

Committee of Public Accounts

Resilience to threats from animal disease

Fifty-Second Report of Session 2024–26

HC 885

Committee of Public Accounts

The Committee of Public Accounts is appointed by the House of Commons to examine “the accounts showing the appropriation of the sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure, and of such other accounts laid before Parliament as the committee may think fit” (Standing Order No.148)

Current membership

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown](#) (Conservative; North Cotswolds) (Chair)

[Mr Clive Betts](#) (Labour; Sheffield South East)

[Anna Dixon](#) (Labour; Shipley)

[Rachel Gilmour](#) (Liberal Democrat; Tiverton and Minehead)

[Sarah Green](#) (Liberal Democrat; Chesham and Amersham)

[Sarah Hall](#) (Labour; Warrington South)

[Lloyd Hatton](#) (Labour; South Dorset)

[Chris Kane](#) (Labour; Stirling and Strathallan)

[Rupert Lowe](#) (Independent; Great Yarmouth)

[Catherine McKinnell](#) (Labour; Newcastle upon Tyne North)

[Sarah Olney](#) (Liberal Democrat; Richmond Park)

[Tristan Osborne](#) (Labour; Chatham and Aylesford)

[Michael Payne](#) (Labour; Gedling)

[Oliver Ryan](#) (Labour; Burnley)

[Blake Stephenson](#) (Conservative; Mid Bedfordshire)

[Dan Tomlinson](#) (Labour; Chipping Barnet)

Powers

Powers of the Committee of Public Accounts are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No.148. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

This Report, together with formal minutes relating to the Report, was Ordered by the House of Commons, on 20 October 2025, to be printed. It was published on 5 November 2025 by authority of the House of Commons. © Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2025.

This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament Licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/copyright.

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/pac and in print by Order of the House.

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Committee of Public Accounts, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 8480; the Committee's email address is pubaccom@parliament.uk. You can follow the Committee on X (formerly Twitter) using [@CommonsPAC](https://twitter.com/CommonsPAC).

Contents

Summary	1
Conclusions and recommendations	2
1 Preparedness for a major animal disease outbreak	7
Introduction	7
Preparedness for the most severe outbreaks	8
Vet vacancies	10
Surveillance activities	10
APHA's systems and processes	11
2 Strengthening long-term resilience to animal diseases	13
National Biosecurity Centre at Weybridge	13
Livestock tracing	14
Illegal meat imports	15
Animal vaccines	15
Long-term strategy	16
Formal minutes	18
Witnesses	19
Published written evidence	20
List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament	21

Summary

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (the Department) and the Animal & Plant Health Agency (APHA) have worked hard to manage medium-severity animal disease outbreaks over recent years, but are not adequately prepared for the most severe—or more serious concurrent—outbreaks. Responding to recent outbreaks has resulted in less focus on surveillance activities and updating control strategies for high-risk diseases. APHA has also not done enough to address challenges recruiting and retaining vets.

APHA urgently needs to modernise its working practices, with paper-based systems remaining far too common. Modernisation would allow APHA to respond more efficiently and effectively to outbreaks, and to better balance this with other work such as preparing for future outbreaks. Despite £62.8 million of additional funding for modernisation over the period to 2029–30, APHA still cannot commit to being paperless by the end of this period.

To continue redeveloping the National Biosecurity Centre at Weybridge, the government has committed £1 billion over the Spending Review period 2025–26 to 2029–30. The Department and APHA must manage significant interim risks of failure as facilities age, to ensure Weybridge remains operational in the 10 years before completion. The Department is also investing in a multi-species livestock tracing system, but progress is extremely slow. After more than a decade, UK animal tracing remains fragmented and reliant on creaking systems. The Department does not expect to have a full multi-species system completed until winter 2027 and could not confirm to us if this would be fully integrated across the devolved administrations.

Illegally imported meat poses a significant and growing threat for introducing new animal diseases. Seizures of illegal meat at Dover increased fifty-five-fold from January 2023 to January 2025. Dover Port Health Authority (DPHA) currently only receives funding to allow it to complete proactive illegal meat checks 20% of the time.

Despite all these challenges, the Department does not have a long-term strategy to address the increasing risk of animal diseases, nor does it have a strategy to address the lack of animal vaccine availability. We are concerned about the future efficacy of policy changes for managing Bovine TB. The badger cull, which we understand seems to have been effective in reducing Bovine TB, has been largely terminated. Yet, a new cattle vaccine seems to be years away. This hiatus leaves farmers in a very difficult position with the prospect of TB reactors becoming worse again.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The Department and APHA are not adequately prepared for the most severe—or more serious concurrent—animal disease outbreaks.

Over recent years the Department and APHA have been in a state of semi-permanent response to medium-severity outbreaks of avian influenza (also known as bird flu) and bluetongue virus, and have worked hard to manage these outbreaks. This has diverted resources away from other work to prepare for future outbreaks, such as updating specific control strategies for high-risk diseases. The Department and APHA acknowledge that responding to the most severe disease outbreak, or more serious concurrent outbreaks, would be extremely stretching, despite the potential ability to call on help from other departments and nations. Local capacity is also a concern, with 27% of local resilience forums not confident in their outbreak capabilities. The government is planning to test its preparedness to respond to outbreaks with two major exercises during 2025.

RECOMMENDATION

The Department and APHA must act now to improve preparedness for a major outbreak by:

- a.** Updating all specific exotic disease control strategies over the next year.
- b.** Working with local resilience forums to understand barriers to preparedness, and provide support to overcome these.
- c.** Using upcoming exercises to fully evaluate the UK's preparedness for severe outbreaks, including the scenario where the response becomes overwhelmed.

2. Not enough is being done to tackle the high level of vet vacancies within APHA, which limits its ability to respond to an outbreak.

APHA struggles to recruit and retain sufficient vets. APHA's vet vacancy rate fluctuates—it was 20% in April 2025, but it had fallen to 15% in September 2025. The reasons for difficulties recruiting and retaining government vets are not unique to APHA, or the UK. Major factors include: mental health issues relating to activities such as culling animals; pay and conditions; and

working hours. APHA has introduced several strategies to improve the situation such as specialist pay provisions and mental health support, but recognises it needs to do more to attract and retain vets. The Department is considering updating the Veterinary Surgeons Act to enable other professionals, such as trained veterinary nurses, to undertake work under vet supervision.

RECOMMENDATION

APHA should in the next year produce a veterinary workforce strategy to address vet vacancies. This should set out its understanding of the underlying issues, and how it will make most effective use of tools/ solutions including: using other technical staff; learning from previous schemes; and how other countries are approaching this issue.

- 3. APHA's surveillance activities to detect disease outbreaks early are not sufficiently comprehensive or risk-based.** Surveillance work, or 'eyes and ears on the ground', is vital to help detect new and re-emerging disease threats quickly and stop their spread. But APHA's focus on responding to current outbreaks has resulted in a reduction in some of its surveillance activities. The Department is also concerned about the capacity of local authority trading standards officers to undertake routine surveillance work. APHA is starting the process of making its surveillance work more risk-based, efficient and supported by appropriate management information, but this will take several years. Following EU exit, the UK lost access to the EU's animal diseases intelligence system which provided almost real-time intelligence on animal diseases within the EU. This has resulted in the UK getting information more slowly and in less detail.

RECOMMENDATION

To ensure its surveillance activities provide the maximum benefits from the resources available, APHA should set out in the next six months a clear plan and milestones for delivering the updates to its surveillance processes that are needed to ensure they are risk-based, efficient and supported by good management information.

- 4. APHA has not made fast enough progress with modernising its systems and processes, to allow it to better deploy its resources.** Many of APHA's systems and processes are outdated and inefficient. For example, its vets in the field must complete paper-based forms, which are scanned and manually deciphered before being added to a database. This results in slower response and more risk of errors. Vital modernisation has been delayed by APHA's focus on responding to recent outbreaks. The Department has confirmed funding of £62.8 million over the period to 2029–30 for APHA to undertake a modernisation programme.

However, APHA will still not be fully paperless by the end of this period. By comparison, APHA's bee and plant inspectors are now using digital technology, with it reporting efficiencies of about 30% as a result.

RECOMMENDATION

APHA should ensure that modernising its systems and processes for animal diseases is a key strategic objective. This needs to be supported by a clear delivery plan and milestones for when new services will be phased in and when the transformation will be completed.

- 5. The Department has secured vital funding for the National Biosecurity Centre at Weybridge, but must manage significant interim risks until the redevelopment is completed in 10 years.** The Weybridge facility is a critical national asset for managing threats from animal diseases but is in poor condition with ageing buildings that need major repair and replacement. The government committed £1 billion over the spending review period 2025–26 to 2029–30 to continue the redevelopment of Weybridge. The overall redevelopment programme will be completed in 2034–35 at a total estimated cost of £2.8 billion. APHA has contingency plans to ensure operations are maintained over the 10 years until the redevelopment is completed. It also has the use of its regional laboratories and other laboratories such as the Pirbright Institute. However, APHA acknowledges that managing this process will become more difficult as the Weybridge facility continues to age. Any major failure at Weybridge could mean that APHA is unable to deliver its emergency response during an animal disease outbreak.

RECOMMENDATION

Given the strategic importance of the National Biosecurity Centre redevelopment at Weybridge, the Department should publish a 10-year plan against which it should provide the Committee with an annual update on its progress. This should include how interim risks are being managed and mitigated, and any key risks to delivering the redevelopment programme on time and budget.

- 6. The Department's progress delivering a multi-species livestock tracing system has been extremely slow and may not provide an integrated system for the UK.** Tracing animal movements quickly—to understand where disease may have spread—is key in responding effectively to contain an outbreak. Current UK animal tracing is fragmented, with different systems for different species, and relies on very old and fragile systems. The Department first started work to create a digital, multi-species, UK-wide tracing system in 2013. The original concept of using an off-the-shelf solution for a single species and adapting that

for multiple species was flawed, and the plans needed to be reset. Despite spending £181 million from 2019 to March 2025, the Department does not expect to have an integrated system completed until winter 2027. Animal diseases do not respect national borders, but the Department could not confirm to us if its new system would be fully integrated across the devolved administrations.

RECOMMENDATION

The Department should ensure that progress against its revised timetable is maintained, and that its approach to developing its multi-species livestock tracing system is fully aligned across all devolved administrations.

- 7. Controls at the border to prevent a new disease arriving in the UK via illegal meat imports are insufficient to the level of risk.** Dover Port Health Authority (DPHA) reported a fifty-five-fold increase in the seizures of illegal meat imports from January 2023 to January 2025. The Department is not clear whether this is due to an increase in actual imports, or better surveillance and enforcement activities. The Department provides DPHA with some funding to complete proactive illegal meat checks, but this only allows DPHA to undertake this work for 20% of the time. Future funding allocations are subject to the Department's upcoming business planning processes. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has also raised several concerns about the increase in illegal meat imports.

RECOMMENDATION

The Department should:

- a.** undertake research to understand the reasons for the apparent increase in illegal meat imports to the UK to inform future policy and funding decisions; and
- b.** when determining the resources made available to DPHA and Border Force at Dover to tackle illegal meat imports, weigh this against the significant costs a major disease outbreak could have if introduced through the port of Dover.
- c.** The Department should set out what more can be done to educate travellers not to bring illegal food products into the UK and that high fines are imposed on those that do.

- 8. The Department does not have a strategy to tackle shortages in animal vaccines.** Vaccines play an important role in preventative health and disease control programmes in animals, including managing antimicrobial resistance. However, there have increasingly been

supply shortages of animal vaccines in the past two years, affected by global market issues and limited incentives for the private sector. We are concerned about the lack of a UK strategy to address these problems and ensure vaccines are available. In September 2025, the Veterinary Medicines Directorate published a Statement of Intent on UK Veterinary Vaccine Availability. We are also concerned about the future efficacy of policy changes for managing Bovine TB. The badger cull, which we understand seems to have been effective in reducing Bovine TB, has been largely terminated. Yet, a new cattle vaccine seems to be years away. This hiatus leaves farmers in a very difficult position with the prospect of TB reactors becoming worse again.

RECOMMENDATION

Building on the Veterinary Medicines Directorate's Statement of Intent, the Department should, working with the Veterinary Medicines Directorate and other stakeholders, develop over the next year a long-term strategy and plan for securing adequate animal vaccine supply to the UK.

- 9. The Department does not have an overarching long-term strategy for strengthening resilience to the increasing risk from animal diseases.** The Department has several strategic programmes underway to strengthen resilience to animal diseases, including the redevelopment of the National Biosecurity Centre and developing an integrated animal tracing system. However, there is no overarching strategy and plan which brings this work together in a comprehensive and integrated way. The Department plans to develop such a strategy over the next 18 months.

RECOMMENDATION

The Department should provide the Committee with an update in 18 months' time on its progress in developing a long-term strategy for animal diseases. The strategy should be sufficiently comprehensive and reflect interdependencies with the other areas of the Department's work, such as on plant health and honeybees.

1 Preparedness for a major animal disease outbreak

Introduction

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), we took evidence from the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (the Department) and the Animal & Plant Health Agency (APHA) on the resilience to threats from animal diseases.¹
2. Animal disease outbreaks are a significant threat to the UK's farming and food security, to human health, to rural communities, to wildlife and to the economy and trade. Outbreaks can have a significant economic cost. The major foot and mouth disease outbreak of 2001 cost the public and private sectors an estimated £5.2 billion and £8.6 billion, respectively (in 2023–24 prices). The government's 2025 National Risk Register (NRR) includes four animal disease outbreaks that would have significant impacts.²
3. Animal diseases are categorised as exotic (not normally present in the UK, such as foot and mouth disease) or endemic (already present in the UK, such as bovine tuberculosis (TB)). Factors such as climate change and antimicrobial resistance are likely to increase the rates of endemic diseases and the frequency and variety of exotic disease outbreaks.³
4. The Department is responsible for providing policy, guidance and funding to maintain and strengthen animal disease resilience in England. APHA, an executive agency of the Department, has the lead operational role. Local authorities also have an important role, both in responding to outbreaks and reducing the risk of outbreaks happening. The management of animal diseases is a devolved issue in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, although some aspects such as border controls are GB-wide.⁴

1 C&AG's Report, [Resilience to animal diseases](#), 4 June 2025

2 C&AG's Report, paras 1-2

3 C&AG's Report, para 2

4 C&AG's Report, para 3

5. We also received written submissions from a range of different sources including the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture, trade representative bodies, voluntary sector organisations, academics and researchers as well as wider government stakeholders. A full list of the written evidence we received is available on the inquiry page of the Committee’s website.⁵ Particular issues and concerns drawn to our attention included:

- the slow pace of progress in implementing the animal-related aspects of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023;
- the important role played by other organisations in promoting resilience to animal disease threats for example the Pirbright Institute, the Roslin Institute and the Moredun Research Institute, and the importance of coordination across organisations and devolved administrations;
- the potential to strengthen the links between animal health and public health by adopting a ‘One Health’ approach;
- the important role played by the pest control industry in animal disease resilience; and
- the specific vulnerability of the pig industry to African Swine Fever.

Preparedness for the most severe outbreaks

6. The Department and APHA told us that they have been in semi-permanent response mode for several years. The current outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (also known as bird flu—a highly contagious, viral disease which can cause severe illness and high mortality rates in domestic and wild birds) started in November 2020 with the current outbreak of bluetongue (a non-contagious, viral disease spread by infected biting midges which can cause relatively high levels of mortality in sheep flocks with lower rates in cattle) starting in August 2024. The Department welcomed the C&AG’s report which acknowledges that the Department and APHA have worked hard to manage these outbreaks.⁶
7. The Department stated that its exotic diseases contingency plan is updated every year, but acknowledged that several of its specific disease control strategies have not been updated recently due to the focus on

5 Committee of Public Accounts, [Resilience to threats from animal diseases](#)
[Written evidence](#)

6 Q 1; C&AG’s report Figure 5

responding to outbreaks. Its foot and mouth disease control strategy was updated in July 2025 and the Department confirmed it will have a programme to update other high-risk disease strategies over the next 18 months and that it has put more resources into its policy team to do this.⁷

8. The Department and APHA said that responding to the most severe disease outbreak, or serious concurrent outbreaks would be extremely stretching.⁸ As part of the response to such outbreaks, the Department explained that it would be able to call on several agreements for surge capacity. These include surge resourcing and mutual aid protocols within the Department, international health emergency reserve agreements. The Department told us it would ultimately have recourse to the ‘military aid to the civil authorities’ (MACA) regime.⁹
9. At a local level, Local resilience forums (LRFs) are multi-agency partnerships made up of representatives from local public services set up to plan and respond to emergencies. Representatives include emergency services, local authorities, the NHS, the Environment Agency and others.¹⁰ APHA explained that capability assessments were undertaken with local resilience forums across England earlier in 2025. These showed that 73% of local resilience forums were generally confident in their animal disease outbreak capabilities. However, we are concerned that 27% are not confident. The Department said that local resilience forums cited training and practising for outbreaks as the main gaps in the capability assessments.¹¹
10. The government is planning to test its preparedness to respond to outbreaks with two major exercises during 2025. Exercise Pegasus, which is a whole-of-government exercise led by the Department of Health and Social Care alongside the Cabinet Office, will take place this autumn to test preparedness for a pandemic of a zoonotic disease (one that can transfer from animals to humans). The Department confirmed it will publish a post-Exercise report. This will be followed by Exercise Aspen, which will specifically test preparedness for a foot and mouth disease outbreak.¹²

7 Qq 19-21

8 Q 1

9 Qq 1, 22

10 Cabinet Office, [Local resilience forums: contact details](#)

11 Q 25

12 Qq 4, 25; [Letter from Defra to Committee](#), 18 September 2025

Vet vacancies

11. In 2023–24, APHA’s peak vacancy rate for vets was 24% (108 full-time equivalent staff) which had fallen to 20% (99 full-time equivalent staff) in April 2025.¹³ In correspondence received after the evidence session the Department stated that it has a target of approximately 470 full-time equivalent vet roles within APHA with a current vacancy rate of around 15% (9% excluding jobs under offer).¹⁴
12. APHA explained that difficulties in recruiting and retaining government vets are not unique to APHA or the UK. Key factors include: mental health issues relating to activities such as culling animals; pay and conditions; and working hours. APHA set out a number of strategies it has put in place to improve recruitment and retention of vets, including using its specialist pay provision to increase the pay of vets and introducing mental health and wellbeing support for its vets in the field. APHA recognised it needs to do more and has recently completed a national listening exercise with its staff, including vets, on understanding health, safety, mental wellbeing and what more it can do to support staff. The Department highlighted that The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the British Veterinary Association are doing work on recruitment and retention, and APHA said that, for vets in general, 44% leave the profession in the first four years of their service post-qualification.¹⁵
13. The Department set out the work it is looking to do, with support from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, to update the Veterinary Surgeons Act which has not been updated for a long time. Reforming the Act could allow other professionals, such as trained veterinary nurses, to do the same range of work as a vet under the supervision of a vet.¹⁶

Surveillance activities

14. Surveillance work, or ‘eyes and ears on the ground’, is vital to help detect new and re-emerging disease threats quickly and stop their spread. The Department’s and APHA’s approach to managing disease outbreaks is through a ‘surge capacity’ resourcing model, where staff switch priority from business-as-usual activities to outbreak response. Responding to recent outbreaks has meant reduced capacity to undertake important

13 C&AG’s Report, para 3.7

14 Q 9; [Letter from Defra to Committee](#), 18 September 2025

15 Qq 6–8

16 Qq 8, 13

work such as disease surveillance activities. In 2022–23, APHA missed its corporate key performance targets for visiting animal markets and inspecting animal by-products.¹⁷

15. APHA pointed out that its current surveillance activities are not risk-based or efficient, which results in APHA returning to a location on a regular basis even though it finds no issues. APHA is starting work to move to a more risk-based, intelligence-led surveillance regime and to design its management information to support this. APHA stated that this is not a quick fix and that it will take several years to complete the work.¹⁸
16. The Department set out concerns it has about the capacity of local authority trading standards officers to undertake routine surveillance activities. While local authorities have stepped up to provide extra resources during recent outbreaks, capacity to undertake business-as-usual activities such as visiting livestock markets has reduced over the last 15 years.¹⁹ Work on animal diseases is competing with other local authority priorities and statutory responsibilities where there is limited capacity and financial resource.²⁰
17. The Department explained that following EU exit, the UK lost access to the EU’s Animal Diseases Information System which provided almost real-time intelligence on EU animal diseases. While the UK has access to an international intelligence system provided by the World Organisation for Animal Health, information is received in slower time and less detail compared to the EU system. The Department stated that it was still able to react quickly to the case of foot and mouth disease in Germany based in informal intelligence.²¹

APHA’s systems and processes

18. APHA acknowledged that its systems and processes are outdated and require modernisation. For example, its vets in the field must complete paper-based forms, which are scanned and manually deciphered before being added to a database. APHA also cited the example of having 36 different email addresses through which people can contact APHA. This causes inefficiency, slower responses and increases the risk of error. APHA said that work to modernise its systems had been delayed by the need to prioritise resources to respond to recent animal disease outbreaks.

17 C&AG’s Report, paras 22, 2.8-2.9

18 Qq 35-36

19 Qq 37-38

20 C&AG’s report, para 2.10

21 Qq 40-42; C&AG’s report, para 1.5

APHA stated that a key challenge it faces will be to ensure that, regardless of outbreaks, it ringfences people and resources to ensure its systems and processes are modernised.²²

19. APHA has established its Delivering Sustainable Futures programme as the main programme to modernise its systems and has initially started on smaller projects relating to plant health and bees. Its plant and bee inspectors in the field now have digital technology which allows them to report in real-time. APHA said that this has resulted in efficiencies of around 30%. APHA is aiming to roll this technology out to its animal inspectors in 2026. The Department confirmed funding of £62.8 million over the period to 2029–30 to support APHA’s modernisation programme. APHA stated that it would not be fully paperless in five years’ time as the programme had to cover a wide range of its systems, and that it needed to undertake a fundamental assessment of the information it is collecting and redesign its systems to support these requirements.²³

22 Qq 14-15

23 Qq 14-18

2 Strengthening long-term resilience to animal diseases

National Biosecurity Centre at Weybridge

- 20.** The National Biosecurity Centre at Weybridge is the UK's primary science laboratory capability for managing threats from animal diseases. It contains 98% of APHA's high-containment laboratories. The site is in poor condition, with ageing buildings that need major repair and replacement.²⁴ While acknowledging the critical importance of Weybridge, the Department highlighted that it does have other laboratory capacity to draw on such as the Pirbright Institute and APHA's regional laboratories.²⁵ However, any major failure at Weybridge could have potentially significant impacts on the UK. For example, APHA may not be able to deliver its emergency response during an animal disease outbreak.²⁶
- 21.** In 2017, the Department started a programme to redevelop Weybridge. In the 2025 Spending Review, the government committed £1 billion over the period 2025–26 to 2029–30 to continue the redevelopment, with a total estimated cost of £2.8 billion.²⁷ In correspondence received after our evidence session, the Department stated that the overall redevelopment programme will be completed in 2034–35, with interim laboratory facilities completed in 2027 and 2028 to allow operations to continue while the new National Biosecurity Centre is built.²⁸ The Department said that managing the risk of failure during the interim 10-year period was a very high priority. APHA explained that it has contingency plans in place to deal with any outages at the site and also to enable it to move activities around as the redevelopment continues. However, APHA acknowledged that managing this process will become increasingly difficult as the facilities at Weybridge continue to age and it could not guarantee that operations would remain at Weybridge for the entirety of the 10-year period.²⁹

24 C&AG's Report, paras 17, 3.10

25 Q 26

26 C&AG's Report, para 3.10

27 Q 28; C&AG's report, para 17

28 [Letter from Defra to Committee](#), 18 September 2025

29 Qq 26, 28-30

Livestock tracing

- 22.** Livestock movements in England are significant. For example, there are around 20 million movements of sheep to or from different farms, livestock markets, collection centres, and to abattoirs each year. These movements increase the risk of spreading disease. Being able to trace animal movements quickly is therefore key in responding quickly and effectively to contain an outbreak.³⁰ The Department set out that the current UK animal tracing is fragmented, with different systems for different species, and relies on very old and fragile systems.³¹
- 23.** The Department first started work to create a digital, multi-species, UK-wide tracing system in 2013 and acknowledged that it has been working on this for a long time. It explained that the original concept of using an off-the-shelf solution for a single species and adapting that for multiple species was not technically possible, and this required a significant reset of the programme around four or five years ago.³²
- 24.** Between 2019 and March 2025, the Department has spent £181 million on the programme and some services have been developed including a new sheep, goat and deer tracing service.³³ However, the Department does not expect to have a fully integrated system in place until winter 2027. It set out that further work is required on the sheep, goat and deer service to transfer it to the multi-species system. The cattle service will be added in 2026 and it expects the pig service to be added by winter 2027. Funding for this work is only confirmed to summer 2026 with a further business case required for funding beyond this.³⁴
- 25.** Animal diseases do not respect national borders, but the Department confirmed that implementing animal tracing systems is a devolved matter. The Department explained that its livestock tracing programme director meets regularly with the devolved administrations. However, it also highlighted that different decisions are being made. For example, Scotland had made a different choice of ear tag which is an important element of cattle tracing systems, and transition timetables are not aligned across the devolved administrations. The Department could not confirm to us if its new system would be fully integrated across the devolved administrations.³⁵

30 C&AG's report, para 3.14

31 Qq 43-44

32 Q 43; C&AG's report, para 3.15

33 C&AG's report, para 3.16

34 Qq 43-45;

35 Qq 46-48

Illegal meat imports

26. Illegally imported meat and animal products, which have not gone through checks to confirm they are disease-free and conform to UK health standards, pose a significant and growing threat for introducing new animal diseases, such as African swine fever. Dover Port Health Authority (DPHA) seized 22 tonnes of illegal meat in January 2025 compared with 0.4 tonnes in January 2023, a fifty-five-fold increase.³⁶ The Department told us that it was not sure whether this is due to an increase in actual imports, or better surveillance and enforcement activities, but it was concerned by the increase.³⁷
27. Port Health Authorities and Border Force are responsible for seizing illegal meat and animal product imports at ports.³⁸ The Department praised DPHA and Border Force for their work at Dover and confirmed that it has provided £9 million of funding to DPHA to support work on illegal meat imports.³⁹ However, DPHA's funding has only allowed it to undertake proactive illegal meat checks for 20% of the time, with the volume of meat being seized coming from less than 0.2% of inbound vehicles.⁴⁰ The Department stated that future funding for this work was subject to its internal business planning which is usually undertaken in the autumn with funding confirmed in January of each year.⁴¹
28. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's recent report on illegal meat imports also raised serious concerns about the threat from illegally imported meat. It highlighted that the authorities tasked with tackling illegal meat imports do not have the necessary leadership, resources and intelligence to do so effectively.⁴² We believe that the Department could do more to educate travellers not to bring in illegal food products into the UK and that high fines will result for those who break the rules.

Animal vaccines

29. Vaccines play an important role in preventative health and disease control programmes in animals, reducing disease incidence, and maintaining health and welfare. They also reduce the need for antibiotics, helping

36 C&AG's report, para 4.13

37 Q 51

38 C&AG's report, para 4.13

39 Q 51

40 C&AG's report, para 4.13

41 Q 54

42 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Biosecurity at the border: Britain's illegal meat crisis](#), HC 1296, 8 September 2025

combat antimicrobial resistance in animals. Limited availability of animal vaccines is a growing global issue which has become more acute in the last two years. Long-term issues include: production capacity at UK and EU sites; production capacity being diverted to human health; increased demand; and the challenging economics of vaccine manufacture.⁴³ We received a number of written submissions which highlighted the importance of vaccines as part of improving resilience to animal diseases and raised concerns over supply shortages and the lack of a coordinated vaccine strategy.⁴⁴

30. In September 2025, the Veterinary Medicines Directorate published a Statement of Intent on UK Veterinary Vaccine Availability. This sets out a framework for future cross-sector action to address the mismatch between supply and demand for existing veterinary vaccines and facilitate the pipeline of innovative products to address existing and emerging therapeutic gaps.⁴⁵ The Pirbright Institute highlighted the important work of The Centre for Veterinary Vaccine Innovation and Manufacturing. The Centre will support the development and deployment of vaccine technologies to combat neglected and emerging diseases of livestock, including zoonotic diseases that represent a threat to public health.⁴⁶
31. We are concerned about the future efficacy of policy changes for managing Bovine TB. The badger cull, which we understand seems to have been effective in reducing Bovine TB, has been largely terminated.⁴⁷ Yet, a new cattle vaccine seems to be years away.⁴⁸ This hiatus leaves farmers in a very difficult position with the prospect of TB reactors becoming worse again.

Long-term strategy

32. The Department said it is undertaking a range of strategic capability building work that will improve long-term resilience, including redeveloping the National Biosecurity Centre at Weybridge, developing a multi-species livestock tracing system, and modernising APHA's systems and processes. The Department recognised that there is no long-term strategy that brings all its work together in a comprehensive way and confirmed that it will be working on this over the next 18 months. The Department also explained

43 C&AG's report, paras 4.8-4.9

44 Dr Alexander Waller ([TAD0001](#)); The Pirbright Institute ([TAD0008](#)); Royal Society of Biology ([TAD0009](#)); Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) ([TAD0012](#)); British Veterinary Association ([TAD0013](#)), NFU ([TAD0015](#))

45 Veterinary Medicines Directorate, [Statement of Intent: UK Veterinary Vaccine Availability](#), 11 September 2025

46 The Pirbright Institute ([TAD0008](#))

47 [Letter from Defra to Committee](#), 18 September 2025

48 [Letter from Defra to Committee](#), 18 September 2025

that this will form part of a larger piece of work led by the Cabinet Office to strengthen the UK's resilience to a range of biosecurity threats across human, animal and plant health.⁴⁹

49 Qq 59-60

Formal minutes

Thursday 20 October 2025

Members present

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, in the Chair

Mr Clive Betts

Anna Dixon

Sarah Green

Sarah Hall

Chris Kane

Sarah Olney

Resilience to threats from animal disease

Draft Report (*Resilience to threats from animal disease*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 32 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fifty-Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned till Thursday 23 October at 9.30 a.m.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Thursday 4 September 2025

David Hill, Interim Permanent Secretary, Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs; **Emily Miles**, Director General for Food, Biosecurity & Trade, Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs; **Dr Richard Lewis**, Chief Executive, Animal and Plant Health Agency; **Professor Christine Middlemiss CB**, UK Chief Veterinary Officer, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Q1-63](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

TAD numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

1	APPG Science & Technology in Agriculture	TAD0003
2	Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board	TAD0012
3	British Pest Control Association	TAD0002
4	British Retail Consortium	TAD0010
5	British Veterinary Association (BVA)	TAD0013
6	Dover Port Health Authority	TAD0017
7	Faculty of Public Health	TAD0011
8	NFU	TAD0015
9	O'Mahony, Dr Kieran (Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences); and Whitehead, Mr Torny (Department of Geography, King's College London)	TAD0018
10	Pig Health and Welfare Council	TAD0007
11	Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST)	TAD0016
12	Royal Society of Biology	TAD0009
13	Tarlinton, Professor Rachael Eugenie (Professor of Veterinary Virology, University of Nottingham)	TAD0014
14	The British Equine Veterinary Association	TAD0019
15	The National Pig Association (NPA)	TAD0006
16	The Pirbright Institute	TAD0008
17	The Roslin Institute & Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh; and The Moredun Research Institute	TAD0005
18	Waller, Dr Alexander (Visiting Professor, American University of Sovereign Nations)	TAD0001

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2024–26

Number	Title	Reference
51st	The UK's F-35 stealth fighter capability	HC 1232
50th	Local bus services in England	HC 892
49th	Administration of the Civil Service Pension Scheme	HC 888
48th	Smarter delivery of public services	HC 889
47th	First Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts	HC 1300
46th	Improving local areas through developer funding	HC 886
45th	Improving family court services for children	HC 883
44th	Governance and decision-making on major projects	HC 642
43rd	MoD's oversight of Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations	HC 893
42nd	Water sector regulation	HC 824
41st	UK Research and Innovation	HC 826
40th	Collecting the right tax from wealthy individuals	HC 827
39th	Government's use of private finance for infrastructure	HC 821
38th	Increasing teacher numbers: Secondary and further education	HC 825
37th	Immigration: Skilled worker visas	HC 819
36th	Jobcentres	HC 823
35th	Introducing T Levels	HC 822
34th	Department for Business and Trade Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24	HC 818

Number	Title	Reference
33rd	Supporting the UK's priority industry sectors	HC 1070
32nd	The Future of the Equipment Plan	HC 716
31st	Local Government Financial Sustainability	HC 647
30th	Antimicrobial resistance: addressing the risks	HC 646
29th	Condition of Government property	HC 641
28th	Decommissioning Sellafield	HC 363
27th	Government's relationship with digital technology suppliers	HC 640
26th	Tackling Violence against Women and Girls	HC 644
25th	DHSC Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24	HC 639
24th	Government cyber resilience	HC 643
23rd	The cost of the tax system	HC 645
22nd	Government's support for biomass	HC 715
21st	Fixing NHS Dentistry	HC 648
20th	DCMS management of COVID-19 loans	HC 364
19th	Energy Bills Support	HC 511
18th	Use of AI in Government	HC 356
17th	The Remediation of Dangerous Cladding	HC 362
16th	Whole of Government Accounts 2022-23	HC 367
15th	Prison estate capacity	HC 366
14th	Public charge points for electric vehicles	HC 512
13th	Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children	HC 365
12th	Crown Court backlogs	HC 348
11th	Excess votes 2023-24	HC 719
10th	HS2: Update following the Northern leg cancellation	HC 357
9th	Tax evasion in the retail sector	HC 355
8th	Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage	HC 351
7th	Asylum accommodation: Home Office acquisition of former HMP Northeye	HC 361
6th	DWP Customer Service and Accounts 2023-24	HC 354
5th	NHS financial sustainability	HC 350
4th	Tackling homelessness	HC 352
3rd	HMRC Customer Service and Accounts	HC 347
2nd	Condition and maintenance of Local Roads in England	HC 349
1st	Support for children and young people with special educational needs	HC 353