Thank you for your letter of 17 September 2019 regarding the Scottish Government response to petition PE1662: ‘Improve Treatment for Patients with Lyme Disease and Associated Tick-Borne Diseases’.

The Scottish Government (SG) takes the issue of Lyme disease very seriously and together with Health Protection Scotland (HPS), is committed to raising awareness and supporting those affected with this complex disease.

We completely agree that a consistent Scotland wide approach to messaging is key to ensuring that the public in Scotland have access to accurate advice on ticks and Lyme disease, our national approach to awareness raising is being coordinated through the Lyme borreliosis group, which is part of the Scottish Health Protection Network (SHPN).

The group have produced a number of public facing materials which provide clear, evidence based advice on the risks from ticks and tick borne disease and highlight simple steps people can take to avoid infection. These materials are available through the ‘avoiding bugs and germs outdoors’ web page¹ on NHS Inform, Scotland’s national health information service. This brings together in one place, for the first time, comprehensive advice on how to avoid infections that can be encountered in Scotland’s outdoors, including Lyme disease.

In October 2018 the Scottish Government hosted an outdoor health workshop, which was attended by representatives from 20 outdoor organisations, where we discussed ideas for how we can work together to achieve a more consistent approach to messaging and engaging with the public. Through the Lyme borreliosis group we are working with stakeholders, including Forestry Commission Scotland and Visit Scotland, to explore ways of taking forward these ideas and further promoting the materials which have been produced.

In partnership with Ramblers Scotland, Scottish Government have produced a ‘top tips for avoiding ticks’ video which was used as part of a social media video campaign which ran throughout summer 2018, encouraging young people to enjoy the outdoors, whilst promoting outdoor health messages such as checking for and removing ticks safely². The video was also used to mark Lyme disease awareness month in May.

The Lyme borreliosis group is also actively working to raise awareness of ticks and tick borne diseases amongst health care professionals. This includes the launch of a series of educational resources aimed at health care professionals which can be found on the National Education for Scotland website³. The SHPN also hosted a clinician focussed, national Lyme disease educational event in February 2019.

¹ https://www.nhs-inform.scot/bugs-and-germs
² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqL1p-zJKKQ
In June 2019 the Chief Medical Officer wrote to all NHS Health Boards and GP practices on a Scotland wide basis highlighting the availability of these resources to staff. The letter shares current sources of public facing advice and information about Lyme disease as well as links to current guidance on diagnosis and management.

With regard to a national strategy on Lyme disease, the Lyme borreliosis group is taking forward work to improve awareness of Lyme disease and reduce its burden in Scotland at a national level, we will review in due course whether any additional strategy is also required.

In April 2018 the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published a guideline for the diagnosis and management of Lyme disease. An expert committee, including Scottish representatives, looked at the available evidence on Lyme disease and made a series of recommendations for the diagnosis and management of the disease.

In her letter to NHS Boards in June, the Chief Medical Officer directed healthcare professionals to the NICE guideline on Lyme disease and the associated guidance on antibiotic treatment regimens. We also understand that the NICE guideline has been adopted for use by the by the Scottish Lyme Disease and Tick-borne Infections Reference Laboratory at Raigmore Hospital in Inverness.

In relation to research, there are currently a number of ongoing projects being conducted across Scotland by various research institutions, looking at environmental factors associated with tick numbers and distribution. Examples include modelling to predict range and shift of ticks and Lyme disease with climate change and the role of deer densities in tick-borne pathogen (primarily Borrelia) prevalence in ticks, both funded by Scottish Government Rural and Environmental Science and Analytical Services (RESAS).

In addition to this the European Space Agency is funding the LymeApp project, a collaboration between NHS Highland, Scottish Rural Colleges, Epidemic disease Research Group Oxford, University of Highlands and Islands and Avia GIS. The aim of Lyme App is to provide maps indicating Lyme disease risk in the user’s location and provide medical advice from trusted NHS sources which, when combined, will help customers avoid catching the disease and mitigate the effects of being bitten. The project is currently in the development phase.

Understanding environmental factors affecting tick distribution is key to informing understanding on how numbers can be reduced. Through the Lyme borreliosis group Scottish Government continue to be kept abreast of studies and initiatives including those into the environmental factors associated with tick numbers and distribution, identification of hotspot areas for ticks and collaborative working between colleagues in Scotland and further afield on ways to increase awareness, spread knowledge and introduce innovative solutions to improve the management of tick borne diseases.

The responsibility for management, including grass cutting operations, of Local Authority owned land is the duty of individual Local Authorities. However we do understand that there may be concerns around perceived changes in Local Authority approach to land management that may lead to environments being created for ticks
to thrive. It is therefore important that people adopt suitable personal mitigation measures to avoid being bitten by ticks such as wearing long sleeved tops and trousers, using insect repellent and sticking to paths to avoid dense undergrowth. Also to check for and remove ticks after walking through long grass and other areas where they are likely to be exposed to ticks.