

**SUPPORTING**  
**BRITISH SHEEP**  
**FARMING**



# Introduction

High quality sheepmeat is in demand across the world. British sheepmeat is globally recognised for its quality, provenance and high standards of animal welfare. It is a fabulous source of nutritious and sustainable protein. But we risk seeing flock numbers here continue to decline if farmers don't have the confidence to invest in their businesses.

We want a British sheep farming sector that is profitable, data-driven, progressive and globally competitive, while maintaining world-leading welfare and environmental standards and supporting thriving rural communities. To achieve this, we must create systems that are profitable, productive and climate-friendly, so sheep farmers can build a profitable and sustainable future.

Sheep farming is a cornerstone of Britain's cultural heritage and rural economy. From the uplands to the lowlands, sheep play a vital role in maintaining biodiversity, supporting rural communities, and producing high-quality, sustainable red meat and wool.

More than 65% of UK farmland is grassland, the majority of which is unsuitable for growing crops. Sheep turn grass into high-quality, nutrient-rich protein while helping preserve carbon in permanent pasture, hedgerows and soils.

The sheep industry is under pressure from uncertainty around future agricultural policy, rising input costs, the decline in delinked payments, and ongoing volatility in global trade which is leaving many producers questioning the long-term viability of their businesses.

Sheep farming is often the gateway into farming for many new entrants. Rising costs are making it a lot more difficult to take this step and we need to work together as an industry to do all we can to support the next generation into the sector and ensure it thrives.

With the right support and collaboration from government, industry and the wider supply chain across five key areas – animal health and welfare, policy, supply chain, trade and sustainability, climate and environment – British sheep farming can deliver economic resilience, environmental benefits and food security for the nation.

By working together, we can also give sheep farmers the confidence and ability to reinvest in their businesses, maintain breeding capacity, and continue to protect and enhance our iconic rural landscapes.

**Clare Wise**

NFU Livestock Board Vice Chair



# Animal health and welfare

British sheep farmers operate to some of the highest welfare and health standards in the world. Healthy, well-managed flocks are the foundation of profitable, sustainable, and climate-aligned production systems.

Endemic diseases continue to present major challenges and coordinated industry action, supported by government investment, can deliver measurable improvements in welfare as well as productivity and emissions reduction.

The increasing risk of exotic and emerging diseases underscores the importance of robust surveillance, rapid response, and resilient veterinary capacity. Increasing levels of illegal meat imports, and unregulated slaughter, pose biosecurity risks that could devastate the sector and must be addressed through strong border controls and inspection capacity.



## How we can work together to support British sheep farming:

1. Delivery of the government's "Statement of Intent: UK Veterinary Vaccine Availability" to ensure availability of vaccines and medicines and deliver progress on reducing impacts of endemic disease in the sheep sector.
2. Retention of all castration and tail docking methods on lambs from 0 to 7 days old and development of a long-term roadmap to develop suitable and recommended pain relief products for young lambs when castrating and/or tail docking.
3. APHA (the Animal and Plant Health Agency) to be adequately resourced and strengthen disease preparedness and contingency planning to ensure capacity to respond to exotic disease incursions.
4. Industry, supply chain and government to work together to improve and standardise biosecurity and disease prevention on farm.
5. Government to secure and support long-term sustainable methods of disposal of used sheep dip as well as working with SCOPS (Sustainable Control of Parasites in Sheep) to deliver a national sheep scab eradication programme with a coordinated, community-based strategy in hotspot areas.
6. Defra to explore all opportunities to remove sheep and other small ruminants of any age from all requirements to remove Specified Risk Material, following the change to BSE negligible status and the revision of the WOH (World Organisation for Animal Health) BSE chapter.
7. The Animal Health & Welfare Pathway to fund post-mortems to identify endemic disease hotspots and better target preventative measures and coordinated responses.
8. Industry and government to support the work of RUMA (the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance) and expand industry use of AHDB (Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board) eMedicines Hub to demonstrate responsible use of medicines in the sheep sector.

# Trade

Our sheep sector is a net exporter of lamb – a strength that must be protected and developed. In 2025, the UK exported 85,700 tonnes of sheepmeat worth £609.6 million<sup>1</sup>, and imported 79,080 tonnes, 87% of which came from non-EU countries (Australia and New Zealand)<sup>2</sup>.

Post-Brexit free trade agreements are creating significant risks for the sheep industry. Imports from New Zealand and Australia have increased significantly since 2023. These products are produced to lower standards of environmental protection and welfare, threatening the viability of British sheep farmers.

The EU is the UK's most valuable sheepmeat export market, responsible for 93%<sup>3</sup> of all exports by volume and value in 2025. An SPS (sanitary and phytosanitary) agreement will have a positive impact by reducing friction in our export trade, but it must not erode the resourcing of the Border Force teams protecting our national biosecurity.

1. *Lamb market outlook, February 2026, AHDB.*

2. *Sheep meat trade, AHDB website.*

3. *UK sheepmeat trade dashboard, AHDB website.*

## How we can work together to support British sheep farming:

1. Existing trade deals to be monitored for quota usage and market distortion, while recognising the sensitivity of the sheep sector, ensuring clear country of origin labelling and introducing a set of core standards for agri-food imports entering the UK under current and future trade deals.
2. A variable pace transitional arrangement with different start dates for the UK-EU SPS dynamic alignment depending on the degree of divergence and time needed to prepare, with veterinary medicines, and particularly provisions relating to antimicrobial resistance, outside the scope of any SPS agreement.
3. An ongoing government commitment to safeguard our biosecurity and protect consumers from food fraud by ensuring effective, proportionate and well-funded border control measures are in place, and that sufficient resources are dedicated to stamping out illegal activity.
4. Government investment in export growth in priority sheep markets, such as Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, to match fund AHDB's levy payers' contribution and further expansion of the agri-attaché network.



# Policy

The right policy framework is essential for the future of British sheep farming. It must enable profitable, sustainable food production while ensuring fairness, transparency and confidence throughout the supply chain.

Sheep farmers face market volatility, unclear policy direction, declining support payments and increasing regulatory pressure. They need clear and joined-up policies that reward production, safeguard rural livelihoods and support climate action while enhancing food security.

## How we can work together to support British sheep farming:

- 1.** Integration of sheep into the new multi-species LIS (Livestock Information Service) to deliver real-time movement reporting, facilitate a transition away from paper movement licences, reduce audit and inspection burden, and allow government and industry to explore smarter alternatives to the six-day standstill requirements.
- 2.** Use Agriculture Act powers to improve transparency in the red meat sector by mandating minimum 12 weeks' notice for changes to processor terms and conditions and greater transparency of post-slaughter deductions.
- 3.** The RPA (Rural Payments Agency), AHDB and industry to monitor compliance with the newly rolled out Sheep Carcass Classification Scheme and price reporting to help improve the overall transparency of the red meat market, especially regarding pricing and changes to contract terms and conditions.
- 4.** Effective enforcement of the newly passed Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act and improved coordination between the police, National Food Crime Unit and farmers to address illegal on-farm slaughter, livestock theft and food fraud.
- 5.** Government must ensure that the growth-driving proposals set out in the National Planning Policy Framework reforms are applicable in protected landscapes where sheep farming makes an invaluable contribution to shaping the landscape.
- 6.** Farmers and landowners must be consulted, and adequate management options agreed, before any species reintroduction is licensed and any licences must include access to funding to mitigate any negative effects reintroductions might have.
- 7.** Implementation of a long-term immigration concession to allow professional overseas sheep shearers to enter the country for four months each year.





## Supply chain

British sheep farmers use a range of routes to market, from traditional livestock markets and liveweight sales to deadweight contracts and direct supply agreements. We know shoppers want to buy high-quality, high welfare British food and producers are increasingly seeking to promote and market their own lamb, both directly to customers locally and to local butchers and food service outlets.

Small and medium-sized abattoirs are vital to the sector, but the number closing continues to rise and poses a serious risk to the sector's long-term resilience. It is vital supply chains are fair, transparent and competitive to help restore farmer confidence and secure domestic supply of British lamb.

### How we can work together to support British sheep farming:

1. An independent review into the FSA's (Food Standards Agency) cost structures, workforce management, and use of third-party contractors, to ensure official controls are being delivered efficiently.
2. FSA to maintain the official controls discount scheme for small and medium sized abattoirs and move to a headage-based model when delivering official controls.
3. A long-term commitment by retailers and food service to British sheepmeat sourcing, including a responsibility for clear product labelling and marketing, and a strengthened relationship between industry and the processing sector to improve trust and facilitate confidence for long-term supply.
4. The delivery of a Red Tractor beef and lamb scheme that includes all the recommendations from the 2025 Farm Assurance Review and has a smarter audit, adds value, and secures domestic and export market access.
5. Continued industry support for British Wool in safeguarding animal welfare and in adding value to wool, demonstrating the fibre as a valuable, sustainable, renewable resource within a circular economy.
6. Industry, supply chain and government to work together to support new entrants into the sector to secure its future and to develop a training programme to develop skills and knowledge across the sector.

# Sustainability, environment and climate

British sheep farming produces one of the most sustainable red meats in the world while maintaining landscapes, supporting biodiversity and safeguarding soil health. The UK's greenhouse gas emissions from sheep are 36% lower than the global average<sup>4</sup>, and its grass-based systems mean it is one of the most efficient livestock sectors in the world.

To help maintain this, it is crucial to protect upland grazing and our stratified sheep system so we can safeguard our breeding ewe supply and the sector's long-term resilience.

A sustainable future for the sector relies on recognising that profitability, animal health, climate progress and environmental delivery are interconnected. Food production must stay at the heart of this transition, underpinned by fair returns and evidence-based policy.

<sup>4</sup> *Beef and Lamb Environmental Roadmap, AHDB et al, February 2025.*



## How we can work together to support British sheep farming:

- 1.** Implementation of split-gas accounting in national emissions reporting, with dual reporting of a warming-based metric alongside GWP100 to provide fairer representation of sector impact on climate change and global warming.
- 2.** Harmonisation of carbon calculators and establishment of minimum standards, recognised methodologies, and mandatory third-party verification, to ensure calculators fairly represent all sheep systems, recognise permanent pasture, and provide results which could be used for carbon markets when available.
- 3.** Delivery of the Farm Data Exchange and expansion of the Baseline Project nationwide.
- 4.** Continued industry support for the Beef & Lamb Roadmap, providing evidence to support the sector and highlight where productivity and environmental gains can be made.
- 5.** Development of ELMs (Environmental Land Management schemes), capital grants, and the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund offers which recognises the importance of grassland for environmental and net zero targets, while supporting sheep production and livestock integration into other sectors in England. All offers must be available to all sheep producers, regardless of farm type or tenure.
- 6.** Industry, levy bodies, government and supply chain to work together to support informed breeding decisions through the LIS and carcass and CCIR (Collection and Communication of Inspection Results) feedback loops and raise sector productivity through continued genetic improvement, knowledge exchange and utilisation of genotyping technology.



The UK is

**99%**

self-sufficient  
in sheepmeat

*Beef and lamb market summary 2024, AHDB*

**33%**

of sheepmeat  
production is exported



*Lamb market outlook, February 2026, AHDB*



In 2025, the UK exported

**85,700  
tonnes**

of sheepmeat worth

**£609.6  
million**

*Lamb market outlook, February 2026, AHDB*



The UK is the  
world's

**3rd  
largest**

exporter of sheepmeat,  
after Australia and  
New Zealand

*What is the long-term outlook for beef and  
sheepmeat consumption, October 2024, AHDB*



In 2023, the sheep sector  
contributed

**£1.6  
billion**

to the UK economy

*Future of sheep farming, House of Commons  
Library, August 2024*



The national sheep flock  
contains around

**30.5  
million  
animals**

*Livestock populations in the United Kingdom  
at 1 June 2025, Defra*

**SUPPORTING  
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FARMING**

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