



**Environment, Food  
and Rural Affairs  
Committee**

Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP  
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
London  
*By email*

26 April 2023

Dear Secretary of State

I want to thank you and the Permanent Secretary for appearing before the Committee on 28 March, and request that you address a number of points that were raised during the meeting. The Committee would also like to use this opportunity to highlight a couple of other pressing topics.

**Supermarket profits**

On the issue of excess supermarket profits, the Agriculture Act 2020 allows you to require data from food supply chain businesses, and to make regulations to promote fair contractual relationships. Please can you provide further information about your monitoring of supermarkets, and what criteria you employ to use these powers? The Committee noted that you said you would write to John Allan, CEO of Tesco plc, to follow-up on his claims that other supermarkets are making excess profits.

Given the high level of food inflation and high costs that have been incurred by producers in recent years, you agreed to provide information on what referrals there have been during this time to the Groceries Code Adjudicator, and whether there has been any increase overall in the level of referrals. We would be grateful for this information in your response.

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## **Food security summit**

We asked when the Prime Minister's Food Security Summit would take place, which you expected to occur during the current quarter. The Committee would be grateful if you or Number 10 could provide a more precise date for this event please.

## **Global Environment Fund (GEF)**

On the GEF, we asked you to provide details about the position, level of experience and responsibilities of the official at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) who represents the UK Government on the GEF Council.

## **Sea life mortality off the north east coast of England, and issues at Whitstable**

On crustacean mortality, we were disappointed again to hear that you will not be looking further at providing some form of financial support to fishers due to crustacean mortality off the north-east coast. You told us that current data suggests that you are not seeing a particular change in revenues amongst this part of the fisheries sector. We understand, however, that whilst no official data is available on the economic impact of the mass die-offs, local fishers continue to remain concerned about the fall in stocks which is leading to significant costs, financial losses, and a negative impact on mental health.

In your 7 February letter and on 28 March, you suggested that local fishers should instead consider accessing support from the Government's UK Seafood Fund (UKSF) and the Fisheries and Seafood Scheme (FaSS). We note that the UKSF may support diversification, new forms of income, and measures to improve the resilience and sustainability of a shore-based facility. The FaSS may support science and innovation, infrastructure, skills and training, and exports support. However, given that local fishers' need to access support as soon as possible because of the mortality event, it is unclear how readily these schemes respond to the current circumstances of local fishers affected by crustacean mortality. We therefore suggest that Defra and the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) need to offer proactive support in the short-term to enable local fishers to effectively access these funding schemes.

During the hearing, Rosie Duffield MP highlighted ongoing concerns amongst whelkers at Whitstable in her constituency about reduced catch sizes of live whelks, and requested that an official from Defra visit the whelkers and investigate possible causes. The Committee would be grateful if you could arrange for such a visit to be undertaken before the end of May.

## **Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill**

The issue of the programming of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was raised during the hearing.

Having begun its Parliamentary passage during the 2019-20 session, the Bill was carried over into the current session and was read the first and second time on 11 May 2022 without debate. Having completed Committee Stage in the last session, it is now awaiting Report Stage.

The Bill is of particular interest to the Committee, especially in the light of its recent Moving Animals Across Borders inquiry. For example, the Bill proposes welcome changes in regard to pet smuggling to tackle the abhorrent trade by criminal gangs who exploit the current rules, thereby endangering both animal and also human health and welfare.

Furthermore, as the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries said on 30 March, the Bill:

“contains a number of manifesto commitments, including a ban on live exports and curbs on puppy smuggling, which we are committed to progressing when Parliamentary time allows”.<sup>1</sup>

The Committee notes that a large number of parliamentary questions have been asked about when the progress of the Bill. Since the start of March alone, and notwithstanding the Easter recess, seven questions have been tabled by a variety of Members in both Houses.

All have been met with the same answer by Defra Ministers along the theme of “the next stage of the Bill will be announced in the usual way”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [PQ174318 30 March 2023](#)

<sup>2</sup> [PQ158989 9 March 2023](#); [PQ165230 17 March 2023](#); [PQ167158 21 March 2023](#); [HC Deb 30 March c1141](#); [PQ176806 17 April 2023](#); [PQ181659 25 April 2023](#); [HL7197 25 April 2023](#).

Could you specify to the Committee:

- the date when the Bill will have its Report Stage in the House?
- will the Government seek to carry the Bill over into the next session if necessary?
- that the Government is committed to progressing the Bill?

Could you also inform the Committee when the Government will publish its response to its consultation “Commercial and Non-Commercial Movements of Pets into Great Britain” which closed on 16 October 2021.

As the Government stated, the Bill will introduce restrictions – to be implemented through secondary legislation – on commercial and non-commercial pet movements into Great Britain on welfare grounds and to make changes to the supporting enforcement regime.

If this is the approach that Parliament agrees to – although as our Report stated, the Committee wants such measures to be on the face of the Bill – then it is vital that such regulations are ready to laid very swiftly after Royal Assent.

### **Defra staff resources**

During the hearing, the issues of staff recruitment, retention and morale were raised, and I note that on 21 April the *Financial Times* reported that Defra was “struggling to handle its large workload”. The article also stated that your Department was “grappling” with the requirements of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, a topic which the Committee also discussed with you.

Could you provide the Committee with information on each of the following matters please:

- detailed information on the latest staff surveys for both Defra and the Environment Agency, and comparisons to the results of previous surveys over the past five years;
- the latest vacancy rates, both overall and by programme-level (e.g. Environmental Quality, Future Farming and Countryside, Floods and Water), and Defra’s target vacancy levels;
- the current and projected numbers of full-time equivalent staff (within the Defra Group, and elsewhere supporting the Defra Group)

who are working both directly and indirectly on the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill.

The Committee would also be grateful if you could assure us that Defra has adequate staffing resources to successfully fulfil its Business Plan for the current financial year, and the basis for your assessment.

### **Post-Implementation Reviews (PIRs)**

As you will be aware, the National Audit Office (NAO) published its report "Regulating to achieve environmental outcomes" on 21 April. The report highlighted that Defra had a backlog of 63 PIRs as at March 2023. The NAO stated that:

"While PIRs are not the only way to determine what works, this [backlog] limits its insight into how well regulation is working or the burden it is placing on business [...] Until it has carried out these reviews, Defra lacks an important source of evidence for whether regulation is meeting its objectives and the impact it is having".

You will be aware that the Office for Environmental Protection's (OEP) March 2023 report said Defra's PIR backlog was "regrettable" and that "these failures undermine Government's accountability to Parliament and wider scrutiny of how well environmental laws are being implemented".

We note the Permanent Secretary's recent letters of 12 December 2022 and 28 March 2023 in which she highlighted that action was being taken.

Please could you set out to the Committee the additional resources that are being directed to this work, and the level of prioritisation that you are directing officials to take in completing the PIRs to the revised timetable as stated in the letter of 28 March.

### **Full resumption of pork exports to China**

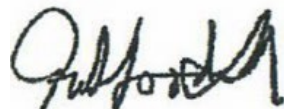
Some of our biggest pig abattoirs remain unable to export to the key Chinese market following the voluntary surrender of their licences in 2020 after outbreaks of covid-19. I understand there the plants have fulfilled all the requests made by the General Administration Customs China (GACC) necessary for the suspensions to be lifted. I also believe that there

has been some positive dialogue recently, and note that China relaxed all covid-19 restrictions on 8 January 2023.

Given the challenges facing the pig sector – as highlighted by Defra and the Devolved Administrations’ ongoing UK-wide review of pig supply chain – and the risk that Chinese businesses seek contracts with exporters from elsewhere, the Committee calls on Defra to lead a rapid resolution by the UK Government to this issue, including engagement with the GACC, in order to restore the pre-pandemic *status quo* for the licencing of UK pork exports. The Committee requests that you set out the steps the Government plans to take in this regard.

I would be grateful if you could reply by 8 May.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R Goodwill', is centered on the page.

**Rt Hon Sir Robert Goodwill MP**  
**Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee**