



**Environment, Food
and Rural Affairs
Committee**

08 September 2026

Abigail Seger
Chief Executive, Veterinary Medicines Directorate

Richard Lewis
Chief Executive, Animal and Plant Health Agency

[by email]

Subject: Response to the UK Bluetongue BTV-3 outbreak

Dear Abigail and Richard,

The National Audit Office reported in June 2025 that key public bodies were insufficiently prepared for a major animal disease outbreak and would be likely to struggle to respond effectively if one occurred. The current Bluetongue outbreak represents one of the first significant animal health challenges since the publication of that report and raises important questions about disease preparedness, communications, operational resilience and contingency planning. BTV-3 has been spreading across parts of continental Europe since 2023, meaning that the risk to the UK livestock sector was understood well in advance of the current outbreak. However, we have heard concerns from farmers and veterinarians regarding the effectiveness of communications on disease risk, the availability of vaccines and delays in laboratory testing

Communication and vaccine supplies

We are interested in understanding how communication strategies evolved as the outbreak progressed and what lessons have been learned for future disease threats. We have heard concerns that communications with farmers and other stakeholders could have been stronger before the outbreak escalated, enabling livestock keepers to take preventative action sooner.

Could you therefore set out:

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- What contingency planning was undertaken by APHA, the VMD and Defra in anticipation of BTV-3 reaching the UK.
- What communications activity was undertaken with farmers, veterinarians, livestock markets and other stakeholders regarding the risks associated with BTV-3 before it was detected in the UK.
- How those communications changed as the disease situation developed, and whether any lessons have been identified regarding the timing, frequency or content of messaging.

We have also received evidence from farmers and veterinarians regarding difficulties in obtaining Bluetongue vaccine supplies. While livestock keepers have been encouraged to vaccinate to protect their animals and businesses, some have reported delays in obtaining doses when required. We are keen to understand the extent of these challenges and the factors contributing to them.

During our evidence session with the VMD, you explained that, whilst the VMD does not control vaccine manufacturing, it plays an important role in communicating anticipated demand and priorities to manufacturers in order to support vaccine availability.

Could you therefore provide:

- An assessment of whether sufficient vaccine supplies were available when demand increased and, where shortages occurred, the reasons for those shortfalls.
- Details of any engagement between government, the VMD and manufacturers regarding anticipated vaccine demand prior to and during the outbreak.
- What steps are now being taken to improve vaccine availability and ensure similar supply issues do not arise during future Bluetongue seasons or other animal disease outbreaks.

Testing capacity and turnaround times

We have also received reports from stakeholders of delays of up to three weeks in receiving Bluetongue test results. Such delays can create uncertainty for farmers, affect business decisions and animal movements, and may complicate the diagnosis of other diseases where cases are assumed to be Bluetongue while awaiting confirmation.



Given the concerns raised by the National Audit Office regarding preparedness for animal disease outbreaks, we would welcome further information on testing capacity and resilience during the current outbreak.

Could you therefore provide:

- Information on APHA's Bluetongue testing capacity before the current outbreak and its current testing capacity, including average turnaround times for results.
- Details of the factors that contributed to testing delays and the steps taken to increase capacity as demand rose.
- What consideration has been given to expanding testing beyond APHA and the Pirbright Institute, including the use of additional laboratories, and the opportunities and risks associated with such an approach.
- What information is used to produce the bluetongue disease outbreak map, and how do testing delays impact the map's accuracy and updates?

Ultimately, this outbreak raises wider questions about the UK's resilience to recurring animal disease threats. We would therefore welcome your assessment of the lessons learned from the response to BTV-3 and the actions being taken to ensure that similar challenges relating to communications, vaccine availability and testing capacity are not repeated in future years.

Yours truly,


Alistair Carmichael MP
Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee