



Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs

Animal welfare strategy for England

December 2025



CP 1474



Government of the United Kingdom

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

Animal welfare strategy for England

Presented to Parliament
by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
by Command of His Majesty

December 2025

CP 1474

We are responsible for improving and protecting the environment. We aim to grow a green economy and sustain thriving rural communities. We also support our world-leading food, farming and fishing industries.

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Ministerial foreword

We are a country that cares deeply for animals. And we have a proud and long history of supporting animal welfare - from the world's first known animal welfare law in 1822 to the animal welfare pioneers and organisations known across the globe today. As a government, we are committed to delivering the most ambitious animal welfare programme in a generation.

Animals have always been at the heart of British culture and identity. From the cats and dogs we share our homes with, the horses that have served alongside us, to the wildlife in our gardens - our relationship with animals runs deep. They bring us comfort and companionship, support livelihoods, and keep our ecosystems healthy. Protecting animals is something that is personally important to both of us and to this government.

We know that many across the country do exceptional work to improve the lives of animals - from dedicated farmers keeping their livestock healthy in all weathers, to veterinary teams treating sick pets, to volunteers giving abandoned animals a second chance at rescue centres. We want to build on this work, with government bringing together those who can make the greatest difference and support them to achieve even more.

We have held roundtable discussions on priorities and worked to understand the underlying issues that lead to poor welfare. We sincerely thank everyone who took the time to contribute their views and expertise. This collaborative approach - bringing together government, industry, scientists, charities and civil society organisations will continue throughout implementation, because lasting change requires shared commitment and collective action.

This government is committed to safeguarding the welfare of animals for the long term, and we are changing how we will deliver the improvements needed. Rather than piecemeal legislation, we will take a more strategic approach - one that targets intervention where it's most needed. This means tighter regulation where standards are weakest, effective enforcement, and working with the sector to provide animal keepers and owners additional support where they need it.

Our manifesto pledges will be delivered as part of this coherent framework for lasting change. We will ban trail hunting and the use of snare traps. We will end puppy smuggling and puppy farming, cracking down on criminal networks that exploit animals and families.

However, legislation alone does not always alter habits and behaviour or guarantee real world change. That's why we will work with scientists, industry and civil society, supporting efforts to improve animal welfare, including by phasing out animal testing wherever possible, backing alternatives with funding and research partnerships.

Our vision is clear and uncompromising: Every animal will experience positive welfare throughout their life. We will use the best available science to set standards and measure outcomes, working transparently with stakeholders to ensure real-world improvements.

Together with industry, animal welfare organisations and individuals across the country who share our values, we will deliver the most ambitious reforms to animal welfare in a generation - a strategy that combines scientific rigour with moral purpose to create enforceable, lasting change and a legacy we can all be proud of.

The Rt Hon Emma Reynolds MP

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Baroness Hayman of Ullock

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Biosecurity, Borders and Animal Welfare

Introduction

Animals¹ are sentient beings, capable of feeling pain, fear, pleasure and joy and it is our collective responsibility to protect their welfare, especially in our interactions with them. 85% of UK adults agree that we have a moral duty to safeguard animal welfare².

This strategy sets out the UK Government's priorities for England, focusing on the changes and improvements we aim to achieve by 2030. Using a new integrated approach, the government will deliver sustainable and embedded improvements to animal welfare in England. Working across departments, the government will work in partnership with key stakeholders, charities, experts, enforcement bodies, and industry from across the different sectors to ensure as many animals as possible have the highest welfare standards at every stage of their life.

In developing this strategy, we held a number of stakeholder roundtables with representatives of the companion, wild companion, wild animal and farming sectors along with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and those involved in enforcement. We also received input from other interested parties.

Key messages

- The government is committed to a generational step change in animal welfare, considering the developing body of scientific knowledge and our changing responsibilities.
- Animal welfare is a complex area that spans across species and sectors. The government will take an approach which considers animal welfare in the round, prioritising those actions which make the biggest difference.
- This involves understanding and delivering what only the government can do, such as establishing a regulatory framework and providing a clear direction of travel, while also working in partnership with industry and others to collectively improve animal welfare, underpinned by an effective enforcement strategy.
- This strategy sets out how the government will take forward an ambitious programme of reforms across four key areas: companion animals, wild animals, farmed animals and internationally.
- This strategy identifies the priority actions for animal welfare to be taken throughout the course of this parliament. These include addressing loopholes around regulations governing the breeding of dogs and cats, banning snare traps,

¹ As defined in the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022: any vertebrate other than *homo sapiens*, any cephalopod mollusc, and any decapod crustacean.

² Based on a survey of 2000 households. (2025). Available at: <https://sciencesearch.defra.gov.uk/ProjectDetails?ProjectId=21860>.

introducing a close season for hares, delivering on the manifesto commitment to ban trail hunting, consulting on phasing out the use of cages in farming, moving away from the use of carbon dioxide (CO₂) to stun pigs, and introducing standards for the humane killing of fish.

- While the actions focus on England, some policies are relevant to other parts of the UK. We will continue to work closely with Devolved Governments on animal welfare matters to take coordinated action where appropriate.
- Underpinning all this work is the need for good enforcement. Effective compliance and enforcement of regulations are necessary to achieve good welfare. We are reliant on our network of operational delivery organisations, particularly local authorities, to ensure legislation is working effectively.
- The government will work with stakeholders to monitor the impacts of these changes and ensure that they are delivering the welfare improvements promised. This will be a continuous endeavour as we continue to strive for the highest animal welfare standards.

The need for change

Good animal welfare is an issue that matters to the UK public, and we collectively have a moral duty to protect the welfare of animals we have control over and interact with. We will do this in a way that considers potential impacts on the economy, UK businesses and the cost of living.

The UK has a strong track record of good animal welfare, of which we are rightly proud, but the government is clear that there is more to do. Although the UK is at the forefront of some animal welfare standards, we risk falling behind some countries in other areas.

There are around 150 million farmed animals in England at any one time, comprised of 22 million cattle, sheep, and pigs, and 133 million poultry³. Around 1.1 billion meat chickens are reared and slaughtered each year in the UK⁴. Meanwhile, over 35 million⁵ pets are estimated to be in the UK.

Animal welfare is also an issue that impacts our economy, the environment and our communities, animal and human health and wellbeing. It is an issue many individuals and consumers care about. The livestock sector contributes £20.1 billion to the UK economy⁶ ;

³ Livestock populations in England at 1 June 2025 - GOV.UK (February 2025 updated publication). Available at: [Livestock populations in England at 1 June 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

⁴ Latest poultry and poultry meat statistics - GOV.UK (August 2025). Available at: [Latest poultry and poultry meat statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ UK Pet Population (2025). Available at: [UK Pet Population | UK Pet Food](#).

⁶ Chapter 4: Accounts (2024). Available at: [Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2024 - GOV.UK](#).

the UK pet care market is estimated to be worth £8.2 billion and is forecast to grow by 7% annually⁷.

For farmed animals, high welfare is linked to improved animal health which in turn can drive improved productivity and lower input costs. Better animal health can reduce the need for the use of antibiotics in animals, reduce the consequent risks of antimicrobial resistance, and reduce the risk of diseases transferring between animals and humans. In contrast, poor animal welfare is linked to health issues and can lead to loss of livestock and financial losses to farmers. For example, endemic diseases in cattle, sheep, and pigs cost over £300 million annually⁸.

There is already a comprehensive legislative framework for animal welfare. However, while legislation plays a vital role in setting the minimum standards, prohibiting harmful practices, and setting expectations for animal welfare, regulations alone will not drive meaningful and lasting change. We also know that in some areas, legislation or practices have not kept pace with the latest evidence, and some individuals will seek to take advantage of loopholes in regulations, for example in relation to the breeding and sourcing of pets, which allows unacceptable practices to continue.

There are other reasons, such as market failures, why the government may need to act. For example, there may be insufficient incentives for farmers to improve animal welfare, as the farmer will bear any costs of improvements but may not be fully compensated for them. Animal keepers or owners may not have sufficient information or lack incentives to maintain high standards of animal welfare. Consumers may not have sufficient information to make informed decisions on the animal welfare standards of the food produce that they purchase.

Through our engagement, we received a range of views, some on specific issues, and some on the broader systems in place. This engagement emphasised the need to take a systems approach to welfare, identifying who is best placed to deliver change and improve how different organisations work together. There were consistent topics which were identified, including:

⁷ *Pets at Home: Annual Reports and Accounts* (2024). Available at: [44783-pets-ar24-web-final.pdf](#).

⁸ Endemic diseases quantified are: gastro-intestinal parasites, footrot and scab in sheep; BVD in cattle; PRRS in pigs. These diseases are a subset of all endemic diseases in livestock, many of which incur further significant costs. The sources for this figure are: Nieuwhof GJ, Bishop SC. 'Costs of the major endemic diseases of sheep in Great Britain and the potential benefits of reduction in disease impact.' *Animal Science*. 2005;81(1):23-29. doi:10.1079/ASC41010023; Bennett, Richard. 'The 'Direct Costs' of Livestock Disease: the Development of a System of Models of the Analysis of 30 Endemic Livestock Diseases in Great Britain.' *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 2003;54(1):55-71; Nathues, H., et al. (2017) Cost of porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome virus at individual farm level – An economic disease model. *Preventive Veterinary Medicine*, 142, 16–29. H. Nathues, P. Alarcon, J. Rushton, R. Jolie, K. Fiebig, M. Jimenez, V. Geurts, C. Nathues, Cost of porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome virus at individual farm level – An economic disease model, *Preventive Veterinary Medicine*, Volume 142, 2017, Pages 16-29, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.prevetmed.2017.04.006>; Economic costs inflated to present day in line with the [BoE inflation calculator](#); English livestock figures from [Defra's June Survey](#).

- in the companion animals' area, loopholes in current legislation allow animals to be bred in and sourced from low welfare settings – such as puppy farms, unscrupulous traders, and unsuitable rescue and rehoming centres
- specific areas of wildlife legislation which have become out-dated or in need of amendment to better protect wild animals
- the importance of setting a clear direction of travel for the farming sector, reducing confinement, improving the welfare of farmed fish and the role of food labelling
- the importance of using our trade strategy to protect and enhance our welfare standards

An integrated approach to animal welfare

How we will do this

The welfare of individual animals is affected by many factors, at all stages of an animal's life. We will take a dynamic systems approach to animal welfare, looking at the system as a whole to understand how different elements of an animal's life interconnect and affect overall welfare. A systems approach takes into account the entire context of an animal's life, including the environment that they live in, interactions with humans and management practices. This approach will help us to identify where we can make the greatest difference and what the most effective interventions are.

This strategy complements other work across Government, including the Farming Roadmap, [Food Strategy](#) (2025), [Trade Strategy](#) (2025) and the work the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) is leading to work towards the phasing out of animal testing. In line with the government's Manifesto commitment, DSIT have engaged with partners from sectors with interests in animal science and across-government to develop a strategy to support the development, validation and uptake of alternative methods to the use of animals in science. The strategy has recently been published.

The government recognises that each sector and species of animal has its own needs and challenges that must be considered to ensure good welfare. As such, different approaches are required, balancing priorities, interventions, legislation and roles for different organisations. Therefore, our strategy looks at how best to deliver these aims in a way that reflects the individual structures, challenges and preferences of each sector:

Companion animals

We will take coordinated action across a complex system of breeding, sourcing and ownership to close loopholes and tighten, modernise and clarify regulations where these are being abused, including taking action to tackle puppy smuggling and puppy farming. We will recognise, build on and amplify the important work that sector organisations do in education and rehoming. Their work is vital in providing essential care and helping owners to properly provide for their pet's needs. This will help ensure that our nations' pets are cared for at each stage of their life.

Wild animals

Wildlife: we want to ensure that wild animals are treated with respect, as other animals are. We recognise that some legislation has not kept pace with the latest evidence, risking the standards of welfare experienced by wild animals. This is why we've committed in our manifesto to ban trail hunting and bring an end to the use of snare traps. We will also conduct a review of the use of other wildlife traps. We will work with the sector to understand these issues in more detail and will support efforts to improve public awareness of wild animal welfare.

Kept wild animals: we will continue to protect and promote high standards of welfare for kept wild animals - those species of animals not normally kept in Great Britain. We will work with the sector to support owners in understanding how to care for the needs of their kept wild animals, continuing to improve animal welfare in zoos and aquariums and the welfare of privately kept primates.

Farmed animals

Farming is a critical industry, with the livestock sector alone contributing £20.1 billion to the UK economy. We will continue to build on existing high welfare standards in our farming sector in a measured way, while supporting the farming sector to be profitable and contribute to UK food security. Our aspiration is to move towards a model where as many farmed animals as possible experience a good life and not just a life worth living⁹. Healthier, happier farm animals will help British farmers to produce food sustainably. We will continue to build on the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway to make sure farmers have access to the right advice and support.

International

We will use our influence in bilateral and multilateral fora to champion high animal welfare standards around the world, recognising where we have a strong track record, and where others have higher standards. We will consider whether overseas produce has an unfair

⁹ Assessment of animal welfare at different points in an animal's life is key to ensuring that good welfare is maintained, including a humane death. An animal's quality of life can be classified as: a life not worth living, a life worth living and a good life. A life not worth living is one where the animal is suffering from a debilitating untreatable disease, or experiences severe negative conditions such as chronic, intense pain, fear or distress. A life worth living requires that the balance of an animal's experiences must be positive over its lifetime. Any pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm must be necessary, proportionate and minimal, and there should be good husbandry, considerate handling and transport, and humane slaughter. The concept of 'a good life' is where an animal's quality of life is over and beyond that of a life worth living, for example there is a higher standard of accommodation, positive mental experiences, etc.

advantage or presents ethical concerns and, where necessary, will be prepared to take appropriate steps to address these concerns and protect our sensitive sectors.

The role of the government

We recognise that there are some things that only the government can do. The government has a key role in establishing a regulatory framework, setting expectations and providing a clear direction of travel.

The government aims to increase compliance with existing legislation and improve existing regulations where loopholes exist, scientific evidence has developed, or unnecessary burdens, such as disproportionate administrative requirements, can be removed. We recognise that securing cultural and behavioural change through information, education and engagement is also needed to improve compliance with legislation. We will seek to balance legislative and non-legislative approaches to achieve the most effective outcomes.

The government will bring people together, convening individuals and organisations across the sector to share knowledge, coordinate action, and work in partnership to secure sustainable, embedded change over time.

The government will focus on the most pressing priorities, working closely with all relevant stakeholders - particularly industry bodies, businesses, enforcement bodies and animal welfare organisations. Through this collaboration, we will deliver and embed lasting improvements that will have the greatest impact on animal welfare.

The importance of enforcement

Where legislation and guidance is clear, the government will focus its efforts on a combination of education and compliance with the rules or guidance when they are not being followed. Our aim is to ensure the right rules are in place and are understood, support early intervention to guide individuals towards compliance when issues arise, equip enforcers with appropriate tools, powers and capabilities, and ensure that regulators and enforcers take appropriate corrective actions when required.

Effective compliance and enforcement of regulations are reliant on our network of operational delivery organisations, particularly local authorities. Veterinarians, animal welfare organisations and industry bodies are also key partners. Their on-the-ground experience and trusted relationships with communities make them invaluable in translating legal standards into everyday practice. This is done through:

- educating animal owners and carers on best practices
- monitoring compliance and providing feedback to regulators
- promoting innovation in animal care and welfare standards
- taking appropriate action when animal keepers break the law.

Stakeholders

There are certain points across the animal welfare system where it is most effective for stakeholders to take the lead and deliver change. For example, animal welfare NGOs provide advice and vital services to individual pet owners, vets and other specialists. Additionally, industry organisations share best practice and advise their members, and keepers of animals take steps to protect the welfare of their animals day by day.

The veterinary sector

Enhancement and maintenance of animal welfare across all species relies on a well-functioning veterinary sector. Veterinary teams are fundamental to the health and welfare of animals, from pets to livestock, zoo animals and wildlife. Work is progressing to consider options for veterinary sector reform to allow veterinary practice to flourish and make it more accessible to consumers and animal keepers. The provisional decision report from the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), as part of its market investigation into veterinary services for household pets¹⁰, sets out important recommendations on pricing and transparency. Work is underway to assess how these recommendations, alongside planned reforms to the Veterinary Surgeons Act (VSA) as soon as parliamentary time allows, can help modernise and strengthen the provision of veterinary care, and in turn help support the welfare of animals. The VSA dates back to 1966 and requires updating in order to continue to meet the needs of animals, animal owners, and veterinary professionals, including through the regulation of veterinary and animal healthcare businesses. Helping to create a better market for veterinary services could materially benefit the welfare of pets by making care more accessible and affordable. A consultation on VSA reform will be launched shortly.

Expert advice, evidence and research

Evidence is evolving all the time, and it is important to be at the cutting edge on research and evidence. The government will continue to commission and use the latest evidence and research to drive policy thinking and draw upon the expertise of government scientists, analysts and veterinary advisers, the Animal Health and Welfare Board England (AHWBE), Animal Welfare Committee (AWC), Animal Sentience Committee (ASC) and Zoo Expert Committee (ZEC), Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) and wider research.

¹⁰ [Veterinary services for household pets - GOV.UK](#)



Pets and companion animals

Overview

Pets play an important role in many peoples' lives, with half the adult population of the UK (51%) owning a pet. The dog population continues to grow with there being around 10.6 million pet dogs in 2024, while the number of pet cats remains stable at around 10.8 million, and ownership of other pets continues to rise¹¹.

We will take coordinated action to ensure that these pets experience high welfare standards throughout their lives, ensuring that the right framework and safeguards are in place. We will deliver on our manifesto commitments to end the unacceptable practices of puppy smuggling and puppy farming. We will also ensure that the existing licensing regime for animal activities is proportionate and effectively enforced and explore whether strengthened oversight of the rescue and rehoming sector is needed.

The actions of individuals, businesses, importers, animal welfare organisations and veterinary professionals are also vitally important to ensure pets experience high welfare and owners get the most effective support and advice to source and care for their pet. We want to continue to support and work in partnership with these organisations to ensure we can suitably communicate with, educate and influence owners to ensure the best life for their pet.

Another important part of this is the [CMA's market investigation](#), which is consulting on remedies to tackle areas where competition is not working well in the market, which could limit access to veterinary care and therefore reduce the welfare of pets.

Unfortunately, we know in rare cases, some individuals will still choose to take actions that undermine the welfare of companion animals. In these cases, effective enforcement is crucial, and we will continue to work with the authorities to ensure that appropriate action is taken.

By focusing together on these key areas, we will deliver lasting improvements to the welfare of companion animals across the country.

Objective

To ensure that pets have high welfare at every stage of their lives by:

- taking coordinated action across breeding, sourcing and ownership, to tighten the rules where these are being abused or the market has changed
- working with the sector to improve standards and ensure that owners understand the needs of their pets

¹¹ *The PAW Report* (2024). Available at: [The PAW Report 2024 - PDSA](#).

How we will deliver this objective

Breeding and sourcing pets

The majority of breeders and sellers ensure that their animals are given the best start in life. However, unfortunately, there are some who prioritise profit over animal welfare. Our aim is to make sure that all animals are bred and sold in a responsible way, that protects their health and welfare.

Imports of companion animals from abroad

Many prospective pet owners import dogs and cats from abroad. For example, in 2024 internal APHA data shows that there were approximately 32,000 dogs and 6,000 cats commercially imported into Great Britain, and the number of non-commercial pet movements of dogs, cats and ferrets into the UK has risen from approximately 108,000 in 2011 to over 368,000 in 2024.

The non-commercial pet travel rules are intended for use by genuine pet owners travelling with their pets. However, these rules have sometimes been used as a cover by deceitful traders who have taken advantage of the regime to illegally import puppies and kittens, which are sometimes underage, into Great Britain for sale and rehoming. Illegally imported pets are often at risk of poor health and welfare outcomes, with some coming from facilities with poor welfare standards before being transported on long journeys with insufficient food and water, no exercise and no toilet breaks. This is unacceptable.

Additionally, our domestic animal welfare laws can be circumvented by traders who import pets with painful mutilations, such as declawed cats and dogs with cropped ears. These are mutilations which have long been prohibited in the UK. Stakeholders have also raised concerns that there is an emerging market involving the importation of heavily pregnant dogs and cats that give birth to litters intended for onward sale shortly after arriving in the country.

As set out in our manifesto, we are committed to ending puppy smuggling. We were pleased to support the successful passage of the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Act 2025 through the UK parliament and onto the statute book. This law will close loopholes in our pet travel rules which are abused by unscrupulous traders and give the government powers to prevent the supply of low-welfare pets to the United Kingdom.

As part of this approach, enforcement agencies must also be equipped with the appropriate tools and guidance so they can take meaningful action to stop those trying to circumvent the legislation.

Actions

We will:

- deliver the measures in the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Act 2025 to close loopholes in our pet travel rules

- develop secondary legislation to tackle low-welfare imports. As part of this, we will work closely with enforcement bodies and stakeholders to develop appropriate exemptions and robust enforcement processes
- work with enforcement agencies to strengthen existing enforcement of our pet travel rules and facilitate improved intelligence sharing between agencies

Dog breeding

Commercial dog breeders are subject to a specific licensing regime with strict licensing conditions to protect the health and welfare of these animals. However, there remain persistent problems with the breeding and sourcing of low welfare puppies. This is challenging to address because so many breeders currently fall outside the existing regime. There are also growing concerns about dogs bred for fashionable aesthetic qualities, which allow known health and welfare issues to persist. The growth of new establishments focused on dog breeding practices, such as canine fertility clinics, and the irresponsible use of stud dogs, raise further welfare concerns.

We are committed to ending puppy farming and the low welfare breeding of dogs. Traceability in this sector must be improved, and overall standards increased to achieve higher health and welfare across the sector.

Actions

We will launch a consultation on:

- the introduction of a new registration scheme for all dog breeders, which would dovetail with licensing of dog breeders, to improve traceability and enforcement across the whole sector
- improvements to the health and welfare standards which all licensed breeders of dogs must meet
- proposals to bring canine fertility clinics, stud dog and whelping services in scope of the licensing system

Cat breeding

Anyone in the business of selling cats must have a licence from their local authority and can only sell microchipped cats that they have bred themselves. This legislation provides important protections for cats and kittens, and it is important that it is operating effectively.

While there have been calls to regulate cat breeding as a separate activity, there is still limited evidence on the size, scale and current management practices related to cat breeding. Our priority is to improve compliance with the existing rules and to work collaboratively with stakeholders to further our understanding of the sector and help to drive up standards.

Actions

We will:

- take steps to improve the uptake of the pet selling licence by those who sell cats and kittens as pets
- improve our understanding of the size, scale and current management practices related to cat breeding, drawing on expertise from the sector, and consider any further steps which may improve welfare practices in the cat breeding sector

Rescue and rehoming

Many potential pet owners will choose to source a companion animal from a rescue centre rather than from a pet shop or breeder. Rescue centres provide an essential service for pets, offering shelter and veterinary care, as well as helping animals recover from traumatic situations. They are also instrumental in carefully matching pets with suitable families, ensuring a better future for each animal. The challenges faced by these centres are complex and with an increasing number of pets to care for, it is important to recognise the important work these centres undertake.

Unfortunately, there are situations where rescue centres do not have the resources, capability, or capacity to look after the animals in their care. In some cases, unscrupulous individuals may make money from rehoming animals sourced both domestically and from abroad, in circumstances where there is little oversight of the conditions in which they are keeping or transporting animals or whether they are suitable for rehoming. This can lead to poor welfare outcomes.

We need to crack down on these poor practices. We will consult on whether there should be strengthened oversight of domestic rescue and rehoming organisations. At the same time, we need to continue to develop our understanding of the international rescue and rehoming sector. The public should have access to the information they need to source pets from responsible rescue and rehoming organisations. The provision of this information is often sector-led, and we will continue to amplify the work of animal welfare organisations to encourage the public to source pets from responsible rescue and rehoming organisations in the United Kingdom.

Actions

We will:

- launch a consultation on licensing domestic rescue and rehoming organisations
- develop the evidence base on welfare issues associated with international rescue and rehoming

Pet sales

All businesses that sell pets must meet a set of clear welfare standards through a local authority licensing scheme, which is supported by detailed guidance. Stakeholders have identified that improvements can be made across regulated and non-regulated sales, including online sales, and that some businesses face disproportionate administrative

burdens in complying with the regulations. There are also concerns that enforcement of the regulations can be inconsistent which can impact on the welfare of pets for sale.

Many animal welfare organisations and pet trade bodies already provide additional guidance to pet sellers, including on how best to look after animals in their care, but this is not always known about widely enough. We will work with the sector, animal welfare organisations and local authorities to address these issues so that the welfare of animals is protected in both regulated and non-regulated sales.

Actions

We will:

- work with the sector to support the work that is already underway to encourage responsible sourcing practices by prospective owners
- work with the sector, animal welfare organisations and local authorities to ensure that the relevant guidance applicable to licensing is clear and proportionate
- work with pet selling businesses to reduce the administrative burdens they face, including in relation to record keeping requirements
- promote consistent and effective enforcement through working with local authorities

Public safety

Owners are not just responsible for the welfare of their pets but also the safety of the public around their pets, and this is particularly the case with respect to dogs. Ongoing dog attacks mean that it is imperative that we all do more to promote responsible dog ownership.

We have therefore recently reconvened the Responsible Dog Ownership (RDO) taskforce as a first step towards tackling this important issue. This is a group of experts that will provide recommendations on ways to encourage responsible dog ownership and reduce dog attacks across England and Wales. The taskforce is considering four themes: education and communication, training (for both dogs and their owners), data collection and sharing, and enforcement. We will continue to work with this Taskforce, as well as with other relevant experts and organisations, to implement steps to promote responsible dog ownership and help reduce dog attacks.

Actions

We will:

- consider the recommendations of the Responsible Dog Ownership Taskforce and outline next steps
- continue to work with stakeholders to promote public awareness of safety around dogs and to raise awareness of existing powers amongst enforcement authorities

Training

Positive reward-based training, which includes the use of things that dogs like or want, such as toys, food and praise, is widely regarded as the preferred method of dog training, and as highlighted above, the Responsible Dog Ownership Taskforce is considering training as a key workstream.

Separately, however, we know that some owners continue to use electric shock-collars (e-collars) as a training tool. E-collars can send an electric current from the collar to the animal wearing the collar and potentially cause harm and distress to the animal.

We are therefore concerned about the possible welfare implications of the use of e-collars.

We will gather views and evidence on the current use of e-collars to inform whether to take forward a ban. The use of e-collars has already been banned in Wales.

Actions

Later in this Parliament we will:

- consult on whether to ban the use of electric shock collars

Pet microchipping

Cat and dog owners have a legal responsibility to get their pets microchipped and register their details with a Defra-compliant database operator. Microchipping helps to reunite pets with their owners if they should stray thereby promoting companion animal welfare.

When dog microchipping was introduced in 2016, there were only 4 database operators. Now there are 23. Whilst the growth in the number of database operators has resulted in more choice for consumers, it has made it harder for users such as vets to access records quickly. We are concerned about variable standards of service being offered to consumers and the increased difficulty in updating records, which has led to more records being out of date. These challenges risk undermining the effectiveness of the microchipping regime, and therefore the benefits that microchipping provides for companion animals and their owners.

We will work with the pet microchip database industry to develop improvements to the way the microchipping regime currently operates to make it easier for vets and other users to access records digitally and improve the accuracy of data. We will also continue to support the roll out of cat microchipping.

Actions

We will:

- develop a more robust process of due diligence before recognising pet microchipping databases as compliant

- improve our regulatory oversight of pet microchipping databases to ensure that all databases meet expected standards

Supporting owners

Pet ownership and housing

Pets can bring a huge amount of joy to their owners. Yet, currently, only around 7% of private landlords are advertising properties that accept pets¹². This means that more needs to be done so that responsible pet owners are supported to keep their pets in the private rented sector.

The Renters' Rights Act will ensure landlords do not unreasonably withhold consent when a tenant requests to have a pet in their home. The act confers upon tenants the right to challenge unfair decisions by landlords and will improve tenants' ability to keep pets in rented accommodation.

Actions

We will:

- implement the measures contained in the Renters' Rights Act to make it easier for tenants to keep pets in rented accommodation

Tackling pet abuse and domestic abuse

Studies have shown that there is a strong link between pet abuse and domestic abuse¹³. In cases where a pet is present, pet abuse can be used as a coercive control strategy to manipulate and exploit victim-survivors in the abusive relationship.

Raising awareness of the link between pet abuse and domestic abuse and working with stakeholders to support current initiatives will help to protect pets facing harm in domestic violence settings and will also further the delivery of the government's Tackling Violence Against Woman and Girls Strategy.

Actions

We will:

- consider the outcomes of the research project commissioned in summer 2025 to explore the link between animal abuse and domestic abuse and identify intervention opportunities

¹² *Renting with pets: 7 top tips for finding the perfect-pet friendly home* (2023). Available at: [Renting with pets: 7 top tips for finding the perfect pet-friendly home - Zoopla](#).

¹³ *Animal Abuse as a Strategy of Coercive Control* (Wakeham, 2021). Available at: https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/316598264/Final_Copy_2021_28_09_Wakeham_M_PhD.pdf

- work with the veterinary profession to support initiatives designed to help vets and practice staff recognise potential signs of domestic abuse through non-accidental injuries to pets
- work with charities to increase the awareness of fostering services available for the pets of victim-survivors to encourage them to flee from abuse
- strengthen the pet microchipping regime to prevent victim-survivors' personal information potentially being accessed by perpetrators

Animals for business purposes

Many animals are kept permanently in England as part of a business activity, such as horses in a riding establishment, or animals in mobile animal exhibits that attend schools or fairs. Others are kept by businesses for a short period on behalf of their owners, for example in boarding facilities or dog day care. These activities are regulated under the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018 and are enforced by local authorities. These regulations ensure high standards are maintained by these businesses, but the industry, animal welfare organisations and horse-riding associations also play a very important role in this. Defra's Post-Implementation Review of the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, published in 2024, identified various improvements that could be made to the licensing regime. We will consider these findings carefully as we continue to make further improvements to the licensing regime and its enforcement.

Actions

We will:

- work with the sector to drive up welfare standards and improve compliance with the licensing regime
- work with local authorities to ensure that enforcement is consistent and effective



Wild animals

Overview

Wild animals are sentient, can experience pain, suffering and pleasure and should be treated with respect. Where wild animals come into contact with humans, or are under the control of humans, they are at risk of experiencing harm.

Our understanding of animal welfare, and the needs of wild animals, continues to evolve, supported by the work of scientists and other experts and researchers. This can lead to situations where legislation falls out of step with the latest evidence and action is needed to prevent wild animals from suffering cruelty, pain or distress.

Where people choose to keep wild animals, such as in zoos or other environments, they are responsible for ensuring their wellbeing and safety. This includes providing proper care and provision of environments that closely mimic their natural habitats to meet their physical and psychological needs. The government is committed to working collaboratively with industry partners and animal welfare NGOs to support animal keepers in understanding and delivering high standards of welfare for the animals in their care. The government is also working closely with enforcement bodies to ensure the licensing scheme introduced in 2024 for private keepers of primates is implemented effectively, including by issuing guidance, so only those who can provide long-term zoo-level welfare conditions can keep primates.

Our ambition is that wild animals, whether living in the wild or under the control of humans, experience good welfare, and are not subjected to suffering. We have already committed in our manifesto to ban trail hunting and ban the use of snare traps and will consult on these issues. We will review the use of wildlife traps, work towards the introduction of a close season for hares and look at how best to enhance welfare for wild caught decapods. We will address the disparity of penalties for cruelty to wildlife and similar offences for farmed or companion animals.

We have already taken action to reduce the risk to human health and the environment from lead in ammunition. Lead is internationally accepted to be a toxic element. Evidence shows lead poses a risk to at least 1 million birds over the next 20 years if usage continues at its current rate, while around 40,000 birds of prey such as red kites and white-tailed eagles are at risk from ingesting lead through carrion¹⁴. In July 2025, we announced that we would introduce a UK REACH restriction on lead in ammunition.

¹⁴ The Health and Safety Executive's final opinion on the UK REACH Annex 15 dossier on the proposal for a restriction on lead in ammunition (2024). Available at: [hse.gov.uk](https://www.hse.gov.uk)

Compliance with existing legislation is critical in ensuring the welfare of wild animals, and we will continue to work with relevant authorities and other stakeholders to support compliance to protect the welfare of wild animals.

Objective

To ensure wild animals are treated with respect as other animals are by:

- updating legislation that has not kept pace with the latest scientific evidence
- continuing to protect and promote high standards of welfare for kept wild animals – those species of animals not normally kept in Great Britain

How we will deliver this objective

Wildlife

Trail hunting

Over 20 years after the 2004 Hunting Act was introduced, concerns persist around illegal hunting being carried out under the guise of trail hunting. Trail hunting, where an animal-based scent trail is laid for dogs to follow, is an activity that did not exist when the Hunting Act was enacted. The use of large packs of hounds can put wild mammals, household pets and even members of the public at risk. In addition, the use of animal-based scents increases the risk of the scents of wild animals being picked up, as does the practice of lifting and dropping the trail, which means hounds must actively search.

There is also a real risk trail hunting could be used to facilitate illegal hunting by being used as a smokescreen to obscure intention and enabling the inevitable chasing of animals.

We have already committed in our manifesto to put an end to trail hunting.

Actions

We will:

- put an end to trail hunting and consult in early 2026 on how to deliver a ban on trail hunting

Snares and traps

A snare trap is an anchored cable or wire noose set to catch wild animals, mainly foxes. The traps catch a running animal by the neck with a wire noose and may leave it for an extended period without water, food or shelter. The use of snares is indiscriminate, capturing non-target animals, such as hares, badgers and pet dogs.

There is public concern around the welfare of wildlife being compromised by snares. A YouGov poll conducted in January 2025 found that 71% of adults in England think it

should be illegal to use snares¹⁵. In our manifesto we committed to ending the use of snares to ensure wild animals are free from unnecessary suffering caused by them.

Snares are not the only form of traps used in England. Concerns also exist around the welfare of wildlife from the use of other types of traps used to control wildlife outdoors. Therefore, while we will not be examining traditional baited snap traps used in households to catch mice and rats – those which snap shut when the bait or a trigger is disturbed - we are committing to work with experts to develop evidence on the animal welfare impact of other traps that have been brought to Defra’s attention, for example older spring traps, mole traps and live capture traps used to catch corvids.

Actions

We will:

- deliver on the manifesto commitment to ban the use of snare traps in England
- conduct a review of other traps used to catch wildlife in England for which welfare concerns have been raised and carefully consider any recommendations for further action

Close season for hares

England (and Wales) are among the few European countries that do not have a close season on shooting hares during their breeding season. This means that if the mother is killed during breeding season, leverets can be left motherless and vulnerable to starvation and predation. A significant positive impact on the welfare of brown and mountain hares would be made if this was introduced.

Animal welfare concerns are a significant justification for the need for a close season for hares, but conservation efforts are also vital to ensure that hares are protected from growing threats of habitat loss and hunting. Much of the existing legislation relating to hares in England and Wales is outdated and ineffective, having been introduced in the 1800s.

The breeding season for hares runs from February to October and introducing a close season would mean that fewer leverets would be left motherless and vulnerable to starvation and predation. A close season is also consistent with Natural England’s advice on wildlife management that controlling species in their peak breeding season should be avoided unless genuinely essential and unavoidable.

¹⁵ YouGov / League Against Cruel Sports Survey Results (2025). Available at: [Survey Report](#).

Actions

We will:

- consider how to bring forward and introduce a close season for hares

Welfare of decapod crustaceans and cephalopod molluscs

The Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 marked a pivotal milestone by formally recognising that decapod crustaceans such as crabs, lobsters, shrimp and prawn, and cephalopod molluscs such as squid and octopus are sentient beings capable of experiencing pain and suffering. While there is a growing body of evidence informing what welfare protections and standards are appropriate, gaps remain in our understanding. This is especially true in relation to our knowledge of how live animals move through supply chains – from catch to kill. Without this knowledge, it can be difficult to make sure these animals are properly protected at every stage and to prevent unnecessary pain or suffering.

Improvements to the way in which decapod crustaceans and cephalopod molluscs are managed throughout the supply chain are needed. The fishing industry is already taking steps to improve protections. Improved insights into supply chain practices are also required so that further action can be taken if needed. This includes reviewing whether legislative amendments are required, as is standard practice.

Actions

We will:

- publish guidance on which methods of killing decapods are compatible with the existing welfare at time of killing legal requirements, including by clarifying that live boiling is not an acceptable killing method
- develop the evidence base on the movement of live decapods and cephalopods through the supply chain, through research and continued stakeholder engagement
- build the evidence base as to how the welfare of decapods can be ensured at critical points through the supply chain

Enforcement

Disparity remains between penalties for cruelty to wildlife and similar incidents that involve pet or companion animals and livestock abuse offences. Wildlife can experience pain and suffering, and positive emotions in the same way as pets or farmed animals.

Changes to legislation will be required to address this disparity between wild animals and kept animal offences.

Actions

We will:

- review and look to strengthen penalties for cruelty against wildlife so that they are consistent with higher levels of sentencing available for animal welfare offences against pets and livestock

Kept wild animals

Primates as pets

Some private individuals keep primates as pets. Primates are highly intelligent animals with specialised welfare requirements and, as such, it is vital that owners who wish to keep them have a comprehensive understanding of their welfare needs.

The Animal Welfare (Primate Licences) (England) Regulations 2024 introduced a new licensing scheme in England, setting strict rules to ensure that only private keepers who can provide zoo-level welfare standards will be able to keep primates. Working closely with enforcement bodies, we will ensure this licensing scheme is effectively implemented, and that owners are clear on the requirements they must meet to improve the welfare of primates kept as pets.

Actions

We will:

- work with local authorities and support them to effectively implement and enforce the primate licensing scheme

Zoos and aquariums

Zoos and aquariums provide opportunities to get close to a wide array of species from around the world, observe, and learn about them and their natural habitats. In May 2025, the government published new Standards of Modern Zoo Practice for Great Britain, which will ensure GB zoos remain global leaders in the zoo industry. Taking effect from May 2027, the new standards reflect the latest best practice in keeping animals in zoos and aquariums and aim to drive up welfare across all Great Britain's zoos and aquariums, helping to ensure all zoos and aquariums, not just the best and the biggest, look after their wild animals well. The standards require larger habitat enclosures for elephants, the phasing out of tethering birds of prey as a method of long-term accommodation and prohibits aquariums from allowing visitors to touch fish and cephalopods, as handling causes them harm.

We will continue working with experts and industry representatives to make sure these standards are implemented effectively and ensure that all animals kept in zoos and aquariums in Great Britain are looked after to the highest standards. We will also monitor more closely continuing improvements in the welfare of the small number of elephants

kept in zoos in Great Britain, with our Zoos Expert Committee receiving reports every 2 years from the Elephant Welfare Group.

Actions

We will:

- develop and provide training on the new standards to our panel of zoo licensing inspectors by 2027
- update any necessary guidance and inspection forms to make it more straightforward for zoo licensing inspectors and local authorities to enforce the new standards by 2027
- improve welfare standards for elephants in zoos and introduce new biennial reporting to the Zoos Expert Committee by the Elephant Welfare Group to ensure improvements are being continued



Farmed animals

Overview

The government's ambition is to embed the principle of good farm animal welfare, where animals experience not just a life worth living but a good life throughout all life stages¹⁶.

The government values the excellent work of the British farming industry in producing the highest quality food that feeds our country. We are rightly proud of the high animal welfare standards we have in this country; they are one of the selling points of our British farming industry and are greatly valued by consumers both at home and abroad.

Good animal health and welfare is linked to better farm business management, which supports the government's growth mission. Farm animal welfare policy is being considered alongside other government commitments, such as the Food Strategy, Farming Roadmap, the Trade strategy, Food and Farming Decarbonisation Plan, and five-year antimicrobial resistance national action plan. Healthier, higher welfare animals contribute to outcomes across all these strategies. The Animal Health and Welfare Pathway provides the framework for a generational shift towards achieving and maintaining universally high standards of farm animal health and welfare, through partnership with farmers and vets. Healthier animals generally produce food in a more sustainable way; producing lower greenhouse gas emissions and with less use of antibiotics.

Our farm animal welfare policy will continue to be backed by robust science and evidence, supported and shaped by input from expert advice groups, including the AWC, as well as a wide-ranging programme of funded research and development. It is also vital that this work is supported by proportionate, transparent and robust enforcement systems.

We are committed to working together with the farming community to maintain and enhance our world-class animal health and welfare standards. We can achieve this in a number of ways, in partnership with those involved in keeping, transporting and slaughtering animals. Our goal is for farmers to make positive choices to improve the health and welfare of their animals and to see the benefits of their increased investment. Legislation alone will not achieve wholesale change: we will work with all livestock

¹⁶ Assessment of animal welfare at different points in an animal's life is key to ensuring that good welfare is maintained, including a humane death. An animal's quality of life can be classified as: a life not worth living, a life worth living and a good life. A life not worth living is one where the animal is suffering from a debilitating untreatable disease, or experiences severe negative conditions such as chronic, intense pain, fear or distress. A life worth living requires that the balance of an animal's experiences must be positive over its lifetime. Any pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm must be necessary, proportionate and minimal, and there should be good husbandry, considerate handling and transport, and humane slaughter. The concept of 'a good life' is where an animal's quality of life is over and beyond that of a life worth living e.g. there is a higher standard of accommodation, positive mental experiences, etc.

sectors to promote good practice through guidance and continue to use appropriate financial incentives to reward early adopters.

Not all animal welfare improvements are achieved through regulation or other government action. We have been pleased to see many in the meat chicken industry sign up to the 'Better Chicken Commitment', which aims to improve the lives of meat chickens. A good proportion of the sector has now moved to lower stocking densities. It is vital that this work is supported by proportionate, transparent and robust enforcement systems. We continue to support and encourage the uptake of these higher welfare standards.

The government shares the public's high regard for our high welfare standards at home. While we rightly explore areas where these standards can be further enhanced, we recognise the potential for increased divergence between domestic standards and those of significant global exporters. Where necessary we will be prepared to take appropriate steps to protect our most sensitive sectors and uphold animal welfare standards where we consider overseas produce has an unfair advantage.

As we develop and implement the policies set out below, we will consider how they may impact on UK businesses, consumers, the food supply chain.

Our public sector food procurement policies also have the potential to drive more positive animal welfare outcomes. We will explore such opportunities as we develop our policy, including the potential to strengthen the animal welfare provisions within the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services (GBSF).

Objective

To ensure that farmed animals, including farmed fish, have a life worth living and as many animals as possible have a good life by:

- working in partnership with farmers and vets through the framework of the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway, to improve the health and welfare of livestock
- working with industry to phase out the use of enriched cages for laying hens and farrowing crates for pigs
- improving welfare at the time of killing, including by introducing legislative requirements for the humane slaughter of farmed fish and by phasing out the use of CO2 gas stunning for pigs
- working with the sectors to improve welfare during transport, reduce the prevalence of painful mutilations, and ensure breeding practices do not cause any unnecessary suffering

How we will deliver this objective

The use of cages and crates

Enriched ‘colony’ cages for laying hens – which supply just over 20% of the UK shell egg production¹⁷ - are larger than battery cages and are legally required to have nest boxes, litter and perches. However, these cages do not fully provide for the physical and behavioural needs of the birds, as in these systems the birds do not have full freedom to express normal behaviours. Enriched ‘colony’ cages restrict a hen’s choice, preventing her from accessing the ground and other levels and limiting her ability to run, flap her wings, dustbathe, and forage.

The laying hen sector is increasingly moving towards free-range and barn production systems. We are already supporting the transition to cage-free systems through grants for laying hen and pullet farmers in England with flocks of 1,000 birds or more, to refurbish or replace existing housing, including those transitioning from colony cages to high welfare non-cage systems. This transition has been accelerated by the major retailers’ pledge to stop selling shell eggs from hens kept in colony cages by the end of 2025 – with some retailers extending their 2025 pledge to processed egg, such as powdered or liquid. We are committed to working with the laying hen sector to move towards cage-free systems for all laying hens.

For pigs, a significant number of sows are confined in farrowing crates from around 5 days before they are due to give birth, until the piglets are weaned at approximately 28 days of age. A farrowing crate, which is designed to protect piglets from being crushed by the sow, restricts the sow’s movement, preventing her from turning around and performing natural behaviours, such as nest building. Approximately 92% of indoor production systems still use farrowing crates¹⁸.

There is already a significant outdoor pig sector with 50%¹⁹ of the national sow breeding herd giving birth freely on outdoor units with no option for confinement. Currently around 8%²⁰ of indoor production has already moved to alternative farrowing systems to improve sow welfare, protect piglet welfare and ensure human safety. We want to work with the sector to move all sows out of farrowing crates over a sustainable transition period.

Removing the use of intensive confinement systems is an essential component of the government’s plan to ensure all farmed animals have a life worth living, and that as many animals as possible have a good life. Ending the use of cages and crates is therefore a key priority for this government.

¹⁷ *UK Egg Industry Data* (2024). Available at: [UK Egg Industry Data | Official Egg Info](#).

¹⁸ 8% of the indoor sow herd are in flexible farrowing systems. Source: *NPA Position Paper – Flexible Farrowing systems* (2024). Available at: [NPA Briefing](#)

¹⁹ “How are breeding sows kept in the UK?” (2025). Available at: [FAQs - National Pig Association](#).

²⁰ *NPA Position Paper – Flexible Farrowing systems* (2024). Available at: [NPA Briefing](#).

We are pleased that the cattle industry is already moving from individual calf pens towards pair housing of young calves and some farm assurance schemes require calves to be housed in groups or pairs from less than 8 weeks of age. Defra's cattle welfare code provides guidance on how both dairy and beef cattle should be kept, including recommendations on accommodation and we will look to update that to reflect latest developments and scientific research.

Gamebirds bred and reared for sporting purposes are not subject to the same legislative requirements on welfare as farmed poultry. Defra's 'code of practice for the welfare of gamebirds reared for sporting purposes' provides keepers with guidance on how to meet the welfare needs of their gamebirds but has not been updated for several years. We are considering the existing protections for gamebirds that are bred and reared under controlled conditions for the purpose of release for sport shooting, together with birds retained or caught up for breeding purposes.

Actions

We will:

- transition to non-cage systems and consult on phasing out enriched 'colony' cages
- work with the industry to explore how to transition away from the use of farrowing crates to alternative systems: either flexible farrowing where the sow is confined for the crucial few days around farrowing, or free farrowing where there is no confinement during farrowing or lactation and consult on the transition
- improve cattle welfare through working with stakeholders on improving the welfare code for cattle
- improve our understanding of the welfare issues on how gamebirds are reared in the gamebird sector through issuing a call for evidence

At slaughter

All animals should be spared avoidable pain, suffering and distress when they are killed. The available evidence shows that there are significant changes that can be made to improve the welfare of animals at the time of killing.

There is a pressing need to address the welfare issues associated with high concentration CO₂ gas stunning of pigs. Defra commissioned the AWC to provide an up-to-date assessment of the current evidence on high concentration CO₂ stunning of pigs and potential alternative stunning methods. The AWC concluded that to prevent pigs from experiencing avoidable pain, distress or suffering at slaughter associated with high concentration CO₂, its use should be prohibited and that the transition period provided should be as short as possible. They also concluded that argon gas stunning and automated electrical stunning are higher welfare alternatives. These are commercially feasible alternatives, and we therefore want to see an end to the use of CO₂ gas stunning.

Each year approximately 40 to 45 million male chicks of conventional laying hen breeds are culled within 12 to 36 hours of hatching²¹. The AWC in its 2024 ‘Opinion on alternatives to culling newly hatched chicks in the egg and poultry industries’ considered a range of technologies that could help end the routine culling of male chicks by identifying or determining the sex of chick embryos before hatching.

We would like to see an end to the practice of killing day-old chicks. The currently permitted killing methods for chicks in legislation, such as gas stunning, are based on scientific research and assessment to ensure birds are spared any avoidable pain, distress or suffering. However, in recent years there has been rapid global progress in the development of technologies that remove the need for killing day old chicks and we welcome the UK egg industry’s interest in the development of day zero sexing technology.

Actions

We will:

- ban the use of carbon dioxide gas stunning of pigs, subject to a consultation
- encourage industry to end the practice of culling male laying hen chicks
- publish a review of the Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015 to ensure that the regulations still meet their objectives

Management practices

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 prohibits any procedure which involves interference with the sensitive tissues or bone structure of an animal. The Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007 list certain exemptions to which the prohibition does not apply if certain conditions are met.

Exemptions include: tail docking of pigs, which is done to prevent tail biting in certain circumstances; beak trimming of laying hens which is done to reduce the risk of injurious pecking and cannibalism; castration of ram lambs carried out to avoid unwanted pregnancies, for stock management purposes and to avoid lower market appeal and value (due to ram taint); and tail docking of lambs done to decrease the risk of fly strike, a significant welfare issue. We want to encourage farmers to move away from using these procedures routinely.

We will aim to work with sectors to either reduce frequency of management procedures or, where procedures are deemed necessary, improve the use of anaesthetics and analgesics. We will work with veterinary societies to promote the use of the Animal Health

²¹ GB only and assuming 90% hatching rate, Source: *Opinion on alternatives to culling newly hatched chicks in the egg and poultry industries* (2023). Available at: [Animal Welfare Committee: opinion on alternatives to culling newly hatched chicks in the egg and poultry industry.](#)

and Welfare Review to initiate a discussion with farmers on the need to perform management practices and the most 'welfare-friendly' methods to use.

The industry's Laying Hen Welfare Forum is working to accelerate progress to reduce injurious pecking, which is key to eliminating the need for beak trimming.

Actions

We will:

- reduce the prevalence of pig tail docking, working with the industry and the veterinary profession
- end the practice of beak trimming of laying hens, working with the laying hen sector through the Laying Hen Welfare Forum
- work with the sheep sector to implement the advice and recommendations in the AWC's ['Opinion on the Implications of Castration and Tail Docking for the Welfare of Lambs'](#) (2024) and update the Sheep Welfare Code

Fish

There has been growing attention paid recently to the welfare of farmed fish, including those raised using recirculating aquaculture systems, a type of onshore fish farm, as well as calls for new legislation to set down detailed requirements at the time of killing. Whilst existing legislation on the protection of animals at the time of killing requires that farmed fish be spared avoidable pain, distress or suffering during their killing, unlike terrestrial livestock farmed fish have no further detailed protections in domestic law (such as no requirement to stun fish pre-slaughter).

A joint government and industry working group on farmed trout has been exploring options for more detailed welfare at killing requirements for farmed fish. This co-design work has made good progress. To increase the protections, detailed requirements on killing farmed fish should now be brought into legislation.

We also want to work with stakeholders to build the evidence base as to how fish can be farmed to ensure their welfare is safeguarded.

Actions

We will:

- introduce humane slaughter requirements for farmed fish into legislation, subject to consultation
- improve fish welfare during production and, as a first step, commission the AWC's advice on the welfare of farmed fish prior to slaughter

Breeding

Over the last decade there have been a number of significant technological advances in livestock breeding, including greater emphasis on genetic selection in breeding

programmes. These changes have the potential to improve health and welfare of animals, as well as the sustainability and resilience of farming systems, but concerns have been expressed by animal welfare NGOs about fast-growing breeds of chicken, and the health and welfare of high production dairy cattle.

The government supports the production of healthy, high-welfare animals as part of the UK's food system. A responsible, evidence-led approach to animal breeding is essential for this goal. The AWC has been commissioned to provide a sound, up-to-date evidence base on livestock breeding and animal welfare. The project involved a [systematic evidence review by Queen's University Belfast](#) (2024), and wide-ranging stakeholder engagement.

Actions

We will:

- publish and consider carefully the report from the AWC on breeding and breeding practices, including how we reflect advice in the welfare codes
- support voluntary efforts to move away from the use of fast-growing meat chicken breeds
- monitor the welfare risks associated with breeding practices and update standards as necessary

During transport

During transportation, animals can be subjected to extreme temperatures, limited space allowances, motion and vibrations, and a restriction on expressing normal behaviours. These factors can lead to serious negative effects on animal welfare.

The government's aim is that animals should only be transported if it is necessary, and transport should be by the most welfare considerate route. Journey durations should be minimised where possible to reduce the risk of welfare complications arising during transport.

We are taking action to ensure the live exports ban is enforced as robustly as possible so that animals are spared a long journey prior to slaughter. We have put in place a regulatory and enforcement regime, providing the Animal and Plant Health Agency and local authorities with the powers necessary to act against any non-compliance, through the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Enforcement Regulations 2024.

Actions

We will:

- explore further measures to prevent equines being exported for slaughter, working closely with the horse sector and enforcement bodies
- continue to monitor progress of the EU proposal for a new welfare in transport regulation, and engage with industry to gather evidence of its anticipated impacts

across the UK, including how these interact with a future Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement between the UK and the EU

Food labelling

Most consumers care about how their food is produced²². However, we recognise that the current lack of consistency in food labelling makes it difficult for consumers to understand the animal welfare standards their food was produced to and make informed purchasing decisions. This lack of transparency also makes it harder for farmers to differentiate their goods and be fairly rewarded for their higher welfare products.

We are committed to ensuring that consumers have access to clear information on how their food was produced. To support this, we will work with stakeholders to explore how improved animal welfare food labelling could provide greater consumer transparency, support farmers and promote better animal welfare.

Actions

We will:

- work with relevant stakeholders, including farming and food industry stakeholders, vets, scientists and animal welfare NGOs to continue exploring how improved food labelling, including method-of-production labelling, could improve animal welfare

Adaptation to climate change

During the 2022 heatwave, millions of birds died on farm on the hottest two days whilst other animals experienced heat stress either on farm or during transport. Future climate predictions suggest that we will continue to see heatwaves and these present challenges for all those who keep livestock. Risks to UK agriculture from climate change include drought, flooding, heat stress and increased pests and diseases, all of which can impact farm animal welfare.

We want to work with industry, keepers and farmers to improve resilience to a changing climate, which is expected to lead to warmer, wetter winters, and hotter, drier summers in the UK.

Adapting livestock housing, using more heat tolerant breeds, and improving livestock transport will improve the health, welfare and productivity of farmed animals. We welcome the move to lower stocking densities for meat chickens across parts of the sector and the

²² Food Standards Agency, *Food and You 2, Wave 7, 2024*. Available at: [Food and You 2: Wave 7 | Food Standards Agency](#)

potential for improvements in welfare this could bring, particularly during extreme hot weather events.

Defra has commissioned the AWC to assess the likely impacts of climate change on farm animals and what further measures could be put in place by industry sectors to help mitigate those effects. Part 1 of this project has begun and focuses on poultry species across all stages of life. Part 2 is due to start in 2026 and will cover pigs and ruminants.

We have published a review of welfare outcomes when transporting poultry in commercially available temperature-controlled vehicles. It provides valuable information on the feasibility of using temperature-controlled vehicles based on historical data and on factors such as temperature and humidity, which can negatively affect bird welfare during transport.

Actions

We will:

- publish and consider carefully the reports from the AWC and support work to help the poultry and livestock sectors adapt to the effects of climate change

Enforcement

The government is aware of the challenges in enforcing animal welfare laws. [The Animal Sentience Committee's report on enforcement published in February 2025](#) identified systemic issues, such as poor inter-agency coordination, lack of transparency and consistency of enforcement action, and insufficient detection of offences. We are taking these concerns seriously and are committed to strengthening enforcement mechanisms to ensure meaningful accountability.

While most people want to do the right thing when it comes to protecting the welfare of animals, there are occasions where animals suffer, or welfare is compromised. When this occurs, it is vital that we have proportionate, transparent and robust enforcement systems in place that can educate, redirect and, where appropriate in serious cases, punish and disqualify offenders from keeping animals.

Our integrated approach to improving enforcement focuses on 6 key themes that are essential aims for good enforcement. These interdependent themes create a framework for future action and underpin our ambitions for a fair, effective and proportionate enforcement system, working in conjunction with each other to achieve the outcome of an enforcement system that protects the welfare of animals.

1. The right rules: Ensuring legislation sets a minimum baseline and states what might happen when an animal keeper does not follow the rules.
2. Good enforcers: Ensuring enforcers are upskilled and have fit for purpose resources, tools and powers to ensure that keepers and businesses are meeting the legal baseline for animal health and welfare in England.

3. Right corrective action: Ensuring regulators and enforcers are taking appropriate and proportionate corrective actions to encourage compliance and redirect non-compliant behaviours.
4. People know and understand the rules: Ensuring animal keepers understand their responsibility to ensure animal welfare and the rationale for this, reducing the need for enforcement action.
5. Knowing when something is going wrong: Ensuring that enforcers and policy makers can intervene at an early stage to redirect behaviour towards compliance with less severe measures.
6. Good support: Ensuring animal keepers have access to support that prevent problems before they escalate and reduce the likelihood of expensive interventions.

We will continue to support our regulators and enforcement partners in sharing knowledge and best practices to drive continuous improvement. By fostering strong partnerships and sharing knowledge, we will build a culture of continuous improvement where compliance is not just a regulatory obligation, but a shared commitment to protecting animals and promoting their welfare across all sectors.

Actions

We will:

- systematically track and publicly report enforcement actions taken in response to non-compliance for animal welfare, working closely with local authorities. Our initial focus is on the farming sector, with the first data return—covering the 2026 calendar year—set for publication in 2027
- undertake a review to ensure the appropriate tools and frameworks are in place to deliver a proportionate and robust enforcement system



International

Overview

The UK has some of the highest standards of animal welfare in the world. Animal welfare is a global issue, and the government will continue to work in international fora, including the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), to champion the importance of high standards of animal welfare and promote best practice.

We will also keep working collaboratively with international partners bilaterally to build a shared understanding of animals as sentient beings, emphasise the importance of phasing out low welfare practices, explore opportunities for sharing approaches that have worked well, and collaborate on mutually held challenges.

As part of our work to phase out animal testing, we are working within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Environmental Health and Safety Programme to produce internationally harmonised tools and guidance for alternatives to animals in science.

The UK government is not the only party able to make a difference on these issues. Choices made by UK consumers and retailers also impact the welfare of animals abroad for example the animal activities they choose to undertake while on holiday or sell to holiday-makers. There is also a thriving array of non-governmental organisations and groups working with their counterparts around the world. Together, powerful opportunities exist to improve the welfare of animals worldwide.

Objective

- To champion high animal welfare standards around the world; promoting robust standards nationally and internationally.
- In our approach trade, to consider whether overseas produce has an unfair advantage and be prepared to use the full range of powers at our disposal to protect our most sensitive sectors.

Trade

A 2021 NFU²³ survey found 86% of respondents believe animal welfare standards for imports should match those in the UK, and a Which?²⁴ survey found similar results, with 87% of people agreeing that imported food should meet UK animal welfare standards.

²³Champion and protect British food in trade deals, British public say (2021). Available at: [Champion and protect British food in trade deals, British public say – NFUonline](#).

²⁴Are the UK's Trade Deals Reflecting Consumer Priorities? (2023). Available at: [Are the UK's Trade Deals Reflecting Consumer Priorities? - Which?](#).

Around 1 in 3²⁵ UK respondents identify maintaining animal welfare standards as one of their top five priorities in trade negotiations with non-EU countries, and rank animal welfare alongside or above environmental and product standards in trade priorities.

As set out in the UK's Trade Strategy, we will not lower food standards and will uphold high animal welfare standards as part of our approach to trade. We recognise concerns about methods of production, such as sow stalls and battery cages, which are not permitted in the UK. While methods vary in line with different climates, diseases and other contextual reasons, we will always consider whether overseas produce has an unfair advantage and any impact that may have. Where necessary, we will be prepared to use the full range of powers at our disposal to protect our most sensitive sectors including permanent quotas, exclusions and safeguards.

In May 2025, the EU and the UK agreed to work towards a UK-EU SPS Agreement to make agrifood trade with our biggest market cheaper and easier for British producers and retailers. The UK and EU share high animal welfare standards and a desire to go further in many key areas. The details of the Agreement are subject to negotiation, but we have been clear about the importance of being able to set high animal welfare standards.

Actions

We will:

- promote the importance of high animal welfare standards and best practice as part of our bilateral and international relations, including through international fora

The fur trade

Fur farming has been banned in England and Wales since 2000, and since 2002 in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, the import of fur and fur products remains legal, both from farmed animals and those hunted or trapped in the wild.

There are restrictions on some skin and fur products that may never be legally imported into the UK. This includes fur from cats and dogs. Seal products can only be imported and placed on the UK market for sale in limited circumstances and subject to strict conditions linked to the rights of indigenous communities. We have established controls on fur from endangered species protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and we do not allow imports of fur from wild animals caught using methods that are non-compliant with international humane trapping standards.

²⁵ DBT, *Public Attitudes to Trade Tracker, Wave 7, March 2025* Available at: [Public attitudes to trade tracker \(PATT\): wave 7 - GOV.UK](#)

The 'Opinion on the Responsible Sourcing of Fur', which Defra commissioned from the AWC, will provide a range of conclusions and recommendations to inform possible future action in this area.

Actions

We will:

- publish the results of the previous government's call for evidence on the fur trade and publish and consider carefully the report from the AWC
- bring together a working group on fur, with involvement from both industry experts and those who support restrictions on the trade in fur to explore concerns and the different ways in which they could be addressed
- engage with the EU, a major source of fur imported into the UK, as they consider the findings of the recently published European Food Safety Authority scientific opinion on the welfare of animals kept for fur production, and the results of the European Commission's recent Call for Evidence on the 'Fur Free Europe' Citizens' Initiative

Animals abroad

Some animals abroad are subjected to considerable suffering and unacceptable practices to provide entertainment or experiences for tourists. Many individuals may not be aware of the conditions these animals experience.

Tourists should be supported to choose higher welfare animal activities when on holiday, thereby helping protect animals abroad from these unacceptable practices. Businesses and organisations advertising activities which involve animals should ensure that they do not promote or support low welfare activities and help improve information available on how the animal activities they might wish to engage in when travelling overseas could impact on animal welfare.

Actions

We will:

- explore with industry and NGOs legislative and non-legislative options to stop the advertising in the UK of low animal welfare activities abroad
- work with industry and NGOs to enable travellers to choose activities which have high welfare standards

Next steps

This strategy sets out the priority areas we have identified to improve animal welfare in England. We will monitor progress against this strategy to ensure that the outcomes we are seeking to achieve are met.

We will continue to develop the evidence base on animal welfare and draw on the expertise of the Animal Health and Welfare Board England, the Animal Welfare Committee, the Animal Sentience Committee, and the Zoo Expert Committee in developing our approach to animal welfare.

The government cannot monitor real-world animal welfare impacts alone. Continued engagement with stakeholders is a vital part of our ongoing work, facilitating the partnership approach we seek to build. Sharing information and insights is critical to being able to assess whether policies are delivering their intended improvements, whether and how improvements can be made, and keeping abreast of new or emerging issues.

We will therefore convene regular meetings at both official and ministerial level to facilitate sharing of information and best practice and as a forum to explore where further steps are needed. We will also work through the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway to improve the welfare of livestock. This will ensure that there are regular reviews of the policies set out in this strategy and help ensure their effective implementation.

Acknowledgements

Defra would like to acknowledge all the stakeholders with whom we have engaged in the development of this strategy. Their work, expertise, and continual support have helped shaped our priorities and where we should focus our efforts. We look forward to our continued engagement in the implementation of this strategy.

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