

Balmoral Agricultural Show, Northern Ireland

Future of Farming visit note

Date: Thursday 14 May 2026

Location: Balmoral Agricultural Show, Lisburn, Northern Ireland

Attendees

EFRA Committee

- Mr Alistair Carmichael MP (Chair)
- Sarah Bool MP
- Charlie Dewhurst MP
- Terry Jermy MP
- Josh Newbury MP

Purpose of the visit

As part of its ongoing thematic inquiries into the Future of farming, Food supply chain resilience and fairness, and Biosecurity and animal welfare, the Committee visited the Balmoral Agricultural Show in Belfast.

Whilst at the show, the Committee met with representatives from the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS), the British Veterinary Association (BVA), the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), and the Northern Ireland Assembly's Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs (AERA) Committee.

The purpose of attending the show was to hear from stakeholders about the issues for farmers and farm businesses in Northern Ireland, including in relation to veterinary medicines and vet access and a future Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) deal. Through the UFU, the Committee heard from representatives across different types of farming, and different holding sizes.

Meeting with the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU)

The Committee held informal roundtables with members of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU). The roundtables included attendees from different farming sectors and UFU commodity boards, as well as representatives from the Ulster Young Farmers Club. The discussion was wide ranging but aimed to focus on the most pressing issues for farmers in Northern Ireland.

The attendees were proud of their contribution to food security; they said that the six counties produced food that fed around 10% of the population of the UK, despite the area only containing around 3% of the UK population. Much of what they produce is exported to Great Britain.

Although the attendees were proud of the quality of the food they produced, they felt more needed to be done to level the playing field for British produce. They felt that the market was being flooded by cheaper food produced to lower standards than British food could legally be produced, and that British food needed to be protected in trade deals.

The attendees felt that supermarkets were good at selling British products in the fresh aisles, but highlighted the need for more British produce in pre-prepared products (e.g. supermarket sandwiches) and in other catering contexts. There was concern about misleading labelling – consumers may believe that they are buying Northern Ireland meat, but it has in fact only been processed in Northern Ireland.

Planning was a major issue, and roundtable attendees raised concerns about the impacts of planning issues on animal welfare. Various examples were given of where planning permission had been sought for a building which would have improved the animal welfare standard, but it had not been possible to get permission to build it. In particular, attendees highlighted challenges with having insufficient housing to separate TB infected animals.

More broadly, the issues with planning made it difficult for businesses to expand, diversify, and modernise. The lack of planners with rural expertise was highlighted as a particular barrier, and farmers in designated areas like AONBs or SACs felt it was near-impossible to get planning permission for agricultural buildings.

There was some discussion over whether there are enough abattoirs available to farmers. The attendees felt that they were able to access abattoirs with relative ease, but because they were dependent on the Republic of Ireland there was potential for issues in the event of an outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease, or another biosecurity issue.

Supply of veterinary medicines was another issue raised. One farmer said that the approach to medicine access was about “not what you want, but what you can get”. Many of the attendees had had experience of this, including being prescribed lamb vaccines for cattle, or having to buy larger medicine pack sizes and consequently increasing costs and waste. The farmers were concerned about the potential animal welfare issues which would arise because of this. Some of the requirements to achieve Red Tractor accreditation meant that farmers have limited options to avoid waste or share costs of medicines.

On the upcoming Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) deal, attendees felt that EU alignment on plant protection products would have little impact on their businesses, because they are already functionally following EU rules. In their view, farmers in Great Britain would be worse off under EU alignment. However, they felt that, if

farmers across the UK were limited in the way that farmers in Northern Ireland are, there was more chance that solutions would be found.

The farmers had mixed views on the real terms cut to the agricultural budget. Some felt that, as food producers, they needed to be able to be profitable and not dependent on the funding available, and therefore it wasn't a major issue. Others felt that the real-terms cut reflected a lack of interest or appreciation for farm businesses from government.

In terms of the specifics of the schemes available to them, many of the farmers felt that the schemes available to EU farmers, including in the Republic of Ireland, provided far more support. There are no payments for farms in LFAs in Northern Ireland, so upland farmers are particularly hard hit. Other attendees felt that the schemes available from the Northern Ireland Assembly were not financially worth it in terms of the time and money farmers are required to put in.

Bovine TB was another issue, and farmers in attendance were extremely concerned about wildlife to livestock spread. According to the attendees, tests of roadkill badgers show the rate of infection is rising, and the problem is getting worse. As a result, the cost to both the farmer and the taxpayer is rising.

The changes to inheritance tax for farm businesses were particularly hard felt in Northern Ireland, with roundtable attendees explaining that the extremely high land prices in the region meant that more farms would be impacted than in other areas of the UK, with an acre of land costing £15-30k. There was anecdotal evidence of farmers selling their land in Northern Ireland and buying farms in Scotland or England because they could get far more land for the same money.

The high price of land was identified as a major barrier to new entrants into farming. One attendee described the changes to APR and BPR as a "sledgehammer to crack a nut", but felt that something did need to be done to help new entrants be able to buy or rent land. Some of the attendees explained that retiring was not an option for many farmers, because without a pension or retirement fund they had no choice but to keep farming.

It was felt that, whether it was new entrants or successors, farming was becoming less appealing to young people due to rising costs and low profitability.

Other engagements

British Veterinary Association (BVA)

The Committee met with the BVA to hear about issues for the veterinary sector in Northern Ireland. The BVA has since written to the Committee with evidence on the issues.

Northern Ireland Assembly's Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs (AERA) Committee

The EFRA Committee met with the Northern Ireland Assembly's Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs (AERA) Committee, to discuss areas of shared interest.

Water pollution was an area both the EFRA and AERA Committees felt was pressing. In Northern Ireland, the pollution of Lough Neagh is a major issue. Because the lake is relatively shallow and warm, algal blooms are prevalent. The dredging of the lake is thought to exacerbate the problems. The need to address agricultural water pollution without maligning farmers who are producing food and complying with laws was something both Committees agreed on, and there were some comparisons to be found between Lough Neagh and the River Wye. AERA Committee noted that it was important to look at pollution at a catchment scale, and not assign blame to one sector unfairly.

One member of the AERA Committee had a private members bill on support for upland farms, which was of interest to EFRA Committee, who were about to launch a Call for Evidence on upland landscapes.