

Latest ‘best practice’ protocols aim to double down on cattle disease

Images available for download [here](#).

New CHECS ‘best practice’ protocols to control infectious cattle disease have been released today (12 June), coinciding with a step-up of pressure on tackling Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD) across UK and Ireland.

Included in the latest version of the CHECS ‘Technical Document’ is a new way for dairy herds to indicate low risk for BVD to their buyers following the end of the BVDFree programme, and updated risk categories for Johne’s Disease.

Vet James Russell, who is a CHECS board member as well as non-executive director of the Animal Health & Welfare Board for England, says CHECS disease protocols are an industry ‘bedrock’, and the latest update is well-timed for a number of changes taking place in 2025.

“CHECS has been accrediting and setting industry standards for infectious cattle disease control since 1999,” says Mr Russell. “We’re in a unique situation globally, in that standards are developed through consensus by a volunteer group of veterinary and scientific specialists under the CHECS umbrella, then adopted as a single ‘best practice’ across the whole of UK and Ireland.”

He says that even if farmers aren’t part of a CHECS-accredited cattle health scheme, the chances are the labs they send samples to are licensed with CHECS, and the vets they work with should be observing CHECS protocols.

“All this means consistency across UK and Ireland about how insidious diseases such as BVD, Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis and Johne’s Disease should be tackled, and how the risk of herds having those diseases is communicated.”

The updated protocols include the new Dairy BVD Negative programme based on quarterly bulk milk testing and youngstock screening. Although it is primarily aimed at farmers who were involved in the now-defunct BVDFree England, it lands at a time when BVD is a particularly hot topic with devolved and Irish control programmes ramping up action on the disease.

Mr Russell says the reason BVD is being targeted by governments is it’s extremely ‘eradicable’—and there are very high returns for farmers in doing so.

“The suppressed immunity BVD causes has been calculated to cost UK farmers up to £61 million per year; that’s £6.50 for every single bovine. In Ireland the cost estimate is even higher at over €13/£11 per animal.

“Yet the biggest risk with BVD remains not looking for it because it hides in plain sight, amplifying cases of pneumonia or scours, and preventing animals recovering despite treatment. Hence identifying whether BVD is the cause of other health issues in your herd is one of the most cost-beneficial steps a cattle farmer can take.”

While BVD is dominating the headlines at the moment, other diseases continue to cause not just economic but emotional loss. One of the most challenging remains Johne's Disease—and a second major change in the new protocols is the introduction of an additional level of Johne's Disease Risk-Level Certification, Risk Level 1*.

This development follows several years of divergence among industry experts about how risk from Johne's Disease—which is extremely complex and difficult to control—can be accurately and consistently communicated.

As before, Risk Level 1 (R1) for Johne's Disease is awarded to low risk herds passing three consecutive annual herd tests whether on faecal matter or blood. However, R1 herds that also have no positive blood tests for more than 12 months will become Risk Level 1* (R1*), the lowest level of risk.

CHECS veterinary director Keith Cutler says the changes to CHECS's Johne's Disease risk levels are robust but very fair. "Most importantly, they will help vets and farmers more accurately gauge risk," he says.

R1* will be published on herd certificates and pen cards from 1 October 2025 onwards, with the number of years the herd has been at that level stated in brackets. For example, for a herd that has had no animal testing blood positive for four years, its classification will be R1*(4 years).

"Agreeing this change was a tough and lengthy process, but Johne's Disease is such an important and costly disease to both dairy and beef sectors, it was worth persevering," explains Mr Cutler. "If anything, the process has shown the resilience of the CHECS technical group in that its members will stand up for what they believe in, but do so for the good of those who keep cattle.

"That's why, as a practising vet, I would urge farmers to use CHECS protocols where they can. Even if you don't want to go the lengths of joining a CHECS-accredited cattle health scheme, make sure your vet is incorporating CHECS protocols into your herd health plan. It's best practice for free."

The new CHECS technical document can be downloaded from the resources pages at www.checs.co.uk.

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Notes to editors

For further information about BVD control through Defra's Pathway programme, visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/animal-health-and-welfare-pathway/animal-health-and-welfare-pathway>. For a summary of the wider changes to BVD control programmes across UK and Ireland, visit www.bvdplatform.org.