

CONSULTATION PAPER

**PROPOSED RELAXATION OF BRUCELLOSIS PRE-MOVEMENT
TESTING CONTROLS**

11 April 2014 to 4 July 2014

Background

1. Brucellosis has significant public health and economic consequences and, therefore, the shared vision of DARD and the farming industry is for its reduction and ultimate eradication. Excellent progress has been made with the herd incidence now being 0.13% at 28 February 2014. As we move towards achieving brucellosis eradication, it is opportune to review our current Brucellosis Eradication Programme (BEP). One area that it is appropriate to review at this stage is pre-movement testing for brucellosis.
2. Pre-movement testing for brucellosis was introduced for cattle herds here on 1 December 2004. The Brucellosis Control Order (NI) 2004 (as amended), states that all cattle over 12 months (with the exception of steers) must be tested within 30 days of movement to another herd, market, show or exhibition.
3. Pre-movement testing is a requirement under EU Council Directive 64/432 ("the Council Directive") where brucellosis herd breakdowns have exceeded 0.2% of herds in the previous 2 years. However, the Council Directive provides discretion to Member States or regions, when: (a) the percentage of bovine herds infected with brucellosis has not exceeded 0.2% for at least two years; (b) where the animal comes from an officially brucellosis-free herd within that Member State or region; and, (c) has not, during transportation, come into contact with bovine animals of lesser status.

Current Position and Assessment of Risk

4. Whilst the level of brucellosis fell below the 0.2% figure in late 2008, a significant upturn in 2009/10 postponed serious consideration of any pre-movement testing reduction. However, since January 2011, there has been a serious reduction in disease and the confirmed incidence rate is now zero.

5. There has not been a confirmed brucellosis breakdown in the north of Ireland since 28 February 2012. Whilst small numbers of animals that blood test positive continue to occur, none of these have subsequently been confirmed as positive following laboratory culture. While such results are ultimately regarded as “false positives”, they are taken seriously. Subsequent herd tests at 30 and 90 days under EU legislation are also required. Precautionary testing of at risk herds is also conducted.
6. According to the Council Directive, if we have a three year period without a confirmed outbreak of brucellosis and have 99.8% of herds brucellosis-free each year for 5 consecutive years, we can apply to the European Commission to be awarded Officially Brucellosis Free (OBF) status for the north of Ireland. Provided we have no further confirmed outbreaks of brucellosis, an application for OBF status for the north of Ireland could be made to the European Commission in March 2015.
7. Whilst the overall risk of a new brucellosis outbreak is considered to be low, it is important that we continue to vigorously implement the EU Commission approved BEP as we work towards achieving OBF status. The routine brucellosis surveillance programme is based on annual serological testing of all beef herds and those dairy herds in what would have been high incidence areas. Most dairy herds are serologically tested biennially with monthly milk testing to achieve regular monitoring. There is targeted surveillance of some animals at slaughter depending on their age and location.
8. As we move towards achieving OBF status it is still important to ensure that our disease controls are robust yet proportionate. The impact of any future brucellosis breakdown would be high because even an isolated and confined confirmed outbreak would reset the three-year clock (no confirmed cases) in relation to making the case to the European Commission in respect of seeking OBF status. An outbreak with significant lateral spread could also re-set the five-year clock (99.8% herds to be OBF). The total financial consequences would approximate to

£8-10 million testing costs for each year's delay, plus an estimated £7 million per year in compliance costs to farmers.

9. However, one area of our BEP that we can review now, in advance of obtaining OBF status, is our pre-movement testing controls for internal cattle movements in the north of Ireland. Any adjustment to our pre-movement testing controls would require an amendment by DARD of Article 5 and Article 20 of the Brucellosis Control Order (NI) 2004 (as amended). Once we obtain OBF status, should we decide to further relax pre-movement testing controls in a phased approach through to possible abolition, DARD would have to introduce each stage of any new pre-movement testing controls by a process of progressive amendment. In addition, should a major disease outbreak or outbreaks require a rapid return to the pre-movement testing control regime introduced in 2004, we would need to bring about the required legislative change.

Options considered to relax pre-movement testing controls in advance of obtaining OBF status

10. In the context of the above circumstances, DARD has considered a range of options for pre-movement testing controls in advance of achieving OBF status, namely:-
- Increase the age threshold of the current pre-movement test from 12 months to 24 months;
 - Extend the period for which a movement is allowed after a negative test from 30 to 60 days; and
 - Abolish the test completely.
11. DARD has considered these options, while taking account of the following:
- the recommendation of the EU Brucellosis Task Force in late 2011 to continue with our current controls;

- the reference in our 2014 BEP as approved by the European Commission to the continuation of our annual and pre-movement testing disease surveillance regime;
- the on-going need for continuing compliance with the requirements, in general, for trade between Member States by dealers or operators as specified in the Trade in Animals and Related Products Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 and, in particular, for exports to Britain; and
- the basic assumption that there will be no further major outbreak or outbreaks of brucellosis here during the period of the programme.

12. Based on the above and as informed by a veterinary risk assessment, DARD has concluded that, whilst the risk of a new brucellosis outbreak is low, risk-based and proportionate controls must be retained. Therefore on the basis of an assessment of current risk, DARD has concluded that for internal pre-movement testing:

- The age threshold should be increased from 12 to 24 months;
- The movement window should be extended from 30 to 60 days;
- It would be premature to abolish pre-movement testing at this stage but, once OBF status is obtained, we could continue to consider further relaxations of our pre-movement testing controls in a phased approach through to possible abolition.

Questions:

Options for the proposal to relax Brucellosis Pre-Movement Testing Controls in advance of obtaining OBF status

- 1. Do you agree that the current age threshold of 12 months should be increased to 24 months? If not, what would you propose and why?**

- 2. Do you agree that the current movement window of 30 days should be extended to 60 days? If not, what would you propose and why?**
- 3. Do you agree that we should introduce the relaxations outlined in Questions 1 and 2, in advance of obtaining OBF status? If not, why not?**
- 4. Do you agree that it would be premature to abolish pre-movement testing at this stage? If not, what would you propose and why?**

Exports to Britain or another Member State

- 13.** The proposal to relax current pre-movement testing controls applies only to cattle movements internal to the north. The requirements of the Council Directive relating to export to other Member States will continue to necessitate the pre-movement test to be conducted on animals intended for breeding and production that are aged 12 months and over within 30 days of export. This will also remain the requirement for the export of cattle for breeding and production to Britain.
- 14.** Currently animals aged 12 months and over that are exported to Britain for breeding and production must have a valid pre-movement test within the last 30 days and this requirement will remain unchanged. In practice, any animal entering an approved Export Assembly Centre here from an approved “GB Export Premises” (i.e. a locally approved export premises) for breeding and production export is often able to use either their routine surveillance test or pre-movement test to meet the this requirement. If, however, DARD implements this proposed relaxation, operators of Export Assembly Centres and “GB Export Premises” may no longer be able to rely on the internal pre-movement test.

15. In order to clarify testing details of individual animals, DARD proposes to make the date the sample of the most recent negative brucellosis test was taken available to operators of “GB Export Premises” who may have the option to display this information to potential buyers. The “brucellosis test expiry date” will in future refer to the end of the 60 day period, rather than the 30 day period.
16. If operators of an Export Assembly Centre have animals that do not have a valid brucellosis test in the last 30 days, they will need to arrange for a brucellosis test to be carried out in the Export Assembly Centre on any eligible cattle. This test will be carried out at the operators’ expense and will be done in line with any other pre-export Private Check Tests. It will: include laboratory costs; and be subject to laboratory protocols. The current expected turnaround time for pre-export samples is 3 to 5 days.
17. Operators of Export Assembly Centres will need to ensure that adequate time is allowed to receive brucellosis test results before the export date is due and the related Export Assembly Centre open period ends.
18. The proposed change to brucellosis pre-movement testing controls will have no impact on any other type of cattle export.

Question:

GB Export Premises Operators

5. **Do you agree with the Department’s suggestion to make the date the sample of the most recent negative brucellosis test was taken available to operators of “GB Export Premises” from the introduction of the Brucellosis Pre-Movement Testing Rule Change? If not, why not?**

Next Steps – obtaining OBF status

19. As already outlined in paragraph 6 above, provided there are no further outbreaks of brucellosis, DARD hopes to be able to submit an application to the European Commission for OBF status in March 2015.
20. Securing OBF status will allow DARD to consider further relaxations to our internal pre-movement testing controls and, if appropriate, possible abolition.
21. In addition, securing OBF status will allow DARD to subsequently relax progressively and proportionately its annual surveillance testing regime. The reduction in the brucellosis risk has already allowed DARD to plan to take the majority of dairy herds out of the annual surveillance testing regime since there is now an increasing reliance on the bulk milk test as the necessary screening tool for such cattle. There may, however, need to be particular exceptions, for example where any dairy herds, that are deemed to have significant risk factors on the basis of emerging test results or epidemiological information, may have to be placed on a more frequent testing schedule. In terms of changes to the current annual surveillance testing regime on receipt of OBF status, it should be noted that it is not envisaged that any such relaxation of annual surveillance testing will require legislative changes.
22. It may be necessary to issue a further related consultation in due course to seek views on how best DARD may relax its annual surveillance testing on receipt of OBF status. However, views from industry and stakeholders are welcomed at this stage.

Questions:

Obtaining OBF status

6. **Do you agree that, once we obtain OBF status, we should continue to relax our pre-movement controls in a phased approach through to possible abolition? If not, what would you propose and why?**

7 (a) In relation to DARD's proposal to relax its annual surveillance testing regime following attainment of OBF status, do you have any particular views to express?

7 (b) Do you have any other comments or alternative proposals or any additional background information?

Position in the south of Ireland

23. The south of Ireland made significant progress towards the final eradication of brucellosis in cattle and achieved OBF Status in July 2009. The south has adopted a cautious approach to reducing controls and any changes to their programme are based on risk assessment. They did not relax their pre-movement testing arrangements before achieving OBF status, mainly because they regarded such tests as a significant element in their disease control. In September 2009, following attainment of OBF status, the south of Ireland increased the pre-movement testing age threshold from 12 to 18 months for dairy animals and to 24 months for bulls and the validity of the test to 60 days. From 1 January 2013 they increased the pre-movement testing age threshold to 24 months for dairy animals as well and abolished the one sale rule. The benefit of a pre-movement test is that it controls the sale of a female animal that has aborted, with the abortion not being declared, being sold, with the risk of potential disease spread to another area.

Potential Economic Impact of the Proposal

24. A partial Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) has been drawn up in line with guidance issued by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. This partial RIA considers:

- the potential economic impact on farmers of DARD's proposal to relax brucellosis pre-movement testing controls; and

- the on-going need for continuing compliance with the requirements, in general, for trade between Member States by dealers or operators as specified in the Trade in Animals and Related Products Regulations (NI) 2011 and, in particular, for exports to Britain.

Questions:

The potential economic impact of the proposal to relax Brucellosis Pre-Movement Testing Controls

- 8 (a) Do you agree that the analysis of the evidence given in the accompanying partial RIA accurately describes the potential impacts of these proposals?**
- 8 (b) Are there other potential impacts that we may not have foreseen and taken account of in this consultation document or in the accompanying partial RIA?**

Equality Impact

25. Under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998, DARD is required to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:

- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- between men and women generally;
- between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- between persons with dependants and persons without.

26. Our proposal to relax brucellosis pre-movement testing controls has been screened in terms of equality and it has been concluded that it will not have any differential impact on the groups listed above. We would, however, welcome any comments on the equality aspects of the consultation.

Questions:

The potential impact of these proposals on different groups

- 9 (a) Do you agree that the analysis of the evidence given in the accompanying DARD Equality and Human Rights Screening Template accurately describes the potential impacts of these proposals?
- 9 (b) Are there other potential impacts that we may not have foreseen and taken account of in the accompanying Equality and Human Rights Screening Template?