and competence, and I have known many people who have been doing the wrong things for a very long time. It is important to have the correct system delivering the correct procedures, and people who are able to deliver those procedures in an intelligent manner.

[13] **Brynle Williams:** In your evidence, you state that the current approach to official controls does not focus sufficiently on the farm-to-fork approach. Will you explain to the committee what changes you would like to see to the current system?

[14] **Mr Aldiss:** We believe fundamentally that animal welfare, public health and animal health are three sides to one triangle that cannot be separated. We believe that the production of safe food starts on the farm. That is the point at which controls start and go all the way through that food chain. At the moment, a lot of emphasis is put on one particular part of that food chain. I am not saying that less emphasis needs to be put on that part of the food chain; I am saying that the controls need to be placed at the appropriate points throughout the food chain, so that farmers understand that they are producing food and not growing animals. That is a fundamental concept that we believe that the farming industry needs to grasp—not in all circumstances of course, but in general terms—so that it clearly understands that it is producing food and that, when it transports that food to the slaughterhouse, the food business operator at that point is also producing food. There is room for improvement in that area in respect of the industry coming up to the mark and appreciating what it is doing with regard to food production, and the regulators and industry coming together and delivering a risk-based, stable and protective system.

[15] **Brynle Williams:** You think that farmers have a major role to play. Is that not safeguarded by the various farm assurance schemes and the record of the animal's health and medicines?

[16] **Mr Aldiss:** It is critical. As I said, food is produced on the farm. If a good, safe product is produced on the farm, we will ensure that its safety is maintained throughout. If we end up with a poor product that comes from the farm, we will not improve its safety. So, we need to link into the farm assurance schemes, which are excellent, and bring together the farming sector, the slaughtering sector and the regulator, in order to ensure that we are all delivering one safe product for the benefit of the consumer, which is ultimately what the profession as regulators, and when it works with the industry, wants.

[17] **Mick Bates:** Thank you for your written evidence and for your opening remarks. I am sure that you would agree that profitability is vital to keep both our industries moving along. In evidence that we have received from National Farmers Union Cymru, it says

[18] 'Presently the FSA appear to be making efforts to pass significant additional costs to industry. Given that historically any additional costs to meat controls are passed back to primary producers rather than reflected in the retail price of meat NFU Cymru has concerns at the potential impact this will have on farm gate profitability'.

[19] Similarly, it goes on to say that

[20] 'A change to the current arrangements and the removal of subsidy will also place the

future of...isolated slaughterhouses within Wales in jeopardy’.

[21] Could you comment on NFU Cymru’s view on the changes that are proposed in how the subsidy operates through the Food Standards Agency?

2.10 p.m.

[22] **Mr Aldiss:** I would not like to comment specifically on the policy that is being put forward, but, in general terms, profitability is an essential part of all of our industries. As a veterinary profession, we have a fundamental concern for the farming sector and for the meat industry. We produce high-quality animals under animal welfare friendly conditions, and the meat industry is one of the finest in the world. We are firmly committed to that. We believe that the Government has a responsibility and a duty to provide necessary controls in order to provide assurances to the consumer. Therefore, if those controls are necessary, one could argue that it is incumbent upon the Government to provide them out of the public purse. That would assist both the profitability of the industries concerned as well as ensuring that necessary controls were in place, while maintaining independence throughout.

[23] **Mick Bates:** I am pleased that we are in agreement on the fact that both our industries need to be profitable. Are you telling me therefore that you wish to see the subsidy level that is currently operated by the Government maintained? In the view of these professionals, there will be threats to the viability of farming and some of the slaughterhouses here in Wales.

[24] **Mr Aldiss:** Again, without commenting specifically on the policy of the subsidy, in general terms, if removing part of the subsidy results in a loss of profitability in the farming sector and in the small slaughterhouses becoming non-viable, it is not a so-called ‘good thing’. We would want the farmers to maintain their economic viability and, similarly, for the small operators to remain viable, because we believe that animals should not be transported too far. We should minimise food miles; local production is important, and it is important to maintain local sustainability. Therefore, if it is important that that subsidy remains in place in order for some of these premises to continue operating, we would support that position.

[25] **Mick Bates:** I am sure that we would all sign up to your last answer in respect of sustainability, and food miles in particular. However, the concern that has been expressed to us, and the reason for holding this inquiry, is that to pass back or remove the subsidy will jeopardise viability and, thereby, undermine all the good things that you have just mentioned. Do you come down and say that you want to retain this subsidy because you agree with the NFU and Hybu Cig Cymru that its removal would be a threat to slaughterhouse facilities and to the viability of the primary producer?

[26] **Mr Aldiss:** If the subsidy results in a reduction in viability—

[27] **Mick Bates:** It will be too late then, will it not? We will have lost them. That is why I am asking you for your policy on this matter.

[28] **Mr Aldiss:** It is not for us to comment specifically on the viability of each individual business, so if the loss of subsidy results in a negative impact on a business’s viability, and it is one that is important to local sustainability, then we should keep it. We should not reduce the subsidy in that case.

[29] **Mick Bates:** We should not reduce the subsidy in those circumstances. I see. That is very fair of you; thank you. I would, however, point out that, in the past, we have lost a lot of facilities in Wales. You mentioned earlier that there is one set of regulations throughout Europe, and although I am not currently able to get to the bottom of this story about costs and

inspection in the other countries of Europe, does your organisation have a view about how these regulations are implemented across Europe and the cost increase that we in the industry possibly face? Is that reflected throughout Europe?

[30] **Mr Aldiss:** Yes. Each country decides its own charging mechanism. The regulations post 2006 allow a member state to adopt a charging mechanism that suits its particular parameters. Some countries charge the industry more than we currently do, while others do not charge at all. There is considerable variation in the charging mechanisms across Europe. I think that that perhaps answers your question.

[31] **Mick Bates:** It does, to some extent. You mentioned some countries; does the BVA have further information about the cost regimes in other EU countries, and if so, could you send that to us outside of this meeting?

[32] **Mr Aldiss:** Yes, we can provide you with general and correct information about a number of member states' charging mechanisms and what they charge. We can do that. I would be limited and inaccurate in my answer if I tried to summarise that now.

[33] **Mick Bates:** Quite, and I do not expect you to provide that information now.

[34] Public health is paramount. Would you agree that public health measures are the responsibility of Government? When the subsidy, through the FSA, was established, there was a recognition that public health was the responsibility of Government, so that was the route for the subsidy. Removing that would place responsibility for all regulatory payment back on the industry.

[35] **Mr Aldiss:** Food safety is everyone's concern, from the farmer, to the industry, to the Government, to the profession. All the stakeholders have a responsibility to ensure that safe food is produced. As I have said before, animal welfare and health cannot be separated from public health. A safe, happy animal—excuse the frivolity—produces a safe food, and it is important that we maintain that approach all the way through. So, we must not make any change that would result in diminution in animal welfare, animal health or public health. The Government does, therefore, have complete responsibility for ensuring that the consumer protection controls are in place, as per the 2006 regulations. There is responsibility there. How they are delivered depends very much on the Government's view, but we would maintain that removal of parts of the subsidy and increases in charges to the industry could result in a reduction in animal welfare and in animal and public health.

[36] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Brynle, do you have any questions?

[37] **Brynle Williams:** My questions have been answered, thank you, Chair.

[38] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Yr wyf am droi at faes deddfwriaeth. Yr ydym wedi derbyn tystiolaeth sy'n awgrymu y byddai'n dda o beth gweld y cyfrifoldebau'n cael eu datganoli i Gymru. Yn eich sylwadau agoriadol ac yn eich tystiolaeth ysgrifenedig, yr ydych yn wyladwrus o hynny, gan bwysleisio'r angen am gysondeb drwy'r Deyrnas Unedig. A oes angen adolygiad o'r rheoliadau sy'n bodoli ar hyn o bryd? Yn ail, a ydych o'r farn y dylai mwy o gyfrifoldeb orwedd gyda Chynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru a Llywodraeth Cymru, yn hytrach

**Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** I will now turn to the issue of legislation. We have received evidence that suggested that it would be preferable to see the responsibilities devolved to Wales. In your opening remarks and your written evidence, you are wary of that, emphasising the need for consistency across the United Kingdom. Is a review needed of the current regulations? Secondly, do you believe that more responsibility should be devolved to the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Government, rather than it being administered centrally in the United



na'i fod yn cael ei weinyddu yn ganolog yn y Kingdom?  
Deyrnas Unedig?

[39] **Mr Aldiss:** With regards to whether the regulations should be reviewed, we operate to the European regulations; they are currently under review, and remain constantly under review. They are a useful next step from the old regulations. There is opportunity for further change, but I would argue that wholesale change at the moment would not allow the significant improvements that we have in the current regulations to be shown. We need more time before a more fundamental review is performed.

[40] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** The evidence was referring more to the controls rather than to the regulations. You have referred to this in answering the first question from Brynle, in that you feel that the right people are in the right place. However, do you think that the controls need to be reviewed?

[41] **Mr Aldiss:** The control mechanism is delivered through the Meat Hygiene Service, which has been through considerable reorganisation in the last year. We believe that it delivers a better set of controls, and that insufficient time has elapsed for a full evaluation of the effectiveness of that delivery mechanism. So, we believe that a wholesale change at this stage would be premature.

[42] Forgive me, but I have forgotten the second question.

[43] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** The second question was about devolved responsibility to the National Assembly for Wales and the Government of Wales. You emphasised in your oral and written evidence the need for consistency. However, others giving evidence have said that transferring the responsibility to the National Assembly for Wales makes a great deal of sense.

2.20 p.m.

[44] **Mr Aldiss:** I am mindful of possibly upsetting the committee, but the meat industry and the farming sector are small. We work within Europe—Europe is a set of individual member states all working to one set of regulations. In essence, the UK is a small part of that. We must not further increase costs. The delivery mechanism is currently expensive in any case by virtue of what it is and what it must deliver. Further segregation could result in introducing further inefficiencies, which could also result in increasing the cost of delivery.

[45] We have concerns that we would lose some efficiencies in terms of cross-border trade. We have seen examples of that in the past with regard to the Scotland/England border. Whatever you do, you should be mindful of the fact that it should not result in an increase in cost. We believe that the delivery in Wales works well. We believe that the current model is a good model that works within the Great Britain framework. We would urge caution in terms of making wholesale change at this stage.

[46] **Mick Bates:** To continue on this theme of what happens in Wales, we have heard people say that there are too many vets in the system and that it would be much better if we had an audit system, where operators employed their own inspectors. From a veterinarian's point of view, is it possible for an employee of a company to provide rigorous inspection and meet all the standards that we currently have?

[47] **Mr Aldiss:** That is a vast question. It is primarily the responsibility of the food business operator to deliver safe food. The veterinarian is enshrined within the legislation in terms of providing independent controls, assisted by the official auxiliary, who is an independent, trained individual who delivers official controls alongside the official

veterinarian. We believe that it is possible, in some circumstances, for a food business operation to run on an audit system, if the regulations were changed so that some of the regulatory controls could be released if that food business operation had demonstrated that it had an equal or improved level of control that resulted in safer or as safe food products. That is a vast set of ifs.

[48] We believe that the meat industry has a long way to go in improving itself, linking in to the assurance schemes and the farm sector on the stable-to-table approach. So, yes, we believe that it is philosophically feasible, but we would argue that, just at the moment, it is not practical, although it is something that we should be working towards. At all times, however, it is important that there is an independent audit and inspection of each premises, working on behalf of Government to provide those consumer protective measures. It is not possible under the current regulations for a food business operation to run solely self-regulated, but we believe it is philosophically possible, in the future, for controls to be reduced in some premises on certain occasions. However, that time is not the present—that is some way in the future.

[49] **Mick Bates:** You make some big qualifications in terms of ‘some premises’ at ‘some time in the future’. We currently have risk assessments working on the traffic-light system. Are you saying that those who currently reach a green light on risk assessment would not be capable, at this time, of undertaking their own inspection, and be subject to an annual audit, or whatever the system would be?

[50] **Mr Aldiss:** The current regulations require all animals to be inspected by a veterinarian at ante-mortem. The current regulations require all carcasses to be inspected post-mortem by either an official veterinarian or an official auxiliary—a meat inspector. At present, that change would not be possible.

[51] However, we foresee that, in the future, it will be possible for some premises to change the structure; but that is a long-term ambition and objective, and at the present time it is not possible. When I say ‘some premises’, each premises is different, and each has different levels of controls and standards. It is important that each premises is treated individually, based on the standards of that plant, and the controls tailored to suit the particular risk present within those premises.

[52] **Mick Bates:** I will just go back to an issue that was left hanging there. We both agree about the long-term future; the problem that I have is with the phrase ‘long term’. What would you envisage as being ‘long term’?

[53] **Mr Aldiss:** This is firmly in the hands of the industry, so I could not answer specifically how many years it will take. It is incumbent upon the industry to step up to the mark, and when I say that, I mean everyone from the farming industry through to the slaughtering industry. We would need to join up everything from the delivery of the stable-to-table approach to food safety, improving standards to the point where they could feasibly move on to a auto-regulatory system. I will give a personal opinion: I do not think that that would be feasible within the next 10 years.

[54] **Brynle Williams:** To go back to another point, out of my own interest, we all agree that public health has to be maintained at the highest level. However, we put a lot of emphasis on abattoirs; do the same criteria apply to cutting and processing plants? I believe—I stand to be corrected—that the last few food safety problems related to meat have come from cutting or processing plants rather than the abattoir. What can be done there?

[55] **Mr Aldiss:** Just to differentiate, there are two sets of audits—one is an audit of the slaughter premises, and one of the cutting premises. There is also an inspection on top of that.

Moving from primary processing to slaughter through to cutting, there is a risk-based audit system in place. Previously, before the 2006 regulations, there was veterinary attendance on a daily basis, delivering on-the-spot official veterinary controls. In some circumstances, that audit has potentially resulted in a diminution in the level of control. It might be the case that, in some premises, the restoration of a higher level of veterinary control is required. Further down the chain, this goes out of veterinary control and moves into local authority control and the environmental health officer's control. We believe that it is essential that the linkage of the stable-to-table approach to producing food fundamentally comes in and we have a safe food product, all the way through to the consumer. If we had the linkages all the way through that chain, we could perhaps have prevented some of the problems that were seen.

[56] **Brynle Williams:** You do not believe that the linkages are there?

[57] **Mr Aldiss:** We do not believe that those linkages are necessarily there in all circumstances and there is definitely room for improvement.

[58] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Diolch, Mr Aldiss. Yr ydym yn ddiolchgar ichi am eich tystiolaeth ac am eich parodrydd i fod yma'r prynhawn yma. Os oes rhywbeth yr hoffech ei ychwanegu, mae croeso ichi gyflwyno'r wybodaeth honno'n ysgrifenedig i'r ysgrifenyddiaeth ar unrhyw adeg yn ystod yr ymchwiliad. Diolch yn fawr.

**Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Thank you, Mr Aldiss. We are very grateful to you for your evidence and for your willingness to be here today. If there is something that you would like to add, you are more than welcome to present that information in written form to the secretariat at any time during this inquiry. Thank you very much.

2.29 p.m.

**Ymchwiliad i Les Anifeiliaid a Hylendid Cig: Sesiwn Dystiolaeth—Cymdeithas yr Arolygwyr Cig**  
**Inquiry into Animal Welfare and Meat Hygiene: Evidence Session—Association of Meat Inspectors**

[59] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Gwahoddaf Rhian Parry a Kevin Lewis o Gymdeithas yr Arolygwyr Cig i'r bwrdd i gyflwyno'u tystiolaeth. Croeso cynnes i'r ddau ohonoch. Gwahoddaf y naill neu'r llall ohonoch i gyflwyno rhai sylwadau agoriadol; gofynnaf ichi eu cadw i ryw dair munud, ac wedyn caiff yr Aelodau ofyn cwestiynau.

**Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** I now invite Rhian Parry and Kevin Lewis from the Association of Meat Inspectors to give their evidence. A warm welcome to you both. I invite either of you to make some initial opening remarks; I ask you to keep those to around three minutes, and then Members will have an opportunity to ask questions.

2.30 p.m.

[60] **Ms Parry:** Thank you for inviting us along today. The Association of Meat Inspectors is the only professional representation for meat hygiene inspectors in the UK. We have objectives, three of which are promoting and encouraging meat inspection and hygiene, and improving the standards thereof; publicising the importance of meat inspection and educating the public about meat inspection and hygiene; and enforcing and assisting in the enforcement of standards of meat inspection and hygiene recognised by law, in legal proceedings or otherwise.

[61] The association has long advocated the use of a centralised, independent and centrally funded system of meat inspection that puts the interest of the consumer first and foremost. We believe that it is imperative that there is an informed, but impartial, judgment made by a

suitable and qualified individual on every carcass, and any move away from this system equates to a lessening of standard and a move away from our stated objectives. It is with these objectives in mind that I represent the Association of Meat Inspectors today.

[62] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Diolch yn **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Thank you. I ask fawr. Gofynnaf i Brynle Williams ddechrau'r Brynle Williams to start the questioning. cwestiynu.

[63] **Brynle Williams:** Good afternoon to you both. In your evidence, you argue that the clean livestock policy should be reinstated. Why do you believe that this would be beneficial?

[64] **Ms Parry:** It is beneficial because when contaminated animals arrive at the abattoir, it is difficult for the slaughterhouse staff to process those animals in a clean and efficient way.

[65] **Brynle Williams:** I thought that dirty animals could not currently be presented in an abattoir and that the abattoir charges if they are presented in such a condition. That was stated in evidence today, but I will leave it at that.

[66] In your view, how effective is the current system used by the MHS of contracting official veterinarians and meat hygiene inspectors as opposed to employing them directly?

[67] **Mr Lewis:** The association has always advocated that all veterinarians should be employed by a competent authority. We stand by that view because we have seen many inexperienced veterinarians from overseas—I do not like to use the term 'foreign'—coming here with limited English and no knife skills. We feel that some of these people are exploited; they may be on low wages and are expected to work all over the country at short notice and therefore may not have the same protection under employment law as someone employed by a competent authority.

[68] **Brynle Williams:** So, you say that these people have language difficulties, a lack of people skills and so on. How effective are these people because, speaking to several plant operators over the past two to three years, I have learnt that there have been serious problems. Have they been inefficient because of not being able to communicate and so on?

[69] **Mr Lewis:** A language barrier causes huge problems, as does the lack of meat inspection knowledge, which is the case if they have come straight from college. It is not these people's fault—they have come here for a job and just want to earn a living like the rest of us. We have strong feelings about the system that allows this to happen.

[70] **Brynle Williams:** One suggestion made to the committee by another organisation was that the MHS should complete less of the day-to-day inspections and adopt a policy of unannounced visits. What are your views on that suggestion?

[71] **Mr Lewis:** I know of a cutting plant in Wales that, about three or four weeks after the new regulations were introduced in 2006, which meant that the official veterinarian did not have to attend every day and the system had changed to five or six-monthly audit visits, had increased its production from 18 to 22-hours-a-day and cut down on the cleaning procedures and schedules. That answers that, does it not?

[72] **Mick Bates:** Could you give me a snapshot of the industry in Wales today? We have just been up the road to visit a large abattoir. How many people are working for you today in abattoirs in Wales?

[73] **Mr Lewis:** There are approximately 150 to 160 people.

[74] **Mick Bates:** I see; there are 150 people working now to carry out all these functions. Are they there all the time? I have not quite grasped the pattern of how some of the inspectors work. Are they there on a daily basis or an hourly basis?

[75] **Mr Lewis:** Yes.

[76] **Mick Bates:** Which is it, hourly or daily?

[77] **Ms Parry:** They are there on a daily basis.

[78] **Mr Lewis:** They are there all day. While production is going on there is a requirement for a meat inspector/veterinarian to be present to carry out post-mortem and ante-mortem inspections.

[79] **Mick Bates:** I see. So, it is a small abattoir.

[80] **Mr Lewis:** Yes.

[81] **Mick Bates:** Are they there all day, or just for a part of the day?

[82] **Mr Lewis:** To my knowledge, yes.

[83] **Ms Parry:** They are there during production. However long the abattoir is producing, the inspectors are there.

[84] **Mick Bates:** What is the daily charge for that?

[85] **Ms Parry:** I am not sure.

[86] **Mick Bates:** Okay. I would like to pursue the costs in a minute. I am particularly interested in the Government proposal that more costs are passed back to the industry. I noticed a relevant comment in your paper, under point 3, when talking about workload:

[87] 'This has led to some major reviews of staffing levels on lines, and to MHI's taking on enhanced workloads. In some cases this has meant that some MHI's on some very high speed/high throughput lines have not had the time to physically do the job to standards that they themselves might expect.'

[88] That is now. What in your view would be the impact of the FSA's proposals to reduce the subsidy from its current level being taken up? What impact would that have on your workload?

[89] **Mr Lewis:** If the FSA went along the lines of full-cost recovery, you will probably have two or three abattoirs left in Wales because the costs are astronomical. It is potentially £59,000 a year for a meat inspector and £70,000 or more for a veterinarian. What small business can afford that?

[90] **Mick Bates:** I think that it is worth putting that on the record again. What you are saying is that if full-cost recovery takes place, we will be down to possibly two or three abattoirs.

[91] **Mr Lewis:** What other enforcement body/agency in the UK is not funded by the taxpayer? The police, revenue and customs and so on are all funded, except the FSA, which wants to charge the meat industry for meat inspectors. If the Government wants meat inspectors/veterinarians in plants, let it pay for it.

[92] **Mick Bates:** That was a very clear statement. Thank you very much. Let us look at what is happening at the moment. Your scenario is that there would be perhaps two abattoirs left if full-cost recovery went ahead—

[93] **Mr Lewis:** I have been in the industry for 31 years. In the early 1990s, we had a mass of abattoirs closing and that is what you are going to get again.

[94] **Mick Bates:** Is the answer as simple as the converse of your reply would suggest, which is that the Government should simply pay for the inspection regime?

[95] **Mr Lewis:** It is not just about paying for it; it is about getting an efficient inspection service. It is about value for money as well.

[96] **Mick Bates:** We will pursue the point on value for money in a moment. In the modern age, it is all about trying to recover the costs that are on the public purse. You are saying, categorically, that that cannot happen in this case because it would jeopardise the survival of many of our abattoirs in Wales, as the NFU has also said.

[97] **Mr Lewis:** That is my personal view.

[98] **Mick Bates:** The second issue that you talk about is value for money. What advice would you give us in our inquiry as to how we could get greater value for money without reducing the subsidy?

[99] **Mr Lewis:** Everyone should be employed by the competent authority.

[100] **Mick Bates:** Will you tell me a bit more about that?

[101] **Mr Lewis:** At present, contract companies are providing veterinarians/meat inspectors. They are out to make money like every other business, on the back of the taxpayer. Is that right?

[102] **Mick Bates:** Do you mean that they are overcharging?

[103] **Mr Lewis:** It is irrelevant whether they are overcharging.

[104] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** The point that you are making is that they should be directly employed—

[105] **Mr Lewis:** Yes, directly employed by the competent authority. That is in our paper.

[106] **Mick Bates:** I want to go back to a previous question. You would support direct employment by the competent authority, but what about a food producer; is that a competent authority?

[107] **Mr Lewis:** Not in my understanding. A competent authority at the moment is the FSA or the MHS.

[108] **Mick Bates:** So, what if we move to a system of value for money, where the abattoir employed the inspector? Would that save any costs, if there was an audit system?

[109] **Mr Lewis:** I know that a lot of abattoirs are keen on employing the meat inspectors. When a meat inspector salary is £22,500 a year and they are faced with the prospect of £59,000 a year, which option would you take?

[110] **Mick Bates:** I am also concerned about public health here, so I just want to get this balance—

[111] **Mr Lewis:** I work as a meat inspector, and if it came to a situation where I had to work for the plant, I would leave the industry.

[112] **Mick Bates:** You would leave the industry.

[113] **Mr Lewis:** Yes, that is my personal view.

2.40 p.m.

[114] **Mick Bates:** I am trying to get to the bottom of your statement about value for money in relation to these costs as well. Is it not value for money if the plant employs a meat inspector?

[115] **Mr Lewis:** It is if you can be sure that that person will be able to carry out his duties as per regulations.

[116] **Mick Bates:** Let us say that it was subject to an independent audit. Would that provide sufficient credibility in the system that that arrangement would be operable?

[117] **Ms Parry:** It depends whether the audit is just going to be sporadic. You need someone there on a daily basis, who is independent and does not work for the plant themselves.

[118] **Mick Bates:** I come back to this point about the salary of £22,000, but the FSA charges £59,000.

[119] **Mr Lewis:** Potentially, if it goes to full-cost recovery.

[120] **Mick Bates:** Okay. We have seen figures from the unions about how the cost would increase per head—per animal. It seems that you are saying that, if you were employed by the abattoir, you would not accept that. Is that right?

[121] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** I think that what Mr Lewis is saying is that inspectors or veterinarians should be directly employed, not necessarily by the abattoir itself, but by the Government. That is the cost efficiency, but he would not want to be in a position where he is directly employed by the abattoir because he loses independence and objectivity.

[122] **Brynle Williams:** Who are the agencies? Are they laypeople, or professional people who have contracts to supply veterinary officers to abattoirs?

[123] **Mr Lewis:** You would have to ask the representatives from the Meat Hygiene Service to fill you in on that. We do not have that information.

[124] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Byddwch wedi clywed fy nghwestiwn ynglŷn â'r mesurau rheoli. Yr wyf yn derbyn nad oes unrhyw beth y gellir ei wneud o ran y rheoliadau Ewropeaidd, ond yr ydym wedi derbyn tystiolaeth y dylai'r mesurau rheoli gael eu hadolygu. A ydych, yn y lle cyntaf, yn credu bod hynny'n beth da, ac ydych

**Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** You will have heard my question about the controls. I accept that there is nothing we can do with regard to the European regulations, but we have received evidence that there should be a review of the controls. Do you, in the first instance, believe that that is a good thing, and do you also believe that it would be beneficial to see the

hefyd yn credu y byddai'n fuddiol gweld y legislative responsibility being devolved to cyfrifoldeb deddfwriaethol yn cael ei the Welsh Assembly Government? ddatganoli i Lywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru?

[125] **Mr Lewis:** As a Welsh person living in Wales, I think that it would be beneficial for the Welsh Assembly Government to take over the responsibilities, and we could have our own independent meat inspection service. I say that as a Welsh person living in Wales, therefore I may be a little biased.

[126] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** You are perfectly entitled to be biased. However, do you think that there is a need for review of the controls?

[127] **Mr Lewis:** Possibly. They have only been in place for nearly four years, so it may be a little early and that they need a little more time.

[128] **Brynle Williams:** Briefly, following on from what Mr Aldiss said, do you have any evidence of what is happening in other EU countries and how the regulations are being interpreted?

[129] **Ms Parry:** The AMI council may have information on that, but I do not personally.

[130] **Mr Lewis:** We have links with other inspection agencies and bodies around Europe, so the information is available, and if you want it, we can get it for you.

[131] **Brynle Williams:** I would be grateful if we could have that information.

[132] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Do you believe that the merger of the Meat Hygiene Service and the Food Standards Agency will improve the service delivery?

[133] **Ms Parry:** If the FSA and the MHS are not operating side-by-side, but are merged together, giving out one set of information, it will lead to uniformity.

[134] **Mick Bates:** On that point of the merger, we mentioned value for money earlier, do you think that the savings would all be in the back office? Is it possible to save a substantial amount of money through the amalgamation?

[135] **Mr Lewis:** We are not privy to those figures.

[136] **Mick Bates:** However, surely you have asked that question.

[137] **Mr Lewis:** Yes, probably, but we have not had an answer.

[138] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Diolch yn fawr i chi'ch dau am gyflwyno eich tystiolaeth. Yr ydym yn ddiolchgar am eich cynnig i gyflwyno mwy o dystiolaeth ysgrifenedig a byddem yn gwerthfawrogi unrhyw beth yr ydych yn teimlo sy'n berthnasol i'n hadroddiad. **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Thank you both for presenting your evidence. We are grateful for your offer to present further written evidence and we would appreciate anything that you consider relevant to our inquiry.

2.46 p.m.



**Ymchwiliad i Les Anifeiliaid a Hylendid Cig: Sesiwn Dystiolaeth—Unsain  
Inquiry into Animal Welfare and Meat Hygiene: Evidence Session—Unison**

[139] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Symudwn yn awr at ein sesiwn dystiolaeth gyda chynrychiolwyr Unsain. Gwahoddaf Ron Spellman, Simon Watson a Graham Cross at y bwrdd. Gwahoddaf un ohonoch i gyflwyno sylwadau agoriadol am rhyw dri munud o hyd ac yna byddwn yn gofyn cwestiynau.

**Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** We now move to our evidence session with Unison representatives. I invite Ron Spellman, Simon Watson and Graham Cross to the table. I invite one of you to make some opening remarks for some three minutes and then we will ask questions.

[140] **Mr Watson:** My name is Simon Watson, I am a national officer for Unison, covering the Meat Hygiene Service. My colleague Ron Spellman is our national convenor and Graham Cross is our convenor for Wales. They are appearing as Unison representatives, not on behalf of the Meat Hygiene Service. Unison represents almost all meat hygiene inspectors and a large proportion of the veterinarians who perform official auxiliary and veterinary functions in the Meat Hygiene Service, and has long been an advocate for the vital importance of high-quality public services. The job of meat hygiene inspectors is positive, namely ensuring that clean carcasses are the basis of all the meat that goes out to the public in Britain. It is an important job. Producing meat is different to producing potatoes and the consequences of having unsafe meat are far more severe than with other foodstuffs and materials.

[141] The service that is provided at the moment is an efficient and economical service. I will just get up to show you an example of that.

[142] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** It is a case of ‘Here’s one that I made earlier’.

[143] **Mr Watson:** This is a premium chicken that costs £6, this is a pork shoulder roast that costs £4.99, this is a brisket that costs £6.04 and here is a lamb shoulder roast that costs £5.11. I invite you to consider the cost of inspection for each of these products. How much of those prices do you think comes down to inspection? We do not operate full-cost recovery at the moment, but if we did—

[144] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Excuse me, we are having a problem with the technology. Could you please take your seat so that the microphones can pick you up? You probably need to go back to the point when you were talking about the cost of the inspection of each product.

[145] **Mick Bates:** It depends on whether you are getting £22,000 or £59,000

[146] **Mr Watson:** If there was a move towards full-cost recovery, the price of inspection for the £6 chicken would be 1.4p—that is based on the FSA figures—and the cost for the other pieces of meat, all of which retail for about £6, would be around 2p. The service that we provide at the moment, the subsidy for which works out at around 50p per person per year across Britain, is very efficient as it stands, and does not pose a huge burden on the industry. However, the key problem that our members tell us that they face on a daily basis is that of contamination. The FSA appears to us to have a view that many of the issues with meat inspection are to do with disease, but we find that the issues relate to contamination, which meat inspectors have to cut off carcasses on a daily basis. That is a major problem, and they are not being presented with carcasses of a high enough quality. The system is not working.

2.50 p.m

[147] So, what is the solution? Where responsibility has been passed over to meat plants, there have been a number of examples where brain-stem samples, when undertaking a specified risk material control, have been moved from pot to pot, or where the wrong brain-stem samples have been delivered. The evidence is telling us, and our members have told us in survey after survey, that the hazard analysis and critical control point system for ensuring that cattle are clean, which changed on 1 January 2006, is not working. Many of the cattle are wet or dirty, and contamination therefore transfers onto the carcasses. That is also what the very critical Food and Agriculture Organisation report found last year; in the 12 plants that it looked at, only a proportion of which were abattoirs, it found that dirty animals were being slaughtered, and contamination therefore carries over from them. There are also great commercial pressures on the industry.

[148] Unison feels that the most important thing that we could do to tackle the problem, which is currently a big problem—this is important for the long-term viability of the Welsh industry, of which high quality is a part—is to change back to the high standards that we saw between 1997 and 2001, following the bovine spongiform encephalopathy outbreak, when meat inspectors had a wide remit over meat hygiene across all abattoirs, and when there was an adequate number of inspectors. The evidence shows that inspectors are saying that they now do not have enough time to do the job properly—they cannot say that in public, as they would probably lose their jobs or be disciplined—because the number of inspectors has been cut to such an extent. We need an adequate number of inspectors and for them to receive proper back-up, so that they have the power to enforce the meat hygiene regulations across the industry and the abattoirs.

[149] That does not have to be a bad thing. I would like to end on a positive note, by saying that this could be a positive move for the meat industry. The standards of imported meat cannot be seen to be the same as those for meat produced in Britain. Having a stamp on meat that says that it is approved and inspected by the FSA would not only give consumers reassurance as to the quality of the meat that they are eating and that each carcass had been independently inspected, but it would also apply only to meat that was slaughtered in Britain, and not meat that was imported and then reprocessed in Britain. That could make a positive feature of the high standards of inspection that we need.

[150] **Brynle Williams:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. To what extent do you believe that the current meat hygiene and animal welfare inspection procedures in abattoirs are effective? What could be done to improve their effectiveness?

[151] **Mr Spellman:** Our members tell us that, currently, there are quite big problems regarding the contamination of carcasses in Wales and throughout Britain. Furthermore, staffing levels of plants in Wales are probably among the worst in Britain in relation to line speed. You have very fast lines running in some parts of Wales, with people trying to carry out an inspection function in a matter of seconds—trying to inspect a sheep's liver, lungs and heart in five seconds, when you have lines killing 800 lambs an hour. We cannot identify those inspectors, but in a recent survey of our members, a substantial percentage—around 75 per cent—reported not being able to wash their hands frequently enough to protect public health.

[152] If current controls were succeeding, the Food and Veterinary Office would not be able to come to Britain and find contaminated carcasses in fridges, contaminated vacuum-packed meat and contaminated frozen meat. Between 1997 and 2000, this country produced the cleanest meat, in the opinion of Unison, that it has ever produced. Our standards have slipped since then, and since 2006, they have slipped even further.

[153] You asked a question earlier about dirty livestock; if you read the FVO report on Britain for May 2009, you will see that a particular abattoir must have got so used to

accepting dirty stock that it actually unloaded what the FVO described as ‘very dirty sheep’ and killed them in front of the European FVO inspectors. That is a sign of a problem. From what you have said, I know that you are concerned about the financial and commercial aspects. What we know from FSA’s survey of consumers is that they want independent inspections. Regardless of whether you can get the 1.4p a kilo off the joint, it is no good to you if no-one wants to buy it. You need consumer confidence. The total cost of inspection is around £8.50 a bullock. I am sure that you can all remember what it was like in 1996-97 when no-one wanted to buy beef, for example, after the E. coli outbreak that started in Wishaw and killed many people in Scotland. The view towards beef is that at £8 a bullock, it is well worth the money, but you have to ensure that that system is working. The consumer wants it to be independent and it needs to be independent and tough, because it works that way. That is not where we are at the moment.

[154] **Brynle Williams:** So, you are saying that we have serious problems.

[155] **Mr Spellman:** Our problems are not as bad as those facing many of our partners in Europe. If you were to go on the internet to read the Food and Veterinary Office’s reports on different European countries, it would be a worthwhile exercise. To compare France, Italy and Spain with our own country would be a very worthwhile exercise. Our standards have slipped, but my goodness, they are nowhere near as bad as theirs. The report on France in June 2009 was absolutely appalling. Europe needs to toughen up in order to protect our consumers. We are not doing it well enough; we are not doing it well enough in Britain or in Wales.

[156] **Brynle Williams:** I am rather surprised about this. I also declare an interest as a farmer. I am rather surprised, given the regulations, particularly over the last four or five years, on trimming cattle and trimming sheep, particularly at this time of year when sheep are fed on swedes. However, you say that that is not happening, but I can see where it is happening, so I am a little lost here. I regularly visit markets and abattoirs in north Wales and I can see that the sheep that are grazing on swedes, in particular, are belly sheared; cattle are all sheared or they are not allowed to be presented at livestock markets or at abattoirs.

[157] **Mr Spellman:** I would not pretend to know—I think that I will let Graham come in on this.

[158] **Mr Cross:** I could probably say something about that. Members tell me that they consistently see dirty livestock being processed on a daily basis, and not just dirty livestock, but dirty, wet and clagged livestock. The slaughtermen are moaning to our members, asking ‘How can the vet let animals like this through?’. It is now the food business operator’s responsibility to ensure that the animals are clean, but even the slaughtermen on the line are saying, ‘Look at the state of these’. That is what our members are telling us. What is happening in the abattoirs is different from what you have seen where you have been.

[159] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** To be clear, Mr Cross, you are saying that, throughout Wales, on a daily basis, dirty animals are being presented at abattoirs.

[160] **Mr Cross:** That is what our members are telling us. Dirty animals are being presented at abattoirs throughout Wales on a daily basis.

[161] **Mick Bates:** Thank you very much for your paper. In the second paragraph, you say very clearly, in reference to the Food Standards Agency—and perhaps I had better quote it so that people understand it—that

[162] ‘Two of the major reasons for their attitude are to save money and to continue their apparent slavish desire to please the UK Meat Industry, with whom they have close links.’

[163] That struck me as a challenging statement when I read your paper. Would you like to justify that statement?

[164] **Mr Watson:** We could give you a number of examples to justify that. I can give one from when I sat in the meat hygiene policy forum: the chair of that forum encouraged the representatives by telling them how they could go about influencing the FSA to make changes to specified risk material controls. That does not seem to me to be the role of the Food Standards Agency. It seems to be trying to help and to encourage the industry to pursue its objectives, which I do not think is a role that a consumer safety watchdog should pursue. I am sure that there are other examples that we could quote.

3.00 p.m.

[165] **Mick Bates:** I will look forward to receiving those other examples, if you could forward them to the sub-committee. They would be useful, because part of the remit of our inquiry is to examine the full-cost recovery regime. You have just heard evidence stating that full-cost recovery would be a good thing, but, on the other hand, it appears to us, through our inquiry, that other organisations feel that full-cost recovery would threaten a lot of the existing infrastructure in Wales. For example, you will have heard earlier that some of our abattoirs would disappear if full-cost recovery took place. In fact, it is on the record that perhaps only two would remain in Wales. That statement causes me great concern because of the sustainability issues, to do with our food miles and so on. Can you expand a little on your view of how the costs should be met?

[166] **Mr Spellman:** We did not say that we thought that full-cost recovery should be put in place. We do not necessarily have a view one way or the other on that. Our view is that all Meat Hygiene Service operational staff should be full-time employees of the organisation. How the Government decides how it will recover the money or not is a matter for the Government and is not necessarily one on which we have much of an opinion.

[167] **Mick Bates:** Clearly. We share the view that public health and consumer safety are absolutely paramount; without that, there would be no industry. However, the picture that you have painted depicts the system as being bad. To back up some of the recent statements that you have made, there should be a record in your paper of the outbreaks of E. coli, say. We have had serious outbreaks in the past and there was one recently in south Wales, and that causes me great concern, but your description of how terrible the system is does not seem to fit with the number of outbreaks. I just feel that there is not enough evidence in your paper to prove your case. I would have expected more serious outbreaks to have occurred, if what you describe your paper were true.

[168] **Mr Spellman:** That goes far beyond our brief, does it not? The instructions to the Meat Hygiene Service are to deliver clean meat with minimal faecal contamination. If we do not have too many outbreaks, we are just lucky. However, our members are telling us that we are producing a contaminated product. We are much better than we were in 1995, but much worse than we were in 1998-99. We can be better, and we should be. You may have an outbreak in Wales that kills 100 people, like the one at Wishaw. It may happen tomorrow. The more faeces are left on carcasses, the more likely that becomes. Just because we do not have people falling very ill with E. coli all the time, we should not be patting ourselves on the back. If we produce visually contaminated carcasses, people will get ill.

[169] **Mick Bates:** Thanks, I think that I have got your point.

[170] **Mr Watson:** If I may, I will just add to that some of the evidence that we have. When our members see contamination, they are not supposed to cut it away, as people have been

severely disciplined and maybe even dismissed for trimming, but many of them are expected to trim daily—basically, because they are presented with a contaminated product.

[171] We survey our members every two years. We last did it in late 2008, and I am happy to share the results of that with you if it would be of help. The results of the survey showed that 57 per cent of our members said that they were expected to carry out trimming at the point of inspection. So, they were getting contaminated carcasses and they were expected to trim them to remove the contamination.

[172] **Mick Bates:** Could you define ‘contamination’ a bit more for me? It is easy to see it on an animal, but what do you mean by contamination when the meat has been trimmed?

[173] **Mr Cross:** Say you have a dirty fleece on a sheep, if that fleece rolls onto the animal’s carcass, that would be contaminated, because the faeces transfer from the fleece to the carcass. It could also mean that, during evisceration, which is the removal of the intestines, you break the intestines or some faeces leak from the anus onto the carcass. That, basically, is what contamination is.

[174] **Mick Bates:** Simon, you said that that is pretty common.

[175] **Mr Watson:** Yes, 57 per cent of our members told us that they expect to be presented with a carcass contaminated with faeces, and that they are expected to remove that contamination at the point of inspection. We ran our survey in 2006 and again in 2008, and we will run it later this year as it is held biennially.

[176] **Brynle Williams:** Do you have a percentage on that?

[177] **Mr Watson:** The percentage was 57 per cent of respondents.

[178] **Brynle Williams:** Is that the percentage of contaminated carcasses?

[179] **Mr Watson:** No, the percentage of our members expected to trim contaminated carcasses.

[180] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** So, 50 per cent of the respondents said that they are expected to trim carcasses, but that is not 50 per cent of the carcasses.

[181] **Mr Watson:** It was 57 per cent.

[182] **Mick Bates:** I do not want to get too tied down with that. I want to come back to the issue of cost, because important evidence is being presented here, Chair. Although we are looking at costs in this inquiry, our concern is to ensure that the public health is of paramount importance. Returning to the issue of funding, to what extent do you agree with the Association of Meat Inspectors that the Meat Hygiene Service should be funded centrally?

[183] **Mr Watson:** We do not have a particular view one way or the other on that specific issue. Our view is concerned with what will protect public health, essentially, and we believe that ensuring a high-quality, strong, independent inspectorate is the way to do that. It could be funded in several different ways. Obviously, you would not want something that would perversely cause the industry to collapse, but, as the evidence that I pointed out shows, we believe that it is a very efficient service as it is run at the moment, based on the cost of inspecting each piece of meat.

[184] **Mick Bates:** I thought that it was an efficient service until you started citing all these rather negative points. I would be prepared to accept, as I am sure would many consumers,

that the safety of our food is worth 1.14p per carcass, or whatever it was that you quoted. However, coming back to your lack of opinion on whether the MHS should be centrally funded, you are well aware that full-cost recovery would result in other costs, although they sound small here. To take you back to something that I have said before, we have had evidence that the increasing costs would jeopardise the existence of some of our slaughterhouses in Wales, and possibly even of primary producers. Although you do not have an opinion, could there be a financial impact if the current subsidy were removed, which could jeopardise the profitability and very existence of primary producers and slaughterhouses?

[185] **Mr Cross:** We would echo Tim Smith's view that public health should not be based on the food business operator's ability to pay.

[186] **Mick Bates:** In that case, is it better for the Government to pay for it all?

[187] **Mr Cross:** I reiterate that it should not be based on the FBO's ability to pay. Public health should be paramount, and how it is funded beyond that should not be based on the ability of the food business operator to pay.

[188] **Mick Bates:** Given that you submitted such a strong paper, I am slightly disappointed that you do not have a view on the funding.

[189] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** You do not necessarily have to have a view on it.

[190] **Mr Spellman:** It is not a matter that Unison has ever considered. Our focus is on public health, and the funding of it is another matter.

[191] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Okay. Just for clarification, I need to check a couple of factual references in your evidence. You refer to a report by the Food and Veterinary Office into official controls in British red meat slaughterhouses. Were any slaughterhouses in Wales involved in that report? To what extent does it reflect slaughterhouses in Wales?

[192] **Mr Spellman:** We do not know.

[193] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Okay. The second question is also about your evidence where you state that the Meat Hygiene Service is failing. Will the proposed merger of MHS into the Food Standards Agency improve the service?

3.10 p.m.

[194] **Mr Spellman:** I do not think that it would make any difference one way or the other. It is the attitude towards enforcement that will make the difference. It is about the willingness to enforce and to get tougher, and we just may be starting to see that emerge. The Meat Hygiene Service was started in 1995, and here we are in 2010. It has been a circular organisation to be involved in. From 1995, the view was—and this has been very much echoed in some of the statements that you have made today—to pass on the responsibility, reduce the cost, and get it over to the industry. The link between CJD and BSE and the big outbreak at Wishaw in 1997 changed the landscape of what the Government intended to do. The priority became public health. The view of everyone in the Meat Hygiene Service was to get the job done no matter what it cost, but it had to be done properly. Things were very tough, and lines ran slower.

[195] Before 1997, when a carcass was contaminated with faecal matter, no attempt would be made to cut off the faeces—and it sounds ludicrous to think of it now. Instead, you would frequently get a plant operative with a car pressure washer running at around 120 pounds per

square inch, blasting it with the hose, sometimes in a little enclosed cocoon so that everyone else did not get soaked. That method did take some of it off, but mostly all that did was spread it out and dilute it. After 1997, the instruction came from MHS headquarters that there would be no more washing of carcasses before inspection. That was a big step for the industry in this country, believe it or not, and it produced much cleaner carcasses. Everything toughened up. The chief executive made a statement to us as a trade union, saying ‘Tell your members that I do not care whether the cattle floats go out on the main road and block the traffic, but you will process in a way that produces clean meat’, and it worked very quickly. In 2001, when the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak happened, suppliers and farmers knew that their animals could no longer be rejected or kept for 24 hours or 48 hours once they got to the slaughterhouse; they had to be killed. Things started to slide with the clean livestock policy. In 2006, when the clean livestock policy became the plant’s responsibility, things got even worse.

[196] We have now got to where we are now, where plants will actually kill dirty stock in front of visiting European inspectors. That would probably be one of the most important inspections that that plant would ever undergo, and they have forgotten where they are.

[197] **Mick Bates:** Chair, may I just come back on some of those issues?

[198] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Be brief.

[199] **Mick Bates:** In view of the fact that we have the MHS in next, I just wanted to follow up on the points that you made in your paper about the MHS being a failing service. You say that its staff is demoralised because managers will not act on what they have been told. On what do you base that statement?

[200] **Mr Watson:** I will start by going back to the evidence that we have. We surveyed our members at the end of 2008 and asked, ‘If you observed a breach of the regulations that seriously compromised consumer protection, how confident are you that the MHS would probably follow up any report you made?’. There were no responses that said that people were ‘very confident’, but 38 per cent said that they were ‘reasonably confident’, and 63 per cent said, ‘not confident at all’. When we asked our members if they thought that they were supported by their managers and the management system above them—‘Does the MHS management support you in your enforcement work?’—only 5 per cent said ‘always’, 50 per cent said ‘sometimes’, and 43 per cent said ‘never’.

[201] **Mick Bates:** It is like a poll about politicians, is it not? For example, ‘Do you trust politicians?’ Have you done one for Unison along similar lines?

[202] I would advocate a little caution because you have made a very bold statement. You also refer in your paper to a report commissioned by the FSA, ‘FSA Project E03010: Evaluation of the effectiveness of supervision versus audit of operator controls within meat plants’. What was the content of that report and why will the FSA not release it? Its representatives will be here soon to answer questions.

[203] **Mr Watson:** We would very much like to know what it contains. We are aware that this report exists and I understand that it compares an inspection process with an auditing process to ensure that safe meat is produced. I understand that the report has been finished, but we have not seen a copy of it. I would strongly encourage you to ask for a copy of it.

[204] **Mick Bates:** I certainly will. Thank you, Chair; that was the point that I wanted to get to.

[205] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Does Unison have a view on devolving powers over the

enforcement and implementation of meat hygiene and animal welfare legislation to the Welsh Assembly Government? Do you think that that would be beneficial?

[206] **Mr Watson:** We do not have a view on that. We feel that there are problems with the way that the system is operating at the moment. If those problems are not addressed, it will not necessarily make any difference who is carrying out the function. The key thing is to get those problems addressed.

[207] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Thank you for your evidence. If you feel, at any point during our inquiry, that you would like to present additional information, feel free to do so. Diolch yn fawr.

3.16 p.m.

**Ymchwiliad i Les Anifeiliaid a Hylendid Cig: Sesiwn Dystiolaeth—Gwasanaeth  
Hylendid Cig ac Asiantaeth Safonau Bwyd Cymru  
Inquiry into Animal Welfare and Meat Hygiene: Evidence Session—The Meat  
Hygiene Service and Food Standards Agency Wales**

[208] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Yr ydym yn symud yn awr at dystiolaeth Asiantaeth Safonau Bwyd Cymru a'r Gwasanaeth Hylendid Cig. Mae gennym Steve Wearne, Collin Willson a Steve McGrath i roi dystiolaeth inni. Mae'n bosibl y bydd yn rhaid i mi wahodd dau ohonoch i wneud sylwadau agoriadol, y naill ar ran Asiantaeth Safonau Bwyd Cymru a'r llall ar ran y Gwasanaeth Hylendid Cig.

**Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** We will now take evidence from the Food Standards Agency Wales and the Meat Hygiene Service. Steve Wearne, Collin Willson and Steve McGrath are here to give evidence. I may have to invite two of you to make opening remarks, one on behalf of the Food Standards Agency Wales and one on behalf of the Meat Hygiene Service.

[209] **Mr McGrath:** Thank you, Chairman. To introduce myself, I am the chief executive of the Meat Hygiene Service. I am also a director of the Food Standards Agency. My colleague on my left is Collin Willson; he is responsible for all of our Meat Hygiene Service activities in south Wales. I have another colleague, who could not be here today, who is responsible for north Wales. Collin is also a senior veterinarian within the Meat Hygiene Service. My colleague on my right is Steve Wearne. He is the FSA director in Wales and we work together, as a team, in Wales.

[210] Thank you for offering us the opportunity to come to speak directly to you. We welcome being able to give you written evidence, but also verbal answers to any questions that you might have. I will start by pointing out that the FSA is an independent non-ministerial Government department. It was set up to protect the public's health and the interests of consumers in the safety of food and drink. Our purpose is to ensure safe food and healthy eating for all. We have core principles that underpin that. We put the consumer first; we practice openness; we are independent; and we make decisions based on science and evidence. The MHS is a core part of the Food Standards Agency.

[211] The law is quite clear that food business operators are responsible for the safe production of meat. They are also responsible for the welfare of animals in the abattoir, right up to the point of being killed. The legal requirement for food business operators is clear. Both the FSA and the MHS are totally independent of the meat industry, and, in everything that we do, we put the consumer first. We strive for the meat industry in Wales to fully comply with legislation, and, in doing that, we put in place mechanisms to provide the assurance that meat is safe when it is produced. The vision of putting the consumer first is



shared by all our stakeholders: Unison, our meat inspectors and the industry itself. That is our passion and our vision.

[212] We want to ensure compliance, initially through education, so we help and encourage the food business operators, the plants, to understand all the safety controls that are necessary within an abattoir, and to understand what good practice is. Generally, we have good working relationships with most of the industry and, indeed, most of our staff as well, although, as a regulator, you will understand that there are occasions when there is tension, and that tension particularly comes to the fore when we take enforcement action.

3.20 p.m.

[213] There is general acceptance, across Europe, that the current official controls require reforming. However, it is absolutely crucial that the legislation in force is adhered to by the food business operators; and by the MHS and FSA as the central competent authorities. That message was reinforced by Professor Hugh Pennington in his inquiry into the E. coli outbreak in Wales; the law is the law, and we have to accept and implement it. Some might have differing views about the law, but, nevertheless, it is important that we accept and embrace it. Where there is non-compliance with the law, we have to take enforcement action. That is our duty. Where a legislative regime is in place, we must comply with it, and if there is a need for reform, then we have to use science and evidence to support that. Other witnesses may have mentioned that we want to use science and evidence to inform us about how efficient the regulatory environment is, and what changes might be necessary; but changes will only be considered supported by science and evidence. It would also have to be based on discussions with Europe, because the UK can have one opinion, but we also have to deal with all the opinions of the other member states across Europe. The food law that is in place is pan-European, and we embrace and work with that.

[214] I and my colleagues are happy to answer any questions that you might have.

[215] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Thank you, Mr McGrath. Do you accept or recognise the scenario that was just presented by Unison? I do not expect you to accept the accusation that the meat hygiene service is failing, but aside from that, we were presented with a scenario in which dirty animals were being sent on a daily basis to abattoirs in Wales—I hope that that is a fair synopsis of what was said. Is that something that you recognise?

[216] **Mr McGrath:** To begin, I do not accept that it is a failing service. We are an open organisation, and all that we do is subject to public accountability. We have nothing to hide, and that comes back to the point about our openness. The changes in the law over time have reinforced the message that food business operators are responsible for the safe production of food. They must demonstrate to us, as the central competent authority, how they will deal with livestock coming into the abattoir. Yes, there was the clean livestock policy, but food law is now embracing the responsibility of the food business operators, taking full responsibility for ensuring that the production of meat is safe and hygienic, and where it is not safe and hygienic, we must discuss with them about how to make it safe and hygienic.

[217] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** That was a pretty comprehensive answer to what I thought was a very straightforward question. Are dirty animals being presented on a daily basis to slaughterhouses in Wales?

[218] **Mr McGrath:** My veterinary colleague can perhaps pass comment on that.

[219] **Mr Willson:** It is quite clear that there is a requirement within the legislation that the food business operator has a critical control point to assess whether or not an animal is fit to be slaughtered. There is a problem here, in that once an animal arrives at the slaughterhouse,

it cannot be returned to the farm, unlike in Scotland. So, the abattoir is forced to deal with whatever is presented on the doorstep, and that is why Brynle says that he and his farmer colleagues get charged for clipping and trimming. The larger premises certainly have people on site who belly-clip sheep and cattle when they are perceived as being excessively dirty. It is not a facility that a small operator can either afford or justify, and it is left trying to deal with the problem. In some cases, it will try to place them on clean bedding to let them dry out. Another problem for a very small premises is that it may only work one day a week, so, the animals cannot be left there for a week until the next week's processing, and so it is stuck with trying to do something with what it has because it cannot send them back to the farm. So, I would not say that they never arrive, but, at the end of the day, it is being dealt with regularly as per the needs of each individual case.

[220] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** I am still unsure whether that is a 'yes' or a 'no' answer.

[221] **Brynle Williams:** It is not a bad a picture as painted by the previous witnesses.

[222] **Mr Willson:** They do arrive at abattoirs, but they are being dealt with.

[223] **Mick Bates:** You heard the evidence presented by Unison. I was concerned about one thing, and I have now found the right reference. It referred to the fact that you commissioned a three-year study to assess the effects of the introduction of new legislation and the change from supervision to audit. This report is entitled 'FSA Project E03010'. According to this paper, that report has not yet been made public. Is there a reason that it has not been made public? Is it a timescale issue?

[224] **Mr McGrath:** The reason for that is that when the group received the report from the Agricultural Development Advisory Service, there were further questions about it and further analysis that the Food Standards Agency required of it. That analysis is being done. The final report has not been presented to me as the full and final report. Unison confirmed that it was aware of the preliminary findings of that report and that they were party to the discussion about its validity. As the chief executive of the Meat Hygiene Service, I have not received the final report, so I cannot really pass comment on it. What I can say is that it is important that policy is reviewed and reformed where appropriate, but it must be based on science and evidence, and not based on hearsay or rumour. I can assure you that we in the MHS, and indeed in the Food Standards Agency, always put the consumer first. If there is any doubt about an issue, we will always go on the safe side rather than the unsafe side.

[225] All of what we do is open; there are no hidden reports within the Meat Hygiene Service. There are some things that are commercially sensitive and, therefore, we do not release that information. However, generally, we have a point of principle that we would like to publish everything that we can without infringing any data protection laws.

[226] **Mick Bates:** I have a final question, Chair, before we move on. When can we anticipate sight of this report?

[227] **Mr McGrath:** I think the report is in the final throes of being completed. I do not have the timescale with me, but I can say that when we receive the report and it has then been officially accepted by the Food Standards Agency, we will decide on a communication strategy in the context of our openness type of programme.

[228] **Mick Bates:** That answer does not fill me with confidence, because, in other words, you do not know when the report is to be presented.

[229] **Mr McGrath:** I do not have the information here; I was not aware that this was a topical issue, but I can certainly write to the Committee and give that commitment. I will also

advise you on how the report will be published.

[230] **Brynle Williams:** Good afternoon gentlemen. The committee has received evidence that the current system of contracting official veterinarians is leading to the employment of inexperienced staff who are reluctant to raise concerns for fear of losing their jobs. How do you respond to this?

[231] **Mr McGrath:** We pay and expect all of our staff and contractors to undertake the duties that we expect of them, whether they are official veterinarians or meat inspectors. We will take robust action against any person who turns a blind eye to what is going on in the abattoir. The issue with the contractor model is that we have a mixed economy. Within the Meat Hygiene Service, there are roughly 1,000 staff, some of whom are veterinarians, like Collin, and those who are out in the field. On top of that, we have contractors who help us to undertake the official controls that we must abide by under the law.

[232] The situation in the UK is that there were not enough UK veterinarians who were able or interested in doing the type of work that we do. Being part of Europe, we advertised for interest from anyone who would be looking to work with us, in partnership, as a contractor. Part of the reason for the contractor model is that we needed to bring in more resources fairly quickly, otherwise we would have been in contravention of European law, but there is also restructuring going on in the meat industry and our contractors are better able to deal with that than if they were employed directly as civil servants.

3.30 p.m.

[233] You can see this in Wales. In the relatively short time that I have been the chief executive, two plants in north Wales have closed. We did not want to make people redundant, but we had to because there was no way of redeploying them. We did everything that we could to redeploy our staff; we were successful in some instances, but unsuccessful in others. Our contractors who were working with us were quicker to react to a restructuring, or indeed relocation across GB. So, there are a number of things going on within the meat industry and we have to anticipate what is going to happen and ensure that we undertake the duties expected of us as effectively and efficiently as possible.

[234] **Brynle Williams:** The committee has also heard that, due to a reduction in staffing levels, hygiene inspectors no longer have enough time to complete their jobs properly. To what extent have staffing levels been reduced over recent years, and have you put any systems in place to ensure that reduced staffing levels do not impact on the end goal, namely meat hygiene and public health?

[235] **Mr McGrath:** We have reduced the number of staff and contractors within our organisation. Some of that reduction is down to efficiency and effectiveness changes, and some of it is down to policy reform. For instance, within a plant, passports for bovines are checked by the plant operators. Another member of my staff was also checking them, so there was a double-checking of passports, which was not effective or efficient. So, we talked to the various policy colleagues and decided that it was unnecessary to duplicate a lot of the work of the food business operator. We work with the operator; we audit and inspect, and there is no reason why we would not expect them to adequately deal with cattle passports in the same way that our staff do. However, we must deliver a cost-effective service and a service that is effective, as well as efficient. The restructuring that we put in place in the Meat Hygiene Service was not just about cost efficiency; it was about effectiveness and ensuring that we had the right skills within our organisation to deliver an effective service. That is what we have always been striving to achieve.

[236] We note the evidence submitted from Unison. We have to understand that we have

been working with Unison for many years. Over the past few years we have had to deal with some difficult issues of restructuring and addressing terms and conditions of employment, which needed to be modernised. We have worked on that modernisation through Unison. We are aware of the survey that it has undertaken. We do not accept the survey, partly because of the way in which it was undertaken. It was loaded to get the answer that we believe was being looked for. We have told Unison that if it has any evidence that our staff cannot do the official controls that we have paid for, they need to flag it up to us. I have had a separate discussion with Collin and his colleagues, saying ‘We understand this from Unison, now go out there and tell me whether it is true or not—is it about job creation, or job protection?’ As the central competent authority, we are subject to audit and if we are putting in place official controls that are not fit for purpose, then the auditors would flag that up. They have not flagged it up to us, and so we trust our managers. If there are any issues of a local nature, we address them on a local basis.

[237] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Before we move on to the cost of the inspection process, I seek your views on certain aspects of the structure of the inspection. You will have heard both Unison and the Association of Meat Inspectors raising concerns on self-regulation. We have also received evidence form the industry itself, which is promoting self-regulation. What are your views on where we should be going in terms of regulation? Is there an argument for more self-regulation or would you be wary of that?

[238] **Mr McGrath:** No part of the food industry is self-regulated. All parts of the food industry are subject to regulation of some sort. It might be through audit, so even in a local authority, restaurants, supermarkets, and so on are all subject to regulatory oversight. There are parts of the meat industry where we have a permanent presence, for example, in the abattoir when animals are being slaughtered and processed—that is quite unique in the food industry. We have to ensure that all interventions made by Government are fit for purpose, and are achieving the goals of why we are paid to be there. The public expects us to be there, because our presence gives consumers confidence in the safety of meat. In fact, that was the basis on which the Food Standards Agency was created—there was little public confidence in the safety of beef because of BSE issues. That is why the overarching values of the Meat Hygiene Service and Food Standards Agency are that we put the consumers first. We have a continuous presence in most slaughterhouses for anti-mortem and post-mortem inspection, and audit the meat processing industry. We are not striving to move to self-regulation because no part of the food industry is self-regulated. We would not single out the meat industry to be self-regulated when the rest of the food industry is not.

[239] We have many inspection duties in the meat industry. We check that slaughterhouses are fit for purpose. If our interventions are not underpinning public health, and animal health and welfare then we have to understand why. That is something that you, as a taxpayer, would expect us to be doing—to be proactive in looking at and making sure that there is not an element of jobsworth there and that we are doing the interventions for the right reason. It is about public health and public confidence in what we do.

[240] I come back to what I said earlier. The checking of cattle passports is the responsibility of the plant, and we double check that. We felt that that was unnecessary, and thought that we could play more of an audit role, in the way that cattle passports are checked. During the working day, we look at a selection of cattle passports to ensure that the animal’s age has been correctly identified and that the right animal is being processed at that time.

[241] What we do is a combination of audit and inspection. If there was any possibility of change we would have to negotiate that through Europe because European law requires us to carry out ante-mortem inspection—that is before the animal is killed—and it also requires us to carry out post-mortem inspection of the carcass. We then apply the health mark, which recognises the duties that we have undertaken. All of that is part of our duty.

[242] The only part of the meat industry that might carry out self-inspection is the poultry industry, which has plant inspection assistants who inspect the carcasses of chickens. However, that inspection is all overseen by a veterinarian—one of our official veterinarians—who has to be there when poultry is being killed and processed.

[243] There is certainly the possibility of some self-inspection in the poultry meat industry, but this is not allowed in the red meat industry. By not allowing self-inspection in the red meat industry we have to ensure that we fully understand the reason for that. Any change in Europe will take many years to implement, and this is not something that I can see appearing as a possibility on the horizon for a very long time. We must understand that the red meat industry in particular has had a number of experiences of *E. coli* and BSE. We must, therefore, give the public confidence that the controls that we put in place are fit for purpose and are delivering results according to the legal requirements of Europe.

3.40 p.m.

[244] **Mr Wearne:** It is not just about meat but about food businesses in general. As Steve said, we do not believe in self-regulation because there must always be some independent regulatory oversight. That is what Professor Pennington said in his interview in the *Western Mail* last Friday. We believe that that supervision must be proportionate and risk-based.

[245] The question that I would ask in return—if I am allowed to do so, Chair—is that if there is a slaughterhouse that processes meat exclusively for a major supermarket that applies its own hygiene controls that are audited, and the results of those audits are accessible to us and we have confidence in them, why should we not use that information to determine what a proportionate and risk-based regulatory intervention in that plant should look like? As Steve said, we currently have an extremely prescriptive regulatory system for meat plants that does not apply anywhere else in the food business.

[246] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** That is an interesting question, and one that was posed to us this morning as we visited a company that works in that exact way. Staff there said that 98 per cent of what the company produces goes to a supermarket that imposes very strict meat hygiene and animal welfare criteria. However, we are here to ask questions rather than answer them, but the question is an important one, albeit rhetorical in these circumstances.

[247] Before we move on to costs, I have a question on clarity. You have already talked about roles and responsibilities. We have received some evidence that refers to confusion within the system as to who is ultimately responsible for the maintenance of meat hygiene and animal welfare standards. Do you accept that that confusion exists, and if so, what are you doing to try to clarify the situation?

[248] **Mr McGrath:** I do not accept that confusion exists, because food law was changed across Europe in 2006. That reinforced the message that food business operators are responsible for the safe production of food. It is unequivocal: that is the law.

[249] The food business operator is also responsible for animal welfare, but that is a different part of the law. There is absolute clarity in the eyes of the industry as to who is responsible for the safe production of meat; I am sure that you saw that this morning in the abattoir that you visited. In the abattoir environment, there has been a history of meat inspectors, and perhaps veterinarians, rolling their sleeves up to undertake trimming duties or other types of duties in the plant. We have made it absolutely clear that that is not acceptable, because we want the food business operator to fully embrace the responsibility for the safe production of food. The more interventions that the meat hygiene inspectors undertake, the more the responsibility is put on the Meat Hygiene Service. That is not what we require; we

require clean carcasses to be presented and to apply the health mark, and the inspectors to do what they are paid to do, which is to inspect and to apply the health mark.

[250] The HACCP system in relation to the control of hazards within a plant, which has no doubt been mentioned, is the responsibility of the food business operator. If we as the MHS accepted carcasses that were contaminated and took corrective action, the quality management system would have failed. We want clean carcasses to be presented, for us then to apply the health mark. We make sure that our staff have sufficient time to undertake the inspection to apply the health mark. If a contaminated carcass is presented, it is put onto the detention rail and the food business operator has to sort it out. The whole quality management process aims to ensure that, if that happens, the plant should learn from it, and if the operator is not undertaking the duties expected of it, immediate corrective action should be taken so that the next carcass that comes down the line is fit for human consumption.

[251] I accept that we are dealing with a workforce that has, in some cases, been in the industry for more than 30 years. Over that 30-year period, there have been structural changes to the roles and responsibilities of our meat inspectors as well as in respect of where we are now. However, the law is absolutely clear, and I would argue that most of the meat industry understands that clarity and understands our role. Some abattoirs would like the Meat Hygiene Service to undertake trimming, and some have asked who else would do it. We say that they should employ someone to do it. Not all of them like that answer, but we are clear and robust with regard to the fact that that is the responsibility of the food business operator, and our responsibility is to ensure compliance. Where we do not see compliance, we take enforcement action.

[252] **Mick Bates:** Thank you for your written evidence and for your answers. I have a simple question first of all. Can you give me estimates of the costs of the inspection regime to producers, per beast or per sheep?

[253] **Mr McGrath:** Yes. The cost of the service in Wales is £4 million per year.

[254] **Mick Bates:** That is the total cost.

[255] **Mr McGrath:** Yes. The annual charge to industry is £2 million, and the larger the plant, the larger the charge. The plant that you went to this morning is very large, so it accounts for a higher proportion of that cost. Currently, in the meat industry, large and small plants get a subsidy. So, even the plant up the road gets a subsidy, even though it is a very large producer. The cost of the service per animal is the cost that Unison gave earlier. So, the cost of the service for a bovine is about £4.54 at the moment, for a pig it is 65p, and for a chicken it is 0.8p. These are not a lot of costs when it comes to the value of the animal or bird. You then look at the carcass. The cost of the regulation in the case of a chicken is less than 1p per bird in the context of the retail sale value of £3 or £4 per chicken. We are not talking about a significant burden on the price of either an animal or a carcass that is produced from that. I have all of the figures here.

[256] **Mick Bates:** Thank you; I am grateful for that. Is that in one of your annexes or in your report?

[257] **Mr McGrath:** I do not think that we have provided it, but I am happy to provide it.

[258] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** We would be very grateful if you could provide that.

[259] **Mick Bates:** Yes, we would, because in our previous evidence sessions, I asked many organisations the same question and they said that this stuff was so important and if it is removed it will have a great impact. I have mentioned the effects of that impact today. For

example, the NFU's submission said that it would affect the viability of businesses, even to the extent that abattoirs would close. We have heard evidence this afternoon that, if full-cost recovery takes place and all of the cost transfers to the inspection service, we will be left with two abattoirs in Wales. That causes me great concern and is quite contradictory to the evidence that you have just presented about the low cost of this. Could you put my mind at ease about the evidence that we have received on the impact of removing this subsidy now, leading eventually to a full-cost recovery, and how you interpret that as being quite a small cost?

[260] **Mr McGrath:** Starting out with large abattoirs, our costs are not that material to the cost of running the plants. When you are processing thousands of animals per day, you are talking about the presence of a handful of MHS people, a veterinarian and meat inspectors. If you look at that, it is not a significant cost and, certainly, the figures that I talked about are the bottom line for very large plants. However, as you get to the smaller plants, obviously, the whole balance changes. For example, take a small abattoir killing on a Wednesday afternoon in mid Wales—there are slaughterhouses that will process around three animals on a Wednesday afternoon or on another day of the week, because they are buying and serving locally to their consumers—where the law says that the animal or animals must be inspected ante-mortem, before being killed, and the carcass has to be inspected before it is made available to sell to the public.

3.50 p.m.

[261] We have worked very flexibly with the small abattoir industry because we do not need to be there during the whole time of processing. So, if you are talking about one bovine—some of these slaughterhouses will kill and process one bovine and it takes a long time to process that one animal—it is not efficient for the MHS to be there during that whole process, because we are not earning our keep. We earn our keep by undertaking the ante-mortem and then the post-mortem. So, we have introduced flexible working patterns and what we call 'cold inspection'.

[262] What we mean by 'cold inspection' is that, if the abattoir is going to get the animals lined up for the following day, it might get them in the previous evening, feed and water them for processing the following day. In that situation, the veterinarian can go there within a 24-hour period, before the animals are killed, and say that they have had an ante-mortem and that it is okay for them to be processed. They can then process the animals without the MHS being there. We then have to go back and do the post-mortem. The obligation then is that the carcass has to be inspected along with all of the other bits and pieces associated with the animal, so that we can correlate them. That is what we call 'cold inspection'. However, cold inspection is only offered as a facility to slaughterhouses that have good controls and good responsibility. We trust them to do what they are doing. Part of the trust is reinforced by turning up at random times, unannounced, and they do not find it a surprise; they are doing what they say that they are doing, namely producing safe meat because they want it to be made available to their customers safely. That is what it is about.

[263] To expand on full-cost recovery, I do not accept that it will, if you like, kill off the meat industry in Wales. The meat industry has a combination of large abattoirs, medium abattoirs and small abattoirs—it is a real mixed economy. On a point of principle, the Food Standards Agency is the regulator of the fresh meat industry, and we do not think it appropriate for a regulator to also have to subsidise that industry. The general Government policy is that statutory services should not be funded by Government; they should be paid for by someone, but it should not necessarily be central Government. A good example might be—not the police force, because that is a slightly different environment—the passport service, or the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in Swansea. We all pay a contribution to those statutory services because we are charged as a consumer. With the meat industry, the

FSA is quite clear on the point of principle that we regulate the meat industry, and we do so without taking economic circumstances into account, because public health is non-negotiable. Public health and public confidence are our priorities, and that has to be the case. When we look at approving a business, or the regulations associated with its operation, we do not take into account economic circumstances, because we are not prepared to put public health at risk. That is very clear.

[264] When it comes to affordability, we believe that, as a matter of policy, we should be moving to full-cost recovery. That does not necessarily mean to say that small abattoirs will pay the full cost. The Food Standards Agency should not be the agency that picks up any subsidy, but it should be more regionally based in the way that it supports the industry, and, frankly, should consult with the devolved administrations about what is important for them. Is it important to provide support to the meat industry, particularly the small and rural-based abattoirs, and those that are within Wales? Regions should decide their own spending priorities, and the question is whether some of that money should go into supporting local small businesses. We are having that open and mature discussion with the industry, with political people, and with the Welsh Assembly Government as to exactly who should be funding this gap in the future. The Food Standards Agency has a point of principle that it should not be the regulator, and others should consider the impact on the industry, and whether they should contribute some money to support it. It is of interest to the Government, and therefore it should consider funding.

[265] We are having that open and mature debate, but full-cost recovery is not going to happen tomorrow. It is the direction of travel. We are talking to loads of interested parties to understand where the gap for full-cost recovery will be. I have demonstrated, for instance in a small abattoir in mid Wales, where we have been flexible—we were not there all day, and we charge for the hour that we were there, and that was all. As soon as the veterinarian or the meat inspector comes away from that plant, we stop charging for our time. It is just getting that process working. This arrangement will not be appropriate for some small plants, because they have not demonstrated that we can totally and absolutely trust them. However, once that trust has been built up we can put in place cold inspection, which is cost-effective. It then comes down to whether there is a gap in terms of the meat industry not being able to afford it, and whether some support should come out of the devolved Government.

[266] **Mr Wearne:** May I come in here?

[267] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** Yes, if you are concise.

[268] **Mr Wearne:** As Steve has said, we believe that we are a regulator rather than a support agency. That is the principled approach, but you could also argue, and personally I would, that the way in which we support the Welsh meat industry is not effective. As we have already said, we provide £2 million-worth of subsidy. Looking at the 16 smallest plants—that is the smallest half—they only receive £400,000 of that £2 million, and that is a hangover from how charges are calculated. The agreement was reached back in 2001, and you might argue that, currently, it is not serving us well, because the larger plants get the bigger cash subsidy. If you had to devise a way of supporting Welsh rural abattoirs or the red meat sector with that £2 million, I doubt that you would come up with the same means of giving that money out that we currently use.

[269] **Mick Bates:** We will not make a commitment today, anyway. [*Laughter.*]

[270] **Mr Wearne:** I think it unlikely that you would. What we are therefore saying is that we will move towards full-cost recovery. We are under no illusions. We may not get much or any of that money back, as it will go to the Treasury and then be disbursed among the nations. It will then be for the nations to decide how to spend that money.



[271] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** We have time for a very short question.

[272] **Mick Bates:** Thank you for those replies. We have received evidence that the merger between the MHS and the FSA should produce efficiencies. What efficiencies will we see from this merger that will reduce costs?

[273] **Mr McGrath:** The first efficiency is from the merger of corporate services. The MHS was set up as a next-step agency back in 1996. It was then a part of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and then the Food Standards Agency came into being at the turn of the millennium. We are the largest part of the Food Standards Agency.

[274] The merger with the FSA—

[275] **Mick Bates:** So it is a takeover, rather than a merger.

[276] **Mr McGrath:** No. Actually, it is something that I as the chief executive wanted as part of our direction of travel, and I will get to the reason why in a minute.

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[277] The answer to the question on efficiency savings is £2 million, which will initially come out of the corporate services element, in HR, finance, and IT services. That is where we will see the initial benefit from the merger. We are not being done to, we are doing it ourselves. So, this not a takeover by the FSA; we are pushing for this. The reason for this—as Professor Pennington highlighted—is that there seemed to be gaps in the regulatory environment. The first potential gap relates to who approves meat plants in Wales. The answer is ‘the Food Standards Agency’. What then happens is that they go over to the MHS for daily operation. Then, if it is clear that there are a number of continuing non-compliances in the operation, somebody reviews the plant’s approval. Who is that somebody? It is the Food Standards Agency. What I am clear about is that that is not joined up. We need to join up. The reason why we need to do that is about putting the consumer first. We in the agency can give a better regulatory service in terms of putting consumers first by joining up the service. So, approvals will be our responsibility, as will daily operations and interfacing with local authorities as FSA operations. We are not claiming significant savings over and above the £2 million. We are adamant that it will become a much more effective operation than it has been historically. That is the driving force behind this. It is not just about money; it is about effectiveness and putting the consumer first.

[278] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** I need a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to this next question. Do you believe that, at this point, we should be seeking a review of the SRM controls?

[279] **Mr McGrath:** No. There is a TSE road map in Europe. We demonstrate that we are following that road map. A good example is that, in my short time in this role, two years ago, we had the over-30-months rule. In other words, cattle over 30 months old had to be tested for BSE. The road map said that you can increase the age for testing the animal provided you have sufficient assurances that BSE will not be coming out of the cattle herd. So, we moved the limit to 48 months. The next stage is about SRM controls; in other words, the brain stem and everything else. That is also on the road map. We still have the over-30-months rule applying to the way that SRM needs to be removed. That is something that we will look at over time, but it must be based on science and evidence, and not just on pressure from the industry. We need the assurance that when we make these changes to official controls, including BSE and TSE controls, we are doing it for the right reason, and it is supported by science and evidence.

[280] **Brynle Williams:** You touched on SRM, and, in some of the evidence that we took last week, it was said that significant savings that could be made if we adopted the French method of removing specified material in sheep. Would you support that?

[281] **Mr McGrath:** We are visiting the French to understand how it works. The TSE rules do not require the animal to be split. However, they require evidence that the spinal cord has been fully removed. The difficulty with the French system is that it vacuums out the spinal cord. We are talking with and visiting the French to see whether that is effective. If we can prove that it is, that is absolutely fine, but we are not prepared to change that type of process unless we get an absolute assurance that the spinal cord is fully removed. We need evidence of that before making any change. As it stands at the moment, it is better to be safe than sorry, so the spinal column has to be split. While that is an extra activity in the plant, I do not think that it is particularly material in terms of the impact on the plant itself. However, we are always open to suggestions about changes, but they must be based on science and evidence.

[282] **Brynle Williams:** You have just said exactly what I was going to say, because the science says that there is no correlation between sheep and BSE. So, the science is strong enough. This would make a vast difference in the next six weeks, when sheep start cutting their teeth.

[283] **Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** We will take that as a final comment from Brynle, rather than asking for a response from you. Thank you very much for your evidence. As I have said to the other witnesses, if you feel that you could add anything else to the evidence, we would be very grateful for that information.

[284] Diolch yn fawr ichi a phawb arall a roddodd dystiolaeth yn y sesiwn hon, sydd wedi bod yn sesiwn hynod ddiddorol a dadlennol hefyd i'r pwyllgor. Bydd cyfarfod nesaf yr Is-bwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig ar 4 Chwefror yn y Senedd yng Nghaerdydd. Diolch yn fawr iawn.

I thank you and everyone else who gave evidence in this session, which has been a very interesting and revealing session for the committee. The next meeting of the Rural Development Sub-committee will be on 4 February in the Senedd in Cardiff. Thank you very much.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 4.06 p.m.  
The meeting ended at 4.06 p.m.*