



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural  
Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Bovine TB Review: National Trust

19 June 2012

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

### Bovine TB Review: National Trust

19 June 2012

#### **Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)  
Mr Joe Byrne (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Michaela Boyle  
Mr Trevor Clarke  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mr Chris Hazzard  
Mr William Irwin  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Robin Swann

#### **Witnesses:**

Mr Patrick Begg	National Trust
Ms Philomena Davidson	National Trust
Ms Heather Thompson	National Trust

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Heather Thompson, the Northern Ireland director of the National Trust; Philomena Davidson, its wildlife and countryside adviser; and Patrick Begg, its rural enterprises director. You are all very welcome to the Committee for this important review of bovine tuberculosis (TB). I am sure that you have a presentation to give. We will then have questions.

**Ms Heather Thompson (National Trust):** Thank you very much for allowing us to come here and present to you. We are taking it as read that you have seen and read our submission, so we will go through its key points and allow time for questions.

It is important to note that the National Trust is not an organisation that is involved and interested in just the environment per se. We also work with a number of farmers and have a farming community within the tenant farmers whom we support across Northern Ireland, Wales and England. It is important that you are hearing us from not just the environmental perspective but the farming perspective.

We are committed to supporting the eradication of bovine TB. It is a notifiable disease of livestock and has the potential to affect the livelihoods of hundreds of our tenants and graziers in Northern Ireland, Wales and England. We have 80 tenants and 100 graziers in Northern Ireland. That gives you an idea how it would work for us. We have 1,500 across the piece in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our approach is to be guided by the best available evidence, drawn from scientific trials and published in peer review journals. We recognise that the control of bovine TB in cattle is contentious. There are

social, environmental and economic issues at play. Those are due to rising costs in the UK and in devolved Governments, impacts on farmers, animal welfare and public health concerns, and the link with the badger, a native wild mammal that is protected by domestic law and an international convention, the Bern convention.

We advocate that a comprehensive package of measures, including the prevention of cattle-to-cattle and cattle-to-badger transmission, is necessary to tackle bovine TB. In addition to the present test-and-slaughter regime for cattle, we wish to see increased biosecurity measures, increased frequency of testing, and vaccination of badgers and, eventually, cattle.

We do not object in principle to the culling of badgers where the criteria for such culls to be effective in reducing the bovine TB breakdowns in cattle herds, as set out in the final report of the Independent Scientific Group (ISG), have been met. We recognise that, in practice, meeting the criteria that the ISG set is fraught with difficulties. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has proposed badger culls in England using controlled shooting. That raises issues around animal welfare, health and safety, efficacy and social disquiet.

Culls of 70% of badgers are needed to reduce cattle herd breakdowns significantly in the pilot areas. However, the estimates of badger numbers in the cull areas are probably too imprecise as to be useful. There is no baseline at the moment for the size of the badger population, so to take 70% is a difficult thing to do. The concern is that either too few badgers will be killed, leading to increased herd breakdown incidents through perturbation, or that the removal of too many in total would contravene the Bern convention.

I will now turn to what the National Trust is doing. We are vaccinating badgers on 18 farms on our Killerton estate in Devon, which is a bovine TB hotspot. Our objective is twofold: first, through immunisation, we are working to minimise the risk of badger-to-cattle transmission for our tenant farmers; and, secondly, we are demonstrating an alternative to culling badgers, which is controversial and, in some situations, may be counterproductive.

We did not expect our tenants to support vaccination instead of badger culls for various reasons. Northern Ireland is in a similar situation of trying to understand the difference between the two. During the project, however, which is running from 2012 until 2016, the attitudes of those tenant farmers are being tracked by social scientists from the University of Exeter so that we get an idea and understanding of how that plays out. A recent update on that work indicates that, although most tenant farmers are in favour of culling badgers, they nevertheless support the vaccination programme.

Our vaccination programme is also a demonstration project. Recently, at Killerton, we hosted the Chief Veterinary Officer for Wales, who is charged with delivering a programme of badger vaccination in Wales and was especially interested to hear about the attitudes of our tenants to vaccination as opposed to badger culling.

Where do we believe that we can make a difference? First, we can do so in the field of communication. We applaud the consultation on bovine TB issues in Northern Ireland. We believe that the stakeholder group is inclusive and genuinely consultative, and we have very much enjoyed being able to be a part of that process. Comparing the devolved countries in which the National Trust operates, we believe that the Welsh approach of increasing the rigour with which cattle-to-cattle transmission is minimised is very worthwhile. That includes a national herd health check, a very rigorous approach to reducing the times at which reactor cattle are present on farms, and the imposition of penalties for overdue testing. We continue to support the intensive action area project and will work with the Welsh Assembly Government to help roll out a programme for badger vaccination where appropriate.

Secondly, we would like to have a chance to build on success, and, in Northern Ireland, we supported a case study in County Down where the attributes of farms with and without breakdowns in a hotspot area are being compared. Building on that study, the results of which will be available later this year, we wonder whether the same farms could be subject to more detailed work on increasing biosecurity to prevent cattle-to-cattle and badger-to-cattle transmission, and on increasing badger vaccination. We are offering the opportunity to work further with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) in developing that.

Thirdly, we believe that comparisons with the devolved countries can be very useful and that we can learn from one other. For example, in an attempt to minimise badger culls in their intensive action area, the Welsh Assembly Government commissioned modelling of selective badger culling based on

disease status, where only those animals that tested positive for bovine TB were killed. The models of selective culling showed a very clear increased risk of perturbation, and that option was quickly abandoned in favour of a non-selective cull. Now that the Welsh Assembly Government have decided that culling will not deliver eradication of bovine TB, vaccination that incurs little perturbation risk is the only option to reduce the reservoir of bovine TB in badger populations.

Our overall impression is that the approach to the eradication of bovine TB that has been taken in Wales, which will happen over many years, has much to offer England and, potentially, Northern Ireland. Although one of the key results of the randomised badger culling trials — the reduction in bovine TB among cattle of between 3% and 22% — has often been challenged, 16 years of intensive culling in the South resulted in a similar 22% reduction in bovine TB in cattle.

We conclude that there may be merit in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland collaborating to deploy a multifaceted approach to bovine TB in which cattle-to-cattle measures are strengthened and the wildlife reservoir is reduced through vaccination. It may also be appropriate for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to push hard for the use of a marketable cattle vaccine.

To sum up, we are happy to work with the Department to achieve its targets for bovine TB eradication. We will be delighted to take any questions that the Committee may have.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much for your presentation. You talk in your paper about your farms in Devon, which is a hotspot area. You have vaccinated on one farm and rolled out vaccination on the other farms. Is that right?

**Mr Patrick Begg (National Trust):** All 18 farms have been vaccinated.

**The Chairperson:** You have vaccinated all 18 farms?

**Mr P Begg:** We are trapping and vaccinating. We are only in year one of the programme, but that is the approach.

**The Chairperson:** Can you give me more detail on that? You are one year into the programme. What are your findings to date? I appreciate that it might be a wee bit too soon.

**Mr P Begg:** It is too soon for scientific results on the effect of the vaccination. We do not know how many of the badgers have been vaccinated and what the hold is on the community. In the first season that we did last autumn, we did not trap as many badgers as we would have liked in such a large area, trapping only around 50 badgers. We have just completed our first proper spring exercise, which is the right time to do this. We managed to trap and vaccinate over 100 badgers, of which over 50% were cubs. That is a great result.

There was an interesting effect of that in the tenant farmer community. When the independent researchers asked them, there was a big jump in credibility for the vaccination trial through our being able to demonstrate how many badgers we have trapped and vaccinated. It felt much more like the exercise would have legs. Previously, our farmers were a bit cynical. They did not think that we would catch badgers and vaccinate them. They asked what the point was. However, they have now shifted quite substantially to the view that this is worth doing. There has been quite a big cultural shift in the tenanted community. Of course, that allows you to have the further discussion about biosecurity and all the things that go along with it. It is about building that bridge into a communication as much as anything, at this stage anyway.

**The Chairperson:** I remind Committee members about the one question rule. If we have time, I promise that we will go around the table again. Oliver McMullan, I have an apology to make. I did not realise that you were back in the room for the previous presentation.

**Mr McMullan:** Can I ask two, then? *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:** Since I am so good-natured, I will let you ask two.

**Mr McMullan:** I will keep to just the one. Thank you for your presentation. I apologise to the previous group for leaving.

You talked about the work that you have done in England and the costings. Do you have any plans to roll out the same here? You seem to do a lot of work with the Welsh Government and a lot on your estates. With your experience, can you not roll out the same programme over here, work with the Government, and put your experience and possibly some of your money into hotspot areas here where you own land?

**Ms Thompson:** I will start and then hand over to Patrick. We have engaged very much with the discussion on that. Queen's did a study on Castle Ward, which is one of our properties in County Down, that looked at bovine TB issues. We are absolutely open to having discussions and working with people to try to find a resolution to managing the disease. The pieces of work that we have done have been where government asked us to come in, so we are completely open to that suggestion. Patrick will elaborate on how and why we have ended up where we have with the other two Governments.

**Mr P Begg:** In Wales, we are talking a lot about what lessons were learned. We are not doing anything practical at the moment. There are not any additional trials in Wales at present, but we are talking to the Welsh Assembly Government about what we might do in partnership with them. In England, to demonstrate leadership, we took the step to push forward with the vaccination, because it felt as though there was a lot of prevarication and not a lot of action on the vaccination stuff that had been started at Woodchester in Gloucestershire. I am sure that you will hear about that tomorrow. It felt like a real situation at Killerton, which is a big hotspot, and we felt that we had a duty to do something. We are delighted to do it and to share all the learnings from it.

You asked about investing beyond our boundaries. That is a hard question for us, given all our other liabilities and things that we have to do. However, on our land, it would not be an effective approach to cherry-pick bits of empty land and do a vaccination. You need to take account of scale and the appropriate boundaries, and our very strong view is that it is not just a vaccination question but an integrated package, and all the other measures need to come in at the same time. Vaccination will not cure anything; it helps to minimise effects as part of a set of measures. There is no magic bullet, but we are trying this out alongside biosecurity and all the other things in Killerton to show what can be achieved. It has the natural boundaries that allow you to stop the perturbation effects and understand the effects of what you are doing.

**Mr McMullan:** Do you not have natural boundaries on your ground in County Down?

**Ms Philomena Davidson (National Trust):** We do have natural boundaries, but they are not big enough. The experiment in Killerton involves 18 farms and is on a very big scale. With that bigger range, you can work with different aspects. The trust financed a very expensive pilot study, and we have put the money into Killerton so that we can learn from the study and disseminate the information to others.

**Mr McMullan:** That is grand.

**The Chairperson:** You got your two, Oliver. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Byrne:** Thank you for your presentation. It was balanced, and that is important. Where do you come down on the debate about vaccination and/or culling and cattle-to-cattle and badger-to-cattle transmission?

**Mr P Begg:** We are pretty clear — although you are right to say that our presentation was balanced — in what we say. Eighty per cent of transmissions of bovine TB are from cattle to cattle, and we must sort that out. The other 20% is from wildlife, and we need to do something about that. We cannot leave that alone, so it has to be a package of measures. We prefer vaccination and feel that, in the long term, that is the only way to go. Cost, complexity, social acceptance and other issues mean that vaccination feels like the right way to go.

However, there may be cases in which culling is acceptable. We do not prefer it, and we will not actively pursue it, but, in certain situations, we would not stand in its way. If our tenants wish to participate in an appropriate scale exercise where the scientific criteria laid down by the Independent Scientific Group are met, such as badger-proof boundaries, an appropriate scale, and an understanding of original badger numbers before you start, that may be appropriate in some

circumstances. The Wales intensive action area trial did not involve culling in the end, but it was probably set up to meet those criteria. Does that answer the question sufficiently?

**Mr Byrne:** I am proscribed from asking a supplementary question, so that will be fine for now.  
*[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:** I will go around again if I can.

**Mrs Dobson:** Thank you for your presentation. I declare an interest as a farmer. Many of us are looking forward to the outcomes of DARD's County Down study, which you mentioned earlier. However, DARD already has the full details of strains of TB at its disposal and has been able to track its movement historically for some time from farm to farm. Should it not use that as a major tool to eradicate TB?

**Ms Thompson:** Sorry, can you repeat that?

**Mrs Dobson:** DARD has had at its disposal the mappings of the strain and the historical movement from farm to farm. Why has that practice not been used to try to eradicate it?

**Ms Davidson:** We have not seen any of the results from the County Down survey. As I understand it, the survey is still running, and we have not seen any interim outcome, so we are not in a position to comment. DARD is working on cattle-to-cattle measures, on biosecurity and on going into hotspot areas and looking at farms that have outbreaks and those that do not. There must be something that we can use from that work to develop a further strategy, because surely there will be a lot of learning opportunities from that work. We would like to see, regardless of the results of the survey, that relationship being built on, behaviours being looked at and a system being rolled out. From what we know of that piece of research, it is something that should be built on.

**Mrs Dobson:** Why has the historical data on the movement of TB from farm to farm not been used?

**Ms Davidson:** I am not sure how far back the historical data goes.

**Mrs Dobson:** We have been told that DARD has details of the movement of TB from farm to farm and information on the strains of the disease, yet that information has not been used.

**The Chairperson:** There is a map of Northern Ireland that is colour-coded to denote strains of TB. You can almost name strains by the territory that they are from. Have you not seen that information?

**Ms Thompson:** No.

**Mr P Begg:** It sounds interesting and useful, though. In the spirit of this research, we absolutely should be building on sound research that demonstrates cause, effect, transmission routes and all those kinds of things. It seems intuitively right to build on that.

**Ms Thompson:** There was a meeting at Greenmount involving number of stakeholders from the farming community and environmental interests. We had a range of presentations that day, at which we were shown some pieces of information for the first time. We were told that we would likely be given that information. However, that has not happened, and there has been no further update since that meeting.

It was an extremely useful meeting, at which those of us in attendance had the opportunity to share our concerns over the farming community's views, the environmental views and the veterinary views. At that meeting, we got some information that we had not seen before, where some of the mapping had been talked about. A further meeting has not been convened, but it was a really good opportunity to have some debate. It is fair to say that, if there is information, it would be great to have some kind of task force that could look at that information together.

**Mrs Dobson:** I am surprised that that has not happened.

**Ms Thompson:** To have those discussions and bring the experience and knowledge that we have from the various different areas would be very helpful. The most surprising thing from that day

occurred when we were given a range of ideas about where money might best be spent by the Department on future research. None of the different groupings was far apart on how that might proceed.

We want to be progressive and look for new information so that, rather than do the same pieces of research that have been done in other parts of the UK, we do pieces of research that take us on and progress us so that Northern Ireland can become a leader in how to manage bovine TB better, looking at all the different facets, including cattle-to-cattle transmission, badger-to-cattle transmission and biosecurity measures.

**Mrs Dobson:** You need the information at your disposal to be able to do that.

**Ms Thompson:** Absolutely, and we need to be able to look at what the methodology might be. That is one of the points. We need to be really clear on what the methodology would be and what the criteria would be. You could then assess that on the basis of what your baselines are and what you are trying to achieve. Your control areas have to be 100% controlled, and you need to know what the variables are that you are measuring in each of those areas.

Therefore, there is a huge opportunity for us, and there is money available for us to be able to do some work. It is about making sure that the money is spent in the right place.

**The Chairperson:** Before I bring William in, can you put a date on that meeting?

**Mr P Begg:** It was in November 2011.

**Ms Davidson:** We will get you the exact date.

**The Chairperson:** That would be great to know.

**Mr Irwin:** Thank you for your presentation. I declare an interest as a farmer, so I am fully aware of the problems caused by TB.

Mrs Dobson mentioned the different strains of TB. Part of the problem may be that there are different strains, some of which are very contagious. Having said that, no animal should move from a farm unless that farm has been tested and deemed to be free from TB. I believe that farms with very contagious strains of TB should have to wait longer before being allowed to sell cattle on. That may help. Of course, each herd must be TB-free before animals are allowed to be sold on, but there is obviously a problem there. They have not fully tested some herds, otherwise it would not be spreading.

Do you accept that any vaccination programme will be long term? For instance, as I said earlier, you can vaccinate badgers that already have TB and those badgers could live for many years. The ones that have TB are the problem. A badger with TB that is vaccinated today could still live for years and could continue to spread TB.

Animal-to-animal contact is another issue. One animal in a herd of 300 cows could be infected with TB through contact with a badger. That herd walks through a milking parlour every day and eats out of the same troughs every day, so it is almost impossible to prevent animal-to-animal contact within a herd. It may be a wee bit easier to prevent contact between herds, but do you accept that, if one animal in a herd contracts the disease, its spread throughout that herd is almost inevitable?

**Mr P Begg:** Yes, that is entirely logical. Part of the answer to your question is, I think, that we are doing the Killerton trial to understand how long it takes to get to effective herd immunity in the badger community. We are doing it for five years, and we will do it rigorously in order to understand, as far as we possibly can, how many of those badgers have become immune to the disease.

You are right; you could not really imagine a situation in which every single badger becomes immune very quickly. However, herd immunity does not require every badger to be immune. Scientists drew this up for me: imagine that there are 20 spots randomly distributed in an area, each representing a badger, and 17 of those are effectively immune. The three badgers that are TB carriers have very little opportunity to interact with cattle, particularly if you have biosecurity measures, etc, on the farm.

So, in effect, you have got to the point where, although not absolutely nailed on 100%, you are so close to it that your incidence of breakdowns will decrease substantially.

**Mr Irwin:** Yes; I understand.

**Mr Clarke:** I apologise for not hearing all of your presentation; I had to nip out for a second. Did I pick up that you own in excess of 7,000 acres in Northern Ireland?

**Ms Thompson:** We own 3,100 hectares of farmed land.

**Mr Clarke:** It is interesting to note that you have carried out your surveys in England. Why have you not concentrated any of them in Northern Ireland, given that you own a vast amount of land here?

**Ms Thompson:** We have been working with Queen's University on a study at Castle Ward in County Down to look at some aspects of TB in that area. The work that is being done in England and Wales has been work with government, through the Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA).

**Mr P Begg:** Yes. We privately contracted FERA to do the job, the vaccination trial, but Killerton presents itself as the perfect place to test.

**Mr Clarke:** Who is paying FERA to do that job?

**Mr P Begg:** We are.

**Mr Clarke:** It is interesting that you can take a legal case against a golf course on the north coast but, when it comes to the farmers in Northern Ireland for whom you have responsibility, you do not put your money up and invest in trying to eradicate TB in Northern Ireland.

**Ms Thompson:** I think that that is unfair. Obviously, as an organisation that works across Wales, Northern Ireland and England, and as a charity that receives money from people to look after a range of special places, be they houses, gardens or farmland, the trust must be very clear about how and where it focuses its energy and funds at any one time. The organisation collectively decides where and when to place its funds. As I understand it, Killerton was chosen because of the size of the land that was available and the issues around it. You are looking at 18 farms; it is a huge amount of land, and the trial must be considered on that scale. In Northern Ireland, we do not have any estates of that scale where we could do that piece of work. We would have to have a very strong argument as to why we would spend our money above and beyond our own properties, because, ultimately, we do not have huge amounts of resources that we can just give out here, there and everywhere. We have to be very focused about how we use it.

**Mr Clarke:** What is the average size of the farms belonging to the farmers who pay money towards the trust?

**Ms Davidson:** Tenants can take land from as small as around 20 acres up to a couple of hundred acres. There is quite a range, and it depends on what the farmer wants the land for. If it is his own holding, he might want to extend it.

**Mr Clarke:** So, in Northern Ireland, there are some quite large farms on your ground.

**Ms Davidson:** Yes, two hundred acres would be the biggest.

**Mr Clarke:** In Northern Ireland, 200 acres is a reasonably large farm.

**Ms Davidson:** In some cases, that farm will have more than one farmer on it.

**Mr P Begg:** The average is about 30 hectares per farm. There are 100 agreements across 3,100 hectares.

**The Chairperson:** Of the 80 farms that you have, how many have been struck down by bovine TB in the past couple of years?



**Ms Davidson:** Traditionally, people do not always share that information. They are under no obligation to share with the trust that that has happened, so, generally, we are not told when that happens. Unfortunately, we cannot answer that question.

**The Chairperson:** I understand that. I cannot speak for the Committee at this stage as we are only halfway through the review, but there seems to be a separation between the Department and other bodies with regard to sharing information. Will you distribute the information that you are gathering from Devon to your farming community to make it aware of the findings?

**Mr P Begg:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Will that go some way towards educating the farming community?

**Mr P Begg:** Yes, it is our duty to do that. We would not do it if we were not trying to make a difference and help people to understand how they can take more measures to control the disease.

**Ms Davidson:** Communication will be a big part of that package.

**Mr Begg:** In fact, we have done a video already to show how the trapping and vaccination process works to try to demystify it, because some people think that it is terribly complex and causes huge distress to badgers. Having done it, we can show that it does not. We have been sharing that video around. We have just shared it with our colleagues in Wales to help them to understand how they can get across how vaccination can happen.

**The Chairperson:** You mentioned risk. This could well be in your presentation; forgive me if it is. What risks are involved in the work in Devon? What do you mean by risk? One of the risks might be perturbation.

**Mr P Begg:** The perturbation risk is almost zero. We are not seeing any perturbation effect at all on the vaccinated badgers. The social distress that arises from the disruption caused by culling, which we know is a real effect, does not seem to happen with vaccination. That has been backed up in a couple of small trials that have been going on elsewhere. There are other risks. The biggest risk for us is that we do it badly and completely undermine the trust between our tenant farmers and us. So, as much as possible, we are trying to share with them what we are doing, keep the communication good, make sure that they understand the findings as they emerge, and listen to what else they think can and should be done.

**The Chairperson:** You will be sharing that with Northern Ireland farmers?

**Mr P Begg:** There are no walls between what we do. We will absolutely be sharing it around the organisation.

**Mr McMullan:** Can we see that video?

**Mr P Begg:** Yes.

**Ms Davidson:** We have been focusing very much on the vaccination of badgers, but, as an organisation, we also want to help to push for a cattle vaccine. As an organisation, we will be extremely supportive of that. We believe that Northern Ireland, with the Republic of Ireland, could lead the way in doing that, and we as an organisation really want to push that.

**Mr Irwin:** Just to clarify, I think the situation is that DEFRA has identified a vaccine but Europe will not give clearance for it. It is probably out of our hands until clearance comes from Europe on that.

**Mr P Begg:** There is a political momentum, and it is important to keep it going. With things shifting in France and Spain, where TB starts to become an issue, you can see how Europe might be more receptive, with those big players having to listen to what they need to do. Now is the time for all the Administrations to be pushing hard for cattle vaccines to be put on the fast track.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much for your time.