



Animal &
Plant Health
Agency

APHA Briefing Note 12/20

Advice for OVs undertaking TB testing during the COVID-19 outbreak in England

Date issued: 01 April 2020 (Last updated 16 April 2020)

This Briefing Note replaces 08/20 published on 24th March

Purpose

To provide guidance to Official Veterinarians who will be undertaking official TB testing in England during the COVID-19 outbreak. This guidance refers to both the SICCT skin test and interferon-gamma (IFN- γ) assay, where appropriate. **Background**

1. The latest advice from Government regarding COVID-19 is available on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk). Please check regularly for updates as the situation is changing rapidly and guidance may change.
2. APHA have recognised the negative impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the ability of Veterinary Delivery Partners (VDPs) and OVs to undertake TB-related activities. There have been reported shortages of staff to complete testing and refusals from farmers to test due to self-isolation.
3. To assist OVs and vets to continue to perform work that supports food safety and the food chain, the Government considers farm vets and OVs as critical workers for the purposes of childcare and work related travel. The RCVS and BVA, in consultation with the UK Chief Veterinary Officer, have issued a statement¹ to support this. Further details are available on <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers#critical-workers>

¹ <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/news-and-views/news/coronavirus-rcvs-and-bva-issue-joint-guidance-on-key-worker/> Accessed 24/03/2020

4. The BVA and BCVA have both published recent guidance for vets continuing to TB test, and how it might be done safely².
5. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons has also issued guidance to assist veterinary practices with decision-making in these rapidly-changing circumstances³.
6. The TB Hub has TB specific information related to the COVID-19 outbreak, to support vets and farmers make decisions over the coming weeks. It will be updated regularly.
<https://tbhub.co.uk/statutory-tb-testing-of-cattle-in-gb-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

General Principles

7. **TB testing should only continue if, in the OV's judgement, it can be done safely in accordance with current COVID-19 public health guidance.**
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others>
8. Reference should be made to APHA Briefing Note 07/20⁴ for guidance relating to access to farms for OVs who will be undertaking official visits during the COVID-19 outbreak. Please also refer to the latest Government advice on COVID-19 on <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/guidance-for-employers-and-businesses-on-coronavirus-covid-19#social-distancing-in-the-workplace---principles>
9. APHA will continue to be supportive of OVs where their dynamic risk assessment finds that the test cannot be carried out safely. This includes when only some of the herd can immediately be tested, or if the test has to be abandoned part way through. If this happens, APHA will provide payment for the part test completed.
10. At present we are continuing with TB testing (government or private funded), however the UK Chief Veterinary Officer is keeping this under constant review.
11. At present we will continue with the current allocation of tests to VDPs/OVs.
12. The situation will continue to be monitored by APHA and reviewed as appropriate.

² <https://www.bva.co.uk/news-and-blog/news-article/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-updates-for-the-veterinary-profession/> and <https://www.bcva.org.uk/news/bcva-covid-19-latest-guidance-farm-vets> Accessed 29/03/20

³ <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus-covid-19/> Accessed 23/03/2020

⁴ <http://apha.defra.gov.uk/documents/ov/Briefing-Note-0720.pdf>

Specific Instructions

13. OV's are advised to continue to apply prioritisation of tests following guidance provided in APHA Briefing Note 06/20⁵; in short this prioritises testing in OTF herds over breakdown testing.
14. TB testing should only continue if, in the OV's judgement, it can be done safely in accordance with current COVID-19 public health guidance. For example, this might mean the farm has good stock handling facilities to minimise vet-farmer contact; that the minimum number of persons are present at the test whilst maintaining safe handling; and keeping to advice to stay two metres / six feet apart from other personnel.
15. Social distancing measures should not prejudice normal health and safety measures, and OV's are reminded to apply best practice biosecurity on and off farm (through cleaning of hands, equipment and protective clothing on and off farm).
16. To facilitate TB testing in England, APHA will allow the closing date of a testing window to be delayed following a risk based approach. This can only be permitted on request from the OV and only on one occasion for any test. APHA will retain discretion on permitting this change in all cases.
17. For surveillance tests that have a 'test window' that is currently open, the closing date will be delayed to help facilitate completion of the test. For tests with a current window of three months the closure of this window will be delayed for an additional two months. For tests with a current testing window of two months the closure of this window will be delayed for an additional one month.
18. Please note that delaying the end of the testing window (Latest Activity Completion Date or LACD in Sam) will also incur a delay of the start of the window (Earliest Activity Start Date or EASD) as testing windows cannot currently be extended in the Sam system. If a test window has been delayed due to COVID19 reasons, tests or part tests can still go ahead before the revised EASD.
19. If a request for a delay in the closing of the testing window as per paragraphs 16 and 17 above is to be made, where possible, OV's should contact APHA before starting the test (or at least starting inputting any tests results in iSam). This will facilitate the management of the Work Schedules for those test.
20. The closing of the test window for tracing tests and re-testing of Inconclusive Reactors (IRs) cannot be delayed and should be completed within the current window where possible. Form TR15(E) (*Tuberculosis Test Types and Sam Codes*:

⁵ <http://apha.defra.gov.uk/documents/ov/Briefing-Note-0620.pdf>

What to use and When – England) in the [OV Instructions](#) has been updated to indicate what specific test types will be eligible to have the closing date of the window delayed due to COVID-19 reasons.

21. Adjustments to surveillance tests in line with paragraph 17 (above) will be permitted for tests that are allocated over the next three months until 30th June 2020 unless advised otherwise.
22. OVs can request this by contacting APHA TB Advice Team – preferably by email – TB.Advice@apha.gov.uk, using “COVID-19 prioritisation protocol request” in the subject line. Please provide the relevant CPH, the test type, the Work Schedule Activity (WSA) if the test has been activated and that they are requesting the closing date of a testing window to be delayed. In exceptional circumstances the request can be made by telephone by contacting the APHA TB Advice Team on 0300 020 0301, advising the call handler that the call is regarding the “COVID-19 prioritisation protocol”.
23. Until further advised, if the keeper and/or his/her OV advise APHA that the TB test could not be completed during the test window, for valid reasons associated with the COVID-19 outbreak, this will not be referred to the relevant paying agency for cross compliance penalties and reactors will not be subject to any reduction in compensation due to delayed testing.
24. If the TB test is not completed within the (revised) testing window, herd restrictions will be issued and overdue testing procedures will follow.
25. In breakdown herds, Short Interval testing will continue to be scheduled with an earliest activity start date 60 days after the last reactor removal, with a testing window set automatically at 30 days. If it is not possible to test within the pre-set window due to valid reasons associated with COVID-19 until further notice an additional 30 days will be given in which you should aim to complete the test (that is until 120 days after removal of the last reactor).

Issued on behalf of Christine Middlemiss, UK Chief Veterinary Officer, Andrew Soldan APHA Veterinary Director and Paul Townsend Deputy Service Delivery Director.