



**Environment, Food  
and Rural Affairs  
Committee**

Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP  
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
London  
*By email*

25 April 2024

Dear Secretary of State,

**Sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) border controls**

In August 2023, the Government set out “three major milestones” for the implementation of the Border Target Operating Model (BTOM): 31 January, 30 April and 31 October 2024. I am writing to seek clarity on the ongoing validity of this timeline and to encourage more timely and transparent communication with stakeholders regarding your approach to SPS import checks.

Reporting by the Financial Times on 18 April suggested that the 30 April milestone will not be implemented in the manner or timeframe that stakeholders and this Committee expected. The measures expected to be introduced on 30 April are set out in the BTOM guidance:

- The introduction of documentary and risk-based identity and physical checks on medium risk animal products, plants, plant products and high risk food and feed of non-animal origin from the EU.
- Existing inspections of high risk plants/plant products from the EU will move from destination to Border Control Posts.
- [...] the removal of health certification and routine checks on low risk animal products, plants, plant products from non-EU countries as well as reduction in physical and identity check levels on medium-risk animal products from non-EU countries.

A Defra presentation – seen by the Financial Times – reportedly suggests that “new border systems will not be fully ready” by 30 April and therefore that queues and delays are predicted if the planned SPS checks on imports are implemented. Although your Department’s response to the media reports affirms that checks will

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commence from 30 April, the Defra presentation reportedly states that you plan to initially set the rate of checks to zero per cent for all commodity groups. We are concerned that this is a sixth delay to the implementation of SPS import checks in all but name.

Proportionate and robust SPS import controls are imperative to preventing outbreaks of pests and diseases that threaten human, animal and plant health. We recently spoke to the Chief Veterinary Officer about the "constant and ongoing challenge on our doorstep" with regards to diseases such as African swine fever and the high risk of disease incursion from imports.

There is broad consensus that a clearly communicated, phased implementation of SPS checks with distinct, achievable milestones is a strategic and pragmatic approach to change. We are concerned that your approach, if as reported, has resulted from poor planning and delivery of the Model.

Despite the Government's statements to the contrary, it is clear that ports and businesses are facing further uncertainty and have once again expressed their confusion and frustration over the delivery of these essential border controls. It is essential that Defra urgently takes steps to communicate the changed arrangements to businesses and the public to build confidence in our incoming border controls and reduce disruption.

As you will be aware, stakeholders' concerns about inconsistent messaging and last-minute announcements from your Department pre-date the Financial Times' reporting on 18 April. In our accountability hearing with you on 26 March, my Committee highlighted ports' frustrations that they had still not received information from Defra that is essential to their preparation for the April phase of the BTOM. This included information regarding requirements for border control post staffing, opening hours and pricing regimes. The common user charge was subsequently published on 3 April, only 27 days before its introduction.

We asked – given these challenges – if you were confident that ports would be ready for the 30 April checks. The Permanent Secretary said that the Government has "a lot of confidence that [ports] will have the capacity in place to manage the checks that we bring in in April." You said that "the intention in April is to take a light-touch approach as we bed it in." The hearing would have been an ideal opportunity to outline any revised plans for a "graduated" approach to the April measures. If the decision was taken after this point, given our ongoing interest in the matter and your Department's commitment to provide monthly updates on the Model's implementation, my Committee would expect to have been informed about these changes at the earliest opportunity.

In the absence of that update, we would appreciate a response to the below questions at your earliest convenience, and no later than Tuesday 30 April. In responding we hope that concerned stakeholders and members of the public will benefit from an improved awareness of, and confidence in, the level of biosecurity at our borders.

**I would be grateful if you could write to my Committee in answer to the following questions:**

- What will a “graduated” or “light touch” approach to the 30 April measures look like in practice?
- What percentage of new SPS checks on imports will take place from 30 April in each risk category, and when will the measures be scaled up to their intended capacity? Will the volume of checks vary between points of entry?
- What barriers remain to implementing any or all checks on 30 April?
- What is the status of the Sevington inland border facility, and will it be operational from 30 April?
- What impact will any delays to the expected checks have on goods being imported from non-EU countries?

**In the interest of resolving misunderstanding between stakeholders and the Department, please also provide:**

- A detailed breakdown of your phased approach to BTOM implementation, which can be shared with ports and businesses; and
- A copy of the presentation your Department presented to ports and seen by the Financial Times.

Given the immediacy of this issue, my Committee would be grateful to receive a response to these questions and requests by 30 April.

As noted above, in June 2023, your Department [committed](#) to providing monthly updates on progress with delivering the controls set out in the BTOM. We have received one such update (in [October 2023](#)). At this critical stage of the implementation process, I ask that Defra recommits to providing monthly updates in writing starting from 1 June for the remainder of 2024.

Yours sincerely,



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