

Health Secretary gives “utmost thanks” to NHS, emergency services and social services staff

Vaughan Gething said:

“I’d like to thank all our dedicated staff who have kept our health and social care services going over the past few days. I have been in awe of the lengths they have been going to, making sure our hospitals, primary and community care and other essential services were able to continue operating, despite pressures from all angles.

“I’d also like to thank all local government workers who ensured the roads were kept clear and the volunteers who ferried staff to and from work, or did anything they could to help in such difficult conditions, without whom, there would have been even more pressure on the NHS, social care and other emergency services.”

The Health Secretary said that as the weather improves, NHS Wales will be catching up, as well as meeting normal day-to-day demand and it’s likely that some disruption to local services will continue.

People can keep up to date with the latest information from local health boards, GP surgeries and local authorities through social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter.

The Health Secretary added:

“I urge people to please help and choose well before deciding which service you need and only calling 999 and attend A&E for serious illness or a genuine emergency.

“If people are unsure, they can visit the NHS Direct Wales website for health advice through a range of symptom checkers, and on availability of local services. Choosing Well means you and your family will get the best treatment and also allows busy NHS services to help the people who need them the most.

“Once again I would like to give my utmost thanks to NHS, social services, and emergency services staff for their commitment and support during this extremely challenging period. They have shown extreme resilience under great adversity. I would also like to appeal to people who have accessed services to be patient while staff deal with the aftermath of storm Emma, as we collectively strive to ensure all patients receive the care they need.”

Report on Welsh dairy farm performance published

In 2017, the Welsh Government provided £3.2 million of European conditional aid to Welsh dairy farmers through two schemes focusing on farm business benchmarking and herd milk recording.

An encouraging 75% of dairy farmers took up the opportunity – the highest level of uptake in the UK. Along with aid funding, farmers also received a bespoke report showing the strengths and weaknesses of their business with a comparison with other dairy farms.

Invaluable data produced from the benchmarking scheme was used to produce a [report](#) (external link) providing a snapshot of Welsh dairy farm performance. Key findings include:

- The importance of farmers constantly measuring the financial performance of their business to help them become more efficient;
- the top performing farms demonstrate that profitable dairy farming is possible with excellent returns, even in difficult trading conditions;
- some farms, have costs of production which are higher than the milk price has ever reached;
- farmers should take advantage of the plentiful supply of grass and maximise the milk they produce from grass and forage;
- farmers who have made a conscious choice about their production system tend to be more profitable; and
- maintaining high standards of animal health and welfare reduced the financial impact of diseases and can give the industry a competitive advantage.

Support to help dairy farmers address the issues identified in the report is available through the Welsh Government's Farming Connect programme and via the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) Dairy.

Welcoming the report, Cabinet Secretary said:

“The approach we adopted to providing aid to our dairy farmers has provided us with useful data on the performance of the industry in Wales.

“The report published today will go a long way to help farmers improve the performance of their business by reducing their costs of production. This will improve the efficiency of our dairy farms, allowing them to become more resilient to business risks and milk price volatility.

“As a government, our priority is to work with everyone affected to prepare for a world outside the European Union and for a resilient agricultural sector. This report will provide invaluable information to help us decide how best to support the dairy sector to prepare for the future.

“While the report shows profitable dairy farming is possible, I am particularly concerned that some Welsh dairy farms have costs of production which are higher than the milk price has ever reached. That is why I am in the process of tailoring the support we offer these farms to help them re-evaluate the structure of their business and use their benchmarking report to see where improvements can be made.

“It is clear from the report that by becoming more efficient and focusing on producing milk at a lower cost of production, all farms can become more profitable, no matter what the milk price is.

“Brexit presents significant challenges to the agriculture industry but also opportunities. The industry, and individual farmers, must start to plan now for the future.

“The long term outlook for the dairy sector is good with global demand forecasted to increase year on year. Our dairy farmers need to be competitive and market focused to compete with the best in the world. If this happens then I firmly believe our dairy farmers have a bright future.

“I encourage all Welsh dairy farmers and the wider industry to use the available data to help them prepare for the post Brexit world; to help make their businesses both resilient and prosperous.”

Kirsty Williams announces £14 million for school repairs

The funding will be spent on areas such as boilers and plumbing works to school toilets, caretaker costs, painting and decorating, plastering and repairing or replacing flooring. This will complement work to improve school buildings through the Welsh Government’s 21st Century Schools and Education Programme.

Local Authorities will receive the funding in the first instance who will then distribute the money to all schools in Wales.

Kirsty Williams said:

"I hear it often enough, from teachers and headteachers across the country, that time and funding is too often taken up by school maintenance issues, as opposed to supporting learners.

"That's why today I am making available an additional £14 million, which is to be allocated directly to schools.

"This will address small scale maintenance costs, alleviating pressures on school budgets. Every single school across Wales will benefit from this money and it will go directly to the frontline.

"I hope local authorities are now able to transfer this money across to schools as quickly as possible so that essential work can begin."

[Poultry keepers reminded of the importance of biosecurity and to be vigilant for signs of Avian Flu](#)

This is the same strain of the virus found in wild birds in England over recent weeks and the first finding in Wales this year.

The wild bird, a buzzard, was found dead and was submitted as part of a regular batch by a Non-Governmental Organisation for testing as part of wild bird surveillance

The finding of the disease in this wild bird follows the introduction of a Prevention Zone in Wales on 25 January, which requires all keepers of poultry and other captive birds to take appropriate and practicable steps to prevent the spread of the disease.

The veterinary risk is not considered to have increased for either wild birds or to poultry/captive birds in Wales as a result of this finding. The existing enhanced biosecurity requirements remain in force and are considered the appropriate and proportionate response.

This strain of influenza affects birds, not people, and the risk to public health as a result of this finding is negligible.

Cabinet Secretary for Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs Lesley Griffiths said:

"The finding of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza H5N6 in a wild bird in Barry follows recent findings of the disease in wild birds

in England and across Europe. This finding is not unexpected at this time of year and there is a constant risk of the disease at this time.

“It follows our recent calls for bird keepers to be vigilant and practice high levels of biosecurity and the introduction of an All Wales Prevention Zone on 25 January to mitigate the risk to poultry and other captive birds. This remains in place and the existing enhanced biosecurity requirements are still considered to be proportionate following this finding.”

Senior Veterinary Officer for Wales Dr Gavin Watkins said:

“This is the first finding this year in Wales and reminds us all of the risk of avian influenza infection. Bird keepers must remain vigilant for signs of disease and I cannot stress enough the importance of practicing the very highest levels of biosecurity.

“The main source of infection to captive birds is wild waterfowl, and biosecurity measures must address both direct and indirect spread of infection to areas where domestic birds are kept. Birds of prey such as buzzards are probably infected by eating affected waterfowl and are unlikely to play a role in transmission. The movement of poultry should be minimised, and clothing and equipment should always be cleansed and disinfected before and after their use.”

If poultry keepers are concerned about the health of their birds they should seek advice from their veterinary surgeon. If they suspect their birds have AI, they should report it to their local [Animal and Plant Health Agency](#) (external link) immediately.

If members of the public find dead wild waterfowl (swans, geese or ducks) or gulls, or five or more dead wild birds of other species in the same location, they should report them to the Defra helpline on: 03459 33 55 77 or email: defra.helpline@defra.gsi.gov.uk. This service covers the whole of GB.

All keepers are encouraged to register their poultry. It is a legal requirement to register if keepers have premises with 50 or more birds. Keepers of premises with fewer than 50 birds are encouraged to [register voluntarily](#) (external link).

Keepers are advised to sign up for [disease alerts](#) (external link).

More information on Avian Influenza, the current situation in Wales and across the UK and advice for backyard keepers, including on biosecurity is available on the [Welsh Government's website](#).

First Minister officially opens Montreal office

The new office in Canada is part of the Welsh Government's expansion of its overseas operations, which is aimed at boosting trade and inward investment to new and existing markets and promoting Wales to the world.

Canada is a growing export market for Wales and in the year to June 2017 Welsh exports to Canada increased by almost 70% on the previous 12 months and were valued at around £392m.

Canada is also a valued inward investor, with over 25 Canadian companies having chosen to set up in Wales in recent years employing over 4,000 people, this includes Montreal-headquartered CGI.

Canadian companies from the ICT, Financial & Professional Services, Aerospace and Manufacturing are seeing Wales as a great place to invest.

The First Minister said:

“The opening of our new office in Montreal highlights the positive and proactive steps we are taking to increase our presence in key global markets such as Canada, and grow trade and inward investment. This has never been more important as we prepare for the unwanted possibility of trade outside of the EU's Customs Union and the Single Market.

“We are also keen to attract more Canadian students to undertake at least part of their studies in Wales. Our new office in Montreal will help us to foster and grow our already strong links with Canadian higher and further education institutions and enable us to attract more Canadian students to study in Wales.”

Currently almost 300 Canadian students are studying at Welsh universities. The opening of the new office in Montreal will help to boost these links and increase the number of Canadian students studying at Welsh further and higher education institutions.

Wales already has strong links with Canadian universities. These include Aberystwyth University's exchange agreement with McGill University, Montréal and Cardiff University's School of Earth Science's Horizon 2020 project with Université Laval in Montréal.