



The Rt Hon Angela Eagle MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
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11 August 2026

Dear Dame Angela,

I am writing regarding the rapidly escalating outbreak of bluetongue virus serotype 3 (BTV-3). There are now hundreds of confirmed infected premises across the UK this season, with cases identified in Scotland for the first time.

Bluetongue is not zoonotic and poses no risk to human health or food safety. But it causes severe disease and mortality in sheep, and milk drop, fertility problems and congenital abnormalities in cattle. As a vet who grew up on a sheep and beef farm, I'm acutely aware of the impact this is having on the farming community.

I am asking the Government to take three urgent steps to help farmers and vets deal with this outbreak.

1. Expand diagnostic capacity by enabling other suitably equipped laboratories to assist with bluetongue diagnostics and pathology.

2. Accelerate vaccine supply, using regulatory flexibility where appropriate to bring suitable overseas stocks into the UK rapidly, while supporting greater production capacity for future seasons.

3. Remove barriers to surveillance including improving capacity on APHA reporting lines and reducing unnecessary administrative burdens.

Expand diagnostic capacity

I am hearing directly from vets and veterinary scientists that the current system is struggling with the volume of samples being submitted, with significant delays in receiving results.

The restrictions governing bluetongue material under the Specified Animal Pathogens Order exist for good reasons, and biosecurity must remain paramount. However, bluetongue poses no risk to human health, so there is a strong case for reviewing whether the current restrictions on diagnostic samples remain proportionate during a major outbreak. We cannot control an outbreak effectively if diagnosis is stuck in a bottleneck.

I would therefore urge Defra to work with HSE, APHA and the Chief Veterinary Officer to establish a rapid, risk-based route for suitably equipped veterinary diagnostic laboratories to receive and test appropriate BTV-3 and BTV-8 material, whether through derogation, expedited licensing or another mechanism.

This is about more than simply confirming that an animal has bluetongue. Good diagnostic capacity is needed because:

- Some clinical signs can look like other serious diseases, including Foot and Mouth Disease. Rapid testing is essential to establish what we are actually dealing with.
- Even where bluetongue is confirmed, we still need to know which serotype is circulating. Vaccines and immunity are serotype-specific, so we cannot assume every new case is BTV-3, some will be BTV-8, and they need different vaccines.
- Bluetongue can also be confused with other important causes of abortions, stillbirths and congenitally abnormal calves and lambs. Diseases such as BVD and Schmallenberg virus can produce similar problems but require different investigation, control and management. We therefore need testing that can distinguish between them

Accelerate vaccine supply

Defra and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate must use every available mechanism to secure suitable vaccine stocks from overseas and get them into the UK as quickly as possible.

Farmers are being told, quite rightly, to vaccinate. This is the best control measure we have, but the immediate problem is supply. Manufacturers planned for the lower demand of previous years and so didn't anticipate this surge. We need Defra and the VMD to secure vaccine stocks from overseas and get them onto farms quickly, taking a pragmatic approach to importation and licensing so requirements don't delay vaccines already safely used across Europe.

Bluetongue should now be treated as an endemic disease. The government should encourage farmers to build vaccination into routine flock and herd planning, which will give manufacturers the confidence to scale up production so we're not in the same position next year.

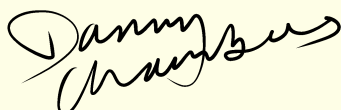
Remove barriers to surveillance

Bluetongue is notifiable, so surveillance depends on farmers and vets reporting suspicious disease quickly. I've heard practical concerns about veterinary costs, burdensome admin, and limited capacity on APHA's reporting lines: small issues that together slow reporting when we need it fastest. I am therefore asking both Defra and APHA to review these arrangements urgently and remove any unnecessary barriers to reporting and testing. Good surveillance is our early-warning system, and the reporting process needs to support vets and farmers rather than add to the pressure they are already under.

I recognise that Defra, APHA, the VMD, Pirbright and veterinary colleagues across the country are already working extremely hard. They deserve the full support of the Government in tackling this outbreak.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely



Dr Danny Chambers MP