

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: IMPACT OF IMPORT STANDARDS ON THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Backbench Business Debate, House of Commons

Thursday 22 January 2026

- The government's plan for land use change envisages that 14% of England's current agricultural land would see a significant reduction or total loss of food production by 2050.
- The government published its Animal Welfare Strategy on 22 December. Measures included efforts to improve the welfare of farmed animals, including phase-outs of 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.
- A recent Countryside Alliance report on the public sector's procurement of British, as opposed to imported, food found that only small minorities of central government departments and local councils were monitoring the origins of their procured food, or had a policy of seeking to procure more food produced in the UK.
- Domestic food security is national security and must be protected.

Background

- Between 30 January and 25 April 2025, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ran a consultation on a new framework for land use in England¹, to which the Countryside Alliance responded.²
- The consultation document set out the expectation that 14% of England's current agricultural land would see a significant reduction or total loss of food production by 2050. This figure consisted of 9% of agricultural land (760 kha) becoming non-agricultural and being fully dedicated to delivering environmental and climate benefits, plus 5% (430 kha) being farmed mainly for other benefits than food, with limited food production.
- In addition, it envisages that a further 1% (50 kha) would undergo small changes, maintaining the same agricultural land use, and 4% would undergo more substantial change, primarily involving the planting of trees alongside agricultural production.
- The document went on to state:

¹ Defra, [Land Use Consultation](#), 01.25

² Countryside Alliance, [Alliance responds to land use consultation](#), 24.04.25

“The Government is committed to maintaining food production. Our assessment is that, based on historical trends of productivity improvement, and supported by new and emerging innovations, the impact of these land use changes on domestic food production will be offset by productivity improvements. We expect that recent trends of increased productivity from agricultural land will continue.”

- A related case was made in the APPG for Science and Technology in Agriculture report, *Feeding Britain Sustainably to 2050: The 30:50:50 Mission*, published in November 2025, which argued for a unified effort to increase UK agricultural output by 30% by 2050.³

Animal welfare strategy

- The government published its Animal Welfare Strategy on 22 December.⁴ Measures included efforts to improve the welfare of farmed animals, including phase-outs of farrowing crates for sows and cages for laying hens. A consultation on the latter policy was launched on 12 January 2026.⁵
- 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.

Public sector food procurement

- The Labour Party manifesto for the 2024 General Election stated:

“Labour recognises that food security is national security. That is why we will champion British farming whilst protecting the environment. We will set a target for half of all food purchased across the public sector to be locally produced or certified to higher environmental standards.”⁶

- In that context, in August 2025 the Countryside Alliance issued *Backing British? Benchmarking public food procurement*, a major report on the public sector's recent performance in procuring British, as opposed to imported, food.⁷
- The report was based on Freedom of Information requests (FOIs) that asked 19 central government departments, 215 local authorities and the British Armed Forces about their food procurement policies. The queries sought to discover what efforts they are making to procure more UK and local food and to monitor the origins of the food they serve.

³ Science for Sustainable Agriculture, [Feeding Britain Sustainably to 2050 - The 30:50:50 Mission](#), 11.25

⁴ Defra, [Animal welfare strategy for England](#), 22.12.25

⁵ Defra, [Cage reform: proposed ban on keeping laying hens, pullets and breeder layers in cages](#), 12.01.26

⁶ Labour Party, [Manifesto 2024](#), P. 59

⁷ Countryside Alliance, [Backing British? Benchmarking public food procurement](#), 22.08.25

- Only one government department, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), had a policy relevant to the procurement of British food. Only one other, the Department for Health and Social Care, could say what proportion of its procured food originated in the UK. The Wales Office said it encourages its external caterers to purchase UK-produced food where possible.
- Only 26 local authorities (12% of all those asked) were able to report data concerning what proportion of the food they procured was produced in the UK. 70 councils indicated they do not have any relevant policy associated with procuring British food, and there were 42 councils for which no response could be recorded.

Countryside Alliance position

- The Countryside Alliance agrees with the principle that domestic food security is national security and must be protected. Any reduction in available agricultural land must be offset by increased productivity, with account taken of population growth. We cannot become reliant on imports.
- The Countryside Alliance has always supported the highest animal welfare standards – but always based on science and evidence. The government's new Animal Welfare Strategy will have far reaching and potentially damaging consequences for farmers, rural communities, wildlife and biodiversity.⁸
- In particular, imported foods must be produced to the same standards as required of UK farmers and this must be reflected in the government's trade policy. UK farmers should not be faced with a domestic market flooded by imports that are cheaper because they have been produced to lower standards.
- The figures revealed in our public sector food procurement report are concerning and point to a lack of effort on the behalf of central government and many councils to examine and consider the effects of their catering policies.
- At a time when British farmers, food producers and suppliers face economic uncertainty, they deserve to have the full support of the public sector with rigorous, traceable food procurement policies that ensure public bodies deliver on government commitments.

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⁸ Countryside Alliance, [Trail hunting to be banned: the government's 'virtue signalling' Animal Welfare Strategy](#), 22.12.25