

Briefing document

Tackling Bovine TB effectively and humanely

RSPCA Cymru welcomes the opportunity to brief Members of the Senedd on our long-standing position on the use of wildlife control in dealing with Bovine TB (bTB). With a new Welsh Government elected, we have identified potential changes in Wales' policy relevant to badger culling as one of the biggest threats to animals here in the coming years. While the RSPCA understands - and agrees - that managing bTB can have a significant impact on farmers' mental health and wellbeing, as well as the health and welfare of their cattle, we remain firmly opposed to badger culling as a solution to tackling the disease. This is based on both scientific and animal welfare evidence.

Badgers are a protected species by law, and are considered one of our most iconic and popular species of native wildlife. England has been culling badgers intensively since 2013, which has resulted in over 247,000 badgers being killed as part of its disease prevention programme. However, there is still **no** scientific consensus that the culling of badgers has been effective in reducing bTB in cattle in England, with a number of recent peer-reviewed studies finding that culling has no effect on bTB incidence in cattle^{1,2,3}. While some stakeholders continue to believe that badgers play a major role in the spread of bTB, the science is now clear and there is consensus that this is incorrect. It is now widely recognised that the majority of bTB is transmitted between cattle, with a growing body of robust scientific evidence showing that the majority of infection occurs within and between herds². Before any policy changes are considered in Wales, RSPCA Cymru is urgently calling for a review of the relevant evidence focused on cattle-based methods that offer more effective, longer-term solutions towards dealing with bTB than the use of unscientific, unethical and inhumane methods such as badger culling.

The relevant data

While the long-term data relevant to bTB in Wales is variable and has a tendency to fluctuate, the [latest statistics](#) provide an encouraging picture. In 2025, the number of new herd instances fell by 5% in comparison to the previous 12 months. On a longer-term basis, the overall trend in the number of new bTB instances since 2009 is [broadly downwards](#), while the rate of bTB incidence has decreased from [8.6%](#) in 2010 to 6.7% as per the latest data.

The number of cattle slaughtered in Wales in 2025 fell by almost 14% in comparison to the previous year following an unprecedentedly high number in 2024. Spikes in the number of cattle slaughtered because of bTB since 2014 in Wales have been consistently linked to strategic use of more [sensitive diagnostic tools](#) such as the Interferon Gamma blood test (IFN). While the Single Intradermal Comparative Cervical Tuberculin (SICCT) test is the primary bTB test used throughout Europe, testing such as IFN is more effective in detecting bTB in the earlier stages of infection, while also being considered more sensitive.

¹ Torgerson et al., 2024a. Absence of effects of widespread badger culling on tuberculosis in cattle. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1), p.16326.

² Torgerson et al., 2024b. RBCT lacks evidence for proactive badger culling effect on tuberculosis in cattle: comment on Mills et al. 2024, Parts I & II. *bioRxiv*.

³ Langton et al., 2022. Analysis of the impact of badger culling on bTB in cattle in the HRA of England, 2009–2020. *Veterinary Record*, 190(6), p.e1384.

Since 2010, new herd incidents of bTB in Wales declined by over [40%](#) without badger culling. In addition, the latest data shows that the number of herds under restriction due to a bTB incident fell by 10% in Wales in 2025, while herd prevalence fell from 5.7% to 5.3% over the same time period. As it stands, **94.7% herds in Wales are currently free from bTB, despite the fact that Wales has not culled badgers since 2012.**

While demonstrable progress has been - and is being - made, we agree that more could be done to accelerate Wales' ambition to be Officially TB Free (OTF). Farmers need to be better supported to take more cost-effective measures⁴ such as improved testing - for routine testing as well as pre and post-movement - restricted herd movement, safer trading and enhanced farm biosecurity⁵. In recent years, Wales has utilised more sensitive diagnostic tools such as the aforementioned IFN test, the removal of Inconclusive Reactors (IRs), lifetime restrictions on resolved IRs, and severe interpretations of the skin test with the intention of clearing up infection and reducing the risk of the disease spreading and breakdowns recurring. Still, a continued focus on better testing is needed. This is particularly key as evidence suggests that **there is a substantial hidden reservoir of infection within herds (up to 50%⁶) which is missed due to insufficient testing in cattle** when using the less conclusive SICCT method.

Calls for the introduction of badger culling in Wales are often justified by comparing the relevant data between Wales and England. While data suggests that England is making better progress than Wales, **evidence^{7,8} cannot separate the effects of badger culling from other disease interventions**, such as enhanced cattle testing, restricted herd movement, and stronger biosecurity measures on farms. As such, any reported benefits or disease reduction from culling cannot be proved and are therefore unevidenced, as supported by a [recent study](#) which failed to identify a meaningful effect of badger culling on bTB cattle herds in England after examining the relevant data. While both Wales and England use the same core diagnostic tool (SICCT), Wales focuses on mandatory annual herd testing across the country while England uses a regionalised risk-based approach. Wales also makes [greater use](#) of the more sensitive IFN test, in addition to SICCT. As such, any difference in approach - and testing frequency - are likely to impact the relevant data from a comparison perspective.

More than half of England's last estimated badger population (247,000+) were culled between 2013 and 2025, with [figures from Defra](#) demonstrating that badger culling cost the public purse at least £23.7 million between 2014-2024. Despite this, bTB persists in England, with the UK Government having [confirmed](#) the end of their badger culling programme last month. The UK Government's change in policy is to end badger culling while still fulfilling its ambition for England to be OTF by 2038. This signals an acknowledgement that lethal badger control is not needed to achieve bTB eradication.

Animal welfare issues in a culling programme

Non-selective culling involves either trapping badgers in cages before shooting them, or the 'controlled shooting' of free-roaming badgers at night. While both methods present animal welfare problems such as disruption to local badger populations, the latter is considered particularly inhumane, as it has the potential to cause slow and painful deaths by injuring badgers as opposed to killing them outright, potentially leaving them with bullet wounds, blood loss and organ failure. 76% (189,910 of the 247,000+) of the badgers culled in England since 2013 were subjected to controlled shooting. An [independent review](#) commissioned by the UK Government in 2014 concluded that between 7.4% - 22.8% of badgers shot

⁴ Voller et al., 2025. Can biosecurity on farms reduce bTB risks in cattle in England? A review of observational and literature-based evidence. *Vet Record*, 196(1), n-o.

⁵ Astley, K.L., 2021. Routes for the potential transmission of bovine tuberculosis in the farmed environment. MSc Thesis

⁶ Nuñez-García et al., (2018). Meta-analyses of the sensitivity and specificity of ante-mortem and post-mortem diagnostic tests for bTB in the UK and Ireland. *Preventive Veterinary Medicine*, 153, 94-107.

⁷ Downs, S.H., Prosser, A., Ashton, A., Ashfield, S., Brunton, L.A., Brouwer, A., Upton, P., Robertson, A., Donnelly, C.A. and Parry, J.E., 2019. Assessing effects from four years of industry-led badger culling in England on the incidence of bovine tuberculosis in cattle, 2013–2017. *Scientific Reports*, 9(1), p.14666.

⁸ Birch, C.P., Bakrania, M., Prosser, A., Brown, D., Withenshaw, S.M. and Downs, S.H., 2024. Difference in differences analysis evaluates the effects of the badger control policy on bovine tuberculosis in England. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1), p.4849.

using this method during the initial pilot culls in England were still alive after five minutes. This suggests between 14,053 and 43,299 badgers suffered an inhumane death. With ethical wildlife principles deeming that lethal methods should only be used as a last resort, we call for this to be considered in future bTB policy, with Wales being home to around [61,000](#) badgers.

The TAG and bTB Programme Board

The Welsh Government's efforts to tackle Bovine TB are supported by a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and the Bovine TB Programme Board. The latter recently published a [paper](#) which confirmed that the aforementioned TAG is currently considering evidence relevant to wildlife and bTB before reporting to the Board. It is vital that this research is completed before any further discussions around badger culling occur to ensure that any subsequent decisions are evidence-based, as opposed to being political. While the aforementioned paper states that the Welsh Government is set to miss its current target for Wales to be OTF by 2041, it does not endorse badger culling. Instead, it calls for 'further investigation' relevant to 'epidemiological-led interventions to tackle the disease in wildlife'. The paper also states that 'more surveillance and research is needed to provide comprehensive data and evidence to inform the development of appropriate policy for disease control in all species affected'.

Furthermore, the paper states that the Board and TAG is calling for investigation as to whether the current testing regime and policy on cattle movement is fit for purpose. This is particularly encouraging as this recognises that the vast majority of bTB is transmitted from cattle-cattle, as noted above. As it stands, all cattle over 42 days of age moving from an unrestricted holding in Wales need to have a clear pre-movement test (PMT) within the 60 days before the move. Meanwhile, all cattle imported into Wales require a PMT 60-120 days after arrival. Further investigation by the Board and/or TAG could help determine if these requirements are sufficient or as to whether any relevant policy changes could lead to further improvements.

Finally, the aforementioned paper notes the importance of the TAG and Board **remaining strictly independent of political influence** - the continuation of such an approach is paramount if Wales is to reach its intended OTF status in an evidence-based manner in the coming years.

Conclusion

The RSPCA wishes to see a humane, sustainable solution to managing bTB. While the evidence relevant to bTB is still contested, there is a general consensus that the most important steps to reducing bTB are: (1) the use and approval/validation of existing more sensitive and specific tests for accurately identifying cattle that have bTB, (2) strict controls on cattle movement, (3) enhanced biosecurity on farms, (4) less risky trading, and (5) the development of a cattle vaccination programme. Importantly, this more effective approach does not involve culling badgers. The science tells us that transmission of the disease between cattle is a far more significant issue than badger to cattle transmission, and that there is an undetected reservoir of the disease in cattle that the current testing regime is not – and is not capable of – picking up. It is critical that any changes in the Welsh Government's approach towards tackling bTB are evidence-based and use robust scientific data, as opposed to being based on perception and confirmation bias. As such, we would welcome the opportunity to use our scientific knowledge and expertise to support the new Welsh Government to tackle bTB in a way which does not needlessly pose a threat to one of our most misunderstood species of wildlife.