Eradication of bovine tuberculosis (bTB) is one of the most difficult challenges facing agriculture in Northern Ireland today. Bovine TB poses a huge risk to Northern Ireland’s £1 billion plus export-reliant livestock industry both now and after we exit the EU. It has a devastating impact on many individual farm businesses. The spiralling costs associated with rising disease levels are also an unwanted burden for taxpayers.

In 2014 the TB Strategic Partnership Group (TBSPG) was established by the then Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), Michelle O’Neill MLA to develop a strategy and implementation action plan to bring about a sustained reduction in bTB. Its final report in December 2016 made a number of recommendations on the way forward.

I want to take this opportunity to again thank the Chair Sean Hogan and members of the Group, Dr Cecil McMurray, Dr George McIlroy, Campbell Tweed and John Thompson for their thorough consideration of the issues.

Incidence rates of bTB continue to rise, putting further pressure on farmers, and driving up costs. Compensation and testing costs in our current bTB programme will reach almost £40 million in 2017/18.

Therefore, finding a workable solution is vital. This consultation outlines proposals - developed in response to the TBSPG’s recommendations - designed to reduce, and ultimately eradicate, bTB in Northern Ireland.

When you read this consultation I would urge you to consider it as a package of interdependent measures rather than a number of stand-alone actions.

It is important to note that final decisions as a result of this consultation will be made by Ministers and take into account budget availability.

Your views are essential to this process. The consultation will run until 1st of February 2018 and I urge you to take the opportunity to shape our policy and help us fight this disease.