

Written evidence submitted by The Rural Payments Agency (RPA)(SHO109)

The role of RPA

1. The Rural Payments Agency (RPA) is an Executive Agency of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). We play an important role in delivering the department's food and farming policy by empowering agricultural and rural communities to create a better place to live.
2. In February 2021 the Agency published its 5 Year Strategy setting out how we would help agricultural and rural communities create a better place to live. It contained ambitions to achieve this by:
 - Delivering economic growth;
 - Delivering environmental sustainability;
 - Supporting agriculture;
 - Enabling innovation; and
 - Facilitating community activities.

RPA's Regulatory and Advice Service

3. RPA has an integrated assurance capability that is responsible for ensuring the highest standards of animal health and welfare; food quality and environmental outcomes are maintained whilst also delivering on our public funding obligations as set out within the Treasury's [Managing Public Money](#) guidelines.
4. In 2022-23, we were responsible for carrying out over 7,950 visits, across a wide range of food and farming grants, support schemes, and our regulatory function areas. In addition, we completed a further: -
 - 1,200 remote visits digitally.
 - 1,300 cattle identification and 2,300 sheep and goat inspection visits.
 - 261 Beef Carcass Compliance visits, 77 Video Imaging Analysis visits to beef plants operating this technology, as well as 133 Pig Carcass Grading visits, 173 Deadweight Price Reporting and 277 Beef Labelling Scheme inspections.
5. The development of the new domestically funded schemes now provides us with greater flexibility to intervene in line with need so that we can support farmers and land managers to achieve even better productivity; environmental and animal health outcomes while balancing our responsibilities for public money.
6. While site visits continue for control purposes (and to protect public funds), they have evolved to be more supportive including better signposting to information and guidance. For example, this approach helps farmers and landowners to achieve the environmental outcomes of schemes and deliver public goods for public benefit. Where issues are found, we are supporting farmers to fix what has gone wrong, wherever possible. For example, we have made changes to cross compliance visits to take a more supportive and collaborative approach in cases where there is no intent to cause harm.
7. The collation and maintenance of the Rural Land Register (RLR) for England is essential to support this work and the wider delivery of RPA's land-based schemes. The RLR captures land information such as boundaries and land covers for areas that are registered to receive funding from the land-based schemes, for example, arable or grassland. This geospatial information is accessible to farmers and land managers for their own land and additionally we publish several wider datasets including, the crop map for England.
8. Last year, we completed 131,099 digitisation transactions representing 105,025 published parcels (units of land) which supported the delivery of accurate and timely BPS, Countryside Stewardship (CS), Environmental Stewardship (ES) and Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) payments for our customers. We also continued with proactive land change detection activity, to support the accuracy of the RLR, with approximately 920,000 parcels checked last year. This activity is completed using the latest intelligence from aerial photography, satellite imagery and other geospatial datasets.

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9. We continue to innovate making use of geospatial data to meet our public funding obligations and support our customers. We are pioneering a new remote monitoring capability that uses new satellite imagery and other data, together with new analytical techniques, to proactively identify customers who may benefit from our further help. This enables us to direct advice and guidance activity to support farmers before issues arise. We are also developing in collaboration with industry, new approaches to on-site checks and new customer-led compliance activities. These include the use of geotagged photographic evidence which is uploaded through a mobile phone app, to further enhance the targeting of farm visits on a risk basis.

RPA's role in the future administration of ELM schemes

10. RPA has a wealth of operational delivery experience and is currently responsible for:
- Delivery of environmental land management schemes (SFI; CS; ES) maximising the opportunities for farmers to take up the schemes.
 - Collaboration with Defra to improve future iterations of the SFI, with aim for a full set of actions in place by 2025, and CS.
 - Delivery of a range of grants to help farmers invest in their businesses and increase their productivity (FETF and FTF).
 - Programme of assurance to ensure that farmers are supported, where there is no intent to harm.
 - Transforming our relationship with farmers on the ground in order to maximise their income and environmental outcomes.

11. We are currently testing opportunities to monitor actions required as part of SFI and CS which will help ensure the aims of the schemes are achieved. In the initial delivery of SFI, the use of satellite imagery and machine learning was used to identify areas of bare soil within parcels. The actions for Improved Grassland soils and Arable and Horticultural Soils required a certain percentage of green cover between December and February and by detecting possible fields with bare soils over the three-month period, it enabled us (via either our processors or field officers) to have constructive discussions with farmers about the results.

Rural Payments Agency
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