

The RSPCA's Response to the UK Government's Animal Welfare Strategy

Summary

The RSPCA welcomes the UK Government's animal welfare strategy, published in December 2025¹. We agree with much of the thorough roadmap for a wide range of issues.

We support the 70 recommendations for raising welfare standards across companion, farm animals, and wildlife. However, these must be completed in under four years. The Government must set a clear timetable with firm deadlines to avoid delays and inconsistent enforcement.

What MPs can do to help

We are calling for MPs to:

1. Urge the Government to publish clear timelines for delivery of all commitments in the Strategy.
2. Ask for an annual debate to review the state of animal welfare and progress on the Strategy.
3. Make sure enforcement of any new laws is effective by ensuring local authorities are properly resourced.
4. Continue to raise these issues in Parliament through debates, questions and meetings with Ministers. (If you require assistance with this please do get in touch with the RSPCA's public affairs team).

Companion Animals

Commitments in the Strategy cover dogs (responsible ownership/breeding), cats (breeding/pet sales), better sanctuary oversight, and banning electronic training devices. The RSPCA is particularly interested in two issues:

Animal Sanctuaries

Currently, establishing an Animal Welfare Establishment (AWE), known as a sanctuary, rescue, or rehoming centre, in England requires no licence or animal welfare experience. While many owners excel, the lack of regulation and oversight is a major concern. RSPCA officers frequently deal with situations where capacity, governance, and financial issues have escalated, causing animals to suffer. Regulation is needed to address these problems both for companion animals and wildlife.

→ The RSPCA supports the Government's plan to consult on this matter. It is vital that any resulting Regulations cover the rescue of both companion animals and wildlife.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/animal-welfare-strategy-for-england> (accessed 23.12.25)

Dog Breeding

Irresponsible dog breeding causes significant suffering, including inherited health problems and poor early socialisation. **Thousands of dogs endure debilitating conditions (like breathing, mobility, sleep, and eating difficulties) due to extreme physical traits such as flat muzzles, short legs, and excessive skin folds.**

The APPG for Animal Welfare (APGAW), with support from welfare organisations, such as the RSPCA, and the Royal Veterinary College, developed the **Innate Health Assessment (IHA) tool**². The IHA addresses **top conformation issues impacting welfare**, scoring dogs on 10 criteria to help breeders and local inspectors meet the 2018 Animal Welfare Licensing Regulations³.

→ **The RSPCA supports the Government's plan for a consultation on this topic and views the IHA tool as an effective method for enhancing dog health and welfare.**

Farm Animals

This section in the Strategy is highly detailed and comprehensive, shedding light on issues such as the culling of male chicks, which many may not be aware of. It contains several critical points that, if implemented, have the potential to significantly improve the welfare of millions of farm animals.

Cages and Crates

Millions of UK farmed animals suffer lifelong in confined, barren cages, unable to move freely or express natural behaviours. Public opposition to cages and farrowing crates is high (73% for hens, 67% for pigs)⁴. The RSPCA has proven change is not only possible but financially viable: RSPCA Assured standards prohibit farrowing crates and hen cages, with nearly 25% of UK pig production compliant. The scheme also mandates slower-growing chicken breeds, demonstrating that current common practices are unjustifiable.

Laying Hens

Around **10 million laying hens in the UK are still kept in 'enriched' cages**. These cages give hens only 9% more space than old battery cages. Each bird has usable space no larger than a single sheet of A4 paper.

→ **The RSPCA welcomes the Government's recently published consultation on this issue and will be responding to it. We urge the Government to act on this issue swiftly.**

Farrowing Crates

About 6 million piglets are born each year to mothers confined in farrowing crates. A farrowing crate is a narrow metal frame that allows a sow only to stand or lie down. She cannot turn around or walk. **Over 200,000 sows (60%) are kept in these crates for weeks at a time, often for 10–15 weeks every year across multiple pregnancies.**

→ **We welcome the Government's commitment to consult on moving away from farrowing crates and strongly urge them to launch this consultation without delay.**

Meat chickens

² <https://www.innatehealthassessment.org/> (accessed 27.01.26)

³ Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018

⁴ RSPCA public opinion polling by Savanta, August 2024

Nearly a billion chickens every year live short, painful lives as a result of being bred to grow so fast to produce the most meat in the shortest possible time. Consequently, the chickens often struggle to stand, develop lesions on their legs, suffer from heart defects and can even experience sudden death. Most supermarket chickens are reared so quickly, that it is the equivalent of genetically breeding a morbidly obese 28 stone three-year-old human child.

→ **The RSPCA welcomes the Government's commitment to supporting voluntary efforts to move away from the use of fast-growing meat chicken breeds and will support initiatives to achieve this.**

Wildlife

The strategy focuses on ensuring wild animals, recognised as sentient beings, are treated with respect. It addresses hunting, the use of traps and snares, stricter penalties for wildlife crimes, and zoo licensing. This section includes two issues promised in the Government's manifesto:

Trail Hunting

The 2004 Hunting Act, a key step in defining acceptable standards, has proven difficult to enforce. Some hunts exploit exemptions, using 'trail hunting' as a smokescreen to continue cruel activities. **Scientific evidence shows that hunting with dogs is inhumane, and can cause severe physiological and psychological suffering.** The chase inflicts extreme stress on the wild animal, far beyond natural conditions.

Public opinion consistently supports a ban: **Since 1997, polls have shown a majority favouring a ban, with recent YouGov polling in May 2025 showing 81% believe hunting should remain illegal**⁵.

We continue to work with the police and partners at the League Against Cruel Sports (as part of the Time for Change coalition) to advocate for crucial legal reforms.

→ **The RSPCA supports the Government's reiterated manifesto commitment on this issue, as outlined in the strategy. Although we are disappointed that the consultation was not launched in January, we look forward to its prompt launch so that this matter can be addressed.**

Snares

Snares are a commonly used, though highly controversial, method of managing certain wild animals, e.g. foxes and rabbits. They **are an indiscriminate trap that can result in 'non-target' species also being caught.** The RSPCA sees many of the victims of snares, with our Inspectors responding to animals caught in the wild and with others admitted to our wildlife centres every year.

The Welsh Government banned the use of snares in 2023⁶ and the Scottish Government banned their use in 2024⁷. Additionally, most European countries have also banned their use, including the Republic of Ireland.

Public support for a ban is also strong: according to latest polling data, over 70% of people across England believe the use of snares should be illegal⁸.

Due to the inherent cruelty of snares, the RSPCA is calling for a complete ban on their manufacture,

⁵ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/should-fox-hunting-remain-illegal>

⁶ Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023

⁷ Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Act 2024

⁸ https://ygo-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/LACS_Results_250113_Engonly_W.pdf

sale, and use—this includes homemade or adapted devices used by both the general public and trained individuals.

→ **The RSPCA strongly supports the Government's re-stated manifesto commitment in this strategy and urges the delivery of a ban on the use of snares in England without delay.**

Trade

The Strategy covers international commitments including promoting high animal welfare in trade negotiations, discouraging the fur trade, and encouraging animal-friendly tourism choices abroad. A central issue for the RSPCA, with broad potential impact, is making animal welfare key to all trade negotiations.

The UK-EU SPS Agreement is a post-Brexit agreement which is being negotiated as part of the broader 'reset' of UK-EU relations. The aim of this is to reduce trade barriers on food, animal and plant products by aligning standards.

Without explicit exemptions, dynamic regulatory alignment with the EU could force the UK to accept imports produced to lower standards that are illegal in Britain. This would create an "unlevel playing field" for British farmers who comply with stricter domestic welfare laws.

The RSPCA believes that the UK needs an explicit animal welfare carve-out or specific exemptions in trade negotiations to protect its welfare standards. Key areas include:

- **Import restrictions:** Maintain the ability to ban or restrict imports of animal products from systems illegal in the UK (e.g., sow stalls, Foie Gras, fur products).
- **Live animal transport:** Uphold the ban on the export of livestock for slaughter or fattening (Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act 2024).
- **Mandatory labelling:** Retain the power to introduce Method-of-Production Labelling based on welfare standards for consumers to make informed choices.

→ **The RSPCA strongly encourages the UK Government to prioritise high animal welfare standards in all trade negotiations. We welcome the Government's pledge to promote these standards as best practice in its international and bilateral relations, and we urge them to adopt a firm position on this vital issue.**