



Northern Ireland Audit Office

MEDIA RELEASE

Worrying Increase in the Prevalence and Cost of Bovine TB in Northern Ireland

The Comptroller and Auditor General published today his report on *Eradicating Bovine TB in Northern Ireland*. A Bovine Tuberculosis (TB) eradication programme was first introduced in Northern Ireland in 1964. Over 50 years later and after spending more than £0.5 billion, prevalence of the disease remains high (affecting 1 in 8 herds in 2017). Bovine TB is no longer a human health problem in Northern Ireland because of the current testing programme, pasteurisation of milk and meat inspection.

The report examines the escalating costs of the programme, the continued prevalence of the disease and outlines the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs proposals to adopt a new strategic approach to control, and ultimately eradicate, the disease.

Mr Donnelly said: *'The long running and costly Bovine TB eradication programme has not achieved Bovine TB-free status for Northern Ireland and, therefore, cannot be seen as value for money. Under current arrangements, Northern Ireland farmers receive 100 per cent compensation when their animals are compulsorily removed for disease control purposes. In effect, since 1998 the public purse has underwritten farmers' risk of herds contracting Bovine TB. This has provided little incentive for the industry to share ownership of the problem. Stakeholders (government, farming industry and environmentalists) must work together if the disease is to be eliminated.'*

The report acknowledges that prevalence of the disease would have been significantly higher and would have hindered the success of the agri-food sector in the absence of any interventions by the Department.

2017 figures reported to the European Commission, show that herd prevalence in Northern Ireland (at 12.4 per cent) was higher than the Republic of Ireland (4.9 per cent), very similar to Wales (12.5 per cent) and lower than the overall rate in England (20.4 per cent). Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom to have Bovine TB-free status.

Bovine TB Herd Prevalence Rates 1995-2017

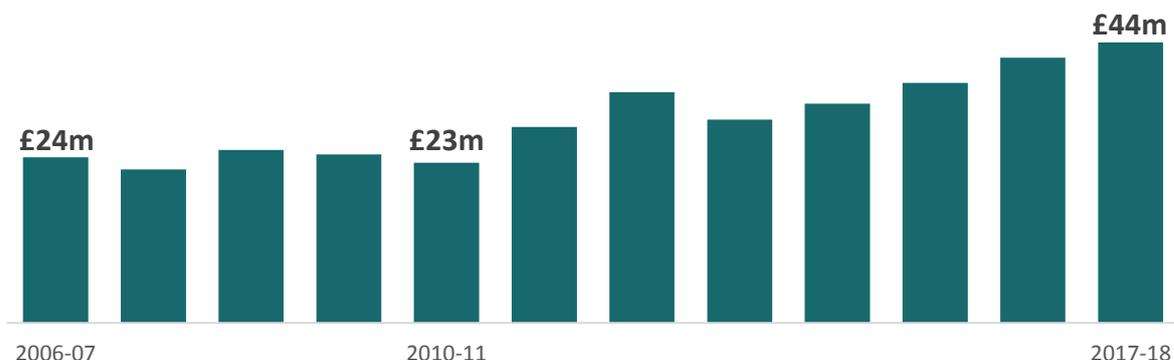
Despite the high levels of expenditure, the prevalence of Bovine TB remains high amongst herds in Northern Ireland and is rising: 12.4 per cent in 2017, close to the peak of 13.2 per cent in 2002.



Annual Expenditure 2006-2018

There has been a substantial increase in annual expenditure on the bovine TB eradication programme. Costs incurred have almost doubled since 2010-11.

In the five years to 31 March 2018, the Department's eradication programme has cost just over £177 million. Since 2006, farmers have received over £158 million compensation for the compulsory removal of almost 127,427 cattle under the eradication programme. In 2017-18 the Northern Ireland eradication programme cost £44 million. £23 million of this related to compensation costs to farmers.



While animal testing is extensive, with over 3 million Bovine TB tests performed on some 1.7 million cattle in 2017-18, the EU-approved test is not consistently reliable as an indicator of infection.

Successful eradication depends upon tackling all sources of infection concurrently. Around one in five transmissions of the disease are from wildlife, principally badgers, but other sources are equally significant. Spread of the disease between cattle and buying infected cattle each account for around one in five transmissions. More than a quarter of infections have more than one potential source or the source is unknown.

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OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON 27 November 2018**

In 2014, the Department appointed an independent expert advisory group, the TB Strategic Partnership Group, to develop a long-term solution. Its key proposals include:

- establishing new management/partnership arrangements with a Northern Ireland Eradication Partnership Board, three sub-regional boards and ad hoc local disease teams;
- changing the current testing regime and focusing more on bio-security measures;
- removing and vaccinating badgers in targeted areas;
- encouraging ownership across the farming industry for improving herd health; and
- Introducing changes to the compensation system and charging for an annual herd test.

On 30 November 2017, the Department launched a public consultation on a range of proposals to work towards the eradication of bovine TB in Northern Ireland. The consultation included details of the Department's response to the Strategic Partnership Group report. The consultation closed on 1 February. The Department has convened an internal bovine TB Programme Management Board to consider the responses, oversee advice to the Minister (once in post) and prepare an Outline Business Case to underpin the finance to implement accepted recommendations.

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. The report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on 27 November 2018.
3. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Neil Gray (028 9025 4345) or Clare Dornan (028 9025 1035).
4. Bovine TB is a persistent, infectious cattle disease that is difficult to clinically diagnose and tough to eradicate.
5. For disease surveillance and eradication purposes, England has recognised three distinct geographical areas, based on the level of disease risk (*low risk*, *high risk* areas, and an *edge* (or '*buffer*') area between the low and high risk areas). Each area has specific strategic bovine TB objectives and control policies.