



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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Dear Iain,

Thank you for your email of 1 April on behalf of your constituents about badger culling. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) is a disease with a complex epidemiology, in part because of the presence of a reservoir of infection in wildlife throughout large areas of England. It is important, therefore, to pursue a wide range of evidence-led interventions as part of the Government's strategy to achieve Officially TB Free (OTF) status for England by 2038.

Routine and targeted bTB testing of cattle herds, movement restrictions on infected herds, and rapid detection and removal of cattle testing positive, remain the foundations of the Government's strategy, supported by statutory pre- and post-movement testing of cattle and slaughterhouse surveillance.

To reinforce those measures, on 1 January 2022 we increased the frequency of mandatory surveillance testing throughout England's High-Risk Area from annual to every six-months, with some exceptions for lower risk herds¹. We also remain committed to supporting and strengthening biosecurity to limit the likelihood and severity of bTB breakdowns on cattle farms.

As part of a substantial and wide-ranging research and development programme, with a particular focus on diagnostics and vaccine development, we are working to develop a deployable cattle bTB vaccine. This work is on track to be completed by 2025 and involves trialling the candidate vaccine alongside the candidate diagnostic test to detect infected animals among vaccinated animals (referred to as 'DIVA' test).

As wider measures like cattle vaccines are developed, we will also accelerate other elements of our strategy and start to phase out badger culling in England, as no one wants to continue the cull of a protected species indefinitely. Nevertheless, the culling of badgers for bTB control has been beneficial.

¹ <https://tbhub.co.uk/tb-policy/england/six-monthly-surveillance-testing-of-cattle-herds-in-the-high-risk-area>.

The epidemiological analysis conducted by Downs *et al* (2019)², has shown that the incidence of bTB breakdowns in cattle herds in the first cull areas of Somerset and Gloucestershire has fallen substantially, by 37% and 66% respectively, relative to matched un-culled (comparison) areas.

Badger culling will not be halted immediately. As set out in the Government's response to the January 2021 consultation on proposals to help eradicate bTB³, no new intensive cull licences will be issued after 2022. New supplementary badger culling licences have been limited to a maximum of two years. As set out in its response to Professor Sir Charles Godfray's bTB strategy review⁴, culling would remain an option where epidemiological assessment indicates that it is needed.

As part of our move towards wider badger vaccination, we are introducing several schemes and initiatives. Training courses have been streamlined to make these less time-consuming, more accessible, and affordable. A new 'Train the Trainer' scheme, which allows experienced cage-trappers and lay vaccinators to qualify as trainers and form their own local training hubs, will enable more people to be trained as vaccinators than ever before. In East Sussex we are funding a five-year vaccination scheme, which aims to pilot the deployment of large-scale vaccination by the local farming community. We are also bolstering Government capability to deploy badger vaccination in areas where intensive culling has ended, as well as exploring new ways and opportunities to support and incentivise more farmer-led approaches to vaccinate badgers. We also continue to financially support vaccination in the edge area.

There is no single answer to tackling the scourge of bTB, but by deploying a range of policy interventions, we can continue turning the tide on this disease and achieve our long-term objective of declaring OTF status for England by 2038.

Yours sincerely,

Richard

THE RT HON LORD BENYON

² <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-49957-6>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/Government/consultations/bovine-tuberculosis-proposals-to-help-eradicate-disease-in-england>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/Government/publications/a-strategy-for-achieving-bovine-tuberculosis-free-status-for-england-2018-review>