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Rt Hon Mr Alistair Carmichael MP

Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
Via email

From Paul Kissack
Permanent Secretary

13 April 2026

Dear Chair

Thank you for inviting me and my colleagues to appear before the Committee on 3 March to discuss the work of Defra.

Please find my responses to your follow-up questions set out below.

Home Office Visa Concession for Sheep Shearers

Visa concessions for sheep shearers are a matter for the Home Office. However, Defra shares your concerns about the potential animal health and welfare impact on sheep if the national flock cannot be sheared annually.

To that end, Defra continues to work with British Wool to encourage promotion, take-up and delivery of domestic shearing training programmes.

Despite this, it is likely that there will remain a gap in domestic capacity for shearers. This reflects the specialist and seasonal nature of the occupation, which makes long-term retention challenging.

In parallel with action to build domestic shearing capacity, Defra continues to work closely with the Home Office on access to overseas shearers (primarily from New Zealand and also Australia) to ensure the sector has access to the shearing capacity it needs.

More broadly, Defra works closely with the Home Office on a range of immigration matters in relation to farming, food and fisheries, including successfully negotiating a 5-year extension to the Seasonal Worker visa route for horticulture and poultry.

Departmental Outward Engagement

You asked which organisations Defra had engaged in developing the Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund and what we learned from that engagement. To maximise participation and get the broadest range of views, Defra engaged in several ways through the autumn and winter of 2025. Officials held six public webinars with a total of 166 participants. 53 respondents completed a public online survey. The team attended and engaged with Regional Fisheries Groups covering the North West, South and North East of England, and visited the ports of North Shields, Hartlepool,

Poole, Mudeford and Plymouth. Defra officials also conducted one-to-one conversations with stakeholder groups, other government departments, arm's-length bodies and national organisations. A list of organisations involved in those one-to-one conversations is set out at **Annex A**.

That engagement highlighted both challenges for the sector and opportunities. Key challenges included workforce and skills training, infrastructure and facilities, environmental pressures, regulation and administration, and economic and market pressures. Opportunities included fleet modernisation, sustainable fishing, environmental recovery, species diversification and new marine industries. In terms of scheme design, key feedback was that the fund needed to be up and running quickly, and be accessible to smaller-scale operators and community organisations as well as larger businesses.

You asked how we have built that feedback into the design of the scheme. Our year one funding priorities closely reflect the feedback we received. They are:

- labour and workforce development - support intended to help improve recruitment, retention and skills;
- enhanced health and safety - activity to promote safer working practices across the sector;
- community partnerships, including support for place-based pilots and initiatives that encourage local solutions by those who understand the issues;
- strengthened trade and market access - work to improve domestic and international sales and competitiveness; and
- infrastructure investment that supports long-term industry productivity and sustainability.

We also responded to feedback on the administration of funding. A key point we heard from stakeholders was the importance of certainty and early information to help applicants prepare for bids, particularly for smaller organisations. For this reason, in England we released early information on the fund in February this year. I am also pleased to confirm that the Fisheries and Seafood Scheme has now opened, through which we will begin to deliver funding in England in year one. Defra will continue to engage with industry and communities, and respond to their input. Defra has set up an expert advisory group to inform future funding priorities. That group includes representatives from the catching and aquaculture sectors, the recreational sector, eNGOs and universities. Wider engagement will continue, which could include workshops, further webinars and in-person engagement at ports.

Border Controls for SPS

I recognise the seriousness of the nonattendance issues you have highlighted. Defra is working with Ashford Port Health to address these issues by improving nonattendance data which are collected and shared. I also acknowledge the wider concerns the Committee has raised regarding the adequacy and quality of data on border controls. As previously set out in response to reports from the Committee, we have dedicated additional resources to address this issue.

At the end of March, both Emma Bourne, the Director General for EU Reset & Trade who has responsibility for Defra's borders delivery, and Emily Miles, the Director

General for Food, Farming & Biosecurity, visited the Sevington Border Control Post (BCP). They met with the council's Chief Executive and Corporate Director of Health and Wellbeing. They discussed these matters and agreed to continue to work together to improve the operational response.

Defra does not hold records relating to criminal prosecutions for illegal imports of products of animal origin. The ability to directly prosecute for these matters rests with local authorities and port health authorities. Border Force holds powers to stop, search and seize.

Defra officials are working with Border Force and Dover Port Health Authority to assess where enhanced enforcement activity would have the greatest impact. Additional funding will support operations at Dover, and additional resource will support a new Illegal Imports Improvement project within Defra. Through this work we will identify the full range of tools and reforms required to reduce the import of illegal meat and take robust action where it occurs. Emma and I are due to visit Dover next week to progress this further.

Staffing and Efficiencies

Reprioritisation

Defra continually adjusts its workforce to meet changing demands and Ministerial priorities, and reprioritisation is therefore a dynamic and ongoing process rather than a single event. For this reason, it is not possible to produce a definitive list of every team or activity that has been affected over time.

However, I can provide examples of where work has been paused, slowed or reshaped to focus resources on Defra's most resource intensive priorities, including EU reset and water reform.

- The International Strategy team was closed in March 2025, as it became clear that EU reset would be the main new international strategic priority for the department, enabling resource to be released for priority programmes.
- Staff from the EU and International Trade Directorate and the Northern Ireland Borders and Trade Programme (NIBT) were reprioritised into a new Trade Delivery Directorate within the EU Delivery Programme. NIBT was closed three months earlier than planned, allowing staff to be redeployed to EU reset or other priority areas of borders and trade.
- Elements of work have been slowed or paused in Animal and Plant Health and Welfare, such as One Health policy coordination and development of a new Plant Variety and Seeds strategy. Other work has been protected, such as our capacity to respond to disease outbreaks.
- Elements of regulatory reform have also been delayed or paused, including aspects of the UK Pesticides National Action Plan, and residual pro-active chemicals policy outside of the PFAS Action Plan and UK REACH Swiss Model reform (which have been protected). Defra will also provide reactive regulatory engagement with Ministers on pesticides regulatory decisions. This is to ensure sufficient capacity to deliver the new pesticides regulatory framework required under the SPS agreement with the EU.
- We have also reduced the size of our communications function.

Alongside decisions to pause or slow some areas of work, we also make regular decisions on how to deploy internal flexible resource onto key Ministerial priorities, notably including EU reset and water reform. Finally, we are always seeking ways of achieving more efficient ways of working – allowing us to progress work even with less resource available. We have, for example, increased the use of AI tools to deliver work more efficiently.

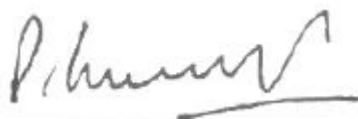
These decisions have inevitably created pressure in some areas, but they reflect deliberate choices to focus capacity on national priority programmes, whilst ensuring sufficient resource remains to deliver key Ministerial priorities and to meet our legal obligations.

Defra's digital capability

The recent National Audit Office report on Environmental Regulation recognised that Defra has one of the most significant legacy IT challenges in government and that Defra is making progress to address risks. The report welcomed the 2025 spending review settlement that included £300 million from 2026-27 to 2028-29, to replace legacy IT systems and invest in innovation and technology to improve front-line delivery, including in its arm's-length bodies.

Defra's work to modernise legacy systems has recently been assured by the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) with the final report due imminently. Initial feedback from the audit has been that "good progress has been made on the complex exercise of modernising legacy applications", with GIAA commending our work with the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology to standardise the use of AI to improve the pace, and reduce cost, of legacy modernisation. I would be happy to share the report and our plan for the recommendations with the Committee once finalised. An independent review of our digital capability by an ex-Chief Digital and Information Officer for Cabinet Office and Government Digital Services has recently concluded. The recommendations from this review will form the basis of Defra's Modernisation for Digital, Data, Technology and Security. I would be happy to share our plans with the Committee once they have been agreed within Defra.

Thank you again for inviting me and my colleagues to appear before the Committee.



Paul Kissack

Permanent Secretary for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Annex A: Organisations and Community Groups Engaged with on FCGF

As part of the FCGF stakeholder engagement, one-to-one conversations were conducted with the following stakeholder groups, other government departments, arm's-length bodies and national organisations:

- Angling Trust
- British Ports Association
- National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations (NFFO)
- The Plymouth Fishing and Seafood Association
- Lyme Bay Fishermen's Community Interest Company
- Shellfish Association of Great Britain (SAGB)
- The Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries (REAF)
- United Kingdom Association of Fish Producer Organisations (UKAFPO)
- Department for Transport (DfT)
- Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS)
- Seafish
- Natural England
- Marine Management Organisation (MMO)
- Association of Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities (AIFCAs)
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)
- Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA)
- Local Authorities and Neighbourhood Board Chairs from phase 1 areas of the Pride in Place programme