### PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE CALL FOR EVIDENCE – RESILIENCE TO THREATS FROM ANIMAL DISEASE

### Introduction

The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) is a statutory levy board, funded by farmers, growers and others in the supply chain to help the industry succeed in a rapidly changing world. In recent years, AHDB has taken a more active role in preparing the livestock industries for a potential incursion of an exotic notifiable disease. AHDB is in a unique position to be able to bring together industry stakeholders and Government to work together to build resilience to animal diseases (both endemic and exotic), including the risks posed by antimicrobial resistance. We believe this position can be further capitalised on by Defra to more fully align and engage all parts of the supply chain in preparing for, mitigating the impact of and recovering from animal diseases.

Evidence in this document includes AHDB’s work in relation to the Bluetongue Virus serotype-3 (BTV-3) outbreak in 2023-current and work in disease preparedness for African Swine Fever (ASF). We also use our experience of endemic disease, in particular, bovine TB (bTB).

### Summary

Government(s) and industry across all four nations could and should be more prepared for a disease outbreak. This should be across the supply chain from farm to retail.

AHDB’s expertise and position could be utilised more fully to develop resilience across the livestock sectors with appropriate financial and technical support.

There is greater awareness and preparation for disease outbreaks in the pig sector than in the ruminant sectors and a greater awareness of farm-level biosecurity. In part, this is a result of greater integration across the whole supply chain and more advanced use of data.

There is greater collaboration now between Defra, APHA and AHDB and the wider industry but there is still further progress to be made. There is opportunity for a more engaged and aligned relationship which maximises the outcome from both industry and Government funding.

### Is Defra able to establish and manage the structures, systems and governance processes needed to ensure England’s resilience to animal diseases?

Collaboration

We have been pleased to work in partnership with Government (including Defra and APHA) and stakeholders throughout the supply chain in planning for disease outbreaks. AHDB is in a unique position as a ‘critical friend’ for Defra and we have strengthened these relationships in the last couple of years through collaborations on Defra’s Animal Health and Welfare Pathway, core groups and industry working groups. However, the inclusion of AHDB is not clearly defined and can be reliant on individuals to champion the role AHDB can play.

This is a significant opportunity to strengthen this relationship to build resilience to animal diseases, through specifically including AHDB in all key groups working on disease resilience and preparedness. This could help significantly in organising timely and appropriate communications to the supply chain and key industry stakeholders.

Communication

The importance of communication in preparation for, during a disease outbreak, and critically in the recovery of trading arrangements, farming and community operations and industry reputation cannot be emphasised enough.

At the start of the BTV-3 outbreak, there was an immediate information void for the farming community. Communication channels were developed for the industry ‘on the hoof’. These lessons are invaluable should a more severe outbreak occur. The limitations of the Defra website and its inability to respond quickly compromised communications and led to frustration and misinformation.

Legislation was changing daily, yet this was difficult to access, understand and action on-farm. The industry, through the Ruminant Health and Welfare group, formed working groups (including APHA and Defra) to ensure consistent, aligned and clear messaging. These groups brought together industry-wide stakeholders including the veterinary profession, trade bodies and farming unions to ensure clarity, and promote the connection between vets and farmers to ensure better, more timely farm management decisions.

Communication needs to be proactive to raise awareness and assess risk, as well as being able to react rapidly to emerging situations. The development of social media and 24-hour news means that every farmer has access to instant information and misinformation on mobile devices, both of which can spread rapidly. This hampers not only disease control measures, but also longer term trust in and engagement with information when it is finally shared.

A key example of this is the recent foot and mouth disease (FMD) scare associated with stock movements from Exeter market, where information was rapidly amplified via social media while Government and APHA were unable to comment as the test results had not yet been confirmed. Farmers, vets and others working in the livestock industry wanted information but were not receiving it. This could have been an opportunity to engage those at risk with calls to action such as taking responsibility for their own biosecurity while awaiting official confirmation of test results, and explaining why waiting for test results is critical and not about keeping people in the dark.

### Is enough is being done to understand and protect against the threat of animal diseases in England?

Biosecurity

International We are aware of the great horizon scanning work undertaken by the IDM team at Defra and we work to raise awareness within the industry when a risk increases. Groups such as the APHA ‘expert groups’ (of which AHDB are a member) are invaluable in amplifying messages.

National Border biosecurity is an enormous concern to the UK and the livestock industries. Recent evidence identifies that border controls are of limited effect and there remains a high risk of contaminated products entering the country. Experience shows that disease outbreaks in farming sectors significantly impact other parts of the national economy, including associated businesses, tourism and reputational standing.

Farm level During recent workshops on disease preparedness across the pig sector, there has been a general lack of understanding of the individual farmer/producer’s responsibilities and ability to control disease on the farm/at the farm gate. Too often, it is deemed someone else’s issue to solve, or that it can only be controlled at national borders, with unrealistic expectations of Defra. Our workshops have in part addressed this in the pig sector, but the ruminant sectors should be encouraged to increase biosecurity at the farm gate. There is still more work to do, particularly with the ‘harder to reach’ parts of the sectors.

The recent BTV-3 experience has again shown that engagement correlates with restrictions to stock movement, with peaks of interest from farmers and vets when zones change. Future emphasis must include a greater understanding of risk and the importance of actions such as vaccination in preventing disease spread on units which are not immediately affected by an outbreak.

Surveillance

The recent announcement of the development plans for Weybridge is welcome news. However, that is a long-term solution and there are very real short-term risks. Disease surveillance through APHA laboratories has been significantly reduced and, together with increased surveillance undertaken by private laboratories, some even abroad, this means that valuable surveillance data are not collected/collated. Greater data connectivity will further improve effective surveillance.

Consolidation in the industry, together with technological advances, means that fewer stockpeople are employed on farm. This is a potential double-edged sword, with the need to train fewer people in disease identification, but conversely reduced observation opportunities. Similarly, stockperson time with animals has been significantly reduced and is often cited as a reason for farmers leaving the industry. Bureaucracy is significantly more onerous and takes stockpeople away from their animals and into an office. This is also true for veterinary surgeons, where visits can be largely consumed by audits, paperwork and data analysis rather than observations of the animals and advising farmers. Increased turnover and short term stays in the sector means lack of expertise and experience.

Advances in sensor and monitoring technologies offer greater early warning capabilities, both at scale and in individual animal monitoring and precision approaches to interventions. In many instances, this leads to reduction in antibiotic use and greater productive efficiency. Using combined data sets including post-mortem data from abattoirs to inform knowledge of disease incidence and spread offers greater opportunity for disease monitoring and targeted interventions.

Industry – changes in structure

Industry memory of previous disease incursions (e.g. Classical Swine Fever and FMD over 20 years ago) is rapidly being lost. The rapid development, consolidation and integration of livestock farming has completely changed the landscape. In reality, the structure of the industry and the demands upon it have changed significantly. Appropriate preparedness for disease outbreaks and enhancing resilience to threats from disease must account for these changes. Many of those with experience from the significant outbreaks of notifiable disease of the early 2000s are no longer in positions of responsibility, and those now occupying those roles do not have frontline experience of such outbreaks.

Particular attention should be given to the management and movement of animals and consolidation of abattoirs. Twenty years ago the majority of pig farms were farrow to finish. Today, split site production for breeding, weaners, growers and finishers means farms have completely different populations. The requirements for accommodation and planning for disease outbreaks needs to take account of these structural industry changes. There is a lack of understanding of how these changes affect resilience to disease threats among those not directly involved in pig production cycles. Similarly, the number of pig-only abattoirs is now eight. This means movement of pigs across the country to an abattoir to fulfil bespoke contracts and could pose a significant issue with slaughter capacity if an abattoir was restricted.

In addition, the further consolidation of abattoir and processing capacity in both pork and ruminant sectors will lead to increased travel times for some stock with associated disease spread risk, as well as risk to industry reputation and potential trading limitations. In recent years, short-term closure of abattoirs has rapidly led to backlogs with resulting welfare issues on-0farm. The economic impact of this is significant to those farms affected, even those able to trade. There is a need to better understand animal flow through modern production systems by those in disease control roles.

Vaccine availability/capacity

The recent BTV-3 outbreak, the subsequent development of vaccines for serotype-3 and campaigning to encourage their uptake has given some insight into the role vaccines could play in preventing or controlling disease. Vaccine shortages in the UK have been plaguing the industry over the last couple of years and in some cases, e.g. for enzootic abortion of ewes, farmers have had to resort to mass antibiotic medication. This is a threat to the work of the industry in demonstrating and promoting responsible antibiotic use. It has undermined the work of vets who champion vaccination over antibiotics, only for the same vets to have to go back and reverse that decision on farm. This is hugely detrimental to the efforts on responsible antibiotic use and it also increases the risk of antibiotic resistant (AMR) infections on-farm, some of which are zoonotic. The industry should be aware of the role and potential threat that social media can play in propagation of conspiracy and anti-vaccination campaigns. These were evident in the BTV-3 outbreak.

Consolidation in the animal health sector has also limited the availability of some products, particularly in the ruminant sectors, with multinational pharmaceutical companies not seeing the UK as a commercial market, increasing the regulatory and approvals burden to import vaccines and other medicines. Limitations on product disposal, for example with organophosphates for the treatment of sheep scab, coupled with increasing resistance across a range of products is further reducing treatment options with resulting concerns for animal health and welfare and productivity.

Identifying opportunities to engage farmers and vets with initiatives such as the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway and with assets such as AHDB’s BTV-3 vaccination finance calculators have prompted greater conversation with those producers who have been harder to engage with. Opportunities to further align AHDB and Defra initiatives should bring greater understanding and better decision-making on-farm with that less engaged cohort of producers.

### Is England prepared to respond to animal disease outbreaks and could it effectively recover?

Animal tracings, visitor and movement recording and contingency planning

This has been poor and a national livestock traceability system is not yet in place, resulting in a significant risk to the early control of a notifiable disease. AHDB has worked with the industry and Defra to understand and address some of the lessons learnt from the recent Avian Influenza (AI) outbreaks. The pig sector is developing robust visitor recording and contingency planning processes with vets and farmers working together which were identified as specific weak spots. These lessons should be applied to the ruminant sectors, recognising the added challenge of less integration across the red meat supply chain.

Veterinary capacity

There remains a shortage of livestock veterinary surgeons both in practice and within disease control teams, despite the expansion in the number of universities offering veterinary degrees. This has been evident during the BTV-3 outbreak with limited availability of veterinary surgeons who are able to blood sample animals, especially those with experience of newborn or heavily pregnant animals. The time taken to bleed a herd or flock has been a common complaint, with many requesting their own known and trusted vet to be allowed to undertake the sampling.

While the regulations require an authorised APHA sampler in the case of exotic diseases, it may be possible to allow practising vets to undertake the sampling under the observation and verification of an authorised but perhaps less competent sampler where experience is lacking. AHDB would be keen to explore this possibility further in collaboration with Defra and the veterinary associations.

There is a concern about lack of capacity within APHA (especially personnel) to not only manage exotic notifiable disease outbreaks, but to ensure that concurrent endemic notifiable disease control is not negatively impacted. There has been notable progress in bTB over recent years with numbers of cases showing a significant decline. There is evidence from the 2001 FMD outbreak that such capacity issues can compromise endemic disease control. During the outbreak bTB testing was paused and the level of bTB in our cattle herds subsequently jumped from less than 0.5% of herds under bTB restriction prior to 2000 to nearly 5% by 2008. Recent AI outbreaks and BTV have led to APHA resources being diverted. Delays to Interferon Gamma testing in bTB breakdown herds to remove residual infection, as well as delayed mapping on new bTB areas, is of concern in the bTB Low Risk Area of England. Enhanced surveillance testing was delayed significantly, risking spread of bTB to neighbouring herds and even spillover into wildlife populations.

The industry is working towards a government target to be officially bTB free by 2038. An outbreak of another notifiable disease would potentially hamper the industry’s ability to deliver against this target. If resources were diverted away from bTB control, we anticipate significant impacts on our control of bTB and on the wellbeing and resilience of farmers and rural communities.

Recovery from an exotic notifiable disease e.g. FMD will be dependent on how well-prepared the industry and government are, the extent of spread, the number of sectors involved and the speed with which disease is stamped out. Reestablishing trade, particularly export markets, after disease outbreaks is critical to the economy and growth. Allied industries and rural communities would also be affected.

In a worst-case scenario, England’s livestock production, associated business employment and national productivity would not recover, significantly affecting the nation’s food security and economic performance.

Mental health

Despite the enormous toll disease outbreaks have on all those involved, too little attention has been afforded to this important area. Following the scale of the 2001 FMD outbreak, the mental health impact was clearly identified, with many suffering mental health challenge. Some left the industry and unfortunately some committed suicide. Employers have a duty of care for their staff and the workplace environment is now very different to 20 years ago. There is a need for more robust mental health and resilience training and plans to protect those involved in a disease incursion need to be expanded across the supply chain. This should be a priority for all employers.

### Conclusion

AHDB is pleased to contribute towards this call for evidence. The resilience to the threat from animal disease is central to its animal health and welfare strategy and AHDB is happy to undertake further consultation in the future.