businesscompanion
trading standards law explained

Humane disposal of infant calves

In the guide

Can I kill the calves myself?
Methods of killing
Possible outlets
Identification and record keeping
Disposal of carcases
Further information
Trading Standards
In this update
Key legislation

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.

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.

This guidance is for England

When dispatching infant calves on-farm, they must be killed humanely and without avoidable distress, pain and suffering. To carry out the dispatch, you must have the relevant skills, training and equipment.

Calves killed on-farm within the requisite timescales are exempt from ear tag and passport requirements. However, if they have been tagged but are unregistered, their births and deaths must be reported to the British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS). The deaths of untagged calves must be recorded in your on-farm records.

A number of firearms are suitable for the on-farm killing of calves, and there are also various outlets for off-farm slaughter. Either way, the carcases must be disposed of in accordance with the Regulations.

Can I kill the calves myself?

The Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing Regulations 2015 (WATOK) and assimilated Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009 *on the protection of animals at the time of killing* create offences for failing to comply with provisions relating to the restraining, stunning and other operations concerned with the killing of animals.

The Regulations also make it an offence to cause or permit any avoidable distress, pain or suffering to any animal during the killing process.

Under these Regulations, religious slaughter is only permitted in approved slaughterhouses. A certificate of competence (CoC) is required for slaughter in a slaughterhouse.

A WATOK licence is required if you cull animals on-farm (except in an emergency, when an animal is killed because it is injured or has a disease associated with severe pain or suffering, and there is no other practical possibility to alleviate it).

Certificates or licences issued in an EU Member State are no longer recognised in the UK. The holder of a certificate / licence issued in an EU Member State will need to apply for one issued in the UK to continue working legally in the UK.

Information on how to obtain a WATOK licence / CoC to kill or slaughter animals can be found on the GOV.UK website.

More information on the legal requirements you will need to comply with for on-farm killing can be found on the GOV.UK website.

You need to have the necessary skills and training to ensure that you kill the animals humanely. You need to have the necessary equipment and be sure that you can use it competently. It is an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal.

Methods of killing

Two methods of killing are permitted:

- Free bullet (rifle, shotgun or humane killer)
- Captive bolt, followed by bleeding and pithing

Operators must be in possession of a current firearms certificate (sometimes known as a firearms licence). Shotguns and rifles should not be used in enclosed spaces or on hard surfaces. The physical appearance of the calf after being shot can be distressing.

More information about how to obtain a firearms certificate can be obtained from the GOV.UK website.

It is not necessary to have a firearms certificate to use captive bolt equipment.

Certain operations for the purpose of killing animals for food require a CoC, both in slaughterhouses and when carried out on farms. One such operation is killing animals by free bullet.

Detailed information relating to the practical considerations of captive bolt stunning of livestock, including equipment, restraint, and bleeding and pithing can be found on the Humane Slaughter Association (HSA) website. Information from the HSA on the humane killing of livestock using firearms is also available.

Possible outlets

Rather than an on-farm kill, the following outlets could be considered:

- Markets
- Direct to slaughter. Calves must be double-tagged and have a passport, in accordance with the Cattle Identification Regulations 2007
- Hunt kennels. Will shoot on-farm (a nominal charge may be made). Removal to a hunt kennel alive, for slaughter, will require calves to be ear-tagged and have a cattle passport

See 'Cattle identification' for more information on passports.

Calves less than 10 days old must not be transported further than 100 km (approximately 62 miles). Any journeys made over 65 km (approximately 40 miles) will require the transporter to hold a CoC (this is different to the CoC issued for slaughtering animals) and a transporter authorisation. For more information, please see 'Farm animal transport journey times' and 'Transporting animals by road'.

Identification and record keeping

The keeper must notify BCMS of the death within seven days, by one of the following methods:

- CTS Online
- CTS Web Services from some farm software packages
- CTS self-service phone line
- Completing the death details in the animal's passport and/or registration certificate and returning it to BCMS

Whichever method of notifying BCMS of a death is chosen, the cattle passport must be returned to BCMS within seven days. Deaths must also be recorded in the on-farm register.

Dairy calves killed on-farm within 36 hours of birth (20 days of birth for non-dairy calves) do not require ear tags or passports; however, if the calf has been tagged but is unregistered, its birth and death must be notified to BCMS.

A dead calf's ear tag must not be used to identify another animal.

You do not need to report the deaths of calves that die before they have been tagged, but you must record this in your records. Tagging and passport rules apply to live farm-to-farm movements.

Disposal of carcases

Please note that carcases must be disposed of in accordance with the Animal By-Products (Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2013. General provisions are as follows:

- Any person who has in their possession, or under their control, any animal by-products (which includes the carcases of fallen or stillborn farm animals, as well as beef bones) must arrange for them to be consigned for or disposed of without undue delay
- The routes available for the disposal and use of animal by-products vary with the category and are listed in Articles 12, 13 and 14 of assimilated Regulation (EC) No 1069/2009 *laying down health rules as regards animal by-products and derived products not intended for human consumption*. In general, the higher the risk category, the fewer options there are for use
- Animal by-products must be transported in covered leakproof containers / vehicles, which must be

maintained in a clean condition

For more information, please see 'Fallen stock and the disposal of animal by-products'.

Further information

For guidance on the correct use and maintenance of firearms and captive-bolt equipment, contact the Humane Slaughter Association, or see the HSA guidance.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) codes of practice are available by telephoning 03459 335577 and further information on on-farm killing and slaughter can be found on the GOV.UK website.

Guidance on home slaughter can be found on the Food Standards Agency (FSA) website and in 'Home slaughter for private consumption'.

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: July 2026

Key legislation

- Animal Welfare Act 2006
- Cattle Identification Regulations 2007
- Assimilated Regulation (EC) No 1069/2009 *laying down health rules as regards animal by-products and derived products not intended for human consumption*
- Assimilated Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009 *on the protection of animals at the time of killing*
- Animal By-Products (Enforcement) (England) Regulations 2013
- Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015
- 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.

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