Introducing the new Chief Veterinary Officer

Find out what the key priorities will be for Christine Middlemiss in her first year as the UK’s Chief Veterinary Officer

Tell us a bit about your background and how you came to work in government

I come from a farming background in the south of Scotland. I was always interested in being a vet because I like to know why things work and why animals do what they do.

I graduated from Glasgow Vet School and spent quite a long time in practice – both in the south of Scotland and north of England. Subsequently, I damaged my back from all the work you do in practice, so I joined government in 2008. I have worked in delivery aspects of government out in the field through to policy roles in London.

I really enjoy working in government. I came here because of the physical constraints of being in practice and, actually, I have never used my vet brain to make such a difference.

What made you apply for the role of CVO in the UK?

Coming from the UK and a farming background, I’m very passionate about animal health and agriculture here. I was working out in Australia as Chief Vet for New South Wales – a fantastic personal and professional learning experience. But the opportunity to be back here when there is so much going on around EU Exit and what farming and our livestock industry might look like for the future, and to be part of influencing that, was an opportunity too good to miss.

What were the biggest challenges you faced as CVO in New South Wales?

At the time, in Queensland, there was an outbreak of white spot virus, which led to white spot disease in farmed prawns. White spot is like the foot and mouth disease of the prawn. For me, that was quite a steep learning curve about the virus (in terms of how it works, how the prawn industry works and the link to recreational fishing), but the principles are the same: How did the disease get there? How long has it been there? Where has it spread? What are the most effective control measures? It was hugely fascinating and a great opportunity to work through something like that.

What key skills and experience will you be drawing on while CVO in the UK?

While I was in New South Wales, we implemented new legislation – a biosecurity act that took all the different plant, animal health, aquatic health and non-native invasive species regulations and made them into one act. It was about responsibility in terms of biosecurity. That was quite an interesting way to approach it. The EU legislation has moved on a lot; there is a new EU animal health law coming out, which is more risk-based, proportionate and prescriptive. Things like that present opportunities for what our legislation could and should look like to achieve the outcomes that we want.

What are your main priorities for this year?

Firstly, never taking our eye off disease control. We’re always thinking about exotic animal diseases; the ones we’re most concerned about at the moment are bluetongue virus in France, African swine fever in eastern Europe and the recently confirmed Newcastle disease in Belgium.

Avian influenza hasn’t been so bad this winter, but in previous winters it has been, so we’re constantly looking at re-evaluating our controls around that.

And then of course, in England, there’s the TB issue that we’re constantly dealing with; we’re five years into our 25-year TB strategy. The Secretary of State announced a review earlier this year and the report will be published later. That’s really looking at: we’ve come five years, what more do we need to do? What further controls will help us achieve eradication in that timeframe?

Then there is EU Exit, where I’m involved in informing some of the technical aspects. And antimicrobial resistance – a huge global problem that the UK has quite a prominent voice on. Our agricultural industry has done a great job of reducing use of antibiotics by 27 percent in three years and so I look forward to working with them further on that.

There is also the Veterinary Capability and Capacity Project and, for me in government, making sure we have enough vets with the right skills enjoying government work and feeling they are able to make a difference.

Is the government’s current strategy for controlling bovine TB working?

The evidence we have to date is that the increasing disease level has reduced. It has plateaued out. There are a number of control methods in place, including badger culls and increased cattle controls; there are lots of things going on because it’s a very insidious disease. We aren’t going to see a sudden drop over months – it’s a disease that must be managed over a number of years.

How does the government plan to tackle the staffing issues anticipated with EU Exit?

The workload will be dependent on what deal is agreed upon in the end and decisions about the common rule