After discussion and due consideration we have decided that as a group of independent veterinary practices we totally oppose the SAC proposal to close the Inverness Disease Surveillance Centre (DSC). In his introduction to the Kinnaird Report Richard Lochhead MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, stated “I commissioned John Kinnaird to conduct this review because I felt that the surveillance system could be strengthened”. It is our considered opinion that closure of Inverness DSC will have the opposite effect and lead to an almost complete eradication of surveillance for a large part of the Scottish land mass which is home to some 25% of Scottish registered agricultural holdings.

The SAC case for closure is based upon the number of sheep and cattle post mortem submissions at the Inverness centre but we believe this to be a flawed argument not accurately reflecting the amount of diagnostic and surveillance work that Inverness DSC carries out. The region served by Inverness DSC is geographically distinct from areas served by other DSCs; holdings within this region primarily have extensive farming practices with low stock density thus fewer disease problems are encountered. In our opinion the actual number of carcass submissions is not important and leads to an erroneous judgement for closure.

In John Kinnaird’s introduction to his report he states that “veterinary surveillance includes diagnosis of farmed and wild animals and birds” but these figures are excluded. In our opinion surveillance is about the maintenance of vigilance, in this situation relating to a large proportion of the Scottish mainland rather than number of submissions.

As a group we have decided that we are not prepared to carry out on-farm post mortem examinations for the purpose of disease surveillance. This decision is based upon concerns regarding accurate diagnosis, lack of competence and experience, cost to the client, inadequate facilities, health and safety issues and professional indemnity. The SAC proposal is that we receive two days’ training to perform this service; an SAC VIO receives one year’s training with mentoring and is involved in post mortem examinations on an almost daily basis. As busy private veterinary surgeons we believe that our level of competence and experience could never match that of a VIO. Many of the practices in this region struggle or are currently struggling to recruit and retain veterinary surgeons willing to work in mixed practice.

We are deeply concerned that under this proposal diagnosis and disease surveillance would be severely compromised and not fit for purpose.

Section 1.9 of the Kinnaird Report states that “An animal disease surveillance programme that is fit for purpose helps to protect the Scottish public from the effects of diseases and infections of animals. These
effects can include direct threats to public health or to the economic success of the rural community and the livestock sector in particular”

The proposal to transport material for submissions to either Thurso, Aberdeen or Perth DSCs is unworkable. Compared to other centres Inverness DSC has the largest number of registered holdings outwith a 50km radius of the centre and the quality of material submitted is already often compromised. None of us would be confident in sending material to these alternative centres.

The third option to build a new “PM only” facility is only viable if VIOs and supporting scientific staff are retained. Surveillance depends upon a relationship between VIOs, private veterinary surgeons and their clients. A resident VIO has knowledge and experience of disease within the whole DSC catchment area and therefore can be alerted to changing disease patterns or the emergence of a new disease at the outset. Private veterinary surgeons would only be aware of such developments within their own practice boundary and so early detection would be lost. The benefit of a resident VIO with local knowledge is also important in the support of disease investigation for practices more remote from the DSC through telephone consultation and on-farm investigations.

It is a matter of grave concern for us that closure of Inverness DSC with almost imminent effect ignores the content of the Kinnaird Report in Section 5.34 which states that “the delivery of dead or diseased animals by livestock owners to local post mortem facilities must be maintained until such time as new systems and structures can be developed and proven to be effective”.

Highland Vets