

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: ANIMAL WELFARE STRATEGY

Westminster Hall, Samantha Niblett MP

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- The Countryside Alliance has always supported the highest animal welfare standards – but only when based on science and evidence.
- There is much in this strategy to be welcomed, especially the government's recognition of the extensive welfare legislation that has been passed in recent years and that education, enforcement and better funding are all vital if the existing laws are to deliver the welfare benefits intended.
- We welcome the fact that the government has acknowledged that animal welfare must be considered in the context of its Food Strategy and its Trade Strategy. We are concerned, however, that recognising the need to integrate welfare in these strategies is not the same as actually doing so.
- Improving animal welfare in farming is welcome, but there is little point in setting ever higher standards at home while allowing the import of products produced in countries with lower standards. The farming community needs a level playing field to compete fairly.
- There is a danger that the Animal Welfare Strategy becomes little more than virtue signalling, and that in some areas it will do more harm than good. Some of the proposals could have far reaching and potentially damaging consequences for farmers, rural communities, wildlife and biodiversity.
- Legislation targeting trail hunting is not necessary and not a priority for government activity. It would represent another attack on the countryside and the many thousands for whom hunts are an integral part of rural life undertaking lawful hunting activity.
- There are a number of issues discussed in the strategy that are important for driving up animal welfare standards, such as reform of food labelling and new legislation to replace the outdated Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, which should be given greater priority by the government.

Background

- The government published its Animal Welfare Strategy on 22 December.¹ Measures included a ban on “snare traps” and trail hunting that were contained in Labour’s manifesto at the last general election.
- There is a danger that this Strategy could become little more than virtue signalling. For example, the strategy includes a proposal to ban ‘puppy farming’, despite there already being extensive 2018 regulations around the breeding and sale of dogs that followed extensive consultation.
- Other proposals could do more harm than good. It is vital that measures to improve welfare are based on science and evidence and proportionate. Simplistic solutions may make good headlines, but the consequences can actually be detrimental to welfare on the whole.
- There is already extensive legislation on animal welfare and we would urge the government to look first at what laws are currently available and how they are being implemented and resourced. Simply passing more legislation and piling further regulation on those who own and work with animals, as well as local authorities, will not necessarily improve welfare.

Farming

- The Strategy includes proposals to phase-out farrowing crates for sows and cages for laying hens.
- Improving animal welfare in farming is welcome, but there is little point in setting ever higher standards at home while allowing the import of products produced in countries with lower standards.
- The strategy does acknowledge the issue of food security and suggests ensuring that imported food is produced to equal standards to domestic production, but unless our higher welfare farming standards are mirrored in our trade policy, there is a real risk that we will simply export our farming industry abroad and become increasingly reliant on cheaper imports. The farming community needs a level playing field to compete fairly.
- Food labelling -The strategy recognises “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.”. The government has committed to “work with stakeholders to explore how improved animal welfare food labelling could provide greater consumer transparency, support farmers and promote better animal welfare.”
- We would note that the last government consulted on food labelling in 2024 and there has already been extensive consultation with stakeholders. The government should get on with ensuring food labelling is fair and transparent supporting farmers and consumers and driving up welfare.

¹ Defra, [Animal welfare strategy for England](#), 22.12.25

Hares

- The strategy states that the government will consider how to bring forward and introduce a close season for hares.
- A closed season on hares will do nothing to help the hare population, which has increased by 35% since 1995 according to British Trust for Ornithology figures.
- The Hares Preservation Act 1892 already creates an effective close season by prohibiting the sale of hare meat during their main breeding season. The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) was made the Biodiversity Action Plan champion for Brown Hares in 1998 under the last Labour government. Its view is that the current combination of law and self-regulation means that Natural England's advice that "*controlling species in their peak breeding should be avoided unless genuinely essential and unavoidable*" is already being followed.
- In wildlife management there is a balance to be struck between the welfare of individuals and the welfare of the population. It would be regrettable if a statutory close season increased the amount of control having to be undertaken later in the breeding season or negatively impacted overall population health.
- The GWCT has rightly noted that: "*Closed seasons are not appropriate in a pest control context. Where the aim is to reduce the numbers of a pest species in an area, allowing them full opportunity to reproduce is clearly counter-productive. That is why non-game wildlife species that are at least sometimes pests (e.g. fox, grey squirrel, wood pigeon) do not have closed seasons in the UK, whereas game species do.*"
- The current de facto closed season means that hare populations are prevented from reaching unsustainable levels. Culling avoids the peak breeding season but allows action to be taken at other times where damage is occurring. This approach balances the need to achieve a manageable population while minimising the impact on leveret welfare.
- Not only do hares breed year-round but those born in January/February have low survival rates due to factors other than culling. As the GWCT has noted: "*While the intended effect of a closed season may be to safeguard the welfare of dependent young, we note that mortality in leverets is typically high (e.g. 50-75% in Pépin 19894, 71-86% in Marboulin et al. 2003) as a result of bad weather, poor nutrition, predation or disease. Clearly any benefit will be diluted to this extent, because the actual welfare of the leverets that die through these causes is not good...*"
- As the GWCT has stated: "*We have spoken to farmers to gauge their likely reactions to the proposed closed season. Given the difficulties presented by hare coursing and now with a potential threat to their income most indicate that under the proposals they would cull hard in the open season as a means of insurance. At present they can wait and gauge the extent of the problem and respond accordingly.*"

- It will be much easier to cull harder and earlier rather than having to rely on some exemption such as a licence at a later date in response to damage being caused. The impact of the fear of illegal hare poachers should not be underestimated.
- It is hard to see how introducing a statutory close season different from the de facto one currently observed will improve hare welfare at either population or individual level. A statutory close season will create a situation that neither assists the hare nor those who manage them. The current arrangements are flexible and, most importantly, they work.
- However, if the government does proceed with a statutory close season, then it should follow existing practice and any exception/licence for killing hares in the close season should be simple and easy for farmers to use.

Snare Traps

- The strategy states that the government will ban the use of snare traps in England and 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.
- There has been extensive research into trapping and trapping standards in recent years and there is already extensive legislation. The government must proceed on the basis of the evidence and not ideology recognising the need to manage wildlife and that the control of pest species is essential to protect rural businesses, vulnerable species and biodiversity.
- Banning snares that by design fail to meet international trapping standards of humaneness is one thing but modern humane restraints properly used are a vital tool to control foxes and the loss of which would threaten the future of some of our most vulnerable and endangered species including ground nesting birds such as curlew and lapwing. It is important for any new legislation to distinguish these from old-fashioned snares.
- The government cannot talk of biodiversity and nature restoration and at the same time remove the very means of effective wildlife management that delivers that biodiversity.

Trail hunting

- Following a pledge in the Labour Manifesto at the last General Election re-confirmed its intention to consult in early 2026 on how to deliver a ban on trail hunting. The document claimed:

“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.”

- The Countryside Alliance argues that further legislation targeting trail hunting is not necessary and not a priority for government activity. It would represent another attack on the countryside and the many thousands for whom hunts are an integral part of rural life undertaking lawful hunting activity.
- Ministry of Justice prosecution statistics show just how ‘successful’ the Hunting Act 2004 has been, if success is measured in terms of court cases rather than any improvement in animal welfare. Since 2010 alone there have been 744 prosecutions under the Act leading to 416 convictions, more than under any other wildlife law and twice the number of convictions as the next most prosecuted wildlife offence.
- The Hunting Act was the result of 700 hours of debate and was what hunting opponents wanted. Hunts adapted and adopted trail hunting, which is what the supporters of the ban said they should do.
- The British Hound Sports Association’s recent socio-economic survey states that hunting contributes £100m to the rural economy each year. A Countryside Alliance survey has also found that 97% of hunting participants believe the activity to benefit their physical and mental health. A ban on trail hunting therefore runs contrary to the government’s ‘missions’ to promote economic growth and improve the NHS for the sake of achieving better health outcomes.

Animal activities abroad

- The strategy commits the government to *“explore with industry and NGOs legislative and non-legislative options to stop the advertising in the UK of low animal welfare activities abroad”* and *“work with industry and NGOs to enable travellers to choose activities which have high welfare standards.”*
- This was considered as part of the Animals Abroad Bill in 2021. At the time the Alliance indicated that it was *“fully supportive of the Government’s desire to use its influence to improve animal welfare standards abroad, and to ensure that UK citizens have the knowledge necessary to avoid supporting enterprises that involve poor animal welfare.”*
- However, we felt that there were many unanswered questions, such as who decides what activities are “low welfare” and whether or not a particular business in a destination company was acting acceptably.
- Will some activities always be considered ‘low welfare’, or does welfare relate to how the animals are looked after? For example, in 2021 there was discussion about camel riding and whether it is a low welfare activity in itself, or only if the camels are not properly cared for. Just as riding horses or donkeys in the UK is not considered a low welfare activity in itself, it can be so if the animals are not properly treated and cared for.

- If the government is going to drive up welfare standards abroad then enterprises that use animals and derive money from tourism from the UK need to see that it is in their interests, as well as that of the animals involved, to operate to the highest animal welfare standards.
- The challenge the government faces is how to assess enterprises involving animals abroad and also whether the UK is prepared to undergo similar scrutiny from abroad.
- We must avoid an outcome where low welfare businesses continue but high welfare businesses suffer, and animal welfare is negatively affected by a failure to distinguish between activities being conducted well or badly.

Countryside Alliance position

- The Countryside Alliance has always supported the highest animal welfare standards – but only when based on science and evidence.
- While there is much to be welcomed in the Strategy, there are other proposals that will have far reaching and potentially damaging consequences for farmers, rural communities, wildlife and biodiversity.²
- Higher welfare standards for UK farmers must be matched by a trade policy and food strategy that does not disadvantage UK producers by allowing cheaper imports produced to lower standards.
- To ban the lawful pursuit of trail hunting because in the course of doing it a few have broken an entirely different law is not something that happens in any other area of law. The proposal to ban trail hunting is draconian, disproportionate and unnecessary. It should not be a priority for the government, which should instead prioritise measures that will genuinely improve animal welfare.
- If a close season for hares is to be introduced, then it must balance welfare considerations with the overall health and welfare of hare populations.
- If we want nature recovery and biodiversity, land managers need the tools to manage wildlife ensuring a balance between species and ensuring the survival of some of our most vulnerable species.

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² Countryside Alliance, [Trail hunting to be banned: the government's 'virtue signalling' Animal Welfare Strategy](#), 22.12.25