



**Environment, Food
and Rural Affairs
Committee**

Tuesday, 24 March 2026

Paul Kissack
Permanent Secretary for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
London
By email

Subject: Work of the Department

Dear Paul

I would first like to place on record our thanks for your appearance, together with your officials, before the Committee on 3 March. We appreciated the opportunity to discuss a wide range of issues, with a particular focus on the work and capacity of your Department.

Home Office visa concession for sheep shearers

We were pleased to receive your post-session update confirming that, following our questions on the sheep shearer visa concession (Q511–Q515), the Home Office announced on 9 March that the concession will be renewed for a further year. This is very welcome news for sheep farmers and shearers.

However, we remain concerned that the extension is limited to a single year, raising the prospect of the same uncertainty arising again in twelve months. Could you therefore set out in your response to this letter the steps Defra is taking to secure long-term clarity and stability for the industry.

Departmental outward engagement

We welcome the Department's commitment to being more "outwardly focused and engaged" in its work on fisheries and the marine environment. You told us that, in designing the new Fisheries and Coastal Growth Fund, you aimed to "exhibit a way of working that is very external."

In light of this, could you please:

- Outline how this external engagement informed the development of the fund in its first year.
- In particular, specify which community groups and organisations contributed, and what lessons were learned from those discussions.
- Given the decision for the MMO to use the Fisheries and Seafood Scheme (FaSS) to deliver the fund in year one, detail the changes that were made to FaSS as a result of that external engagement.
- Set out any plans to continue external engagement in the design of the fund for year two. (Q516)

Border controls for SPS

We welcome the forthcoming visits by the Permanent Secretary and the Director General for EU Reset and Trade to Dover and Sevington. During our evidence session, it became clear that data relating to border controls remains inadequate. Witnesses were unable to confirm whether the incidence of “drive-bys” is increasing, and the Department appears to have limited information on follow-up action when vehicles fail to report to Sevington.

Could you therefore:

- Explain the steps the Department will take to improve the quality and completeness of this data and confirm it Defra can share a progress update in six months’ time with the Committee.” (transcript: Q521 /525/530)
- Provide the number of criminal prosecutions have there been for illegal imports of products of animal origin, whether through commercial channels or otherwise, since the BTOM was established. (Q527)

Staffing and efficiencies

In response to our questions on Defra’s resourcing, you referred to several areas of the Department where posts have been reduced as part of the reprioritisation towards Defra’s four priority areas, including the Northern Ireland team, animal welfare and biosecurity. Could you provide the Committee with a complete list of the teams that have lost staff or have been wound down, together with an explanation of why these areas were selected. (Q551)

You also highlighted Defra’s ongoing work to enhance its digital capabilities, remediate legacy systems, and explore new approaches, such as the use of AI, to improve efficiency (Q583). You mentioned that the Government Digital Service had rated several

services as excellent. Could you please confirm if Defra's digital capability and scope for innovation been subject to any independent review, and if so, confirm if thatc analysis will be shared with the Committee.

I would be grateful for your responses to the questions outlined above by Monday 13 April.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Alistair Carmichael." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Alistair" is written in a larger, more prominent script, and the last name "Carmichael" follows in a similar but slightly smaller script. A short horizontal line is drawn under the end of the last name.

Rt Hon Mr Alistair Carmichael MP
Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee