

SPS Readiness Business Advisory Council

19 May 2026 Minutes

Agenda

Opening remarks and introductions
Agree terms of reference
Business Readiness Campaign Plan – presentation and discussion
Sector information for publication
Next steps and any other business

Opening remarks

Emma Bourne welcomed everyone to the first sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) Readiness Business Advisory Council.

This, and future Councils, will be held under the Chatham House Rule and so any readouts will be high-level with non-attributed comments.

The strategic opportunity of the SPS Agreement was outlined:

- The changes present a significant opportunity to increase exports, especially given the contraction seen since Brexit.
- There is potential to:
 - Encourage businesses that have not previously exported to explore new markets.
 - Reduce import costs, particularly for key ingredients and supply chains.
 - Support efforts to ease pressure on food price inflation.
- Removal of friction (for example Great Britain–Northern Ireland movements) is a core objective.

Terms of reference

The Terms of reference were agreed.

Business Readiness Campaign plan

Rachel Irving presented to the Council sharing some sector insight and the Readiness Campaign overview.

The Council were invited to comment. Key discussion points were:

What's working

- General support for the Campaign Approach in principle.
- Strong support for:
 - Three-phase communications strategy
 - Digital/social-led awareness campaigns
 - Sector-based engagement approach
- Broad agreement on benefits of regulatory alignment.

Concerns raised

- Risk of confusing or overly complex guidance, especially for SMEs.
- Lack of clarity may delay business action.
- Potential burden for businesses not engaged in exporting.
- Differences in regulatory interpretation across jurisdictions.
- Previous Brexit experience creating scepticism about deadlines.
- Social media welcomed but there is a risk of misinformation.
- Concerns around deadlines and how we are framing the changes. Suggestion that we focus the message that the UK legislation is changing rather than focussing on the benefits, so it reflects sentiment across sectors.
- More consideration on alternative conduits to deliver messages. Think about trusted sources where businesses go to for information for example:
 - Import/Export Health Officers
 - Vets
 - Banks, particularly SMEs
- Common challenge is that businesses will not take action until they are confident that they have all the information. Businesses want clear and firm timescales.
- Need for more clarity of legislation in scope once negotiations have concluded.
- Previous Brexit experience is creating scepticism around deadlines.

Key recommendations from stakeholders

- Provide early signals on:
 - Transition periods and deadlines
 - "Direction of travel" even if details are not final
- Use:
 - Trusted sources already embedded in business operations
 - Trade associations and advisory networks
- Develop:
 - Clear segmentation of businesses by impact level
- Ensure:
 - Guidance is simplified and tailored, particularly for SMEs
- Consider:
 - Stronger use of incentives or compliance messaging where change is mandatory

Communications priorities

- Keep messaging:
 - Clear, simple, and consistent
 - Tailored for SMEs as well as large firms
- Improve:
 - Use of trusted intermediaries (accountants, trade bodies, advisory services)
 - Engagement through existing forums and networks
- Address misinformation:
 - Introduce myth-busting / rapid rebuttal mechanisms
- Consider:
 - Role of email outreach and direct communication channels
 - Greater alignment across government bodies and regulators

Information gaps and uncertainty

- Not all operational details are confirmed (for example ID checks, certification processes).
- Ongoing negotiations limit clarity in some areas.
- Risk of:
 - Misinformation and media misinterpretation
 - Businesses acting on incomplete or incorrect assumptions
- Agreement to:
 - Be transparent about what is known vs unknown
 - Provide direction of travel where possible

Sector information publication

This was shared with members in advance. Some members had already shared feedback which has been incorporated into the products.

- Approach agreed:
 - Do not delay publication
 - Be transparent about areas still under negotiation
- Balance required:
 - Provide enough detail to inform
 - Avoid overwhelming or misleading businesses
- Suggested approach:
 - “Light-touch” high-level guidance for uncertain areas
 - Expand detail as negotiations conclude

Next steps

Key ask of attendees

- Council members were asked to support in:

- Identifying trusted communication channels
 - Providing sector-specific insights
 - Helping reach under-served and SME audiences
 - Informing us of key decision points for business cycles (for example labelling, key purchasing dates)
- Continue to share feedback on:
 - Draft guidance
 - Communication effectiveness
 - Readiness challenges
- Offer suggestions for future agenda items.