A step change in tackling bovine TB (bTB) in Wales: Cattle, People & Wildlife - Advice from the Bovine TB Eradication Programme Board

The Welsh Government's response

Executive Summary

The Welsh Government welcomes the Programme Board's paper and supports the direction set out in its advice. The advice provides a strong basis for the next phase of the Bovine TB Eradication Programme in Wales, with an increased emphasis on a holistic approach across cattle, people and wildlife, informed by evidence and responsive to local epidemiological circumstances.

This response moves us from advice to action, beginning work immediately where this can be done responsibly, while developing the evidence necessary to make sound longer-term decisions.

Initial actions include:

- Identifying priority evidence and knowledge gaps.
- Epidemiological analysis and modelling.
- Developing targeted badger population survey work where evidence gaps justify it.
- Advancing deer surveillance.
- Exploring safe outlets for cattle from TB restricted herds.
- Developing options relating to persistent breakdown herds including:
    - additional diagnostic testing
    - farmer and veterinary advice
    - data and risk information.

These will form part of a phased programme extending through 2027, and beyond. It will inform the development of policy options and any consultation required - and provide the basis for a new Bovine TB Eradication Plan.

Introduction

The Welsh Government welcomes the considered advice of the Bovine TB Eradication Programme Board and its call for a step change in the pace and delivery of TB eradication in Wales. The programme has evolved progressively as the evidence and our understanding of the disease have developed and placed greater emphasis on partnership working - including the establishment of renewed governance through the Bovine TB Eradication Programme Board and Technical Advisory Group.

The Board's most recent advice provides an important opportunity to build on these foundations, and we support the direction of science- and evidence-led, holistic approach across cattle, people and wildlife, combining effective national controls with proportionate local action, as appropriate. We will develop a new TB Eradication

Plan which follows these principles, with an adaptive partnership approach at its heart.

There are actions that will be implemented in the shorter term, including:

- A choice of approaches for enhanced management of persistent breakdown herds.
- Changes to cattle testing.
- Working with industry to explore options for safe outlets for cattle moved from restricted herds.
- Developing a new approach to advice on TB for farmers and vets.
- Increased farmer and local private vet involvement in managing TB risk at herd level.
- Improved access to data, risk information and ibTB (interactive TB mapping tool).
- Collection of data on the role of wildlife in TB to inform targeted and proportionate interventions, where these would be supported by evidence.
- Use of epidemiological analyses and modelling to understand drivers of disease transmission and to inform interventions.

Background

The Bovine TB Eradication Programme was first introduced by a previous Welsh Government in 2008. It has progressively introduced controls informed by consultation and gathering evidence.

This approach has delivered significant long-term improvement, which continues. At the end of June 2026, 95.7% of Welsh herds were TB free. There had been 477 new incidents in the preceding 12 months, 59.7% fewer than the 2009 level, while the number of herds under restriction had fallen by 71.1% over the same period. Herd prevalence had reduced from 7.8% in 2009 to 4.3% in June 2026 (Table 1).

Table 1: Wales TB position, June 2026 (latest published statistics) compared to 2009

	12 months to December 2009	12 months to June 2026	% change
New Incidents	1,185	477	59.7% decrease
Animals Slaughtered	11,655	10,090	13.4% decrease
Herds under restriction	2,268	655	71.1% decrease
Herd Prevalence	7.8%	4.3%	44.9% decrease

These improvements over the long-term should be considered alongside continuing variations in disease both spatially and over time, and that TB continues to present a complex challenge. Table 2 below shows data compared to the previous 12 months, with continued reductions.

Table 2: Recent changes in principal indicators of bovine TB across Wales

	12 months to June 2025	12 months to June 2026	% change
New Incidents	616	477	22.6% decrease
Animals Slaughtered	13,032	10,090	22.6% decrease
Herds under restriction	835	655	21.2% decrease
Herd Prevalence	5.7%	4.3%	24.6% decrease

Whilst these figures demonstrate sustained progress, the Programme Board's Position Paper concludes that, on the basis of current disease trends, Wales is unlikely to meet its 2041 target without a significant acceleration in progress. It calls for a step change in effort, resources and holistic policy interventions across the three pillars of cattle, people and wildlife, combining national controls with targeted, proportionate local action, supported with evidence, modelling, partnership working and clear evaluation.

Regionalisation: tailoring response to disease risk

Wales refreshed its TB eradication strategy in 2017, set a target of 2041 to be officially TB-free, and established a regionalised approach to disease control. This recognised how a uniform national response does not reflect the significant geographical differences in disease risk. The Wales TB areas can be viewed here: Wales TB Regionalisation | DataMapWales

The 2023 Delivery Plan built on progress, placing greater emphasis on partnership working between Welsh Government, the farming industry and the veterinary profession. It introduced the ‘Pembrokeshire Project’ promoting farmer/veterinary engagement and established the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) in 2024 to provide independent expert scientific and technical advice. The Bovine TB Eradication Programme Board followed, bringing together farmers, vets, farming unions and representation from conservation and wildlife organisations, drawing practical expertise into the development of policy.

Government response to ‘A step change in tackling bTB in Wales'

The Welsh Government welcomes and supports the advice of the Programme Board. We agree that a step change in the pace and delivery of TB eradication is needed. No single measure will eradicate bovine TB - we must work constructively together and address all routes of infection, considering cattle, people and wildlife together rather than treating each in isolation.

The advice of the Programme Board builds on a programme that has evolved with scientific evidence, epidemiological understanding and practical experience. Our principle is straightforward: intervention should follow the disease. Effective national controls and targeted, proportionate local approaches will both have a role, reflecting the risks in particular places. Equally, this is not a programme Government can, or should, deliver on its own. Success requires farmers, private vets, APHA, scientists, stakeholders and Government to work, understand and deliver policy together.

We will begin scoping and assessment work across all of the advice provided by the Programme Board. Some activities can be progressed immediately, others will require further evidence, modelling, co-design and assessment. Consultation or legislative change may also be required. Nonetheless, our renewed approach will be to act and adapt, making progress where we can while undertaking further work in parallel. Decisions will draw on ongoing research and epidemiological evidence and modelling developed by APHA and other experts.

This reflects the Programme Board's advice: develop and understand the evidence, model proposed changes, understand the trade-offs and risks, and introduce interventions in an appropriate sequence. Every intervention must have clear evidence and measures of success so that we know what is working, can adapt where necessary and can demonstrate value for money.

This work starts now. Through the remainder of 2026 and into 2027, we will scope, assess, cost and develop the seven priority activities identified by the Programme Board, which relate to cattle, people and wildlife. We will move from advice to action, progressing measures that can responsibly be taken forward while building the evidence for further decisions. Changes must safeguard disease control, the health and welfare of animals and people, business continuity and remain affordable and deliverable.

Responding to the Programme Board's immediate priorities

1. The Programme Board advise that a choice of approaches for enhanced management of persistent breakdown herds is made available

Persistent breakdown herds (or so-called EMPBs) should be a priority group for accelerated action. Farmers, working closely with their own private vet, should be given the informed choice to:

i. Continue with existing Enhanced Management of Persistent Breakdown protocols, or,
ii. Adopt a new approach to manage TB infection out of their herd through the identification and managed exit of high-risk cattle using TB test data, alongside other measures such as herd biosecurity. The use of private, non-statutory testing such as ancillary blood tests should also be expanded in these herds to allow more proactive disease management.

Welsh Government response: Develop and make available a choice of approach for enhanced management of persistent breakdown herds

We will prioritise the development of an alternative approach to persistent breakdown herds, giving choice to farmers and their veterinarians to be able to play a more active role in managing disease and risk within affected persistent breakdown herds.

We will draw on the Pembrokeshire, North Wales and Nant y Garth projects, alongside veterinary and epidemiological evidence, to develop and assess alternative approaches.

We will assess changes to testing intervals, additional diagnostic tests, biosecurity, movement restrictions and managed pathways for higher-risk animals as a coherent package, not as isolated measures. Before substantive policy change, we will evaluate their combined implications for disease risk, animal health, business continuity, delivery capacity and the wider statutory regime.

In line with the Board's recommendation, any move to longer intervals between herd-level skin tests will be subject to veterinary and epidemiological assessment.

2. The Programme board advise that options should be developed for the use of different statutory and non-statutory TB tests for surveillance, breakdown management and cattle movement risk reduction

While statutory herd skin testing should be maintained, farmers and vets should be given more choice in TB testing to support earlier detection and improved risk management. For example, allowing access to privately funded ancillary TB testing during breakdowns and in Officially TB Free (OTF) herds would help identify infection earlier and support risk-based decision-making.

Welsh Government response: Advance options for use of ancillary tests for cattle in different settings

We will develop options to use statutory and non-statutory tests effectively for surveillance, breakdown management and cattle movement-risk reduction, while maintaining statutory herd skin testing.

We will work with Defra to develop and align policies and delivery approaches to provide greater access to ancillary non-statutory testing, identifying where different tests can add value.

We will test proposed changes against diagnostic performance, epidemiological consequences, operational deliverability and modelling of their interaction with the wider programme. Regulatory or significant policy changes may be subject to appropriate consultation and impact assessment.

3. The Programme board have requested Welsh Government to explore ways to improved access to biosecure units and a biosecure supply chain

For herds under TB restrictions, appropriate commercial outlets for livestock are required that also do not increase the risk of spreading TB through cattle movements. Challenges around funding, infrastructure and regulatory barriers may limit the development and operation of AFUs (Approved Finishing Units) or other specialist biosecure units for cattle from restricted herds. Ways to increase the uptake, capacity and practicality of a biosecure supply chain, without weakening disease control safeguards, should be explored and an evaluation of whether current rules are proportionate to risk should be undertaken.

Welsh Government response: Work with industry to explore practical options for safe, sustainable outlets for cattle from TB restricted herds

Our objective is to enable practical routes that help businesses affected by TB restrictions continue operating while maintaining effective disease control.

Working with industry, we will identify, assess and enable opportunities for industry to access appropriate biosecure routes and strengthen the resilience of the cattle supply chain.

This assessment will include addressing questions around commercial market and slaughter routes and compatibility with legislative requirements. As most cattle from TB restricted herds move to approved units located in England, policy changes will be considered in partnership with Defra.

4. The Programme board advise the establishment of a new advice service and increased farmer and local private vet involvement

Appropriate biosecurity, including informed purchasing, remains a critical line of defence against the introduction and spread of Bovine TB. Farmer engagement depends on trust, practical relevance and ownership. Communications should use clear, non-technical language, local evidence and quantified business benefits where available.

Welsh Government response: Develop a stronger advisory offer with farmers and private vets

Farmers and their vets must have the information, advice and opportunity to participate actively in disease control. We will make this principle central to our approach, alongside continued partnership working and opportunities for activities to be taken forward by different sectors. The importance of consistency of information and understanding relating to bovine TB is also clearly recognised. We will draw on learning from existing regional activity, including the projects in North Wales and Pembrokeshire to improve support between farmers, private vets, APHA and Welsh Government. The expertise of stakeholders, such as the veterinary delivery partnerships and AHDB will also help inform these improvements.

5. Farmers, private vets and advisers require improved and timely access to farm-level disease data, epidemiological information and guidance

The Pembrokeshire Project has demonstrated the value of farm- and animal-level data in identifying disease risks and informing management and husbandry decisions that reduce disease and business impact or risk. Lessons and feedback from the Pembrokeshire and the North Wales TB Projects should be reviewed urgently and management options implemented at pace where evidence supports wider adoption. Equally, innovative methods should be encouraged and used to support a ‘learn by doing’ approach.

Welsh Government response: Advance better access to TB risk information, with clear and appropriate safeguards

We will improve access to meaningful disease and risk information so that farmers and vets can make better-informed decisions.

We will identify the additional herd-, animal- and area-level information that would most usefully support disease prevention, purchasing and herd-management decisions.

We will test proposals to publish additional information with affected stakeholders before implementation and amend enabling legislation if needed.

6. Collection of data on the role of wildlife in TB to inform decisions on targeted and proportionate interventions

Wales will need to develop and implement a policy for the prevention of transmission of *M. bovis* between cattle and wildlife as part of its ambition to gain Officially TB Free Status by 2041. Evidence from across the UK indicates that disease occurrence and transmission are not only multifactorial, but also locality specific. Collecting evidence and knowledge of wildlife disease transmission pathways here in Wales must be fully resourced with epidemiological and economic modelling a priority.

Welsh Government response: Advance wildlife surveillance and determine targeted and proportionate interventions based on the evidence

We will strengthen Wales-specific wildlife evidence to inform options around targeted and proportionate interventions.

Additional surveillance and evidence gathering will commence now. We will assess existing evidence, investigate badger population characteristics and take forward targeted survey and fieldwork where evidence gaps remain. This may include testing, vaccination and release or removal of badgers in pilot areas. We will also advance wild deer surveillance.

The outcomes of this work may underpin future consultation on a holistic approach to address bovine TB, including wildlife interventions. Badger vaccination may continue without further consultation, as an existing Welsh Government policy.

7. The Programme Board endorse the use of epidemiological analyses and modelling to understand drivers of disease transmission and to inform interventions

The use of Whole Genome Sequencing (WGS) in both cattle and wildlife supports APHA's Epidemiological Team in the proactive identification of emerging or evolving areas of disease. It would also enable a more holistic approach to disease control using analytical and modelling tools to identify likely source attribution. Where the epidemiological evidence suggests there is a risk of disease in cattle and wildlife, intervention should be taken. Systematic analysis would ensure that the right

intervention, with clearly defined metrics, would be deployed, based on the factors driving disease in the local area.

Welsh Government response: Embed epidemiological analysis and modelling across the programme

Epidemiology and modelling will underpin the whole programme, not sit apart as a discrete workstream. We will work with APHA and, where beneficial, other appropriate experts to define the analysis and modelling needed to understand disease patterns and drivers and assess alternative policy packages.

We will use this analysis to assess where intervention is justified, and which combinations of measures are most likely to improve disease control without creating adverse unintended consequences.

Supporting advice from the Programme Board

The Programme Board identifies the following supportive measures and advice to complement the seven main priorities, as summarised above:

- **Cattle vaccination.** Continue preparatory work to take advantage of future cattle vaccination and DIVA testing capability, as part of ongoing GB-wide activities.

- **Resolved severe interpretation Inconclusive Reactors (IRs).** Undertake the proposed review, considering the evidence around residual infection and differences in policy between Wales and England.

- **APHA engagement and regulatory support.** Support the direction of travel, while recognising that delivery will have resource consequences. Additional APHA capacity is likely to be required for some/all measures.

- **Information, communications and farmer support.** We will progress improvements to clearer, accessible TB information and communications now.

- **Regulatory alignment.** Map areas where TB measures interact with other regulatory regimes and identify issues requiring wider government consideration. In particular, the interaction with the Control of Agricultural Pollution Regulations.

Consultation, research and modelling

We will not interpret the need for further evidence as a reason for inaction. Equally, acting at pace must not mean implementing significant policy changes before their consequences are properly understood.

We will therefore pursue two strands concurrently: immediate work to strengthen the evidence base and develop deliverable interventions, and preparation of those substantive policy changes which may require consultation, modelling, appraisal or further research before implementation.

Evidence will be considered as a whole. APHA epidemiological assessment and modelling will be particularly important, but decisions will also take account of TAG advice, operational and veterinary evidence, research and experiences from elsewhere, legislative and economic assessment, and the views of stakeholders and the public, consulting where required.

This will allow an 'act and adapt' approach, with interventions introduced and carefully monitored, adapting where required and as informed by evidence.

Initial programme of work by Welsh Government

The initial phase of work will focus on scoping, assessing, costing and developing the Programme Board's priority areas of advice, supported by continued epidemiological evaluation, modelling, surveillance and fieldwork. This evidence-led approach will inform the development of future policy options and any subsequent consultation, with the intention of publishing an updated Bovine TB Eradication Plan and introducing further programme changes as the evidence develops.

Short term: next six months

- **Commission further specific epidemiological analysis and modelling from APHA**, including wildlife populations, cattle/wildlife disease relationships and assessment of possible future policy and interventions. We anticipate APHA work continuing throughout the remainder of 2026 and 2027.
- **Scope additional external analytical or modelling capability where that adds value**, particularly where independent comparison or specialist expertise complements APHA work.
- **Explore practical options for safe, sustainable outlets for cattle from TB restricted herds**, working with industry and others.
- **Develop proposals for badger population-survey work**, targeted by epidemiological evidence and identified knowledge gaps, so that fieldwork can begin in early 2027 where justified.
- **Progress wild deer TB surveillance**, deer surveillance arrangements are being developed working with relevant delivery and stakeholder partners.
- **Develop options for wider access to ancillary diagnostic cattle testing**, identifying the veterinary, regulatory, epidemiological and delivery questions which need resolution before change.
- **Develop an evaluation framework alongside the policies**, defining baseline information and measures of success before interventions are introduced.

Medium term: within 12 months

- **Scope the future TB advisory offer**, including the respective roles of farmers, private veterinarians, APHA, Welsh Government and other partners.
- **Map data improvements**, identifying what additional risk information could be made available and what issues may require consultation or regulatory changes.
- **Identify regulatory dependencies and barriers**, including those arising from the interaction of TB controls with wider agricultural regulation.

- **Communication improvements** to further improve access to clear information.
- **Define revised approach for persistent-breakdown herds**, drawing on evidence from the Pembrokeshire and North Wales projects, and assessing testing, herd-management and business implications together.

Beyond 2027 a new strategy will be introduced embedding learning from the actions we will have made in the short and medium terms following our principle to act and adapt.

Governance, resources and delivery

The Programme Board's advice represents an integrated programme of change rather than a series of isolated interventions. Their successful delivery will require clear leadership and accountability, appropriate policy and operational capacity, effective partnership with APHA, farmers, the veterinary profession and other stakeholders, and robust monitoring and evaluation.

The Welsh Government supports the Board's advice that dedicated bovine TB policy and delivery capacity should be maintained and that governance should evolve from strategy development to delivery and accountability. We also support its recommendation that policy impacts should be modelled and subject to appropriate cost-benefit and impact assessment, and that monitoring arrangements and measures of success should be designed into interventions from the outset, along with exit strategies.

Affordability will nevertheless remain an important consideration. A genuine step change will require investment and difficult decisions. The Welsh Government's draft budget included an additional £4.5 million in 2026/27 to support and accelerate preventative disease management.

Conclusion

The Programme Board has set out an ambitious package of advice for accelerating bovine TB eradication in Wales. The Welsh Government welcomes that ambition and broadly accepts the direction and advice.

Our response moves us from advice to action, beginning work immediately where this can be done responsibly, while developing the evidence necessary to make sound longer-term decisions.

We will use research, surveillance, fieldwork, epidemiological assessment and modelling to test options, work with farmers, veterinarians, APHA and other partners to develop practical solutions, consult where appropriate, and introduce changes in a deliberate sequence as the evidence, affordability and delivery arrangements allow.

This approach provides a route to tangible progress in the short term while establishing the foundations for a refreshed, holistic and adaptive Bovine TB Eradication Programme across cattle, people and wildlife in Wales.