



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Lord Douglas-Miller
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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
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15 February 2024

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 29 September to Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP on behalf of your constituents, about animal welfare. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

As outlined in our 2021 Action Plan for Animal Welfare, the Government has an ambitious agenda for animal welfare and conservation reforms, which we continue to take forward during this Parliamentary session.

The UK has the highest welfare score in the G7 according to the world Animal Protection Index and some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. Since the publication of the Action Plan, we have delivered on key manifesto commitments: we have increased the penalties for those convicted of animal cruelty, passed the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 and launched the Animal Sentience Committee. We have made cat microchipping compulsory and have announced the extension of the Ivory Act (2018) to cover other endangered species.

In addition, we have provided for penalty notices to apply to animal welfare offences, introduced new police powers to tackle hare coursing, banned glue traps and supported the Private Members' Bills to ban the trade in detached shark fins and to ban the advertising here of low-welfare animal experiences abroad.

The use of farrowing crates for pigs and cages for laying hens

All farm animals are protected by comprehensive and robust animal health and welfare legislation: the Animal Welfare Act 2006 makes it an offence either to cause any captive animal unnecessary suffering or to fail to provide for the welfare needs of the animal; and The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 set down detailed requirements on how farmed livestock should be kept.

In addition to the animal health and welfare legislation, Defra has a series of statutory species-specific welfare codes, which farmers are required by law to have access to and be familiar with, which encourage high standards of husbandry. Defra's Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) inspectors and local authorities conduct inspections on farms to check that the animal welfare standards are being met.

Potential breaches of animal health and welfare legislation are taken very seriously indeed. APHA investigates all allegations and appropriate action is taken against anyone who breaks the law when non-compliances are disclosed.

We do not consider the time is right to consult on cage or farrowing crate reforms, being mindful of the challenges the laying hen and pig sectors are facing.

The market is already driving the move away from using cages for laying hens with over 60% of eggs coming from free range production. The UK also has a significant outdoor pig sector with 40% of the national sow breeding herd farrowing freely on outdoor units with no option for confinement.

We continue to work with the sectors to maintain and enhance our high standards.

The Animal Health and Welfare Pathway, part of our new domestic agricultural policy, supports farmers to produce healthier, higher welfare animals. The Government's welfare priorities for the Pathway include supporting producers to transition away from confinement systems.

Food labelling

We intend to launch a consultation on clearer food labelling, as recently announced by the Secretary of State at the Oxford Farming Conference. This will include proposals to improve and extend current mandatory method of production labelling, including options for the production standards behind them, and will explore how we can better highlight imports that do not meet UK welfare standards.

Kept Animals Bill (KAB) measures

When the KAB was withdrawn, the Government committed to taking forward the measures in the Bill individually as soon as Parliamentary time allowed.

We are pleased to have introduced the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill to deliver our manifesto commitment to end this trade. The Bill will ban the export of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and horses for slaughter and fattening from GB, stopping unnecessary stress, exhaustion and injury caused by exporting live animals.

We remain dedicated to delivering the KAB's other measures: to ban the keeping of primates as pets, to crack down on the smuggling of puppies, to deliver a new offence of pet abduction, to update legislation to tackle livestock worrying, and to raise zoo standards.

On the 14 December 2023, the Government laid the Animal Welfare (Primate Licences) (England) Regulations 2023 in Parliament and published the summary of responses to its 2023 consultation on licensing of specialist private primate keepers in England. The draft legislation introduces a licensing scheme, setting strict rules to ensure that only private keepers who can provide the highest welfare standards will be able to keep primates. These measures have been introduced under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and laid sooner than would have been possible under the KAB.

In December 2023, Private Members' Bills were introduced in the House of Commons looking to address the issues of pet abduction, livestock worrying, and the importation of pets. The Government welcomes the Private Members' Bills introduced by Anna Firth MP and Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP in the House of Commons, looking to introduce new offences for dog and cat abduction, and modernise police powers to investigate and prosecute livestock worrying respectively. We will support these Bills through Parliament. The Government will set out its position on Selaine Saxby MP's Private Members' Bill at its second reading.

Defra maintains a close working relationship with the zoo sector, and we will continue to build upon this to identify non-legislative improvements. We aim to publish updated zoo standards early this year, developed in collaboration with the sector and the Zoos Expert Committee, which will raise standards and support enforcement.

I hope this reassures you that the Government is working hard to take steps in further improving our already high standards of animal welfare.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you need further information.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'K Douglas-Miller', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

LORD DOUGLAS-MILLER