

Strasbourg, 29 July 2021  
[files53e\_2021.docx]

T-PVS/Files(2021)53

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE  
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**Standing Committee**

41<sup>st</sup> meeting  
Strasbourg, 30 November – 3 December 2021

---

**Complaint on stand-by: 2019/04**

**Badger Culling Policy in England  
(United Kingdom)**

**- REPORT BY THE GOVERNMENT -**

*Document prepared by the  
Department for Environment Food and rural affairs of United Kingdom*



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

Horizon House Deanery  
Road Bristol  
BS1 5AH

T: 03459 335577  
helpline@defra.gov.uk  
[www.gov.uk/defra](http://www.gov.uk/defra)

**Our ref:** 2019/04

**Date:** 28/07/2021

Ursula Sticker  
Secretary of the Bern Convention Council of Europe  
F-67075  
Strasbourg CEDEX  
France

Dear Ursula Sticker

### **Complaint No. 2019/04: Badger Culling Policy in England**

1. Thank you for your letter of 30 September 2020 outlining the outcome of the Bureau meeting. As requested by the Bureau, this is an update on the licensed culling of badgers to prevent the spread of bovine tuberculosis (“bTB”).
2. It is timely because we also want to inform the Bureau that, our current badger control policy is now being phased out as part of the latest changes to our adaptive TB strategy: it is our intention that no new intensive cull licences will be issued after 2022 and follow-up supplementary badger culling, under licence, will end in 2025 (please refer to paragraph 11).

### **Background**

3. As we have set out in our letter of 28 April 2020, the UK Government is fully implementing the provisions of the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (“the Convention”) with respect to the culling of badgers. This remains the case.
4. BTB is one of the greatest animal health threats in the UK. Scientific consensus is that badgers are a significant reservoir of bTB in cattle. The disease causes serious damage to the livestock industry, as animals which test positive for the disease must be compulsorily slaughtered to prevent the spread of the disease and protect human health. Last year (between March 2020 and March 2021) 28,356 cattle was slaughtered in England due to a TB incidence, a 6% reduction from the previous year.<sup>1</sup>
5. Bovine TB is a complex disease and there is no single way of controlling it. Therefore, we have a package of disease control measures (cattle testing and movement controls, biosecurity and badger control). Our strategy is adaptive and, following an independent review of the Strategy we are i) changing our approach to promote as much badger vaccination as possible in the future, ii) introducing a more sensitive and better targeted cattle testing programme iii) increasing how often we test cattle for the disease and iv) introducing stricter biosecurity measures on farms to eliminate the disease as quickly as



<sup>1</sup> [Quarterly publication of National Statistics on the incidence and prevalence of tuberculosis \(TB\) in Cattle in Great Britain – to end March 2021 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92424/quarterly-publication-of-national-statistics-on-the-incidence-and-prevalence-of-tuberculosis-tb-in-cattle-in-great-britain-to-end-march-2021.pdf)

possible.

6. We are driving forward an ambitious strategy to eradicate bovine TB which includes a range of evidence-led interventions to tackle the disease in both cattle and wildlife. World-leading government scientists are working closely with industry to deploy a cattle vaccine within the next five years and field trials are underway. We are also working with farmers to implement the highest standards of biosecurity on farms to stop the disease from spreading.
7. As detailed in our letter of 28 April, in order to bring bTB effectively under control in the UK there is currently no other satisfactory solution to the use of badger culling in England as part of the package of measures to address the disease.
8. Our letter of 28 April outlined the licensing process and how Natural England (the licensing authority), closely monitors the badger culls to ensure that these will not be detrimental to the survival of the badger population concerned and publishes an annual summary of culling operations. Badger populations in the UK remain healthy and the species has been assessed as 'least concern' in the UK by the Mammal Society based on IUCN methodologies (<https://www.mammal.org.uk/science-research/red-list/>)
9. As set out in our letter of 28 April 2020, we have a comprehensive and adaptive risk-based strategy informed by the best available evidence. In this letter we provide an update on the implementation and ongoing development of this strategy, including the particular information requested by the Bureau.

#### **Update on bTB strategy in England.**

10. Between January and March 2021, the UK Government held a public consultation<sup>2</sup> on the future of badger disease control measures in England. The consultation set out proposed policy changes to support transition into the next phase of the bTB Strategy. UK Ministers considered the responses to the consultation and announced their decision<sup>3</sup> on 27 May 2021.
11. Alongside the development of wider preventive measures (e.g. a cattle TB vaccine and increasing badger vaccination) we start to phase out badger culling in England. It is our intention that no new intensive cull licences will be issued after 2022 and follow-up supplementary badger culling, under licence, will end in 2025. The badger cull has led to a significant reduction in bovine TB as demonstrated by the publication of independent academic research and past studies<sup>4</sup>. The UK Government will retain badger culling as a policy option where the epidemiology indicates it is needed.

#### *Badger vaccination*

12. While there is broad consensus of expert opinion that vaccinating badgers should have a beneficial effect on TB incidence in cattle, there has been no trial in the UK to assess the magnitude or timing of these beneficial effects. It is important that any move towards wider badger vaccination is science led and it is therefore our intention to incrementally increase the area where badger vaccination is taking place, particularly in post-cull settings, to enable more opportunities to assess and quantify the effect of badger on reducing disease spread to local cattle herds. As this underpinning evidence base improves, we expect to foster greater confidence in badger vaccination as a viable and effective disease management approach, such that by spring 2025 it is the primary form of farmer-led badger disease control in England.
13. In June 2021 we awarded £2.27 million (~€2.64 million) to deploy a badger vaccination scheme in East Sussex, in an area where there is a reservoir of infection in badgers and some incidence in cattle. A local veterinary group, Cliffe Veterinary Group Ltd, will manage the five-year scheme (known as VESBa), which will pilot vaccination deployment by the farming community across 250km sq. The results will help inform UK Government on the delivery of future vaccination schemes on a large-scale across

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/bovine-tuberculosis-proposals-to-help-eradicate-disease-in-england>

<sup>3</sup> [Bovine tuberculosis: consultation on proposals to help eradicate the disease in England \(defra.gov.uk\)](https://www.defra.gov.uk/consultations/bovine-tuberculosis-proposals-to-help-eradicate-disease-in-england/)

<sup>4</sup> Please refer to paragraph 22 of our 28<sup>th</sup> April 2020 letter.

England. Badger vaccination is scheduled to begin in this area in August 2021.

14. In 2021, we also intend to undertake government-delivered badger vaccination over approximately 25km<sup>2</sup>, in an area where four-year intensive badger culling has ended, with ongoing surveillance of disease in that area.
15. UK Government also currently provides funding to badger vaccination projects aiming to create locally protected badger populations, which can act as a barrier between areas where bTB is present in cattle and areas without bTB. The relevant UK Government Department (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) is currently reviewing the scheme and ways in which to continue supporting such projects in the future.
16. We are taking further steps to build our vaccination capability and recruiting cohorts of new vaccinators. This will enable UK Government to offer fully funded badger vaccination schemes in areas that have successfully completed four years of intensive badger culling. It is planned for the first cohort of 10 vaccinators to be capable to deploy vaccination across up to 500-600km<sup>2</sup> per year over four years, starting in 2022. We plan to recruit two further cohorts of seasonal vaccinators in 2022 and 2023, enabling us to significantly increase the area where badger vaccination is taking place, with each cohort capable of vaccinating up to 1,000km<sup>2</sup> per year.

#### *Cattle vaccine*

17. As part of a substantial and wide-ranging UK research and development programme, with a particular focus on diagnostics and vaccine development, we are working to develop a deployable cattle TB vaccine. UK field trials started last month<sup>5</sup> 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.

#### *Biosecurity*

18. As part of the strategy to address bTB we have a comprehensive set of regulatory and administrative measures. Support for, and promotion of, biosecurity is provided by the Government and the livestock industry working in partnership and includes a national TB Advisory Service, herd accreditation programmes and a TB Hub information and advice website. We work hard to influence herd owners to continuously improve their on-farm measures to build greater resilience to the disease. To assess the extent to which that might be improved we carried out a cattle farm practices survey in 2019<sup>6</sup>. These results and other social research evidence continue to inform our ongoing work on biosecurity. There is little evidence to suggest that there is poor compliance with the best practice biosecurity guidance.

### **Information requests from the Bureau**

#### *Monitoring of the badger culling strategy*

19. The 2020 badger control monitoring summary<sup>7</sup> identifies that, as in previous years, the minimum and maximum numbers were updated in some areas as initial estimates of badger abundance (from sett surveys earlier in the year) were refined by actual circumstances observed in the field once badger culling operations were underway.
20. Over the last five years the number of Officially TB-free status withdrawn herd breakdowns (i.e. cattle herds that test positive for TB and have animals that have TB lesions discovered at slaughter or *M. bovis* bacteria are cultured) in the bTB High Risk Area (where most badger culling occurs) has reduced year on year from 2,533 in 2015 to 1,499 in 2020. Demonstrating that our TB strategy is achieving its goals. In

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/field-trials-for-leading-cattle-vaccine-and-skin-test-for-btb>

<sup>6</sup> [Cattle Farm practices survey April 2019-12sep19.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Bovine TB: summary of badger control monitoring during 2020 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

2020, bTB statistics for England show an improving disease picture in cattle in the areas with higher TB prevalence and a very low and stable herd incidence rate in the areas with the lowest TB prevalence (where, apart from occasional discrete hotspots, there is no recognised significant reservoir of the disease in wildlife). However, in parts of the Edge Area (buffer zone between the High Risk and the Low Risk areas), herd incidence rates in some counties had risen over the last few years, despite a significant tightening of surveillance as control measure in cattle herds in recent years.

*Impact of culling on the badger population*

21. The UK Government takes the viability of the badger population seriously. The culling of badgers is carefully controlled and includes badger control licences and the licensing authority Natural England's close monitoring of the associated culls. As it has in previous years, the UK Government published its advice to Natural England on setting and reviewing the minimum and maximum number of badgers to be removed in each licensed cull area<sup>8</sup> in September 2020. This was based on a carefully considered assessment of the badger population.
22. As we set out in paragraph 23 of our previous response "*The estimated badger populations are based on previous baselines, accumulated evidence and annual sett survey by each licensed cull company to understand the geographic distribution of badger activity in their area.*" Further, it should be noted that the UK Government advice to Natural England as the licensing authority, specifically states that culling 'needs to "*not be detrimental to the survival of the population concerned*" within the meaning of Article 9 of the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats'. We set out how these safeguards are achieved in paragraph 24 of our letter of 28 April 2020.
23. Each year sett surveys are carried out in cull areas and this is used to estimate the population present in each area and help set the maximum number of badgers to be culled. However, estimating badger populations is very difficult, therefore as a separate safeguard Natural England monitors the number of badgers culled each day in each area taking into account how much culling effort was expended in the last 24 hours and much culling effort has been deployed in each spatial sub-division of a cull area. This allows NE to be satisfied with the health of the population levels. To date no cull had to be reviewed due to concerns with the levels of the local population. This assessment has always been confirmed by the sett surveys in the following spring which have consistently confirmed the viability of the badger population. Further to paragraphs 21-24 of our April 2020 response on badger control licences<sup>9</sup>, part of their close monitoring is to annually conduct visits of cage-trapping and controlled shooting contractors to monitor compliance with licence conditions and the published Best Practice Guides.
24. The estimated proportion of the English badger population culled in 2020 was 9.6% of the 2011-13 baseline. Culling has occurred across 21% of England. As indicated at paragraph 8, the badger population remains healthy, which is confirmed by the Mammal Society's findings that badgers are a species of "least concern".

Yours sincerely



Simon Mackown  
Head of Species Recovery and Reintroductions National  
Biodiversity and Ivory Division

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/advice-to-natural-england-on-setting-minimum-and-maximum-numbers-of-badgers-to-be-controlled-in-2020>how

<sup>9</sup> [Bovine TB: summary of badger control monitoring during 2020 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bovine-tb-summary-of-badger-control-monitoring-during-2020)