businesscompanion
trading standards law explained

Cattle identification

In the guide

Before moving cattle to your holding
Notification of holdings
Why and how do cattle need to be identified?
Primary and secondary tags
Lost and illegible tags
Tagging of dairy herds
Tagging for all other herds
What are cattle passports?
Types of passport
Do I need a cattle passport?
How do I obtain cattle passports?
What records am I required to keep?
In what form should the records be kept?
How long must I keep these records?
Movement and death reporting requirements
Trading Standards
In this update
Key legislation

Although the United Kingdom left the European Union (EU) in 2021, certain pieces of legislation (known as 'assimilated law') continue to apply until such time as they are replaced by new UK legislation, revoked or permitted to expire. This means that our guidance still contains references to legislation that originated from the EU.

In this guide, the words 'must' or 'must not' are used where there is a legal requirement to do (or not do) something. The word 'should' is used where there is established legal guidance or best practice that is likely to help you avoid breaking the law.

This guidance is for England

The Cattle Identification Regulations 2007 implement statutory requirements relating to the notification of cattle holdings, ear tagging, passports and registration of cattle, and the subsequent record-keeping requirements.

Cattle need to be identified for traceability, to track disease outbreaks and to ensure the integrity of British beef.

Cattle must be identified with a pair of approved ear tags and have been issued with a passport. This identity and documentation must stay with the beast throughout its life. The British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS) must be informed of any movements and deaths.

A record of all cattle births, deaths and movements must be recorded in a holding register.

Before moving cattle to your holding

If you want to keep cattle, you will first require a county parish holding (CPH) number, which identifies the land where they will be kept. Details of how to apply for a CPH number are available on the GOV.UK website.

Notification of holdings

An occupier of a holding who begins to keep cattle on that holding, and any person who takes over the occupation of a holding where cattle are kept, must notify the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) of their name and address and the address of the holding. This must be done within one month. APHA should be contacted on 0300 020 0301 or customer.registration@apha.gov.uk. They will provide you with your herd number at this stage.

You must also notify APHA, within one month, if you stop keeping cattle.

Why and how do cattle need to be identified?

Cattle need to be identified for traceability, in order to:

- identify the herd of origin, and ensure the integrity of British beef by making sure that products going into the human food chain are as fully traceable and as safe to eat as possible
- enable tracing during disease outbreaks, and thereby support the control and eradication of bovine diseases - for example, bovine tuberculosis (bTB) and foot-and-mouth disease (FMD)

All cattle born since 1 January 1998 must be identified with a pair of Defra-approved ear tags; it is a requirement that all such cattle display at least one primary tag, plus either a second primary tag or a secondary tag in the other ear (double tagging).

Primary and secondary tags

The 'primary' tag may be inserted in either ear, but must:

- be made of yellow plastic
- be at least 45 mm from top to bottom
- be at least 55 mm wide
- have characters a minimum of 5 mm in height
- have the crown logo
- have the letters 'UK'
- have a unique lifetime identification number

The 'secondary' tag may be of a range of approved materials and models, including metal, plastic 'button' type and other plastic types. It must contain the same information as the primary tag, but may also contain management information. The secondary tag must be in a different ear to the primary tag.

Since 1 April 1998, only yellow primary tags have been produced. All newborn animals must be identified by these yellow primary tags and a secondary tag, as described above.

Assimilated Regulation (EC) No 1760/2000 *establishing a system for the identification and registration of bovine animals and regarding the labelling of beef and beef products* allows the option of including a barcode on an official tag, and in some EU Member States it is compulsory. However, there is no requirement for cattle born in Great Britain to be identified with ear tags bearing a barcode, including animals going for export. It is entirely up to the importer and exporter to decide, through commercial arrangements, whether or not this is necessary.

Information on identifying cattle to export, import or move to the EU or NI can be found in 'Exporting animals' and 'Importing animals'.

Lost and illegible tags

If a keeper discovers that an ear tag applied under these Regulations has become illegible or lost, they must replace it with an ear tag bearing the same unique number. This must be done within 28 days of discovery.

Cattle must not be moved from a holding until any lost ear tags have been replaced.

If any animal that was identified under the previous Cattle Tagging Order loses its tag, it can be identified in any of the following ways:

- ear tag bearing the same number
- new ear tag / number
- pair of tags bearing the same number

If the animal is given a new number, this must be cross-referenced with the old number in the on-farm holding register. The certificate of registration (COR) and old-style (blue and green) passport must be returned to BCMS within 14 days (and before the animal is moved off the holding) for the passport to be reissued.

Animals born since 1 January 1998 must retain the same number throughout their lives.

Tagging of dairy herds

The first ear tag must be applied within 36 hours of the birth of the animal and the second tag must be applied within 20 days of birth.

Tagging for all other herds

Both tags must be applied within 20 days of the birth of the animal.

What are cattle passports?

A cattle passport is a Government-issued document that states the animal's:

- date of birth
- official ear tag number
- ear tag number of the dam
- breed
- sex

This document must accompany the animal throughout its life, from birth to death, and will include all movements, changes of ownership, passages through cattle markets, etc.

You must check that all the animal's details are correct on its passport; failure to do so may render the passport invalid. If you find an error, you should return the passport along with a covering letter to BCMS, detailing the changes to be made. You cannot move the animal until you receive a corrected passport.

It is an offence to deface or alter any information in a cattle passport or use a cattle passport for any animal other than the animal for which it was granted.

Types of passport

Cattle registered with BCMS since 1 August 2011 are issued with a one page A4-style passport.

Cattle born after 28 September 1998, but before 1 August 2011, were issued with a chequebook-style passport.

Between 1 July 1996 and 28 September 1998, all cattle on a green passport should also have a COR.

Prior to 1 July 1996, all older cattle should be in possession of a COR.

All of these documents are obtainable from BCMS.

Do I need a cattle passport?

It is a legal requirement that all cattle must be correctly identified, and those born since 1 July 1996 must be accompanied by a cattle passport. Those born before this date must have a COR.

The passport / COR must be kept by the keeper of the animal. The keeper, not the owner, must hold all the identification documents for the animals they are responsible for. If animals are moved to common land, summer grazing or winter lets, the keeper of the animals must have the passport. Anyone transporting cattle must ensure that each animal is accompanied throughout its journey by a valid cattle passport / COR.

Cattle with a COR are restricted to the premises where they are located (under the Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (England) Regulations 2018), due to their age and consequent TSE risk; all keepers of such cattle have been issued with restriction notices. Keepers wishing to move such animals must submit a movement licence application form, completed by both parties involved in the movement, to the APHA One Health Customer Service Centre in Worcester. If you need help completing the form please contact customeradvice@apha.gov.uk.

Further information on cattle without passports can be found on the GOV.UK website.

How do I obtain cattle passports?

All applications for cattle passports must be made to BCMS within seven days of tagging (a maximum of 27 days in total from date of birth).

Keepers of cattle must ensure that passport applications are made within the time limits allowed and ensure that movement records, both in the passport and in registers, are kept up to date. It is an offence to have cattle without passports outside the time limits stated in 'Types of passport' above.

Passport applications may be refused by BCMS if you apply late. If so, the animal(s) will be registered on the CTS and you will receive a notice of registration (CPP35); this is not a cattle passport. The animal(s) will not be eligible for slaughter for human consumption and cannot be sold or moved from the holding, except under a pre-movement licence to a hunt kennel or knacker's yard. For more information see 'Cattle that have been refused passports'.

What records am I required to keep?

a) On-farm cattle breeding records

All dairy herd births must be recorded in the register within seven days of birth. All other herd births must be recorded in the register within 30 days of birth.

The following information must be recorded in the holding register in relation to each birth:

- ear tag number of the calf
- date of birth
- breed
- sex
- dam's identification number

b) Cattle movement records

The following information must be recorded in the holding register within 36 hours of an animal moving on to or off a holding:

- ear tag number of the animal
- date of birth
- breed
- sex
- dam's identification number (only for animals born on the holding)
- date of the movement on to or off a holding
- holding or premises from which moved, including the name and address, or county parish holding (CPH) number, of the person from whom delivery was taken
- holding or premises to which moved, including the name and address, or CPH number, of the person taking delivery
- date of any deaths and where the animal is sent for disposal (within seven days)
- date of any replacement ear tags (within 36 hours - only if the ear tag number has been changed and only for animals born before 1 January 1998)

The name and address of the holder of the record must be recorded in the register along with the CPH

number to which the register relates and the relevant herd mark.

If you plan to temporarily keep livestock on someone else's land or in their buildings, you can apply for a temporary land association (TLA) or temporary county parish holding (tCPH) number. Particular care should be taken to accurately record cattle movements if moving cattle from a historically linked premises. For further information on tCPHs and TLAs see the GOV.UK website.

In what form should the records be kept?

The keeper can choose in which format to keep the records, as long they contain the required information and a copy can be provided when requested. Options include:

- a paper record
- a spreadsheet
- using the holding register function in farm management software

The records should be in a format approved by Defra. The keeper must produce these records to an inspector when asked to do so. It is recommended that cattle keepers maintain records following the format of the holding register suggested by BCMS.

This format covers both on-farm cattle breeding records and the cattle movement records.

How long must I keep these records?

Records must be kept for 10 years from the end of the calendar year in which the last entry was made for a farm, and three years from the end of the calendar year in which the last entry was made in any other case.

Movement and death reporting requirements

As well as the record-keeping requirements detailed above, movements and deaths must be reported to BCMS.

Cattle movement details must be reported within 36 hours of the movement taking place. For cattle that have single-page passports, one of the following methods must be used for reporting your movements:

- CTS Online
- CTS Web Services from some farm software packages
- CTS self-service phone line

These electronic services should be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

For more information on movements, and for information regarding cattle with chequebook-style passports or CORs, see 'Cattle keepers and livestock shows'.

Deaths must be notified to BCMS within seven days. The methods listed above may be used, or alternatively the death details may be completed in the animal's passport and/or registration certificate and returned it to BCMS.

Dead cattle may require testing for BSE. For more information see 'BSE testing of cattle'.

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards services - and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law - please see 'Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

In this update

No major changes.

Last reviewed / updated: February 2025

Key legislation

- assimilated Regulation (EC) No 1760/2000 *establishing a system for the identification and registration of bovine animals and regarding the labelling of beef and beef products*
- Cattle Identification Regulations 2007
- Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (England) Regulations 2018

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

© 2026 Chartered Trading Standards Institute

Source URL:
https://businesscompanion.owastaging.co.uk/en/quick-guides/animals-and-agriculture/cattle-identification