

DEVON FOOT AND MOUTH INQUIRY 2001

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

DEVON FOOT AND MOUTH INQUIRY 2001

Into the outbreak and its effects, their handling now and in the future and the recovery and sustaining of the well-being of Devon's countryside.

Foreword

Following the Foot and Mouth crisis that began in February 2001 which had such a devastating effect on the economy of the County of Devon and indeed the whole country, the County Council decided to organise an Inquiry in public into the outbreak. A Committee (Appendix 1) was set up of County and District Councillors under an independent Chairman to oversee the conduct of the Inquiry, and Terms of Reference (Appendix 2) were adopted to guide the Inquiry Committee and anyone submitting evidence. The Inquiry was to pass on its findings to the three Government Inquiries, support the County Council's bid for funding under the Devon Recovery Plan and give a voice to the people of Devon who wanted to express their distress as well as their hopes for the future.

The Inquiry was widely publicised in the media and individuals and organisations were encouraged and assisted to make submissions either via the Internet or by letter. In the final analysis of more than 360 submissions were made to the Inquiry, over 80 via the Internet. Of those submissions 28% were from farmers, 38% were from interested bodies and organisations and 34% were from businesses, members of the public and others.

Sitting in public, its proceedings continuously available on the Internet, the Committee questioned a balanced range of selected witnesses. Government NDPBs (Non Departmental Public Bodies) – English Nature, Environment, Countryside and Regional Development Agencies – were joined by Dartmoor and Exmoor National Park Authorities and powerful Non-Government Organisations – NFU, RSPCA, National Trust and RSPB. The Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, North and East Devon Health Authority, the County Council and the District Councils most affected also appeared. Devon Federations of Young Farmers Clubs and Women's Institutes, Associations of Parish Councils and Veterinarians shared witness with individual parish clerks and chairmen and vets. An Anglican priest, a Citizens' Advice Bureau officer, the Farm Crisis Network and a primary school headmaster and governor gave the Committee an insight into the psychological scenario in which they found themselves earlier this year. They extended the individual experiences of farmers and their families who were directly affected, those who were not and non-farming families. Tourist industry representatives and senior figures from each branch of the media ensured that the whole spectrum of those involved in the outbreak and its aftermath had their chance to expand upon what they had written.

That the Department of the Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) declined the invitation to attend has been deplored by many. Ministers had agreed to provide written answers to the Inquiry's questions (Appendix 3), the

answers are set out at Appendix 4. Ministers agreed to answer supplementary questions which then arise on this response. It is a nice judgement whether cross-examination of Ministers, or locally based civil servants who might claim they were not responsible for decisions made centrally, in inevitably defensive mode would have enhanced the public proceedings now concluded. Timing, and the time to be taken could have meant that such an exercise was frustrating and unproductive. As many have claimed, a thorough national and formal public inquiry (able to summon ex-Ministers and civil servants at all levels) would be a more appropriate process for holding central Government players to account. But, then, the fencing of legal advocates and defenders could prolong, perplex and confuse the issues until the truth was even more deeply buried than it is now. It is after all, already clear that the outbreak and the handling of the ensuing crisis was lamentable.

These preliminary findings and recommendations are produced now so that they can be forwarded to the Government's Policy Commission on the future of Farming and Food whose chairman, Sir Don Curry, has asked for responses to his consultation by the 26th October. They are inevitably in abbreviated form given the time constraint (this Devon Inquiry Committee sat until the 12th October). A full and definitive report will be produced with due dispatch.

We have divided these first findings under three headings: *The Handling of the 2001 Outbreak, Future Security, and The Future of the Countryside of Devon* – which last involves the socio-economic well-being of those who live and work in it. Even the retrospective first of these headings has a bearing on the future of farming and food, so the whole is being sent to the Curry Commission.

Those who have written, those who attended and those who followed proceedings via the media and the Internet are all aware of the emotional atmosphere which surrounded the exposure of personal tragedy. There are also undoubtedly those who have not found it possible to express their feelings in writing or in person yet. What follows is necessarily for the present purpose as objective and pragmatic as we can make it, but none who have suffered should be in any doubt that their experience and their present plight is not meant to be diminished in any way by that. All that we have registered is in some way aimed at reducing, if not removing, the risk that that experience might be repeated.



Ian Mercer
25th October 2001

The Handling of the 2001 Outbreak

- 1.1 While it is certain that the disease entered this county via sheep bought by a Devon dealer from Longtown market in Cumbria, how it entered Britain is still a matter of conjecture. What is clear is that food is different from other internationally traded commodities and must be treated as such. It is fundamental to our existence, perishable and climate sensitive. No country or region can hope to meet consumer demand entirely from within its own boundaries. All of which means that while food traded internationally and within national borders is inevitable, it requires sensitive handling and rigorous bio-security. It was suggested to the Inquiry that import controls of meat and other livestock products at the points of entry are inadequate and below the standard in countries free from Foot and Mouth.
- 1.2 **We therefore find that methods of import control must be tightened to the highest international standards and if necessary be the subject of new legislation. It is important that new powers are implemented promptly at ports and airports with the increase in staffing that that implies.**
- 1.3 The spread of the disease in the United Kingdom was aided by the transportation of livestock around the country. Dealing outside the ring at critical large markets appeared to make the tracing of animals more difficult if not impossible. We were told by the NFU witness that the announcement of a nationwide livestock movement ban after the outbreak had begun, and just before 1st March, made the expansion of the outbreak inevitable. Some submissions also indicated that it would be unwise to interfere with the traditional process that has stock migrating from the hills to lowlands for finishing for centuries. But the policy of paying support to farmers for the number of livestock on their land, irrespective of the environmental impact, has greatly increased animal movements.
- 1.4 **We find that there should be an immediate ban on animal movements from Day One of any future outbreak.**
- 1.5 **We find that a regulation should be made permanent requiring that all livestock, which moves onto a farm or returns to a farm unsold from market, should not be allowed to move off that holding for 21 days.**
- 1.6 **We also find that in principle a new culture needs to be developed around the marketing of livestock and that regulations are introduced that register all transactions which will better control the movement and traceability of sheep.**
- 1.7 **A study should be undertaken to support the re-establishment of small local abattoirs by the possible introduction of a supportive**

grant scheme, but also through the support of large supermarkets who currently invest in a few large ones.

- 1.8 The State Veterinary Service was greatly overstretched during the outbreak and its aftermath, the Inquiry was told, while the knowledge and experience of many local vets was not used. Retired vets, some with experience of previous outbreaks, volunteered their services but were rebuffed. In some cases the eventual hiring of vets from other countries, while very welcome at the time, created new problems arising from a lack of local knowledge and unfamiliarity with the language.
- 1.9 **We find that the State Veterinary Service should be restored to a level which would enable it to respond more effectively to a future outbreak, and that the principle of 'retained vets' should be enhanced. We were told that precedent exists in other countries such as Australia and New Zealand. All should undergo regular training and refresher courses in the handling of animal disease epidemics.**
- 1.10 On the use of vaccination, scientific and lay opinion appears to us to be divided. There are, however, two potential ways in which it might be used in a future outbreak. **We find that the Government should give greater priority to more scientific research into this area backed with appropriate funds and contracts and should initiate international co-operation on this front. It might replace totally the present methodology for preventing a future outbreak.**
- 1.11 But, in the short term, the use of vaccination to contain the disease and thus reduce the pressure on the system of slaughtering and disposal must be considered.
- 1.12 **We find that the whole question of using vaccination in the interest of temporary containment must be explored in the context of 1.10 above. DEFRA should recognise that farmers routinely inject stock regularly as part of their livestock husbandry. The ridiculous and dangerous situation brought about by attempts at last-minute training of vaccinators should never be repeated because there are clear alternatives.**
- 1.13 Reports received by the Inquiry of insensitive and even belligerent operatives and bungled culls do little to enhance the professional reputation of all those involved, from Ministers downwards. If culling on or beyond confirmed infected farms should persist then the actual process of killing animals must be handled more sensitively and more humanely.
- 1.14 **We find that training in slaughter management is needed. It should include clear instruction in the assessment of the likely impact that slaughtering will have on farmers, their families and**

other witnesses. This of course will not be necessary if slaughter is discontinued in future policies.

- 1.15 The disposal of animal carcasses featured in a large number of submissions. While we accept the Environment Agency's established order of preference namely render, burial and burn, the availability of all facilities clearly proved a stumbling block to the speedy removal of carcasses from farms. We understand that rendering plants are few and far between and that even maximum use of current facilities would be unable to deal with the vast numbers involved in this crisis. However, on-farm burial was not seen to be given serious local consideration in specific cases, and we do understand, in recording that, that the integrity of ground water in the vicinity of a burial must be maintained.
- 1.16 **We do not find in favour of large-scale burials. However, if the slaughter policy survives and rendering capacity is exceeded, locations for large-scale burials must be identified and published in future contingency planning. It is vital that full and open consultation must be undertaken with the public and local authorities if the problems that have been associated with these sites are to be avoided. The crisis that a major outbreak generates is not an excuse for Government and its agencies to override the welfare of individuals or communities or to ignore the long established rules for the management of the environment. As in the contiguous culling operation, the insensitive treatment of ordinary individuals and communities confronted by events outside their control did nothing to foster a united front or provide community leadership against the common enemy – the disease itself.**
- 1.17 Burning of carcasses on huge pyres was described to us as "barbaric and medieval" which is certainly the image that was conveyed. We recognise that the urgent need for disposal at the time may have been weighed against the effect on the environment and those communities living in the vicinity. But the disastrous effect of television and newspaper images of the pyres on tourism and other businesses, both nationally and internationally certainly was not given any consideration in advance.
- 1.18 **We find that large-scale pyres should never be used again and if burning persists as an available tool then the use of numerous, small-scale, high temperature pyres of very short duration must be tested and adopted if found viable.**
- 1.19 The volume of carcasses involved in Devon in 2001 and its gross miscalculation in advance on at least one occasion revolves around two things: the so called contiguous cull and the separate welfare motive for culling. The contiguous cull appears to have been implemented by officials poring over maps in remote offices so that

only holdings were considered, not the topography, the disposition of animals upon it nor the distances between them. One witness described the process as “carnage by computer”. In many cases according to farmers and vets the risk of transmission was nil, yet the animals on so-called contiguous holdings were slaughtered.

- 1.20 **Any future cull adopted to contain the spread of disease must be applied by experienced operators trained to assess the risk according to the physical conditions.**
- 1.21 We hope that sufficient thought applied to the whole area of animal welfare brought about by movement restrictions applied in a blanket fashion could resolve the tragic problems that it caused.
- 1.22 **We find that it should not be beyond the combined wit of DEFRA, the Police, Highways Authorities, the RSPCA and local vets to arrange and supervise, if necessary, movements to maintain health and safety among lambing flocks and calving cows in all cases where there is no risk of contagion.**
- 1.23 Farmers living under DEFRA’s Form D restrictions on animal movements, are the forgotten victims of this whole tragedy. There were 4,500 in this position in Devon alone. They had no prospect of trade, they had pressing animal welfare problems and for those that remain under restriction the prospect of worse to come as winter looms, and yet they have received not a penny in compensation.
- 1.24 **The Government must provide rapid financial assistance to farmers and their families on Form D restrictions.**
- 1.25 More than one witness involved in the process of closure told us that the blanket ban on the use of public rights of way or open access land such as Dartmoor and Exmoor was in retrospect a mistake although based on regulation by the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), itself based on scientific advice. This led to the “Devon is Closed” tag and had a catastrophic effect on tourism and associated industries. It was, we recognise, in the absence of a risk assessment system, an understandable immediate reaction to the need to contain disease and remove all unnecessary risks. The psychological effects at the time were clear but with hindsight were outweighed by the longer term situation.
- 1.26 **We find that more research is needed on the transport of the Foot and Mouth virus by boots, clothing, tyres, hooves and any other passive agent so that the degree of selection which might be applied to the closure of rights of way and the type of access may be determined. Until that is done those managing access should be trusted to apply restrictions in line with veterinary advice in a pragmatic way.**

Future Security

- 2.1 It was not obvious to us from the evidence received that MAFF was working to any form of coherent contingency plan. This, in spite of actual evidence that the Government had submitted such a plan to the European Union in 1993 and that some low level MAFF planning was proceeding in 1999. Lessons, which should have been learned from the outbreak in 1967, did not appear to have been implemented and recommendations of the official report into that outbreak were ignored. Moving from the strategic to the tactical position, we were easily persuaded that local knowledge was not sought and was dismissed when proffered. The assertion by one witness that “Strangers don’t work well” in local situations caught our imagination. For instance in navigating lorries from distant bases, parish knowledge could have avoided a huge waste of energy and time. It should also be involved in the risk assessment of rights of way by those responsible for decisions and closure.
- 2.2 **We find that a National Contingency Plan, such as that produced for maritime pollution response by the Marine and Coastguard Agency, needs to be developed. It should identify the organisations that will be involved in response to Foot and Mouth in a County or Unitary Authority area, and explain their responsibilities and the ways they will work together. It should be part of an emergency planning process that involves all the main players in its construction, testing and regular rehearsal. It must cascade down via the region to the county, the district and to the parish with each level responsible for implementing allocated functions (e.g. county responsible for public rights of way, district for environmental health, parish for local knowledge). The National Contingency Plan should be reviewed, tested and rehearsed every 5 years, the more local sections at lesser intervals.**
- 2.3 It was made clear to the Inquiry that such a plan and its cascade should determine how command and control is exercised. In Devon, as elsewhere, it soon became clear that MAFF did not have among its ranks those who could lead operations in the field. It is of course the prerogative of Ministers to determine and instigate policy after due advice from appropriate sources, but the contingency plan should be led nationally by someone able to command respect and with experience of managing emergency operations. But action on the ground in all senses must be in the hands of those used to command and with a sufficient support system to be effective. Much was made to us of the contrast of achievement between a Brigadier in Cumbria and a Major in Devon. Experience must be a factor in that but Brigadiers bring systems with them, command is understood, respect is shown externally and much else flows from those characteristics.

- 2.4 **We find that in the field there would best be a military command, with police, environmental and veterinary aides at its side from Day One of an outbreak.**
- 2.5 The Inquiry heard that a culture of secrecy was perceived within MAFF and this led to an atmosphere of suspicion, confusion, changing advice and inconsistencies which in turn was reflected by farmers, the media and other organisations the Ministry had dealings with.
- 2.6 **We find that from Day One open two-way communications must begin within the operational organisation and with all third parties. It is vital that timely and accurate information is provided to individuals and communities likely to be affected in an outbreak. This must include farmers and all those who provide local support and advice such as parish clergy. The media can be an important source of public information and could greatly assist in the dissemination of accurate information. But the media like nature abhor a vacuum and in the absence of official information will be filled with alternative sources, including rumour. All information must be clear, open and honest, and political considerations should be set aside.**

The Future of the Countryside of Devon

- 3.1 The outbreak of Foot and Mouth in Devon soon brought into the sharpest relief the interdependence of farming and what is generalised as tourism but includes all aspects of human enjoyment of its environment. Indeed, the interaction of both with all aspects of rural life and work were revealed more starkly and to a wider audience than ever before. At the same time the portrayal of what appeared to be happening throughout the countryside was seen to affect potential and actual custom in towns and on the coast.
- 3.2 Early recovery of the socio-economic well-being of Devon has focused the attention of the County Council which has attracted support for its Devon Recovery Plan from 150 partners including Government departments, their agencies and many non-Government organisations. We welcome Lord Haskins' support for the Plan.
- 3.3 Much of the plan looks beyond the recovery phase. The section on agriculture sets the tone:

'establishing a long term vision for the future of Devon's agriculture, the capacity to deliver it and a development programme to help the industry adopt more sustainable practices, including the marketing of local produce, organic farming, co-operative ventures, forestry, horticulture, new local abattoirs, local processing and renewable energy'.

- 3.4 The other relevant points from that Plan are: marketing the 'Devon brand', health and welfare support, environmental multiple benefits and new initiatives relating to access.
- 3.5 The findings of the Inquiry which relate to the longer term future of the countryside of Devon are summarised below.
- 3.6 The agricultural environment of Devon remains, despite global climate variation, one in which grass is the most significant and optimum crop and livestock conversion of it the sensible core of food production in the bulk of the county. Meat and dairy products are our most competitive. This implies a landscape for livestock, and thus dominated by not over-large fields for stock management and shelter purposes. In turn that implies that while average farm holding size may increase as landowner numbers change, perceived patterns in the countryside need not change in general terms.
- 3.7 To these ends, **we find that Government spending and support patterns should reflect the need to achieve two things: the development and sustaining of a quality livestock produce industry; and an adequate labour force for more sophisticated stock management and more detailed environmental quality. Principles agreed already for Common Agricultural Policy reform need to be pursued with more urgency and with the overt motive of accelerating change.**
- 3.8 **We find that developing the marketing of quality Devon produce (within the 'Devon Brand') should be pursued locally with regional and national extension, building upon existing successful exercises.**
- 3.9 **We find that sustaining a comprehensive livestock industry from breeding and store production in the hills to finishing animals, and producing the whole range of dairy products to the quality levels a modern society requires, demands a larger labour force than presently deployed. Prices paid by the customer and support funds from Government will have to reflect that.**
- 3.10 **While that workforce properly managed could also maintain the well-loved detail of the farmed landscape, the increased demands generated by environmental and biodiversity improvement objectives will further increase the workforce required. Contractors who have become an integral part of the agricultural scene will doubtless have an extended role here.**
- 3.11 **We find that these future demands for labour imply new goals for training and recruitment which in turn require new approaches to the integration of agricultural and environmental skills in further and higher education.**

- 3.12 Government agencies and non-Government organisations underlined these needs and proposed to us 'new' models for the public purchase of environmental goods and services. Some of them have been tested, the most straightforward one in Wales for some 8 or 9 years now. Management agreements under the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 proved more sophisticated and flexible than Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) and Countryside Stewardship, and those who have operated them pleaded for much greater flexibility in those current State-run schemes.
- 3.13 **We find that a more flexible approach to these and any new schemes which allows operational plan-making on the farm, should be sought. This demands a consensus between agricultural and environmental agencies in both public and private sectors.**
- 3.14 **We find that the integration of quality food and fibre production with recognised environmental outputs should be the ambition of a new universal farmer culture. That culture shift (universal as opposed to the scattered shining examples already with us) is best begun at the educational and training level where new courses should be devised to achieve the integration.**
- 3.15 Nevertheless, the farming industry has always readily accepted advice linked to incentives, shared experience and on-the-job training. A high proportion of the present generation of farmers is not necessarily immune from cultural change if the right resources are made available. Most are peering for the light at the end of the tunnel and advantage should be taken of that.
- 3.16 We are aware that headage payments, at least in terms of the Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance, are being phased out, and replaced by area payments. In the interests of a sustainable agriculture the principle could become universal.
- 3.17 **We find that all livestock farming support systems should be devised so that numbers of stock are no longer the basic criterion for any relevant formula - in the lowland as well as the hills.**
- 3.18 It was suggested to us that sustainability in farming is, and should remain, underpinned by the concept of the family farm. Despite 3.6 above, a variation in holding size probably ensure the persistence of certain qualities in the landscape. In both respects support and regulatory systems need to take account of the desirable end.
- 3.19 **We find that the basic payments in any tiered system of agri-environment support should be tied to long established grades of agricultural land quality on a sliding scale. Within each grade, thresholds relating to holding area should be applied to favour the smaller but viable farm.**

- 3.20 The network of local roads and rights of way is critical to farmers, the services they require in both delivery and collection, and to other countrymen and the visiting public. The Foot and Mouth outbreak highlighted that in many different ways.
- 3.21 **We find that a rare opportunity now exists to improve the network of footpaths, bridleways, cycleways, byways and unclassified roads in the interests of farm and livestock management and enjoyment of the countryside. The management of access for leisure, exercise and the welfare of animals (in general and during future crises) must itself be enhanced. That demands increases in the application of money and manpower to it by all the relevant authorities.**
- 3.22 Like agriculture, the tourism industry is made up of a vast number of operations, varying greatly in size. It depends upon representative groupings and agencies to produce anything approaching corporate action or lobbying. Yet its enormous variety is its lifeblood. Farmers have been urged to diversify and their easiest option is some form of tourism or visitor servicing. Those used to the combined activities of farming and tourism were dealt a double whammy by the consequences of the Foot and Mouth outbreak.
- 3.23 **We find that tourist industry representatives should be included in local and national contingency plan preparation and especially its access management instructions. They should also be recipients of all information from Day One in communications planning.**
- 3.24 **We also find that tourist operators and accommodation providers across the spectrum should have access to timely and accurate information to help prepare their own advice for visitors in advance so that a welcome, despite a disease epidemic, can still be offered and activated.**
- 3.25 It is clear to us that the future health and well-being of society would be enhanced by what we have found. We acknowledge that much of what we have concluded and written under this heading only confirms that which many rural thinkers have argued for some time. Indeed, we have recorded that some good models for the public purchase of environmental benefits have also been tested. But to achieve the improvement necessary in the contribution which the countryside makes to British society through food and fibre production and the opportunities for all forms of recreation there must be a reorganisation of spending.
- 3.26 **We find that that reorganisation applies to the individual through prices paid and taxes tolerated, and to the corporate will through government at all levels from the European Union to District Councils. 'Reorganisation of spending' includes increases in the**

funds applied in the right places and decreases in the bureaucratic complexity involved. This complexity has been shown in the last few months to distort grossly the routes, and time taken for funds provided, to reach the point of application on the ground. The process of applying the FMD Business Support Fund by Regional Development Agencies appears to us to have been a case in point.

- 3.27 We were disappointed that DEFRA had not produced a timely response to our questions. A consequence is that its views are not reflected here. We have agreed with the Minister, because a response arrived on 24 October, to attach it as Appendix 4. The supplementary questions that arise from that response will now be put to DEFRA.
- 3.28 The Secretary of State said before a Parliamentary Committee in mid-October that it would be a miracle if FMD was finally over. The more reason therefore that the Government now swiftly plans how to deal effectively and efficiently with any future outbreak or resurgence. We believe that this report is 'the voice of Devon' after the crisis. We intend that it should not fall on deaf ears.

APPENDIX 1

MEMBERS OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE

Name	Very Brief Details
Prof. Ian Mercer CBE	Professor Mercer was the first Chief Executive of the Countryside Council for Wales. In 1995 he became the first Secretary General of the Association of National Park Authorities, a position he held until his retirement earlier this year.
Cllr Christine Marsh	Devon County Councillor for Okehampton Rural (Conservative)
Cllr Nolan Clarke	Devon County Councillor for Bovey Tracey (Liberal Democrat)
Cllr Richard Westlake	Devon County Councillor for Exeter Stoke Hill and Polsloe (Labour)
Cllr Roger Giles	Devon County Councillor for Ottery St Mary Rural (Independent)
Cllr Peter Hill	West Devon Borough Councillor for the Chagford Ward (Independent)
Cllr David Poole	Torrige District Councillor for the Waldon Ward (Independent)
Cllr Eric Ley	North Devon District Councillor for the parishes of Bishops Nympton, East Anstey, Knowstone, Molland, Twitchen and West Anstey (Independent)

APPENDIX 2

THE DEVON FOOT AND MOUTH INQUIRY

TERMS OF REFERENCE

To conduct an investigation in public into the Foot and Mouth epidemic in Devon and to make recommendations to the Government's inquiries into FMD and the future of farming and the countryside for:

- i) the tackling of any future major animal disease outbreak;
- ii) the creation of a sustainable, competitive and diverse farming and food sector which contributes to a thriving and sustainable rural economy and advances environmental, economic, health and animal welfare goals.

In carrying out its task the Inquiry will take into account:

- the impact of the Foot and Mouth outbreak on the economy (including tourism), environment and health of the communities of Devon;
- the contribution the Devon Recovery Plan can make to the future reform of agriculture, food production and promotion and land use, and to the creation of a sustainable rural economy;
- the effectiveness of the various agencies involved in the response to the 2001 outbreak, their inter-relationship and relationship with local communities, and identify any constraints such as resources, communications, command and control systems, and training.

And that the findings be:

- Made widely available to the public, stakeholders and key opinion formers such as MPs, MEPs and the media;
- Used to support the county's bid for Government funding for the Devon Recovery Plan.

APPENDIX 3

Questions for DEFRA (set out in a letter dated 27 September)

1. Drawing upon the Department's experience in Devon, in other parts of the UK, and its knowledge of actions taken in Europe and elsewhere, what lessons have DEFRA learned
 - in terms of containment of the disease;
 - in terms of eradication of the disease?
2. Bearing in mind the immediacy of media engagement in any emergency what proposals for improving the chain of communication both within and beyond DEFRA does the Department suggest?
3. Given that farm businesses subject to form D restrictions suffered significant losses in income, were ineligible for compensation and may not access the Farm Business Advisory Service or the Business Recovery Fund, what practical and/or financial help can the Department offer or suggest?
4. What should this outbreak teach us about the future of British farming and the food production/distribution system?
5. The Secretary of State has spoken about her Department developing a Sustainable Development Strategy and agrees that reform of CAP's market support and direct payments to farmers is necessary. Is the Department able to explain how the Strategy will affect Devon businesses and how it sees the direction farming in Devon will take after CAP reform?

APPENDIX 4

**The Contents of a Letter Dated 23 October from
The Minister for Rural Affairs
Rt Hon Alun Michael MP
to
The Chief Executive of Devon County Council**

DEVON FOOT AND MOUTH INQUIRY

I am now able to reply to the questions you sent us on 27 September, in order to assist the Devon County Council Foot and Mouth Inquiry.

First, let me explain the way in which we are ensuring that the handling of the Foot and Mouth outbreak is considered fully and that all relevant lessons are learned. The Prime Minister has announced two independent inquiries. Once we are sure that FMD has been eradicated, Dr Iain Anderson will look at the lessons to be learned from the current outbreak and the way the Government should handle any future major animal disease outbreak. Separately, the Royal Society Study, chaired by Sir Brian Follett, will undertake a scientific review of questions relating to the transmission, prevention, and control of epidemic outbreaks of infectious diseases in Livestock. You can find further information from www.number-10.gov.uk.

As I indicated in my letter of 20 September, we are willing to help as much as we are able with your Inquiry, but it would not be proper for us to anticipate the findings of the national Inquiries into the Foot and Mouth outbreak. To an extent, some of the questions you have asked appear to be inviting us to do this, and I am sure you will appreciate the difficulty. In relation to question 1, we see the Devon Inquiry as providing a local perspective on the outbreak and making a contribution to the government Inquiries, as I think you do yourselves.

The "Lessons Learned" Inquiry has not yet formally begun - in order not to divert energy away from the eradication of FMD until that has been achieved - but you can forward your comments by email to andersoninquiry@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk or send them by post to the Anderson Inquiry, Room 207, Ashley House, 2 Monck Street, London SW1P 2BQ. The Royal Society has already started its inquiry and can be contacted at The Royal Society, 6 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AG.

I should mention that the Policy Commission on Food and Farming will be making suggestions to Government about the long-term, and the events of the last four months are also being scrutinised by others - such as the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee and the Select Committee on Agriculture - whose findings will help inform public debate.

In **question 2**, you asked what proposals we had for improving communications both within the Department and externally. Essentially there

are two aspects to this. One is the Department's administrative arrangements and liaison with peerage on the ground, particularly farmers. The other is communication via the press and media, including responses to media coverage and comments from other parties.

On the first of these, we are reviewing our internal communication processes to ensure that we share knowledge more effectively. DEFRA officials have set up regular telephone conferences with our regional offices so that we can keep our staff informed of policy developments and we are reviewing our channels for internal communications so that information is properly targeted.

Regular stakeholder meetings are held by our animal health teams both nationally and locally to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to get their views across and comment on and feed into our planning. Organisations, including local government and bodies like the CLA and NFU, also work with us by using their own communication channels to convey information to their members. Stakeholder meetings also provide an invaluable opportunity for Ministers to have direct communication with the public.

It has to be recognised that there is no easy way of achieving simple and timely communications at a time of crisis, especially when the issues are complex and the future trend of the emergency - as with FMD - is difficult to predict. Those who seek answers to queries need immediate answers, while those involved in administrative, logistical or veterinary judgements have to develop - often under great pressure - decisions which will be robust in a variety of circumstances. There are practical difficulties in an emergency in keeping front line field staff sufficiently up to date with policy developments to enable them to deal with all the questions that farmers pose. We are now working to improve information flows to our staff and to equip them to pass it on to the farmers.

On the second aspect, DEFRA is continuously striving to improve public communications and to provide information that is factual and clear. Our media activity is informed by the need to disseminate information, demonstrate openness, provide clear explanations, provide accessibility to information to key personnel and to assist in the disease control effort by conveying timely and relevant messages.

Public information campaign strategy is determined by research. We follow standard procedures to produce public information material. All our campaigns are objective based with effectiveness measures built in. As I am sure you are aware, methods of communicating to date have varied from large public information campaigns on biosecurity to individual targeted mailshots, production of leaflets, videos etc.

None of these approaches is perfect. For instance, we launched a video urging stringency in biosecurity when there was worry that - for all sorts of reasons - some farmers and others might relax their vigilance. At the same time we were trying to get over the message that many restrictions on walkers were being lifted because of evidence that walkers pose minimal risk to

spreading disease. It was suggested that these two approaches were inconsistent, but in fact both were based on clear veterinary and scientific advice and both messages were included on the video.

In **question 3** you asked about the help available to farmers under Form D restrictions. The Farm Business Advice Service (FBAS) provides free on-farm business advice to farmers and growers in England. Farmers are entitled to 3 days of consultancy advice, which provides a business health check leading to the preparation of an Action Plan that will help farmers develop better business practices and signpost them to organisations that can provide further support and advice. The FBAS is run by the Small Business Service through their Business Link network and is delivered on the ground by experienced Farm Business Advisers.

An enhanced form of the service was introduced as part of the FMD recovery package to culled out farms. However, the core service continues to run and is open to all farmers including Form D farmers. To help ease waiting lists for the service, a transfer of funds was made from the FMD enhanced service to the core service in July and ring fenced for delivery to Form D farms only.

A further budget review, due to be completed this month, aims to maximise expenditure in this financial year for both services by reviewing demand and switching funding to match requirements.

As you will appreciate, farms under Form D restrictions are not eligible for help via the Business Recovery Fund (BRF), which was set up specifically to help non-farm rural businesses, as they had no other source of help. The BRF operates using the state aids rules' exemption for de minimis grants, but currently the exemption does not extend to farming or transport.

The England Rural Development Programme and its rural economy schemes also provide a sound basis for contributing to the government's medium term objectives for rural regeneration and diversification. Over the seven-year life of the Programme, the ERDP will provide a continued and increasing source of help to projects which will contribute to the creation of more diverse and competitive agricultural and forestry sectors, new jobs, development of new products and market outlets, and provide targeted training to support these new activities. It is not, however, a good vehicle for helping with immediate short term recovery since it is constrained by limited funds and the inflexible nature of the Programme which has to meet the strict requirements of the Rural Development Regulation.

In **question 4** you asked about the lessons learned from the outbreak for the future of British farming and food production/ distribution. As indicated earlier, the Government has set up an independent Policy Commission to advise on how we create a sustainable, competitive and diverse farming and food sector within a thriving rural economy, which advances environmental, health, and animal welfare goals. Chaired by Sir Don Curry, the Commission will have a key role in informing the Government's approach to policy in the future within England. The Policy Commission has been asked to report to the Prime

Minister and Secretary of State by 31st December this year. The report will help to inform the Government's position when CAP reform proposals are published next year. Again, it would be premature for me to comment on the outcome of this study, but we would encourage your Council and anyone who has an interest in this crucial debate to send your comments to Sir Don Curry, Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, Rm. LG12, Admiralty Arch, The Mall, London, SW1A 2WH or by email to farming@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk

Finally, your **fifth question** asked about sustainable development and CAP reform. The Secretary of State has announced that DEFRA will prepare its own Sustainable Development Strategy. Work on this is now under way and external stakeholders will be involved in its preparation. In November we will be publishing information on both the DEFRA and Government Sustainable Development websites seeking further comments (www.defra.gov.uk and www.sustainable-development.gov.uk). The Strategy is likely to be an overall assessment of the Department's potential contribution to sustainable development and identify particular priorities within that, rather than a comprehensive delivery plan.

I hope this is helpful. If you have further detailed questions, it would be helpful if these could be as specific and focused as possible in order to minimise the burdens for staff actively engaged in disease control operations.

I have replied to this correspondence myself because of our earlier useful contacts over the inquiry. From now on responsibility within the Department for co-ordinating evidence to inquiries will rest with my colleague Lord Whitty, to whom all future correspondence should be addressed.

We look forward to hearing about the findings of the Devon County Council Inquiry.