

NOTE: to be read in conjunction with the BVA position on the control and eradication of bovine Tuberculosis

BVA Bovine Tuberculosis and Covid-19 impact assessment

Introduction

The outbreak of Covid-19 has had a detrimental effect on global healthcare systems with consequences for almost every aspect of life.

During the period of restrictions, veterinary professionals have been working in line with government advice and guidance from the RCVS¹ and BVA². Many of the services provided by vets have been able to continue where they are essential for the protection of animal health, animal welfare, public health and the supply of food.

However, social distancing guidance has had far-reaching consequences for all aspects of veterinary work in the short, medium and longer term. This document is focussed specifically on the effect of the restrictions on the control of bovine Tuberculosis (bTB). During the period of restrictions to date, adherence to social distancing requirements has affected the bTB control programmes operating in the four nations of the UK. This will have consequences across all relevant species: cattle, badgers, and other farmed and wild species.

There is considerable uncertainty about how long restrictions will continue, how they will be lifted and what the wider social, economic, environmental, and political impacts will be. New evidence about Covid-19 is constantly emerging but remains limited. This policy position considers evidence of the effects to date and establishes principles for continued bTB controls through this period.

In the UK, the devolved administrations have responsibility for bTB policy. The devolved governments of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are also responsible for key public services affected by the pandemic, including the NHS, education, and public transport, and for implementing the lockdown within their territories. Hence, there are likely to be differences across the UK, both in terms of the general response to Covid-19 and the specific response in relation to bTB. Ideally there would be consistency in approach and messaging to provide clarity to vets and farmers, particularly those whose work crosses the borders of the UK.

Guiding principles:

- Minimising the spread of Covid-19 remains the top priority for everyone. Public health, including the safety of veterinary team members and clients, remains paramount.
- Veterinary work should be carried out as safely as possible, including practising social distancing and good biosecurity. Where 2m distancing is not possible, risks of Covid-19 transmission should be assessed and managed.
- Government policy should take into account of the likely effect of social distancing on bTB control measures, and ensure any potential interventions are assessed and the appropriate choices made.

¹ Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, Flowchart - guidance for clinical practices during COVID-19 <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus-covid-19/flowchart-guidance-for-clinical-practices-during-covid-19/>

² British Veterinary Association, Guidance for veterinary practices in providing essential veterinary care during the Covid-19 pandemic <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/3434/bva-guidance-for-veterinary-practices-on-covid-19-from-14-april-2020-final.pdf>

- Where possible, disease surveillance and controls should be continued across all species, with appropriate social distancing. This is important to ensure bTB infection does not spread undetected – halting or reversing progress that has been made by the UK's bTB control programmes.
- Veterinary practice must be sustainable for the future provision of animal health and welfare and public health.

Recommendations:

- **The four governments of the United Kingdom should build on existing structures to ensure ongoing cooperation and collaboration on bTB during the period of restrictions.**
- **Government should continue to model and then measure the likely and observed impact of Covid-19 on the bTB epidemic so that both current and future policy can be adjusted to take this into account as promptly as is practical.**

Cattle controls

Adherence to social distancing guidance will have wide-ranging and systematic consequences in the short, medium and longer term for the control of bTB infection in the cattle population.

Short term: The effects of limited testing

In the short term, the largest concern is the impact of limited cattle testing. Any reduction in testing increases the risk of undetected infection that could spread within herds and to contiguous holdings.

Authorities in Great Britain (APHA) and Northern Ireland (DAERA), have issued guidance to support the safe provision of bTB testing of cattle by Official Veterinarians (OVs) during the period of restrictions.

OVs have been given guidance to continue bTB testing across Great Britain,³ but only where this can be carried out safely in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. If the OV considers that social distancing cannot be maintained, the test is not undertaken. In Northern Ireland, the default position is that bTB testing visits should no longer be carried out.⁴ Tests may only continue if they can be done safely in accordance with public health guidance. Because of these changes, the proportion of routine, clearing, pre- and post-movement tests that have been undertaken across the UK has decreased, but not necessarily consistently across nations and regions.

Government has provided pragmatic mitigations that allow more testing to continue for more cattle herds while upholding social distancing guidance. One specific change that was called for by both BVA and BCVA has been approved in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Calves under 180 days old at the start of a routine or targeted herd surveillance TB test can be excluded from skin testing in officially TB free herds if, in the vet's judgement, they can't be tested safely in line with social distancing.⁵ In Scotland, normal TB testing procedures still apply.

In England and Wales, OV instructions⁶ have been issued for herds where Officially TB Free status has been suspended (OTFS) or withdrawn (OTFW). A temporary amendment will allow further herd testing to be scheduled even though some or all eligible calves under 180 days old have not been tested. When eligible animals under 180 days old have been excluded from a test due to the requirement to maintain social distancing, the test will be considered a check test and a further Short Interval Testing (SIT) will be required. These changes are necessary as calves at this age are of a size where most handling facilities will not be suitable. As a result, a manual restraint is needed to hold the animal in place while

³ [14/20 - Advice for OVs undertaking TB testing during the COVID-19 outbreak in Wales](#) - to be read in conjunction with [06/20](#) and [07/20](#) - 01 April 2020 - updated 16 April 2020; [13/20 - Advice for OVs undertaking TB testing during the COVID-19 outbreak in Scotland](#) - to be read in conjunction with [06/20](#) and [07/20](#) - 01 April 2020 - updated 16 April 2020; [12/20 - Advice for OVs undertaking TB testing during the COVID-19 outbreak in England](#) - replaces 08/20 - to be read in conjunction with [06/20](#) and [07/20](#) - 01 April 2020 - updated 16 April 2020

⁴ DAERA, [Testing for bovine Tuberculosis during COVID-19 pandemic updated](#) 01/05/2020

⁵ [17/20 - Advice for OVs on a temporary amendment to testing bovine animals under 180 days old in Officially TB-Free herds in England and Wales during the Coronavirus outbreak](#) - 04 May 2020 - updated 7 May 2020

⁶ [19/20 - Advice for OVs on TB testing bovine animals under 180 days old in herds with an ongoing TB incident in England and Wales during the Coronavirus outbreak](#) - 14 May 2020

the vet administers the test and later readings are taken. Consequently, testing these animals is often not possible while maintaining a safe two-metre distance.

This change supports the continued testing of the vast majority of cattle during the period of restrictions while upholding the primacy of human health through the maintenance of social distancing. This will reduce the opportunity for infection to spread undetected in herds. Evidence gathered by government suggests that the infection risk posed by calves of this age is small. This change is pragmatic and welcome for the short term. However, longer term an inability to provide the complete level of assurance that comes from testing full herds may have significant consequences. There will be an increased risk of undetected infection, which may limit the ability to trade internationally. If social distancing measures are required longer term, there may be a need for facilities on farm to be upgraded to support the testing of calves under 180 days.

Across the UK the single intradermal comparative cervical tuberculin test (SICCT) is the primary test used as part of government bTB control programmes. After SICCT, the most commonly used test is the gamma interferon test. The use of this test requires one visit unlike SICCT, where a follow-up vet visit is needed to read the results. Fewer on-farm visits is preferable as this minimises social contact. If the period of restrictions is longer term, wider use of the gamma test to supplement the SICCT test could be explored for pre- or post-movement testing where the risk of bTB infection is limited.

The impact of limited testing over the period of time restrictions last is uncertain. There are concerns that a surge in bTB cases in 2002 was linked to a pause in bTB testing during the Foot and Mouth epidemic. However, a full explanation for the increase in cases has not been proven. Government should seek to develop an evidence base to model what that impact is likely to be to devise an approach to limiting any longer-term effects.

Recommendations

- **Government should continue to engage with veterinary and farming organisations to develop pragmatic mitigations to the bTB testing regime that allow testing to continue while upholding social distancing requirements. These changes should be evidence-based and minimise the risk of infection going undetected.**
- **The impact of limited testing over the period of time restrictions last is uncertain. Government should seek to develop an evidence base to model what that impact is likely to be to devise an approach to limiting any longer-term effects from a return to normal control measures.**

Medium term: The relationship between farmers and vets

The veterinary profession is highly regarded as trusted advisors to livestock farmers. Measures to eradicate bTB are strengthened when farmers and their private vets work together. Consequently, strengthening collaboration between farmers and their private vets can be pivotal in achieving changes in farmer attitudes and decision making.

However, during the period of restrictions, the contact between vets and farmers will be minimised to uphold social distancing measures. This reduced contact presents a barrier to the role of the vet as a trusted advisor.

Trust can be further undermined during this period. This is because the decision as to whether a bTB test is safe to proceed in line with public health guidance is framed as that of the testing vet. There are concerns that the vet may be seen as the barrier to a test being performed which may result in the farmer being unable to trade cattle. This may adversely affect the vital relationship of trust between farmer and vet, which may reduce the effectiveness of the private vet as a facilitator of future behavioural change. This will be different across the regions of the UK, where testing requirements and social distancing guidelines will vary.

Joint messaging between veterinary organisations and farming unions have been prioritised to provide clear messages to both farmers and vets explaining the importance of social distancing and practical guidance on how this should be carried out on farm.⁷

Recommendations

- **Guidance is needed to clarify the balance of responsibility between government, vet, and farmer in determining if testing should go ahead.**
- **Clear messaging and guidance to support social distancing on farm is essential. Veterinary and farming organisations should provide consistent and coordinated advice to ensure the shared responsibility for social distancing on farm is understood and followed.**

Longer term: The viability of veterinary practices

To comply with strict social distancing measures, only essential work is being carried out by veterinary surgeons to support animal welfare and maintain the food supply chain. This means veterinary practices are experiencing a profound loss of income. At the same time, veterinary practices, that have a professional and ethical obligation to provide 24/7 emergency care, must continue to employ enough staff to provide this service.

Social distancing whilst undertaking bTB testing can add time and resource to the procedure. For example, where clients are self-isolating or confirmed to have Covid-19 and there are no other farm staff available, this may require vets to take a second member of practice staff to assist in moving livestock and ensuring their health and safety.

The financial package that the UK and devolved governments have made available to businesses and workers during this time is unprecedented and largely welcomed. However, in many ways, this package does not cover the unique circumstances of veterinary practices, and this is a significant concern. Consequently, veterinary businesses are struggling to cover their overheads during this time, and some may not survive to continue to provide their vital services longer term.

Governments in the UK rely on private veterinary practices to deliver key aspects of bTB control and eradication strategies including testing, herd health planning and biosecurity advice. The loss of veterinary practices as a result of the current pandemic will have a significant long-term impact on the control of bTB across the UK.

Recommendation

- **Veterinary practices must be able to provide their vital bTB services both during this period of restrictions and into the future. Government should ensure financial support is available to the sector.**

Badger controls

During the period of restrictions to date, adherence to social distancing requirements has affected the badger control efforts in the UK. However, the Welsh “badger found dead” survey has continued, ensuring no gaps in surveillance data, although wider factors may have an influence on the survey data. For example, reduced traffic as a result of restrictions may result in fewer badger carcasses to test.

Surveillance and controls should be continued where possible, with appropriate social distancing to ensure bTB infection does not spread undetected and halt or reverse the gains that have been made.

Recommendation

- **If necessary, government should engage with relevant stakeholders to develop pragmatic changes in badger control programmes (surveillance, culling, vaccination) which allow**

⁷ BVA, [Coronavirus advice for farm vets, farmers and livestock keepers](#); [NFU Briefing: Covid-19 social distancing on a farm](#); [NFU farm checklist for social distancing and cleaning protocols](#); [Farmer's Union of Wales: coronavirus update](#)

these to continue while upholding social distancing requirements. These changes should be evidence-based and minimise the risk of infection spreading to cattle while ensuring the humaneness of controls is not undermined.

Other species

The pathology and epidemiology of bTB infection and disease can vary considerably across susceptible species. There are also wider social and economic factors between and within different sectors, and it is important to be mindful of the differing relationships that keepers will have to their animals. Within each species there are a wide range of keepers, from large scale farmers to those who have a relationship that is more akin to that of a pet owner. There are also susceptible animals kept as part of zoo collections. Therefore, the consequences of delays in the bTB testing regime will vary between and within different sectors.

In some instances, such as large commercial goat farms, clinical disease can spread very rapidly. This could be exacerbated by Covid-19 restrictions if infection is not detected early because of delays to post-mortem examination on animals with suspected clinical disease or as part of the routine abattoir surveillance. In addition to the obvious disease control problems, there are also potential occupational zoonotic implications and milk contamination if disease becomes established.

The ability to social distance while testing varies considerably depending on the species and facilities available on farm or in zoos. Therefore, testing of live animals for bTB may prove difficult.

Recommendation

- **Government should enact clear and consistent protocols for bTB in species other than cattle and badgers. These protocols should consider the differences between and within sectors and allow for appropriate veterinary risk assessment.**