

Oxfordshire Badger Group press release: Response to Badger Trust Report “Tackling Bovine TB Together”

Oxfordshire Badger Group (OBG) welcomes and fully endorses the Badger Trust’s report on how best to tackle the problem of controlling bovine tb (bTB).

- Around 60% of Oxfordshire is in the cull zones. Over 6,000 of the county’s badgers have been killed in the first four years of culling. Nationally, around a quarter million badgers have been culled to date.
- The area culled is thought to stretch west of a line drawn down from Banbury to Thame and comes within 5-10 miles of Oxford City.
- In 2023 DEFRA expanded the existing cull zones*. Oxfordshire zone 69 on the Berkshire border grew from 211 km² to 250km² (+18.5%). The Warwickshire, Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire cull zones which overlap into Oxfordshire also increased (by 2%, 46% and 100% respectively).
- DEFRA is widely expected to consult on continuing and intensifying the cull rather than phasing it out. They may introduce ‘epi-Culling zones’ where the aim is to kill ALL (100%) of badgers across a wide area around new herd breakdowns.
- Although bTB rates have been falling in Oxfordshire, there are areas** (around Deddington/Somerton, Thame/Chinnor and Henley on Thames) that might become epi-culling pilot zones.
- The Randomised Badger Controlled Trial (RBCT) was designed and conducted by Oxford University’s scientists and the work is closely associated with Merton College. In 2007, they concluded that while badgers may pass BTB back to cows, badger culling would not help control bTB.
- The RBCT results are open to interpretation and DEFRA continues to use Oxford science to justify the governments badger cull policy.
- Professor David MacDonald is an eminent Oxford scientist and head of the WildCRU at Wytham Woods the centre of research into badger behaviour, ecology, and evolution. His commentary on the Badger Trust report concludes: *“in 2023, much as in 2007, it is hard to see that killing badgers will make a meaningful contribution”*.

Julia Hammett (Trustee) said *“Oxfordshire Badger Group is vaccinating badgers as a service to the many farmers who do not want to cull. It is heartbreaking to know that some of these may well have strayed and been shot”*.

Professor Rosie Woodroffe, speaking to the Tinbergen Society (Oct 2023) on how the RBCT has been interpreted by different policy makers, observed that *“the badger corpses, laid end to end, would stretch from Merton College to Brighton pier and beyond”*. On that model, the badgers that have been culled in Oxfordshire would stretch from Merton College to Wytham Woods and beyond.

Linda Ward, (Trustee) said *“We have been calling on Oxford scientists to comment on whether the scientific evidence justifies the large-scale culling of a native mammal. Their willingness to talk to us and consider new evidence has been encouraging. We think that Professor MacDonald’s comprehensive and balanced scientific commentary is a very positive contribution to the debate. We hope the Badger Trust’s report will help bring about an effective, joint approach to tackling bTB without killing any more badgers. The report shows how much Oxfordshire cattle farmers stand to gain by focusing on managing the disease in the herd”*.

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Notes:

Contact Oxfordshire Badger Group: OBG@OXONBADGERGROUP.ORG.UK or 079 2621 9446

* From a Badger Trust Freedom Of Information request, October 2023

** see: the TB Hub <https://tbhub.co.uk/tb-policy/england/oxfordshire-bovine-tb-cluster-pilot/>