BCVA bTB Policy
Report for public release
18th October 2019
BCVA is a progressive, membership led organisation representing around 1400 cattle vets in the United Kingdom.

We acknowledge the challenge of Bovine TB to our members, their clients and the wider farm community. We further recognise that the control of this disease has been hampered by undue political influence being frequently exerted.

In 2018 Godfray et al. called for a new governance structure to control bTB. As when dealing with any other disease of livestock, a partnership between the farmer and their private Veterinary Surgeon must exist; this should be supported by Government policy. Far too often, the application of control strategies has been subject to the influence of prevailing politics overtaking science. BCVA will work with Defra to improve this governance in the favour of improved disease control. BCVA have produced an infographic to demonstrate how future governance may deliver a consistent approach to policy, outside of the short political cycle. (Annex A).

We call for the existing TB Eradication Advisory Group (TBEAG) to be given a greater role in developing future policies. Its current role is as an advisory body on strategy implementation. This group should draw on the most up to date, evidence-based knowledge and as such we would advise that amongst others, BCVA should be represented on this body with a permanent position. This increase in veterinary input from associations proficient in developing and delivering control strategies will enhance the group’s ability affect change in bTB control.

The current model of state funded skin testing, with compensation for any reactor animal, may not be the most appropriate for the future. A move towards a system which delivers clinical freedom to vets, and operational choices to farmers, has the capacity to improve disease control, build business resilience into the UK herd and most importantly re-engage the veterinary and farming population in the broader issue of bTB control. BCVA are ideally positioned to devise, advise and distribute knowledge of novel and current control strategies and surveillance options. This should include a variety of testing modalities subject to OIE accreditation. As part of the implementation of this, we would propose enabling greater on-farm discretion to select and apply appropriate testing and management methods for this disease.

As the Veterinary Delivery Partnership (VDP) Invitation To Tender (ITT) is developed in the coming months, BCVA have informed Defra that we have no intention to tender for this service. By positioning ourselves outside of this competitive environment, we are able to liaise with Defra to lobby for a comprehensive disease control strategy to be included. There is no other endemic disease of cattle in the UK where we expect veterinary surgeons to diagnose but not manage it. By working with Defra, we aim to shift the ownership of bTB control and eradication towards an increased involvement of Private Veterinary Surgeons (PVS).

BCVA has always supported a cull of badgers, in a targeted, effective and humane manner across areas where there is a demonstrable link between bTB infection in badger and cattle
populations. This is supported by the recent Downs et al. review of the current badger culling strategy.

BCVA recognise and support the Government goal to identify an exit strategy from the intensive cull policy. However, we would voice caution about failing to bank the gains made over the past few years. To this end we call for further evidence to be developed to demonstrate any link between badger vaccination and reduced incidence of disease in cattle.

As a long-term approach, BCVA envisages the role of cattle vaccination alongside the DIVA test as essential. This will further develop the resilience of herds to new incursions of disease. We implore Defra to invest the appropriate funding to bring a cattle vaccine to market without delay. This should coincide with the field trial results and hopeful licensing of the DIVA test within the next five years.

Purchasing of undisclosed infection, as well as local spread and failure of disclosure on farm remain the key drivers of this disease. BCVA welcomes the objectives of the TB Advisory Service (TBAS); controlling the controllable and managing risk at a farm level. It is crucial within the policies of the developing Animal Health Pathway and Livestock Information Service that disease control and information availability must remain key areas of focus. This should enable for the first time, true informed purchasing, as well as the ability to preferentially direct public money towards farms who are engaging with disease control.

The existing model of a competitive tender to deliver a limited number of bTB advisory visits in a fixed time frame has been recognised to have raised the awareness of farm level risk management. In the long term, this approach is restrictive in the breadth of delivery. An approach based on the trusted relationship between the appropriately trained private vet and their client will be more sustainable and more broadly delivered. This may be a suitable addition to future VDP work.

In control of other diseases, BCVA members have seen the benefits of coordinated accreditation schemes. The CHeCS bTB model represents an opportunity to build on existing good work. BCVA believes that the role of the PVS on farm is to deliver trusted advice and support, but not to police compliance.

In summary, BCVA remains supportive of the overarching goals of the 25-year bTB control strategy launched by Minister George Eustice MP in 2014. We see opportunities to utilise an increase in available science, as well as a perceived invigoration in both vets and farmers to take control of their destiny with bTB to maintain and improve the gains already being made.

BCVA will continue to maintain our close relationship with Defra, to minimise the political interference with disease control. Instead, we advocate an approach of farm level control, delivered by trusted practitioners, supported by government, which enables all available tools to be at the disposal of this vet-led team.

With this open and inclusive approach, we believe that the achievement of the status of freedom from bTB by 2038 is an ultimate achievable goal.
On behalf of BCVA, I would like to thank Rebecca Cavill, Dick Sibley, Rose Willis, Renzo-di-Florio, Sarah Tomlinson, John Fishwick and David Barrett for their input into this working group. Their enthusiastic involvement has led us often into areas of policy not covered by this document. Through this process, BCVA can be said truly to have followed its key objective of driving tomorrow’s practice.

James Russell – Chair, BCVA TB policy group

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Annex A – governance structure

Within this structure there would be collaboration between regional and national control, with maximum routes of flow to and from the inner core. These regional groups must be able to deliver a strong voice for their region, whilst understanding the constraints of a national policy framework.

We envisage that the regional groups should be Veterinary led, by BATCAT vets to deliver consistency.

The main circle should be led by scientists and experts in their field. This is a removal of political influence at this level as far as possible whilst retaining ministerial oversight.
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* - Answerable to SoS

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