

Tenant Farmers Association

Actions required from DEFRA on Bluetongue

This briefing calls on DEFRA to take immediate, coordinated action to support farmers affected by bluetongue.

1. Make bluetongue reporting and diagnosis fast, free and accessible
 - Provide a rapid, properly staffed reporting service by increasing telephone and online capacity so suspected cases can be reported without long waits that discourage farmers from completing their legal duty.
 - Cover the full veterinary cost of investigating a suspected case. Farmers should not have to delay reporting until a vet is already due on the holding simply to avoid an additional call-out fee.
 - Expand government-funded diagnostic testing for all samples reasonably required by the attending vet rather than limiting support to three animals and increase laboratory capacity so results are returned within days rather than weeks.
 - Establish active surveillance in badly affected areas through targeted testing and veterinary intelligence to identify the true spread of disease, including cases that are currently unreported.
 - Publish frequent local updates providing farmers and vets with timely county-level information on confirmed cases, clinical patterns and disease risk so intervention decisions are based on current evidence rather than more informal exchanges of information between vets and others.
 - Differentiate on maps between confirmed cases and reported cases not confirmed so that farmers and vets can get ahead of the disease.
2. Deliver an effective and affordable vaccination programme
 - Subsidise the cost of bluetongue vaccine by providing an immediate contribution towards vaccine and administration costs, with enhanced support for small and tenanted cattle and sheep businesses.
 - Secure and coordinate vaccine supply through work with manufacturers, wholesalers and veterinary practices to prevent local shortages and publish transparent information on availability.
 - Tackle issues that lead to waste of vaccine particularly around small farms who only need a few doses from a bottle. Incentivise bottle sharing schemes.
 - Provide a government-backed reimbursement or credit mechanism so veterinary practices are not required to demand full payment in advance from established account holders.
 - Simplify vaccination reporting by allowing keepers to report species, total number vaccinated, holding number, vaccine product and batch number, while retaining individual identification only where it is essential for disease control or trade.

- Provide assisted reporting by offering telephone and veterinary-practice submission routes for farmers without tag readers, suitable connectivity or confidence using online systems.
 - Monitor uptake and outcome with simplified returns to estimate coverage, identify gaps and assess the relationship between vaccination, illness, mortality and reproductive performance.
3. Provide immediate financial and practical support to affected farms
- Create an emergency bluetongue and drought support scheme with payments to viable cattle and sheep businesses experiencing exceptional mortality, veterinary costs, purchased-feed costs or severe loss of grazing.
 - Support carcase disposal by contributing to collection and rendering costs where there is abnormal mortality and monitor regional disposal capacity.
 - Where rendering capacity becomes a limiting factor to consider temporary derogations for on farm burial of livestock.
 - Offer temporary and proportionate regulatory and payment flexibility, expedited grant payments and extensions where drought or disease prevents compliance, while protecting animal welfare and the environment.
4. Protect animal health, productivity and farmer wellbeing
- Commission urgent research and field monitoring assessing how heat stress, poor nutrition, midge activity and wildlife reservoirs may be affecting transmission, severity, fertility and recovery.
 - Prepare for delayed production impacts by monitoring scanning rates, abortions, lambing and calving performance, body condition and pasture recovery so further support can be triggered quickly.
 - Strengthen veterinary outreach through funded proactive farm visits, practical webinars and locally targeted guidance on vaccination, supportive care, welfare decisions and biosecurity.
 - Provide accessible mental-health support via confidential services through trusted farming organisations and veterinary practices, recognising the distress associated with livestock losses and financial pressure.
 - Avoid farmers blaming themselves with communication recognising that earlier advice on vaccination was not always consistent and should encourage reporting and vaccination without stigma.
5. Put in place accountable delivery arrangements
- Appoint a senior DEFRA lead to give one named official responsibility for coordinating bluetongue measures across DEFRA, APHA, the Rural Payments Agency, the Environment Agency, local authorities and the veterinary profession.
 - Form a South West response group including farmer representatives, farming bodies, vets, livestock organisations, laboratories, renderers and local government.

- Publish a time-bound action plan setting out what will be delivered immediately, within 30 days and before the next high-risk season, with named responsible owners and measurable outcomes.
- Report progress openly including regular data on suspected and confirmed cases, reporting delays, laboratory turnaround, vaccine supply and uptake, animal losses, drought indicators and support payments.
- Prepare a long-term livestock resilience strategy integrating disease control, water security, forage resilience, climate adaptation, veterinary capacity and food-security objectives.

In addition, there are wider issues for feed, forage and water shortages within the current drought conditions as follows:

- Introduce emergency forage assistance by supporting the purchase and transport of feed where grazing has failed, facilitate regional forage matching and guard against market distortion or price exploitation.
- Prioritise the water needs of farmed livestock alongside the needs of people and communities.
- Fund on-farm water resilience by offering increased grant rates and by simplifying applications for rainwater harvesting, boreholes where appropriate, pumps, pipework, troughs, tanks and winter-storage reservoirs.
- Fast-track planning and abstraction decisions via a coordinated route through planning authorities and the Environment Agency for drought-resilience infrastructure, with clear safeguards and published decision times.
- Support collaborative water projects and capital works for shared reservoirs, distribution networks and other multi-farm solutions.
- Assist pasture recovery through grants for reseeded drought-damaged grassland with appropriate resilient mixtures, including deep-rooting grasses, chicory and herbal leys, supported by agronomic advice.
- Protect future fodder supplies by permitting suitable flexibility within environmental schemes where temporary action is needed to safeguard livestock feed, subject to proportionate environmental conditions.

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13 August 2025

GWD/0712