

Briefing document

Reform UK debate - bovine TB, July 2026

To propose that the Senedd:

- 1. Notes the continued financial, emotional, and animal welfare impact of bovine TB on Welsh farming families and rural communities.*
- 2. Recognises that bovine TB is a complex disease with multiple routes of transmission, including cattle-to-cattle transmission and infection from wildlife.*
- 3. Regrets that the current approach has failed to command the confidence of many farmers and has not delivered the progress needed towards eradication.*
- 4. Calls on the Welsh Government to:*
 - a) maintain robust biosecurity standards;*
 - b) draw on the advice of the TB Technical Advisory Group in developing a new approach to managing bovine TB;*
 - c) recognise wildlife as a source of infection;*
 - d) enable scientifically validated control methods; and*
 - e) ensure that, in the event that the TB Technical Advisory Group recommends targeted wildlife control, including culling, such recommendations are given full and proper consideration and, where supported by the evidence, form part of the Welsh Government's approach to bovine TB eradication.*

Introduction

RSPCA Cymru welcomes the opportunity to brief Members of the Senedd ahead of Wednesday (the 15th of July)'s debate on bovine TB (bTB). As one of the only animal welfare charities with equal scientific and applied expertise in both cattle and wildlife management, the RSPCA is keen to play a constructive role in this debate and the formation of any future policy relevant to bTB control in Wales. The RSPCA acknowledges the wide-reaching impacts of the disease on farmers, rural communities and animal welfare, as noted by point 1 in the motion above. However, we remain firmly opposed to badger culling as a solution to tackling the bTB, based on both scientific and animal welfare evidence. With bTB being a zoonotic disease, it has the potential to be passed between, and carried by, various species as noted by point 2 in the motion above. **Nevertheless, the main transmission of bTB is between cattle, with this accounting for over [94% of infection in herds](#).** As such, any focus on wildlife control risks perpetuating a damaging narrative about the effectiveness of culling, and diverting resources, funds and action away from essential cattle-based measures which need prioritising if Wales is to become Officially TB Free (OTF) in the coming years.

The evidence

bTB has already been raised on several occasions since the formation of the new Welsh Government and Senedd, by parties for and against badger culling. While the impact of the previous Welsh Government's approach has been debated, [data and statistics](#) provide concrete evidence that progress is being, and has been made in Wales, regardless of political conclusions. This includes the notion that this approach has

'not delivered the progress needed towards eradication' as noted by point 3 in the motion above, as consistent reductions in new herd instance, overall herd instance and herd prevalence are highly important in terms of achieving eradication.

Since the previous Welsh Government announced its decision to stop culling badgers in March 2012, the following has been achieved **without any lethal wildlife control**:

- **The number of new herd instances have more than halved.** The number of new instances recorded in the 12 months to March 2012 was 1,076 while 479 instances were recorded in the 12 months to March 2026. This equates to a reduction of more than 55%.
- The number of overall herd incidence has fallen from 9.9 in the 12 months to March 2012 to 5.7 in the 12 months to March 2026. This equates to **a reduction of more than 40%** and means that herd incidence is currently at its lowest since December 2006.
- Herd prevalence is currently at 4.7% while it was at 6.4% at the end of March 2012. As it stands, **herd prevalence in Wales is currently at its lowest since January 2017.**

While references to the number of cattle slaughtered have also been made over this Senedd term, this number [decreased by over a fifth \(21%\)](#) in the 12 months to March 2026 in comparison to the previous year. As it stands, **almost 95% of herds in Wales are currently free from bTB, under a 14 year programme which focused on reducing cattle-cattle transmission as opposed to culling badgers.**

'Following the science'

The importance of 'following the science' has previously been raised in the Senedd in relation to bTB. While we appreciate this sentiment, **there is no scientific consensus** that the culling of badgers is effective in dealing with bTB and it is important that this is acknowledged and recognised by MSs across the Senedd.

There are a growing number of recent peer-reviewed studies which have looked at the impact of badger culling in England and have concluded that (i) badger culling is ineffective in reducing bTB in cattle, and that (ii) badgers are not a reservoir of the disease. These include:

- [Langton et al., \(2022\)](#). This peer-reviewed paper published by the Vet Record analysed UK Government data between 2009 and 2020 and concluded that badger culling is ineffective in dealing with bTB. This paper attributes the decline in the disease in England to cattle-based measures. The study also notes that in 9 out of 10 countries it studied, bTB had already peaked and begun to fall before badger culling commenced.
- [Tolegerson et al., \(2024\)](#): This study concluded that there is 'no evidence of an effect of badger culling on the incidence of bovine tuberculosis in cattle herds' and that England's badger cull had an 'inadequate scientific basis'. The study also called for a shift to cattle-based biosecurity.
- [Akhmetova et al., \(2023\)](#): This study looked at whole genome sequencing of bTB and disease transmission within badger groups, within herds, and between badgers and cattle. The research found that cattle were driving the epidemic, that transmission from cattle to badger was more common than badger to cattle, and that badger-to-badger transmission was not playing a major role in transmitting bTB.

[Birch et al., \(2024\)](#) and [Downs et al., \(2019\)](#) are two studies frequently used to justify the lethal control of badgers to tackle bTB. Both studies conflate badger culling with other cattle measures in place at the same time, including enhanced biosecurity and improved testing in cattle. The authors acknowledge that they were unable to determine whether badger culling is effective in reducing bTB in cattle.

Only choosing to focus on science which supports political intentions - regardless as to which way they fall - risks the development of policy that is unevidenced and does not deliver the intended effects. While the relevant scientific evidence around badger culling is contested, the importance of cattle-based measures is not. As such, we support the point a) of the motion which calls on the Welsh Government to 'maintain robust biosecurity standards' as this is vital in terms of tackling and eradicating bTB. As well as

maintaining good biosecurity standards, improvements should also be made where needed; for example by adding simple hygiene measures such as foot dips, disinfecting shared equipment, or preventing neighbouring herds having fenceline contact. In relation to the other cattle based measures which have shown to be effective, these include improved testing (for routine surveillance, as well as pre and post-movement), restricted herd movement and safer trading.

[Animal welfare issues relevant to wildlife control](#)

While the motion above makes references to 'scientifically-validated' control methods, 'scientifically-validated' does not always equate to being good for animal welfare. 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 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. While the motion above rightly recognises the impact of bTB on animal welfare, consideration also needs to be given in relation to the animal welfare impacts any future cull would have on wildlife. While references to the removal of infected wildlife to protect their welfare have been made in [the Senedd](#), methods such as non-selective shooting also target healthy wildlife.

[The TAG and bTB Programme Board](#)

As acknowledged in the motion above by point b) and e), the Welsh Government's efforts to tackle Bovine TB are supported by a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and the Bovine TB Programme Board. These two groups were formed by the previous Welsh Government to provide them with independent, strategic advice in relation to bTB. As confirmed in a [paper published in March](#), both groups are currently considering the evidence relevant to wildlife and bTB. The Cabinet Minister for Rural Resilience and Sustainability, Llyr Gruffydd MS, recently [acknowledged](#) this research and relayed the importance of allowing this work to be completed before any decisions are made. With the motion above technically calling on the Welsh Government to 'enable scientifically-validated control' methods relevant to wildlife ahead of the publication of these groups' findings via point d), the timing of this debate could be considered premature. To ensure that the Welsh Government and Senedd's approach is entirely evidence-based, it is vital that the Programme Board and TAG are given the opportunity to complete their research without being subjected to any external and/or political pressure. In the aforementioned paper, the importance of the TAG and Board **remaining strictly independent of political influence** was noted and it is vital that this is adhered to. It is also important that all of the recommendations in the paper are noted, as opposed to only those which support certain political agendas. For example, the paper states: "The eradication strategy should be cost effective, using a suite of measures that cause the least amount of harm to the least amount of animals, livestock or wildlife, and all actions must be informed by scientific evidence". While the paper notes that there is evidence that "wildlife is part of the disease epidemiology" it also states "that 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". The findings from this paper therefore suggest that the Welsh Government - or any political party - is not currently in a position to commit or call for any form of wildlife control in Wales in an evidence-based manner without the surveillance and research the Programme Board and TAG has called for, which is currently being undertaken.

Conclusion

1. The RSPCA understands - and agrees - that managing bTB can have a significant impact on farmers' mental health and wellbeing, upon rural communities and animal welfare. We therefore agree with this section.
2. While we agree with point 2 that bovine TB is a complex disease with 'multiple routes of transmission, including cattle-to-cattle transmission and infection from wildlife', it is important to emphasise that these two routes of transmission are not equal. As noted above, the vast majority of transmission is cattle-cattle, therefore the focus needs to remain on reducing disease spread within and between herds, as opposed to scapegoating species of wildlife.
3. In terms of point 3, we disagree that the 'current approach has not delivered the progress needed towards eradication' as the relevant data and statistics noted above prove otherwise. Consistent reductions in new herd instances, overall instances and herd prevalence are vital in the journey towards eradication and these are being currently made.
 - a) The RSPCA supports the motion's calls on the Welsh Government to "maintain robust biosecurity standards" as this is very much-needed in relation to tackling the spread of bTB on farms and through trading. We would actually call for these to be improved, as opposed to maintained, to further support Wales' journey towards becoming OTF.
 - b) With the purpose of the TAG being to provide independent scientific advice to the Welsh Government, we agree their role in the development of Wales' policies relevant to bTB is highly important. However, with the data and statistics noted above demonstrating that significant progress has been made regardless of the previous Welsh Government's decision not to cull badgers, we do not agree that an entirely 'new approach' is needed. Diverting away from the measures that have helped secure this indisputable progress risks seeing the gains that have been made lost, and essentially worsening the situation for both farmers and their animals, as well as wildlife.
 - c) Wildlife being a potential source of infection is not disputed. The question is less about whether wildlife is a source of infection, and more about whether badger culling/wildlife control is effective in dealing with bTB. As noted above, there is no scientific consensus in this respect, with some studies finding that it is ineffective.
 - d) It is our view that calling on the Welsh Government to commit to 'scientifically-validated control methods' prior to the completion of the aforementioned research is wholly inappropriate. We therefore do not support this section of the motion.
 - e) With the relevant evidence still being considered by the two groups which are responsible for analysing and reporting to the Welsh Government, this point is entirely hypothetical, and borderline preemptive. When the TAG and Board publishes its research, it is important that all stakeholders are given an opportunity to properly consider it before any decisions are made to ensure that they are entirely evidence-based. Calling on the Welsh Government and Senedd to approve anything that may/may not happen before it does without the relevant detail and context that will only be available once the research is published, is, again, wholly inappropriate.

Recommendation: Because of our concerns with this motion, as noted above - especially in reaction to the relevant evidence not having been published by the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and the Bovine TB Programme Board - we recommend that all Members of the Senedd **reject this motion**.