# *The UK Farm Assurance Review*

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# Foreword by the Lead Commissioner

When we established our plans for the UK Farm Assurance Review (UKFAR), we aimed to gather information and evidence, to inform our conclusions, from a variety of sources across the farming and food industries, as well as from other parties with an interest in the operation of the farm assurance system. The material we assembled provided considerable food for thought. It goes without saying that we are grateful to all who made submissions to the Review, and for the contributions by many about the issues they have encountered with the current farm assurance system and the improvements they would like to see put in place.

I also wish to thank my fellow Commissioners for their many and varied contributions to delivering the Review, and this report, alongside colleagues from Promar International and Supply Chain Insites (SCI), most notably John Giles, Lizzie Downes and Diane Dalton, who ably supported the Commission throughout this process. We were pleased to be able to conduct the Review at the request of its sponsoring bodies, the National Farming Unions (NFU) and Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), but the views expressed within this report are those of the independent Commissioners and not of these organisations.

In this report, you will see the results of our work. It included discussions with farmers and their representative organisations at agricultural shows and events; primary research with farmers, growers and crofters, and with other representatives of the industry, the wider food chain and governments; and secondary research from relevant literature, international case studies and a separately commissioned AI-based study of postings about farm assurance from a farming discussion group website. In addition, we engaged with selected farm assurance providers to understand their approach, their plans for the future and some of the constraints under which they have to operate.

Your evidence points to a complex farm assurance environment and an even more complex view from the farming industry about the extent to which they feel that farm assurance is, in some cases, being 'done to them' rather than 'delivered with them'. Whilst smaller farm assurance schemes, often those in the devolved nations, seem to have developed a constructive working relationship with their farmer members, this is not always the case with larger national providers. Where that essential element of trust between the parties is lacking, the view of many farmers is that the schemes are not delivering anything of benefit, other than fulfilling a requirement for a route to market for their assured produce. Indeed, some farmers have opted out of the system altogether, resulting in a non-assured market for which comprehensive product information is not readily available.

Yet others see anomalies in the system where their assured product is combined with imported produce, negating the value of the assurance scheme with which they are obliged by their food chain customer to comply, or the 'double jeopardy' of combined farm assurance and regulatory audits where the stakes for non-compliance by the farm business can be as high as losing the ability to trade. Whilst farm assurance schemes are intended to be voluntary, the increased demands placed upon them, and, in turn, on farm businesses, by other actors in the food chain, have impacted on the audit load, time, cost and stress levels encountered by farmers. In an example we mention in our report, a farm had been subject to 17 separate audits over a period of 20 months.

The majority of respondents to the Review understood the need for farm assurance, but there were others who thought the farming industry would be better off without it. We caution

against such a view, not least because the vacuum left by removing the current system could well be filled by an even more fragmented approach to market access and product accountability, in which there is no guarantee that the voice of farmers would be heard.

That said, in some instances, even when farm assurance schemes involve farmer representatives, there is an impression that some new standards are being generated by the demands of food chain businesses, and there is a lack of clarity about the removal of standards that have been 'overtaken' by legislation. Again, this is not the case with all schemes, but in instances where this view is prevalent amongst farmers (and some other organisations in the food chain), it risks damaging the reputation, integrity and effectiveness of the farm assurance system. The case of the Greener Farms Commitment was widely discussed in the evidence we received. Whilst recognising that the Commitment was dropped in response to the reaction from the farming industry, it was telling that the original website news release for the standard contained contributions from the farm assurance scheme, the British Retail Consortium (BRC) and 5 food retail businesses, but no direct comment from farming representatives, or farmers expected to voluntarily adopt the new standard.

We welcome the involvement of the retail sector in setting out a path towards a more systematic way of addressing environmental issues, but whatever the merits, or otherwise, of the Commitment, this article was symptomatic of a type of culture that needs to change to be more inclusive, to regain the trust required for the proper operation of farm assurance and for farmers to feel that they too are valued customers of, and participants in, the farm assurance system.

We have given careful consideration to the wide ranging views expressed in the submissions made to the Review. Many were thoughtful and well considered, though they often presented very different conclusions about the nature and value of farm assurance. Even in the submissions by retailers there was little commonality about the role that farm assurance should play in satisfying the requirements of their customers or in recognising the additional demands placed on farmers in meeting further farm assurance requirements.

Finding a path towards a set of recommendations was not, therefore, straightforward. It is inevitable, given the complexity of the issues at hand, that we will not please everyone with the recommendations we have provided. Some involve organisations well beyond the farm gate that face commercial or regulatory pressures to extract as much as they can from the farm assurance system and may not see any role for them in taking on board our call to action. We ask those organisations to see this report as an opportunity to reset this aspect of their relationship with the farming industry, so that the farm assurance system can, once again, provide benefit to all who operate within it.

It is, at the same time, vital that farmers, their representatives, the farm assurance schemes, other organisations in the food chain and government departments and their agencies work together, with the report as a road map, to improve the current system, reduce the assurance burden on farm businesses, properly recognise and reward those farms that consistently perform well in relation to farm assurance and enable the UK to maintain its internationally recognised high standards of food production. Our recommendations are intended to work together with these, and other objectives set out in our report, in mind.

It is also incumbent on the farming industry to play its part in delivering the ambition for an improved farm assurance system. We make recommendations, for example, on the greater use of technology to help deliver improvements in the audit experience and efficiency, but these will not work if farmers are resistant to the adoption of new approaches. We have called

on the farm assurance schemes to provide better training and support for farmers to help address current and emerging requirements for farm assurance, including in the use of related technology, but, again, it will be essential for farmers to get involved if this approach is to bear fruit in the longer term.

In short, this report is not the end of the road for improving the UK farm assurance system - it provides the starting point for the journey ahead. We hope that journey will lead to a more positive, respectful and balanced relationship between the various contributors to, and beneficiaries of, the farm assurance system and the farmers on whom the system depends.

Dr David Llewellyn
Lead Commissioner, UK Farm Assurance Review
December 2024

# Section 1. Executive Summary

Farm assurance in the UK is a necessary and important component of the food production landscape and should be retained by the farming and food production sectors, of which and to which, it is a significant asset.

Robust farm assurance brings substantial benefits to UK food and farming, central to which is the reassurance it provides consumers that the food they purchase is produced to consistent and high standards. Without such a solid platform, there would be inevitable fragmentation and variation in production standards and loss of visibility, traceability and responsibility, which would not just undermine the confidence of UK consumers, but also the ability of the whole sector to produce, develop and export what are some of the best food products in the world.

However, farm assurance can and must be improved.

The extensive surveys, interviews, case studies, literature reviews and international comparisons that were undertaken by this Review, all suggest that in spite of the support for, and benefits of, farm assurance ***in principle***, there is much that is not right ***in practice***, and significant improvements are both necessary but, encouragingly, also very possible.

As one of, if not the, key audience for farm assurance schemes, farmers themselves are the most critical about the operation of farm assurance and its practical implementation on farm. The lack of audit consistency, the perceived irrelevance of certain standards, poor communication, duplication of effort, inappropriate follow-up and sanction, the emotional stress, and distress caused…. the concerns were many, considerable, and heart-felt. The degree of concern and criticism varied between farming sectors, by region and by scheme, but these opinions and anxieties were universally present.

It is therefore the dynamic of "farm assurance is right in principle but needs to be much better in practice" that underpins the themes and recommendations that this report explores and presents.

It was this very clear sense that farm assurance was not working well for most of its key stakeholders that provided the underlying rationale for this review. Not only for farmers, growers and crofters, who are in large part shown to be frustrated and reluctant participants in these schemes (even if many recognise their importance to the success of their sector), but consumers are considered to be generally poorly informed with regard to what farm assurance is, what it delivers and how it works. Even amongst food processors and retailers, who the reports' findings indicate are the most satisfied and supportive of these three major constituencies, as a result of farm assurance providing them with quality, traceability and consistency, whilst facilitating access to both domestic and export markets, there is acknowledgement of scheme inefficiencies, the costs and impacts on their suppliers and the benefits that could be delivered from better functioning schemes and more positive engagement.

The absence of any previous comprehensive review of farm assurance in the UK during the 40 years or so since the first schemes were introduced in the 1980s and 90s, together with today's agricultural and food production systems being exposed to arguably the greatest degree of change in a generation or more, as well as the previously noted long-running

undercurrent of disquiet from across the industry, makes this review and report of critical importance and relevance, but also, it is hoped, influence and impact.

The UKFAR Commissioners, appointed by, but independent of, the commissioning bodies (the UK's Farming Unions and the AHDB), have therefore undertaken this investigation, notwithstanding that it might be considered long overdue, cognisant that it has the potential - and the responsibility - to stakeholders across the industry, to catalyse and shape a significant evolution of farm assurance in the UK. This evolution is expressed in nine strategic recommendations, each of which comprise a number of specific, actionable and time-defined, short, medium and long-term related recommendations.

Taken in the round, the recommended improvements to the direction, operation, communication and governance of farm assurance schemes in the UK, could ensure that this important component of food and farming truly becomes the strategic asset that it can and should be - supported by all, effective and dynamic, and driving greater efficiency and value in our industry. For that to happen, scheme owners, with whom most of the responsibility for action sits, must embrace this opportunity, acknowledge their pivotal role, and above all be prepared to change – including with regard to operational practice, communications, internal governance, and cross-industry relationships.

In generating its recommendations, the Review listened closely to, and engaged extensively with, 3,616 survey and 162 other respondents, used the detailed, first-hand evidence obtained to shape its thinking, and in doing so, identified and explored in-depth, 11 key themes (see Section 5):

| | |
|---|---|
| The audit process | Environment and sustainability |
| Technology | Collaboration |
| Governance and the voice of the farmer | Positioning UK agriculture |
| Cost | Communication |
| Operational improvement | Training and development |
| Duplication and earned recognition | |

An extensive literature review, detailed case-study evidence and international comparisons, together with additional written submissions from the NFU, AHDB, Red Tractor and AIC (Agricultural Industries Confederation), all contributed to the understanding and development of these themes, whilst also helping to identify that certain characteristics (see Section 4) are essential for farm assurance schemes to be successful, and which UK schemes should strive to adopt within their culture and management practices:

| | |
|---|---|
| Strong leadership | Focus on delivering value |
| Regular review | Consistency and continuity |
| Transparency | Effective enforcement |
| Collaboration | Healthy competition |

Combining these workstreams - interweaving the characteristics that define success with the exploration of the key themes and the rich body of data, information, experience and opinion behind them - the Review process generated its most important outputs, the Commissioners' **nine strategic and 56 practical, actionable recommendations,** accompanied by a clear rationale for each, describing where responsibility for action lies and proposing a deadline for delivery.

Detailed in Section 6, and headlined below, these are intended to initiate immediate, but considered change, and begin a process resulting in the achievement of a vision, that this report concludes is shared by most across the industry - that of a there being a truly effective farm assurance system in the UK that will be beneficial for and bring value to all stakeholders.

**Strategic recommendations**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | On-farm audits must be reduced, simplified and delivered more consistently. |
| 2 | There must be a transformational step forward in embracing technology and managing data to deliver more effective farm assurance with greater added value for all. |
| 3 | Farm assurance schemes need to reset and/or restate their decision-making structures to establish farmers as the driving voice in standards development. |
| 4 | A new industry-led initiative must set out the future environmental ambitions for farm assurance, establishing this as an area of competitive advantage for UK farming. |
| 5 | The inclusion of regulatory requirements within farm assurance standards and audits should be conditional on government and regulators agreeing a form of 'earned recognition'. |
| 6 | There must be greater coordination in the way in which farm assurance operates across the UK nations. |
| 7 | Farm assurance schemes must better position the UK farming industry in world food markets and in competition with imported food. |
| 8 | All farm assurance schemes must review, and, where necessary, improve their methods of communication with the farming industry. |
| 9 | The Red Tractor (RT) scheme must complete the implementation of recommendations in the Campbell Tickell report. |

The expectation is that actions should begin immediately after the publication of this report, and that the majority of the short-term recommendations should be successfully implemented within six months of its release.

It will be the adoption of these recommendations that the scheme owners in particular - responsible for the implementation of most of the proposed changes - but supported, where identified, by governments, the farming unions and other industry bodies, that will bring the required change and continued evolution and improvement in the operational delivery of the UK's farm assurance system and clarity with regard to its strategic purpose and direction.

In doing so it will provide the evidence that (1) lasting and meaningful value has been derived from the work undertaken in preparing this report and from the significant contributions made to it by so many stakeholders across food and farming, and (2) that the sector is better placed to meet continued and increasing future challenges - being sustainable, productive, competitive, innovative, resilient - whilst maintaining the trust and support of consumers.

# Section 2. The Context for the UK Farm Assurance Review

## 2.1 Background

The UK's position in the world is changing, not least because our departure from the European Union (EU) has generated new systems of trade and prompted a reshaping of government structures used to support UK agriculture. We are mindful of the UK Government's desire for a closer working relationship with the EU: that offers some new possibilities, but adds, for the moment, a further dynamic dimension to the landscape. The agricultural transition to the new policy environment is also at various stages within different parts of the UK. It is therefore safe to say that the road ahead remains uncertain, and it is against this background that our review has been undertaken.

In this changing landscape it is notable that there has been no comprehensive study of the farm assurance system since it was created, largely in its current form, in the late 1980's. This is the first strategic review of farm assurance schemes since their inception. The review is also being conducted in the context of recent issues with the largest farm assurance scheme, RT, which prompted a recent report by Campbell Tickell on its structure of governance.

Over the last year, there have been several other reports on aspects of individual schemes, including those by the Social Market Foundation in October and, in the same month, an independent review of Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) Assured. In the last few months, Linking Environment & Farming (LEAF) has also issued a consultation on the future development of its standards. These reports indicate a growing level of interest in the overall subject of farm assurance, and that changes to the way it operates in the UK may be required.

However, concerns about farm assurance have been building for a number of years, amongst many farmers[1] and other agri food stakeholders. These have been compounded by other pressures on farming, and have included:

- the amount of time needed to prepare for a farm assurance audit[2] before it takes place and the work that needs to be carried out post audit to ensure ongoing compliance
- the costs involved for an audit and for membership of a farm assurance scheme
- the difference in schemes/audits for UK agricultural products and those for imported products which is seen as an example of unfair competition by UK farmers

[1] For the purposes of this report, 'farmer' is deemed to include all primary producers of crops and livestock, horticultural producers, crofters etc

[2] Throughout the various calls for evidence in this Review, there were a range of terms used, including 'audit', 'inspection' and 'assessment' in relation to farm assurance activity. For the purpose of this review, we have adopted the term 'farm assurance audits'

- the level of financial pressure that UK farmers have been under for the last few years, not least as a result of supply chain shocks, such as BREXIT, COVID and the situation in the Ukraine, which has caused commodity prices to soar

- the downward pressure and/or volatile nature of farm gate prices being experienced by many farmers

- the fact that some farm assurance schemes no longer appear to deliver any sense of premium prices back to farmers, as was anticipated by farmers when they first came in to being[3]

- the impact of completing farm assurance audits on the mental health and wellbeing of farmers - for many it is seen as a highly stressful 'make or break' period

- the problems seen in the eventual abandonment of the Greener Farms Commitment by RT, with farmers expressing very mixed feelings about this outcome. While some see environmental standards as a necessary progression, others view them as overly demanding, costly and sometimes impractical to implement effectively, especially without additional support

The recent protests against the introduction of inheritance tax for farmers demonstrate how high tensions are running in the UK farming sector - not just on the issue of farm assurance, though, from the evidence we have gathered, it is certainly an additional source of concern.

The strong feelings around farm assurance are not new. A study undertaken by *Grounded Research* as part of this review has revealed differing insights into the farming community's responses to farm assurance schemes in each of the last 5-6 years. In particular:

- **2019:** farmers expressed varied sentiments, with frustrations over bureaucracy and financial strain offset by optimism about digital compliance tools. Negative sentiments focused on distrust of assurance bodies and perceived corporate favouritism

- **2020**: negative sentiment intensified as the COVID pandemic added pressures. Farmers viewed assurance schemes as costly and misaligned with on-the-ground realities. However, there was some positive response to remote inspections and online compliance tools introduced during the pandemic

- **2021:** saw peaks in frustration, especially with RT, as farmers highlighted the increasing administrative burdens and costs. Calls for a more farmer-led, simplified model of assurance gained traction, reflecting a desire for governance reforms

- **2022:** negative sentiment peaked, with distrust of assurance organisations and dissatisfaction with corporate influence. Farmers voiced strong critiques of high compliance costs and the impact of these schemes on mental well-being. Positive discussions centred on improvements in governance and animal welfare standards

- **2023** and **2024**: farmers expressed frustration with evolving environmental standards, especially around carbon audits. There was, however, also some cautious optimism for

[3] We are aware that Andersons are undertaking a study on the economic value that Red Tractor contributes to UK farming which may provide data on this topic

streamlined processes and more transparent governance structures, as assurance bodies sought to address farmers' concerns more directly

Alongside these sentiments, the market continues to present ongoing challenges to UK agriculture. Over the last five years there have been record input prices, with fertilisers exceeding £1,000/tonne in 2022[4]. There have also been evolving supply chain demands, with sustainability becoming an increasingly key issue, driven by the ambition of governments across the UK to achieve net zero by 2050, and the impact of Scope 3 carbon emissions being introduced in the food supply chain. UK farmers have also experienced, in the last few years, highly volatile weather patterns of extreme heat and rainfall.

Under such a range of pressures, farmers are understandably beginning to question some of the key aspects of farm assurance, including the value that it provides to them and to the onward supply chain.

Our review was established, in the context of these challenges to UK farming, to mainly see the issues around farm assurance from the point of view of the farmer, but also to take into account the views of a wide range of other organisations across the supply chain. Importantly, the review was also intended to cover a range of farm assurance schemes and not just focus on the largest one, Red Tractor. That said, with over 75% of respondents being part of this scheme there was a lot of focus on RT in our primary research. To respond to some of the points that were raised we have provided a summary view about RT's approach to the farming community in Annex 1 that we hope the scheme will take on board. In addition, several of our recommendations specifically focus on RT, though the improvements suggested within them may also be of benefit to other farm assurance schemes.

## 2.2 The Creation of the UK Farm Assurance System

The term '*farm assurance*' covers many different schemes within the UK, serving different purposes, and is applied across a wide range of products and services.

Each scheme has its own history, illustrated within the following *snapshots* (see Table 1[5]). However, there are some common themes relating to their creation and their overall purpose since their inception.

The general consensus suggests that farm assurance was developed, in its current form, following a series of major UK food scares in the 1990s, notably BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) to provide a means to offer the public '*assurance*' that the produce they purchased from UK farms was safe, traceable and of a high standard.

In reality, the reasons for the creation of farm assurance schemes, and the methods for their implementation were inevitably much more complex, as will be seen in Table 1. This report does not cover these processes in detail. We believe, however, that the development of farm assurance in the organic sector is an example of a more diverse rationale for developing farm assurance schemes than to simply provide public assurance. In this sector, the schemes have always operated as a 'supportive' model, linked with legislation, to

[4] https://ahdb.org.uk/GB-fertiliser-prices
[5] Evidence for Table 1 (Snapshots) was compiled with the scheme owners, through a series of interviews or requests for information.

provide the necessary accreditation to be able to make claims about provenance and methods of production on packs or about the product.

## **Table 1A:** *Snapshots – Scheme Background & Statistics*

| Scheme | History | Scopes | Member Numbers | Geographical Areas |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Red Tractor (RT) | Began in 2000 but separate schemes had evolved before | Crops & Sugar Beet, Beef & Lamb, Dairy, Dairy Goats, Fresh Produce, Pigs, Chicken, Ducks, Turkeys, Livestock Transport, Livestock Markets, Collection Centres, Cold Crush Oilseeds, Safe Haven, Meat Processing, Catching & Transport (Poultry) | C. 46,000 members but 56,000 enterprises | UK |
| Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) Assured | Began in 1994 | Laying Hen, Meat Chicken, Pigs, Beef, Sheep, Dairy, Salmon, Trout, Turkey & Duck (integrated standards). Also products such as feathers, leather, wool | 4,000 members | UK, some international (US & Norway) specialist membership (aqua hatcheries) & Republic of Ireland (ROI) |
| Scottish Quality Crops (SQC) | Created in 1984, by Co-operative –NFU Scotland (NFUS), Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society Ltd (SAOS), Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC), Scotland's Rural College (SRUC, Scotch Whisky Association (SWA), Maltsters Association of Great Britain (MAGB), Association of British Millers | Combinable crops (rebrand in 2007 from Scottish Quality Cereals) RED II | C. 3,100 members | Scotland / small no of growers in North East England (c.30) |
| Northern Ireland Beef & Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (NIBL) | 1991, officially launched in 1992 | Beef and Lamb farm standards | As of 23/07/24, 11,169 approved participants | Northern Ireland (NI) |
| Welsh Lamb & Beef Producers (WLBP) | Created in 1998 | Beef and Lamb | 6,800 members | Wales |
| Organic Farmers & Growers (O F & G) | 1975 formed (the longest-established Defra approved control body) | Livestock, Crops, Products (Farm production, including arable and horticultural crops, and livestock intended for human consumption) and animal feeds. Also seeds, manures, digestates | Great Britain, NI, Isle of Man and Channel Islands | Certify over 50% of all organic land in the UK, 30% of organic products and 1,300 farms |
| Global Gap (GG) | 1997/8 | Agriculture, Aquaculture and Floriculture | Over 200,000 globally (small in the UK) and 4.5 million hectares of land | Global (130 countries) |
| Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit (SMETA) | 2004 | Ethical worker welfare. It is a social audit with an environmental pillar. Multi sectoral | 85,000 members globally | International (178 countries) including UK |
| Soil Association | 1946 (First standard launched in 1973). 1992 first EU Organic Legislation, main standard launched at this point) | Organic Certification to 2007/834 and 2008/889 – covers Farming & Growing, Feed Processing, Abattoir & Slaughtering, Aquaculture, Seaweed. Crop Production, Livestock Husbandry, Vegetative Propagating and seeds, Yeasts – Livestock is defined as: Bovine including buffalo and bison, equines, pigs, sheep, goats, poultry & bees (some through horizontal legislation) | 4,000 members | Primarily UK, England, Wales, Scotland, Channel Islands and NI |
| British Egg Industry Council (BEIC) | 'Lion' was used from 1957 – 1971 by the Egg Marketing Board but the Lion Code was launched in November 1998 | Shell eggs (Sister code cover egg products – Code of Practice for Lion Quality Eggs) | 1,274 Laying hen members & 272 Pullet rearers. Also feed mills and packers as integrated supply chain | UK |
| Quality Meat Scotland (QMS) | 1990 (as Scottish Quality Beef & Lamb Association) – 2000 as QMS | Cattle & Sheep, Pigs, Market & Collection Centre, Haulage, Feed, Meat Processor, UK GI - Scotch Beef & Lamb (Equivalence with RT) Lifetime assurance (born, reared and slaughtered in Scotland) | 9,000 members | Scotland |
| Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) | LEAF the charity was established in 1991. LEAF Marque was established in 2002 | Fresh Produce (Fruit & Vegetables), Crops (Cereals & Pulses), Livestock (Meat and Dairy), Flowers & Ornamentals | 1,907 certificate holders, including approximately 4,000 producers globally with many certified through producer groups | Global – 36 countries |

**Table 1B:** *Snapshots – Scheme Delivery*

| Scheme | UKAS Accredited | Delivered by | Price & Funded by | Audit duration | Audit interval |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Red Tractor | Yes (most scopes) | NSF, Intertek (SAI), NIFCC (NI) | Voluntary membership - ranging from £150 to £650 | 2-3 hours - up to 1 day for complex operations | 12 months, except Dairy, Beef & Lamb which is 18 months |
| RSPCA Assured | Yes (most scopes) | RSPCA Assured Auditors, CB is SCI | Voluntary membership - ranging from £299 to £450 | 2-3 hours - simple site | Annual assessment |
| SQC | Yes | FIA | SQC Members £257-£462 (dependant on hectares) If QMS as well (£245 - £439) inclusive of VAT | 1.5 to 3 hours is generally stated time | Annual |
| NIBL | Yes | NIFCC | NIBL FQAS is a voluntary scheme and participation is open to all beef and lamb producers in Northern Ireland. NIBL FQAS participants pay annual fee of £95 + VAT<br>Processors pay a throughput fee of £1.20 per bovine animal, £0.10 per ovine animal | Dependent on site, usual duration time 1.5-3 hours. | 18 months 5% of participants have a spot check annually. |
| WLBP | Yes | QWFC | £160 per enterprise.The scheme is Self-funding from subscription. Welsh Livestock Farmers involved in the production of beef & lamb can join. Some funding from Welsh government but only for very specific projects, such as Health & Welfare planning, which the farmers can then take advantage of | 2-3 hours, site dependent | Assessed @ 18 month interval |
| OF & G | Yes | OF&G auditors and joint inspection with NSF | Anyone can join – do not become members but licensees. Conversion over a 2 year period. £500-£1000 dependent on conversion stage and hectarage | 4-6 hours for small enterprises up to 1 day | Annual assessment |
| Global Gap | Yes (UK) Also IAF | Many approved CB's | There are CB fees and GG System Participation Fees – also based on Product and size of farm | Dependent on complexity, from half to 2 days | Annual assessment |
| SMETA | Not currently | 49 Cetification Bodies (CB)'s Internationally | Cost begins at £150 (SMETA 7) per audit (CB cost on top) Tiered and selectable 4 pillars (Environment and Business Ethics, Health & Safety and Labour) | Typically 1-3 days, depending on site size, complexity and other variables | Risk based – high every year and medium, every 2 years. |
| Soil Association | Yes | Joint audits are available – RT, Farm Assured Welsh Livestock (FAWL), Pasture for Life Intertek (SAI Global) – Soil Association deliver standalone | £495 joining, then £475 - £1,350 depending on size of site | Average audit duration is half a day but can alter depending on size and complexity of the site | Annual audit |
| BEIC | Yes | NSF | Anyone can join – the scheme covers 95% of the UK egg production. It is free for primary producer – the packers pay a levy on all Class A eggs (360 case is 12p). Farmer has to pay if critical non-compliances are identified, or revisits undertaken – risk based approach | Usually 2-3 hours, dependent on size of site | Initial visit is 12 months, then 18-month interval. 2 x 6 monthly self-audits have to be completed (usually with the packer) and validated at the main assessment. Unannounced programme also in place |

**Table 1B:** *Snapshots – Scheme Delivery (continued)*

| Scheme | UKAS Accredited | Delivered by | Price & Funded by | Audit duration | Audit interval |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| QMS | Yes | FIA (Owned by SAOS) currently deliver and certify | Levy paid on each animal – fees are paid from this levy. This allows all sites to have a fair price and even the smallest sites (including crofters) are not precluded because of cost (Grouped memberships from £55) which is up to £200 | Site dependent but around 1-6 hours | Annual audit |
| LEAF | Yes | Globally, there are 36 third-party certification bodies approved to carry out LEAF Marque audits.<br><br>This includes 3 certification bodies in the UK – NSF, FIA, SAI Global | Stakeholders can join LEAF as charity members to access the LEAF Network, LEAF Sustainable Farming Review, LEAF Marque certification, and more by registering via LEAF's website.<br><br>A variety of membership options are available, including Farmer, Corporate Member, Colleges, Advisors & Consultants and LEAF Marque buyers and sellers memberships. Farm, £121 – £709 plus additional certification fee £85 - 175 (Registered Charity). Producer group fees dependant on number of producers | The audit duration varies on business/site size and complexity, especially as LEAF Marque is a whole farm approach. Half day minimum to 2 days maximum, more days where producer groups require sample of on-site audits | LEAF Marque audits are conducted on an annual interval.<br><br>In the UK, LEAF Marque audits are often combined with Red Tractor audits, to reduce the audit time and burden. Many auditors use a combined audit checklist to ensure the audit is efficient |

## **Table 1C:** *Snapshots – Scheme Operations & Objectives*

| Scheme | Standards | Earned recognition | Logo | Purpose |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Red Tractor | Created to restore consumer confidence following a number of food scares in the 1990s including BSE, Salmonella, Pesticide Residues and Foot & Mouth. Created by the NFU, now maintained by NFU, NFUS, Ulster Farmers Union (UFU), Dairy UK, British Retail Consortium (BRC) AHDB. The Food & Drink Federation act as 'observers'. Sector boards in place and member consultations for changes are undertaken. | FSA Dairy Hygeine, Feed Hygeine, RED II | On £25 billion of retail sales, 74% consumer recognition, used by all major retailers (except M&S and Sainsburys) and food service customers (such as McDonalds, Nando's etc) | Required by almost all major retailers and some large food service customers. 1)To provide food that is traceable and responsibly produced. 2) To provide farmers and growers with the maximum market access for the minimum audit. 3) Provide standards with a British buying specification. 4) Provide Government with additional controls on the safety and production of food and drink. 5) To differentiate the products from imports |
| RSPCA Assured | Freedom Food launched by RSPCA, latterly became RSPCA Assured<br>To provide higher welfare standards for farmed animals and drive continuous improvement following a rise in demand for reassurance from customers<br>RSPCA (Farm Animals Department), STAG involvement. | None | 70% recognition, 1400 products<br>100% of the animal derived product in pack | Required by the retailers/consumers, even retailers who do not use the logo still require the standards to be met. Higher welfare for farmed animals. To provide higher welfare standards for farmed animals and drive continuous improvement following a rise in demand for reassurance from customers |
| SQC | Standards were created for growers – access to markets / new opportunities / premium for product. Standards are maintained by Standards Review Committee SQC Board (including representatives from farmers, NFUS, specialist professor, Maltsters, Scotch Whisky, UK Flour Millers, SAOS (Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society). Also have a Scottish Crop Supply Chain Hub – feed in industry requirements/knowledge/feedback, final decision by SQC Co-op members. | | No on pack logo, no marketing activities - Logo is used to increase visibility and awareness of SQC | Used within UK and European Markets, supermarkets, maltsters, brewers, public, processors - also Biofuel and millers<br><br>Main purpose - crop quality assurance and traceability scheme, environmentally friendly production and access to markets |
| NIBL | Owned by Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland (LMC) on behalf of the beef and sheep meat industry.<br>Set up with 3 key pillars: Food safety, Animal Welfare and Care for the environment. Standards are maintained by NIBL FQAS Standard Setting Committee:<br>Representatives from LMC (Livestock & Meat Commission), UFU (Ulster Farmers Union), NIAPA (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association), NSA (National Sheep Association), NBA (National Beef Association) , NIMEA (Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association), DAERA. AVSPNI (Association of Veterinary Surgeons | Yes, with Food Standards Agency (FSA) | As of Jan 2024, 98% of price reported prime cattle are NIBL FQAS at slaughter. Looking at NI beef and lamb sales by geographic region, the importance of retail and food service contracts that require quality assured beef and lamb is clear. For 2021 sales of beef/sheepmeat to the GB market were £1,133.7m (67%) of the total beef/sheepmeat sales- £1,697.2m. Sales in Northern Ireland, that also require quality assured beef and lamb, contribute a further £255.7m (15%) of total sales.<br>[Reference: DAERA Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Processing Report 2021] | Majority of retailers, The scheme is part of the specification for Sainsburys, however they do not display the logo on the pack<br><br>Multiple – covers legislation, earned recognition agreements with Food Standards Agency (FSA) . Standards evolve in line with legislation and industry/stakeholder requirements. Operates equivalence with Red Tractor and other UK beef and lamb schemes (QMS/FAWL), operating under a common framework agreement. SAI platform members, IMS members |
| WLBP | Standard began as Lamb promotion, It is a farmer controlled agricultural co-operative (WLBP) Designed to preserve Welsh farming, promotion of Welsh Beef & Lamb, providing support to farmers. The scheme is aligned to the Welsh government but takes into account the unique topography of Wales. Standards are maintained by WLBP – Full standards setting committee. | Yes and internal benchmark with Red Tractor | None – but the UKGI Welsh Lamb or Beef is part of the scheme | Required by Supply chain, export market and Retailers – Tesco, Sainsbury's and Morrisons – also local butchers and some online retailers<br><br>To confirm high standards of animal welfare, food safety and environmental protection – also high quality products and consumer confidence along with supporting Welsh farmers and to confirm traceability |

## **Table 1C:** *Snapshots – Scheme Operations & Objectives (continued)*

| Scheme | Standards | Earned recognition | Logo | Purpose |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| OF & G | Started as a marketing cooperative for organic produce. The standards were originally private and then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Covers EU legislation (now DEFRA)<br><br>In 1992 it became the first UK organic CB to be approved by government. Covers the statute legal requirements and also guides farmers through the process. It provides integrity and visibility to organic production. Standards are maintained by OF&G – in accordance with regulations set by the UK government (and the EU) | None | On pack (Organic can be claimed if product is above 95% - if <95% then organic ingredients can be listed | To provide complete supply chain certification and equivalence on global production. It is also legislative and promotional, providing integrity to be demonstrated |
| Global Gap | Started by the European Retailer Produce Working Group (EUREP) (Several major European supermarket chains and key suppliers) Not for profit company to create a common standard for Good Agricultural Practice<br><br>Standards are maintained by Global Gap –with collaboration from stakeholders, retailers, producers and CB's. Comprehensive and involved standards setting procedure over several years for changes including multi-stakeholder engagements, consultations and process groups (takes 3 years) | Other schemes tend to be benchmarked to Global Gap (lots of arrangements in place, including some Red Tractor schemes) | Logo not always used on pack, but producers can use their GGN (Global Gap Number) for a certified production process | Required by many major retailers, including Tesco, Aldi, Lidl, M & S, Sainsbury's use the scheme in their sourcing policies for some products<br><br>To ensure high standards of safety, sustainability and quality. Products are produced according to good agricultural practices (safer and sustainable). |
| SMETA | Sedex created the SMETA audit, delivered by independent audit companies<br><br>The SMETA audit is designed to help protect workers from unsafe conditions, overwork, discrimination, low pay, and forced labour. Driving improvements in responsible and ethical business practices in supply chains. Base code of labour practices – covering global legislation and requirements, as well as local. It is not a certification scheme but an improvement scheme.<br><br>Sedex owns, evolves and maintains the standards in line with current legislation. Update is based on feedback from stakeholders - consultation based. Standard is ETI based with local law (where higher) applied. Annual updates, consultative approach | None | Does not have a specific on pack logo but is widely recognised as the number one ethical audit | Required by large buying businesses - Retailers/processor, where sourcing policies dictate<br><br>Used to prove ethical compliance in sourcing activities. Encourages the site to take ownership and identify critical risks and weaknesses in their systems – or to identify indicators |
| Soil Association | The Soil Association was founded in 1946 by a group of people (and Lady Eve Balfour)<br>Following concern about the health implications of increasingly intensive farming systems following the Second World War. Their main concerns were:<br>- the loss of soil through erosion and depletion<br>- decreased nutritional quality of food<br>- exploitation of animals<br>- impact on the countryside and wildlife<br><br>Standards are maintained by Soil Association Certification Ltd – subsidiary of Soil Association. The Standards Board has an independent chair and the process meets with International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance (ISEAL) requirements. Anyone can suggest changes and consultative approach is taken. Impact tests are undertaken to ensure that standards are not set that are already being met | None | The logo is the most widely recognised in the UK and is on 90% of organic food & drink products in the UK<br><br>Used on pack, wide coverage | Required by Consumer, Processor, Retailer, present in all retailers<br><br>Originally the stamp of approval to guarantee quality and integrity – now covers the legal requirement.<br>'Everything we do is to the highest standards of animal welfare and sustainability' |

## **Table 1C:** *Snapshots – Scheme Operations & Objectives (continued)*

| Scheme | Standards | Earned recognition | Logo | Purpose |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| BEIC | BEIC created the scheme. BEIC was a committee within the original British Egg Marketing Board)<br>Main focus was to drive consumer confidence by eradicating salmonella. Following the bad press in 1988 (Edwina Curry) – the industry needed to firstly eradicate salmonella, then demonstrate it had. Vaccines eventually became available which allowed for the scheme to achieve this prior to launch. Consumption was dropping by 8% year-on-year and imports had risen to almost 50%<br><br>Standards are maintained by BEIC – Lion Technical Committee – mostly packers but includes all levels of stakeholders including primary producers. The process is consultative and transparent | The scheme is part of the National Control Programme for the retained EU Zoonoses Legislation (2005) and NSF auditors are approved as competent authority to collect samples etc. | 81% prompted recognition, most widely recognised logo within Farm Assurance<br><br>95% of UK egg production covered. Lion used on pack, POS and also vehicles as well as each individual egg. | Required by packer, processor, retailer, consumer<br><br>Aim<br>To remove salmonella from the UK egg chain and restore confidence whilst providing a route to market. 45% of levy is spent on marketing activities |
| QMS | QMS is a non-departmental public body. In 2008 – gained statutory status replacing Meat & Livestock Commission (MLC).<br><br>To demonstrate the quality and integrity of products – strong focus on animal welfare and Scotch Beef and Scotch Lamb Geographic Indication's (GI). To create trust at all points of the supply chain.<br>Standards setting committee, high levels of industry engagement/consultation, at every level, prior to the QMS board | Yes | UKGI, Scotch Beef, Scotch Lamb, Specially Selected Pork<br><br>Scotch Beef, Scotch Lamb, Specially Selected Pork, proof of born, reared, slaughtered in Scotland and have spent their whole life on QMS Assured Holdings | Required by processor, retailers, consumer<br><br>Marketing support, to drive sales, attend industry events, provide industry toolkits, focus on promotion of products 98% coverage beef and 92% coverage sheep Close involvement with the Scottish SPCA and also benefits from the traceability system SPECC (Scotch potential eligibility cattle checker). Industry funded, here to serve levy members, farmers and processors |
| LEAF | LEAF maintains the LEAF Marque Standard through a robust standard development process, including:<br>- Stakeholder engagement activities – public consultations, stakeholder working groups and piloting.<br>- Oversight from governance bodies throughout the standard development process – the LEAF Marque Board and LEAF Marque Technical Advisory Committee (TAC).<br><br>The TAC is a multi-stakeholder body that oversees the ongoing development of the LEAF Marque Standard. It brings together experts from a diverse range of backgrounds including farmers, retailers, supply chain, environmental Non-Government Organisations, government and industry bodies. They ensure the LEAF Marque Standard continues to evolve to respond to user comments, industry developments, the rise in new technologies and science, and consumer trends. The TAC is currently chaired by a highly experienced producer. | None | >5000 products registered using the LEAF Marque logo.<br>Largely driven by LEAF Marque logo being applied on pack by both Tesco and Waitrose<br><br>To demonstrate a product is LEAF Marque certified, the LEAF Marque logo must be used. A supporting statement must be made if the product contains less than 95% of LEAF Marque certified sources. The use of the LEAF Marque Number is optional. We recommend using a combination, or all three, to add context and transparency to the sustainability credentials of the product<br><br>The LEAF Marque logo can be used on pack or at the point of sale. In both cases, there must be a valid Claims & Labelling licence to use the logo | The vision is a global farming and food system that delivers climate positive action, builds resilience and supports the health, diversity and enrichment of our foods, farms, the environment and society<br>LEAF Marque certification supports the implementation of Integrated Farm Management/sustainable farming practices and continuous improvement on farm, and enable farmers to gain market recognition for farming more sustainably.LEAF supports stakeholders across the industry to understand and adopt more sustainable farming practices, and enables consumers to make more sustainable food choices. Although LEAF Marque is an independent and voluntary standard, a variety of retailers, brands and supply chain actors have made public commitments to LEAF Marque certification and partnered with LEAF to guide farmers in the UK and internationally on the sustainability journey via LEAF Marque certification. These include: Tesco, Waitrose, Sainsburys, Asda, M&S, Aldi, Lidl, Mindful Chef, Jordans Cereals, Pepsico (Quaker Oats)<br><br>LEAF Marque is a leading global assurance system recognising more sustainably farmed products. The LEAF Marque Standard is based on the principles of Integrated Farm Management (IFM), which is a whole farm, site-specific approach that focuses on continuous improvement to deliver more sustainable farming. IFM and the LEAF Marque Standard cover 9 areas:<br>1. Organisation & Planning<br>2. Soil Management & Fertility<br>3. Crop Health & Protection<br>4. Pollution Control & By-Product Management<br>5. Animal Husbandry<br>6. Energy Efficiency<br>7. Water Management<br>8. Landscape and Nature Conservation<br>9. Engaging Society |

## 2.3 The Development of Farm Assurance

Perhaps the main driver of the later development of the farm assurance system was the attempt to consolidate various responses, over time, to animal disease outbreaks. In the process the remit of farm assurance extended to cover issues such as animal welfare and environmental protection.

The emergence of the UK's largest scheme[6], RT, was the most obvious illustration, combining a number of separate, existing schemes and providing a degree of consistency in approach and content across all the main agricultural sectors. It was also introduced to improve the awareness of and support for UK produce. Other schemes continued to develop in parallel, operating alongside RT, to meet specific market needs and opportunities, and seeking to provide additional assurance and value. There are clearly still many schemes operating to meet specific sector or market needs, in some cases duplicating RT activity but in others providing additional assurance and value.

The key components of the schemes in the main livestock and cropping sectors are shown in Table 2. This indicates that the evolving remit of farm assurance, typically based around food safety, traceability and animal welfare has expanded still further, to embrace a much wider range of farm management and food production activities.

As a consequence, the potential for duplication of requirements, and therefore the increased time and effort involved in compliance, has been almost inevitable. This has become a major source of frustration for many farmers, especially those involved with multiple schemes and products.

In most cases, farm assurance schemes sit between being '*voluntary*' and '*regulatory*' in their application. Schemes seldom have authority to apply direct financial penalties, although this can, de facto, be the case, where market access is removed. The farm assurance model does not therefore rely on fines or financial penalties to ensure compliance, with censure typically enacted via applying suspension, or in severe cases, withdrawal of certification or scheme membership.

Most 'delivery' companies (i.e. the Certification Bodies [CB's]) are now required to have schemes and scopes that are accredited by the UK Accreditation Service (UKAS) to Product Certification International Standards Organisation (ISO) 17065 (further details are given in the snapshots.) UKAS 'is recognised by government, to assess against national and internationally agreed standards, organisations that provide conformity assessment services such as certification, testing, inspection, calibration and verification'. It is the sole National Accreditation Body for the UK. This system does a great deal to ensure the consistency of audit, however it has a number of issues associated with the prescriptive nature of how it operates, and the constraints that it imposes means that farm assurance processes are not always fit for purpose.

One example of this is that auditors are not allowed to give advice to farmers. This is often interpreted by farmers as the auditor being deliberately unhelpful, whereas it is simply a farm assurance scheme requirement resulting from the UKAS accreditation held by that scheme.

[6] c. 45,000 members

## 2.4 Recent Developments in Farm Assurance

Duplication of effort, time and cost, both between and within farm assurance schemes, and in the relationship between schemes and public sector bodies, has been reported throughout this review as a major source of frustration for farmers and others in the supply chain.

**Table 2:** *Key Factors of Farm Assurance, by sector*

| | | Livestock Schemes | | | | | Crop Schemes | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Dairy | Beef | Lamb | Pork | Poultry & Eggs | Cereals & Oilseeds | Sugar | Horticult-ure | Potatoes |
| "Core" factors | Food Safety | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Environmental | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Traceability | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Provenance | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Adherence to legislation | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Health & Safety | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Sustainability | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Transport | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Animal Welfare | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | | | | |
| "Non-core" factors | Ethical | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | | | | ■ | |
| | Disease | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | | | ■ | ■ |
| | Soil Management | | | | | | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Pesticide Management | | | | | | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Conservation | | | | | | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | Worker Ethics | | | | | | | | ■ | |
| | Branding | ■ | | | | ■ | | | | |
| | Religious | | | ■ | | | | | | |

Some schemes, not least RT, are already working closely with industry regulators, such as the Rural Payments Agency (RPA), Food Standards Agency (FSA) and Environment Agency (EA), and other policy makers, to drive change and to attempt to embrace a wider range of requirements into a single scheme or audit.

Further integration, increased alignment, better sharing of data and greater consistency of approach are all generally recognised as being an appropriate direction of travel for farm assurance standards. While delivering these outcomes is recognised as being difficult, this review highlights the importance of doing so and identifies a number of opportunities to address these challenges.

The drive to achieve greater consistency, reduce duplication and improve efficiency of implementation is all the more important, because there remains a possibility of expansion of farm assurance standards, either through legislation or market or consumer expectations, to address additional aspects of food production, land and environmental protection and people management.

As topics such as sustainability '*find their level*' and compliance becomes mandatory under legislation, the obvious choice for checking compliance will be the farm assurance system. This is not least because the regulatory bodies associated with farming do not have the resources, capacity or, in some instances, the motivation/desire to deliver further checks that would duplicate the farm assurance process.

These future developments aside, the current status of farm assurance is intended to provide a range of benefits and to help farms meet a number of core business needs, as summarised by sector in Table 3 below.

**Table 3:** *Farm Assurance Needs and Benefits, By Sector*

**Farm Assurance - Needs met & Benefits provided by Sector**

| | | Livestock schemes | | | | | Crops schemes | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Dairy | Beef | Lamb | Pork | Poultry & Eggs | Cereals & Oilseeds | Sugar | Horticulture | Potatoes |
| Needs met | Market Access | | | | | | | | | |
| | Premium prices | | | | | | | | | |
| | Traceability | | | | | | | | | |
| Benefits provided | Earned Recognition - Food Hygiene | | | | | | | | | |
| | Earned Recognition - Feed Hygiene | | | | | | | | | |
| | Earned Recognition - Dairy Hygeine | | | | | | | | | |
| | Animal Health - APHA | | | | | | | | | |
| | Environmental Permit - EA (IPPC) | | | | | | | | | |
| | Responsible Use of AB's | | | | | | | | | |
| | Responsible Use of PPP's | | | | | | | | | |
| | Vermin - CRUU | | | | | | | | | |
| | BASIS Points (RT) | | | | | | | | | |
| | SAI - Platform (Silver) | | | | | | | | | |
| | Official Control (Zoonoses) Salmonella | | | | | | | | | |
| | Defence - due dilligence | | | | | | | | | |
| | RED | | | | | | | | | |
| | Vet Attestations | | | | | | | | | |
| | SFI Qualifier (Future) | | | | | | | | | |
| | Carbon Reduction (Future) | | | | | | | | | |
| | RT Urea Standard | | | | | | | | | |

| |
|---|
| Yes |
| Partial |
| No |

## 2.5 The Role of UKAS & ISO 17065

### 2.5.1 The UK Accreditation Service (UKAS)

As noted earlier, UKAS is the national and sole accreditation body within the UK, operating under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the UK Government's Department of Business and Trade. It is a member of the International Accreditation Forum (IAF) and has a Multilateral Agreement (MLA) with most national accreditation bodies worldwide. Signatories of the MLA are audited and peer reviewed by representatives of other MLA bodies to ensure global consistency of the application of accreditation standards.

In accordance with Regulation (765/2008), UK certification bodies must apply to UKAS in the first instance for any accreditation activity.

There are two main ISO based options that can be applied to UK farm assurance, with both providing certain benefits, but also challenges. They are:

### 2.5.2 ISO 17065

This relates to conformity assessment and the requirements for bodies certifying products, processes and services. The main aim of ISO 17065 is to give confidence that certified services, processes or products fulfil specified requirements. The focus is on impartiality, consistency and competency.

**Table 4:** *ISO 17065 benefits & challenges*

| | Benefits | Challenges |
|---|---|---|
| **Scheme Owners** | • Provides a quality management system and process baseline to which the appointed CB operates<br><br>• Impartiality Board is a requirement<br><br>• There is an annual review of operations, records and witnessing of auditors by an accreditation body - details as follows:<br><br>1. Audit, certification and auditor records are sampled and reviewed, together with the CB quality management system, to ensure that they meet the requirements of the scheme certification body protocol and scheme operating protocol<br><br>2. Auditors are witnessed conducting an audit by sector experts to review audit technique, technical understanding and judgments as required by the specific standard<br><br>3. Each certified organisation has an annual audit against scheme requirements | • May stifle scheme agility and changes. As versions of standards are accredited, any changes need to be planned, both to inform users and CBs. CBs must gain approval (reaccreditation) from UKAS for each version update<br><br>• Auditors are prevented from providing any advice for the closure of any non-compliance (this is seen as consultancy)<br><br>• In general, it does not focus on specific nuances/requirements of schemes that are outside of the ISO 17065 requirements, which may be key for scheme owners. Several schemes have their own additional compliance programmes (e.g. BRCGS, IFS, GLOBAL GAP, FSSC 22000)<br><br>• UKAS accreditation is expensive for CBs and takes time<br><br>• UKAS is also non-advisory and so learning from the process is limited |

### 2.5.3 ISO 17021

An alternative accreditation standard is ISO 17021. This is the conformity assessment for the requirements for bodies providing audit and certification of management systems. The aim of ISO 17021 is to provide assurance that the organisation has implemented a system for the management of the relevant aspects of its activities, in line with its policy.

The certification of a management system provides an independent demonstration that the management of that system conforms to specified requirements, is capable of consistently achieving its stated policy and objectives and is effectively implemented. While many of the CB requirements (structure, impartiality, confidentiality, competency, quality management system) are similar to ISO 17065, there are some differences, for example:

- CBs must determine the audit duration, in line with specific and determined requirements, including size of the site, complexity, and activities; the duration of the 3-year programme is usually calculated and relayed to the organisation on application

- CBs conduct a 2-stage initial audit:
  - pre-assessment review for readiness of any organisation
  - a certification assessment following the pre-assessment
- the audit outcome includes non-conformities and opportunities for improvement
- in general, a 3-year certificate is awarded on closure of non-conformities
- interim annual audits are conducted, including key requirements (e.g. internal audit, complaints HACCP, continual improvement) plus 50% of other requirements
- for most schemes, one of the interim audits is unannounced
- non-conformities must be closed to maintain certification (some schemes allow minor findings to remain open until the next assessment)

# Section 3. The Review: Methodology and Terms of Reference

The Review was commissioned by the UK Farming Unions (NFU, NFU Scotland [NFUS], NFU Cymru and Ulster Farmers Union[UFU]) and the AHDB to address the issues raised by a rapidly changing UK farming landscape and the sense within the farming sector that farm assurance was not delivering what was needed or expected. The following Terms of Reference (TOR) for the Review were established by the commissioning bodies:

1. Undertake a comprehensive review of UK farm assurance, based on agreed criteria following appointment of The Commission, which enables trusted development to take place.

2. As part of the above, consider Farm Assurance primarily through the lens of value delivery to primary producers but not ignoring needs of onward businesses and end consumers.

3. Provide a snapshot of the current farm assurance systems, identify examples of good farm assurance schemes, and detail what drives their success.

4. Seek to understand and articulate the varying sector needs, value potential and priorities from assurance – to include, but not limited by: Food & feed safety, provenance, brand, animal health & welfare, interaction with regulation, supporting market development (domestic & exports), value add opportunities and sustainability.

Sectors are:

   I. Cereals and oilseeds

   II. Dairy

   III. Beef & lamb

   IV. Poultry meat & eggs

   V. Horticulture & potatoes

   VI. Pork

   VII. Sugar

5. Define and oversee a *call for views* exercise from the farm industry and onward supply chain to help inform the review. This exercise should be inclusive of both input from relevant organisations, but also individual farm businesses.

6. Investigate the audit load that farm assurance puts upon farmers and identify the principles of how processes could be made more efficient and effective.

7. Assess how assurance interacts with regulation, whether it provides earned recognition opportunities, avoids mission creep or duplication.

8. Ensure that the nuances of devolved schemes, regulatory systems and markets are effectively understood.

When developing the concept of the Review, the Farming Unions and AHDB established a UK Farm Assurance Review Leadership Group (FARLG), with membership from all of the commissioning organisations. The main roles of this group were to appoint the Commissioners and to maintain oversight of progress in conducting the Review. But the key vision of the commissioning organisations was that the Review should be an objective, and independent, assessment of the current situation and of the possibilities for the future.

## 3.1 An Independent Review conducted by Commissioners

The Farming Unions and AHDB appointed 4 independent Commissioners to conduct the Review:

**Dr David Llewellyn CBE (Lead Commissioner)**

**James Withers**

**Mark Suthern**

**Katrina Williams CB**

Biographies of each are at Annex II. Each of the Commissioners was selected as an individual having knowledge of and interest in the sector but no commercial or other vested interests associated with farm assurance.

Working with the NFU and AHDB, the Commissioners conducted a competitive tender process and appointed Promar International and SCI to provide the Secretariat to the Review.

The Commissioners conducted the Review in accordance with the Seven Principles of Public Life (The 'Nolan Principles') and at the start of their work agreed with the FARLG a set of Operating Principles encapsulating the independent status of the Review - this is attached at Annex III. Their focus throughout was to conduct a Review which was inclusive, transparent and open, independent and evidence-based.

## 3.2 Scope

An early observation of the Review was that there are multiple assurance schemes within the sector. To keep its work manageable and meaningful, the Commissioners decided to focus on the 12 schemes summarised in the snapshots in Section 2.*

- British Egg Industry Council (BEIC)
- GLOBAL GAP
- Linking Environment & Farming (LEAF)
- Northern Ireland Beef & Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (NIBL FQAS)
- Organic Farmers & Growers (OF & G)
- Quality Meat Scotland (QMS)
- Red Tractor (RT)

- RSPC Assured
- Scottish Quality Crops (SQC)
- Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit (SMETA)
- Soil Association
- Welsh Lamb & Beef Producers (WLBP)

This focus does not mean that we discounted evidence we gathered about other organisations: the Review aimed to give as broad a picture as possible but for these 12 organisations, we undertook desk research supplemented by one-to-one interviews. Other organisations had the opportunity to submit further information in response to our 'Call for Evidence', and we have assessed this and incorporated in the Review the insights they offered. So, for example, we received valuable input about Food Fortress in Northern Ireland and from the Halal Certification Organisation Ltd.

In conducting the Review, we focused on crop and livestock products (not aquaculture) and primarily on the pre-farm gate schemes, except in those cases where schemes explicitly provide 'end-to-end' assurance.

## 3.3 Primary Research

The Review employed a number of different methods to ensure that all who wished to respond to the Review were able to do so. We were pleased by the volume of responses received and by the thought which went into engaging with us: the Commissioners wish to thank all those who engaged with the Review. The submissions we received demonstrated considerable amounts of care and expertise and gave the Commissioners a rich base of evidence with which to work.

We gathered evidence via the following routes:

- in-person attendance at agricultural shows and events
- an online farmer survey
- in-person consultation
- an open invitation to submit written responses
- detailed formal written evidence from key stakeholders

As part of this the Commissioners and Secretariat attended 13 Shows and events (list at Annex IV), benefiting from a range of formal and impromptu meetings with groups and individuals.

The online farmer survey ran from 4 July to 7 September, with significant publicity, prompting 3,616 valid responses. We checked the spread of responses throughout against Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and other Government data to guard against regional/sectoral bias. We were grateful for the assistance of the Livestock Auctioneers Associations of England, Wales and Scotland in helping us to reach a further sector of the industry via the distribution of printed surveys with pre-paid return envelopes.

In the event, the responses to the survey showed a spread across the UK and across the sectors covered by the Review (Annex V includes the demographic breakdown of the survey).

The Commissioners and Secretariat conducted 99 in-person meetings with stakeholders from all parts of the food supply chain, Trade Associations, Government Departments, Levy Boards, Banks, Vets, Certification Bodies and Academics. A full list of those we met is attached at Annex VI.

In addition, we invited around 300 organisations to submit written responses and opened the invitation via the farming and food press to anyone wishing to submit views in writing. This exercise, from August until mid-September, attracted another 63 written responses. In addition, the AIC, AHDB, NFU, Red Tractor and several other organisations made detailed submissions to us. In some cases, these were informed by evidence gathered from careful consultation with members.

The analysis of the on-line survey and written submissions was conducted by Promar International and Louise Manning, Professor of Sustainable Agri Food Systems at the University of Lincoln, using conventional quantitative analytical techniques and the AI-based tool Nvivo.

## 3.4 Secondary Research

We used 3 other sources to supplement our evidence base and understanding:

- a review of the (plentiful) literature relating to farm assurance, including reports that emerged from NGOs and others during the course of the Review
- International Case Studies
- a short review we commissioned from Grounded Research on farmers' attitudes to farm assurance

For the literature review, we focused on 30 documents identified by the Commissioners or the Secretariat as relevant or interesting, mostly relating to the UK farming and food sector. We looked, in particular, at how past recommendations on farm assurance were reflected in the evidence we found today. The full review is at Annex VII.

The International Case Studies, focused on the Netherlands, Thailand, Argentina and Ireland, provided helpful examples of alternative models, for example on Government intervention and on collaboration. These 4 countries were chosen either because of their identity as successful trading nations, or because of their known approach to farm assurance. The full case studies are at Annex VIII and IX.

The work by Grounded Research drew on submissions to the Farming Forum website which has some 55,000 members. This used appropriate key-words to identify 8,894 posts with relevance, and to analyse them via a structured approach according to theme and sentiment. This provided an additional valuable input from a significant group of stakeholders.

## 3.5 Terminology

The Agri-Food landscape is rich with acronyms. To help our readers, we have included a glossary at Annex X.

## 3.6 Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the following people for their contributions to the Review and this report.

Promar International Ltd, who provided the services as the review's secretariat, led by John Giles.

Professor Christopher Elliott, Queens University, Belfast, who provided a critical review of the report.

Lousie Manning, Professor of Sustainable Agri Food System from the University of Lincoln, who assisted with the analysis of the qualitative data and provided expert insights into the results of the farmer survey and sector stakeholder submissions.

Dr Rebecca Smalley, who holds a PhD in farm assurance from the University of Reading, who reviewed the online survey.

# Section 4. The Purpose of Farm Assurance

## 4.1 Background

Farm assurance is seen in different ways by different parts of the supply chain and, at times, these views are diametrically opposed. The lack of agreement on what farm assurance really stands for goes right to the heart of the challenges faced by the farm assurance system in the UK (see Table 5).

For most of those operating close to the Point of Sale (POS), such as retailers in particular, it is seen by many as a necessary '*cost of doing business*' (although our research showed this view was beginning to change and a more equitable way of sharing the costs across the supply chain might be sought in the future) as well as a way in which they can be assured of product safety and other attributes from their suppliers.

For farmers the view is much more mixed. A high percentage believe that farm assurance may be not even be necessary. To these farmers, assurance standards are regarded as a means of control by the rest of the supply chain to undertake tasks which they see often as overly onerous and lacking in value. Having said this, a similar percentage of farmers see farm assurance standards in a more constructive manner. In addition, farmers have long considered farm assurance as a way of obtaining a premium price for their products.

In practical terms, however, quality assurance and quality control can both sit under quality system headings, even though they are two distinct activities.

The simplest definition for '*quality assurance*' is that it addresses all activities that provide confidence a product will fulfil the requirements for quality. The simplest definition of '*quality control*' concerns the specific operational techniques used to fulfil the requirements for quality.

Quality assurance could be seen as a holistic view of production and tends to be proactive and preventative in approach, whereas quality control typically focuses on a specific area of activity or production. Consequently, quality control can be a part of quality assurance, but it does not cover the whole process of production.

From the supply chain consultation process, feedback on what farm assurance provides and how it can be best used, took a number of approaches.

Supply chain consultees tended to focus on the mainstream food retail sector. There were limited views provided on public procurement, the foodservice sector and out-of-home food provision (that was not supplied by major food retailers), online food sales and other forms of food retailing, including those predominantly provided by microbusinesses and SMEs.

The most consistently expressed view was that farm assurance was and will continue to be essential to the supply chain function and it will increasingly require farming businesses to professionalise and to address important societal issues, notably GHGs, the environment and people welfare.

One response from a supply chain organisation that summarised the industry's response was:

"….*farm assurance schemes provide reassurance to retailers and consumers that the produce they purchase has a known (UK) origin and has been produced to high quality standards. In principle, this is laudable and can have the potential to add value to UK produced food that has met assurance standards. In practice, however, meeting either broad industry assurance standards (RT, LEAF) or specific retailer in-house standards (e.g. Tesco Nurture, M&S Field to Fork/Select Farm) has in effect become a gateway to trading that tends to add little value, other than the ability to sell through a certain route to market…...*"

**Table 5:** *What is Farm Assurance for? (Source: AI-based analysis of the online farmer survey)*

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Animal Welfare** | **Appropriate conditions** | **Authenticity** | **Biodiversity/Nature** | **Due Diligence** | **Eating Quality** |
| **Environmental Standards** | **Food Safety** | **Food Waste** | **Health & Safety** | **Human Nutrition** | **Human Ethics (staff diversity)** |
| **Integrity** | **Labour Standards** | **Provenance** | **Sustainability** | **Traceability** | **Transparency** |
| **Trust** | **Validity** | **Veracity** | **Visibility** | **Worker Welfare** | |

The positive view of farm assurance provided by food supply chain participants was based on an understanding that it reassures other supply chain partners and consumers that core elements of farm production are appropriately controlled and robustly managed.

However, not all supply chain respondents believed farm assurance schemes were essential, as other forms of guarantee could be supplied, and clearly, in some market sectors, farm assurance certification is not a pre-requisite to supply.

Examples of other comments made in response to our consultation included:

"….*We are clear that the core purpose of farm assurance schemes must be to provide assurance - to consumers, the supply chain, and farmers and crofters. Farm assurance followed in the wake of the BSE crisis of the 1990s and aimed to provide additional reassurances to consumers about the safety of British produce. Assurance has contributed successfully to achieving that aim, but there is still work to be done, and a need for schemes to adapt to new challenges.*" (Farming group)

A Government body said:

"….*third party assurance schemes play a big role in supporting regulation of the food system. Farms are the first step in the farm to fork chain. Robust assurance schemes with comprehensive standards and effective governance provide confidence to us (i.e. regulators) that appropriate checks have been undertaken to safeguard the onward supply to those later in the food chain….*"

The same government source said:

"….. *if the current system of farm assurance we have now, didn't exist today, we would have to invent it, with probably even more duplication and overlap*……"

## 4.2 The role of Quality Assurance versus regulation by legislation

One of the challenges we encountered was that there are many different views on farm assurance, including what it is, what it does and for whom it is intended.

Quality assurance, in this context, is typically concerned with encouraging and guiding producers and supply chain actors to achieve '*best practice*' (as defined for that industry sector), rather than insisting certain practices are undertaken, or achieving minimum standards through the application of legislation. However, activities that meet specific regulations can also be covered within quality assurance schemes if the assurance requirements (and therefore best practice) are coincident with the relevant legislation.

With respect to most farm assurance schemes (organic schemes excepted), most legal requirements are not directly assessed. In farm assurance, regulatory compliance and industry best practice generally function independently of each other, even though some farm assurance audits may be shared by a farm assurance scheme and regulatory body in an effort to avoid duplication.

## 4.3 Is Farm Assurance a measure of quality, a branding tool – or something else?

We received many different views on the purpose of farm assurance and what it provides. Examples we considered where the scheme provides a marketing function included RT, RSPCA Assured, the Soil Association, OF&G, BEIC (Lion Code) and LEAF Marque.

Other farm assurance schemes are used, more specifically, to recognise UK Geographical Indication (GI), including Scotch Beef, Scotch Lamb, Welsh Beef and Welsh Lamb, establishing most critically the place of origin, as well as offering some sense of provenance, and perhaps the brand values associated with these locations.

Yet other schemes do not use a logo at the sale point at all, for example SQC, position themselves more in the background, but nonetheless provide that particular supply chain with robust quality assurance.

Some schemes are more focussed on specific aspects of production and again build their 'brand' around this. Examples include RSPCA Assured - improving farmed animal welfare and LEAF Marque - delivering climate positive actions.

## 4.4 How is Farm Assurance used by Government and other stakeholders in the UK food system?

Our review found there are a number of arrangements in place, with both government and industry bodies, where farm assurance is being used to prove compliance. This includes 'earned recognition' (where in this instance 'earned recognition', means a reduction in audit frequency) for compliance with regulations.

- Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) consider farm assured sites to be of lower risk, although the exact nature of these criteria is not publicly available
- The Environment Agency use farm assurance to deliver some Integrated Pollution Prevention Control Permit (IPPC) validation visits
- The Food Standards Agency uses farm assurance to supplement its own systems of regulatory compliance

In the organic schemes, the standards comply with relevant regulations to ensure that legislation is being met.

For the purchasing stakeholders, farm assurance provides a 'guarantee' that food has been produced safely and in line with industry norms and regulations. It is intended to give the end consumer confidence that this is the case.

There are several other benefits to being farm assured, with details given in the Needs & Benefits diagram at Table 3 in Section 2.3.

## 4.5 The role of schemes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

The red meat sector, in particular, is characterised by having nation-specific farm assurance schemes:

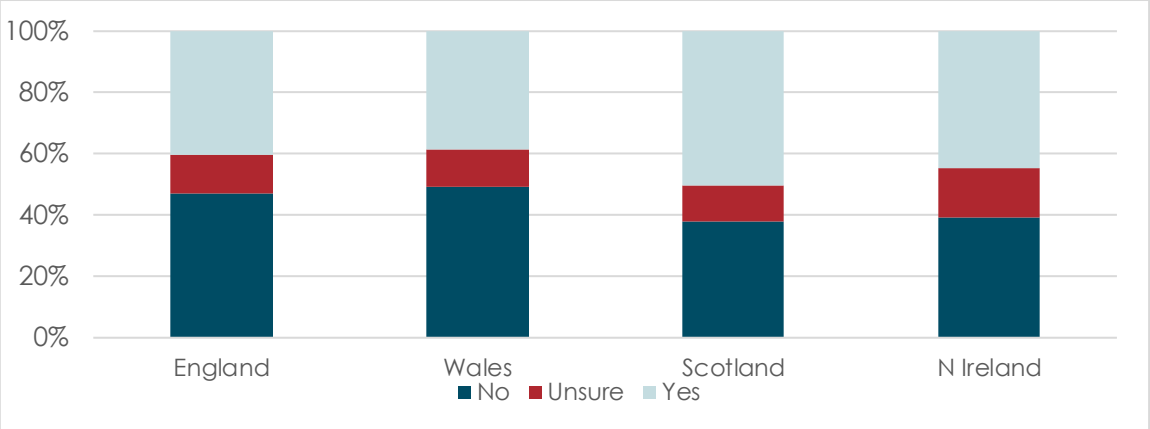
- Quality Meat Scotland (QMS)
- Northern Ireland Beef & Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (NIBL FQAS)
- WLBP – Welsh Lamb & Beef Producers

In addition to this, Scotland has its own crops scheme run through SQC. In most cases, these country-specific schemes replace the requirement for UK wide schemes. These schemes also bring with them a marketing edge through a point of differentiation.

This is further driven by some products in the devolved nations being part of UK GI schemes, which have helped achieve, at times, a premium price. This could explain the generally more positive view of farm assurance in the devolved nations than in England, based on the feedback we obtained from the online farmer survey.

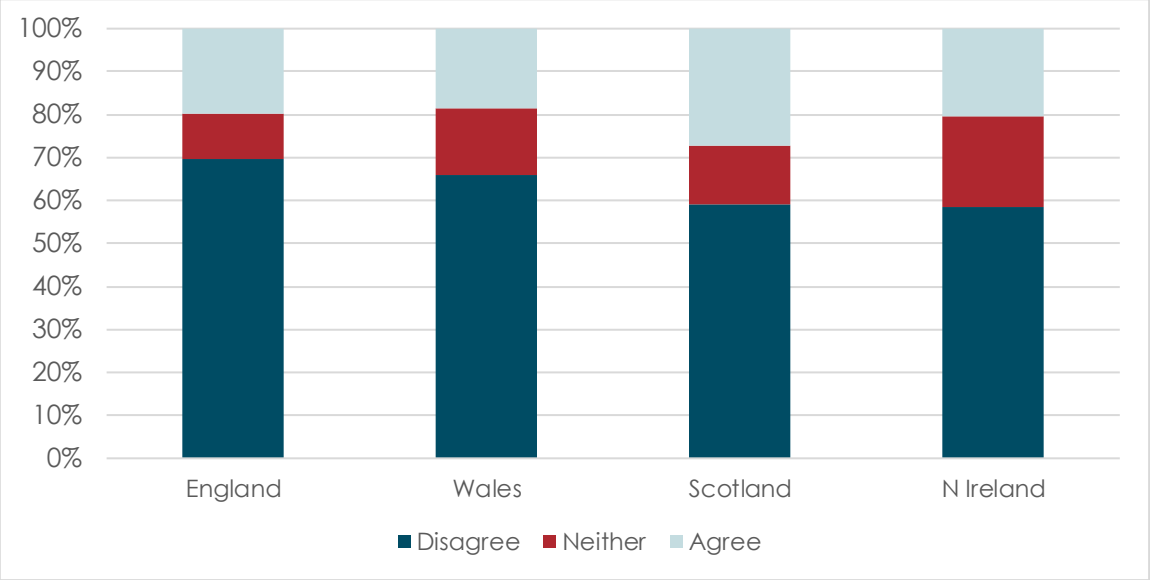
This is also evidenced by two examples. Farmers were asked whether they thought *'farm assurance is an essential requirement for farmers in the UK'*. Scotland and Northern Ireland had the highest level of agreement with this statement, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Do you believe that farm assurance schemes are an essential requirement for farmers in the UK? *(Source: Online Survey)*




In response to a question on whether farm assurance provides the opportunity to earn a premium price, whilst there was general disagreement across the UK, farmers in England disagreed the most (70%) with those in Northern Ireland and Scotland being more supportive of the statement (closer to 60% disagreeing). See Figure 2 for more details.

**Figure 2:** Farm assurance provides the opportunity to earn a premium price for farmers *(Source: Online Survey)*




The supply chain consultation sought to assess the relationship between farm assurance schemes specific to the devolved nations and the UK-wide schemes. The responses indicated this was probably one of the most contentious aspects of farm assurance, with strong views expressed with regard to national identity and how this influenced the market positioning of those countries' products, both in the UK and in export markets.

A supply chain academic stated:

"……*geographic indication, provenance and cultural heritage need to be embedded in devolved standards, but this could mean a divergence (in standards). And for farmers operating across national boundaries, this is an issue with regard to their farm management practices*….."

It was expressed in the responses from participants in the devolved nations that whilst a valued relationship existed between scheme owner organisations in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, this does not appear to be the case in the relationship with their counterpart in England, namely RT. Collectively, Northern Ireland (NI), Scotland and Wales do not see themselves as being in competition with each other and were willing to work together and to share what might be seen as best practice.

They stated that whilst a formal MOU existed for agreeing equivalence between the devolved nation schemes and the rest of the UK, it had taken two years to agree on how to operationalise this within a Common Framework Agreement for beef and lamb products. Feedback from Scotland, NI and Wales also stressed the need for working on an equal basis with RT whilst retaining devolved nation scheme autonomy.

There was also some negativity expressed about how equivalence and complementarity could be confirmed within the Common Framework Agreement. The RT submission did not address this question explicitly.

Equivalence is seen as the process of determining whether the standards from national counterparts achieve the same or equivalent level of outcomes. This does not mean that the requirements within the standards need to be the same, rather that it can be objectively demonstrated that equivalent standards and/or outcomes can be achieved. This should be the same approach across all national boundaries. Complementarity means that the achievement of these equivalent objectives and/or outcomes can be demonstrated using a range of evidence.

Questions were raised around the difference in audit cycles between nations which made aligning audits across different farm assurance schemes difficult:

A processor stated that:

"….*relationships across devolved scheme areas are challenging - different audit cycles and combining audits does not make it easy - farmers find this frustrating*…."

Another processor explained:

"….*in our view, devolution adds nothing but cost and complication and little in value, UK agriculture does not work in the political boundaries set by devolution*…."

A meat processor respondent stated:

"….*there appears to be little cohesion between the devolved nations - whilst we talk about all schemes under the umbrella of RT - we are seeing more divergence within the schemes that could cause challenges. This is evident, with the devolved regions wanting/needing a USP for beef and lamb*…."

A processor said:

"*….it is crucial that there are equivalent standards across the UK given the interconnectedness of the food-supply chain and the shared vulnerability to under-cutting standards by cheaper imports from outside the UK….*"

There were some calls for a single standard across the UK, but equally there was also a view that devolved nation differentiation, with equivalence agreement, was more important. The evidence submitted highlighted this fundamental difference in preferred approach, and the range of operational challenges to be addressed, with regard to the implementation of the Common Framework Agreement.

## 4.6 Where is Farm Assurance legislation/regulation heading?

Almost without exception, consultation respondents identified sustainability as the aspect of farming activity most likely, indeed required, to be incorporated, or addressed, by farm assurance. This will probably be related to Scope 3 carbon footprints, together with other environmental protection and improvement measures (i.e. biodiversity, soils, water), passed back through the supply chain from retailers and processors. These developments to farm assurance may well occur in parallel to changes in legislation concerning carbon reduction, deforestation and promotion of renewable energy.

RT's introduction of its Greener Farms Commitment was a first attempt at addressing these sustainability issues but is widely considered as poorly handled and was met with considerable resistance from farmers and farmer representative bodies across the industry. The failure of the introduction of this addition to the RT scheme does not mean that the subject should not be addressed, and it remains incumbent upon the industry to identify the most appropriate means for sustainability measures to be incorporated within farm assurance.

In the livestock sector, the drive to reduce anti-microbial resistance through monitoring and reduction in the use of third and fourth generation and critically important antibiotics, has already been addressed by farm assurance. It is not unrealistic to expect that usage levels in future will be capped through regulation. The same approach may also apply to agrochemicals, for example zinc inclusion in animal feed.

Standards will have to flex again to accommodate emerging alternative production methods such as hydroponics and aeroponics in vertical farms and other controlled atmosphere environment farming and to encompass modified grain or meat production.

An indication of the main risks or drivers which may impact future farm assurance schemes in the UK are highlighted in the Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental (PESTLE) analysis at Table 6. This list will likely not be totally exhaustive, but it illustrates how broad in scope these influences will be and the challenge farm assurance schemes will face in their introduction.

**Table 6:** *PESTLE Analysis*

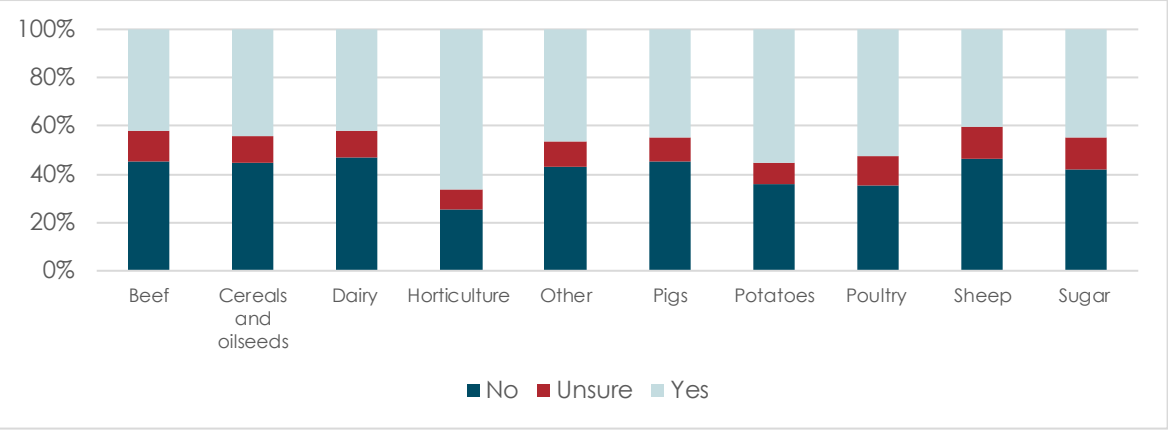
| | P | E | S | T | L | E |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Climate Change adaption – Flood, Heat, Cold | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Biodiversity | ✓ | | | | | ✓ |
| Water management | | | | | | ✓ |
| Renewable energy | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Soya/palm/deforestation | | | | | | ✓ |
| Afforestation – less available cropping area | | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Retailer demands (SCOPE 3) - impact and cost | | | | | ✓ | |
| Fuel emissions/costs/electric vehicles | | | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Disease prevalence - human | ✓ | | ✓ | | | |
| Disease prevalence - animal | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| Soil management - health, fertility, erosion | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Anti-Microbial Resistance | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Government led changes (i.e sugar tax) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Regulatory/legislative changes | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| Plant Protection Product restrictions | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Zinc removal | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| Land use changes (Green to Grey) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| End of Farm Payments | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Urea rules | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Cost of Living | ✓ | | ✓ | | | |
| Reduction in meat consumption | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Increase in cereal/pulse production | ✓ | | ✓ | | | |
| Public wants/needs | ✓ | | ✓ | | | |
| Religious requirements | | | ✓ | | | |
| Trade opportunities – Post Brexit – International markets (the America's) | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| Mutilation ban | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Animal Activism | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| War – especially Ukraine, Middle East | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Carbon Dioxide shortage | | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Loss of workforce | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| SMETA – Human rights | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Modified grain/meat | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Robotics/AI | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Hydroponics/aquaponics/vertical production | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Aging farming demographic | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |

## 4.7 Do we even need a Farm Assurance system?

There are polarised views in the UK farming and food sector on the whole subject of farm assurance, not least in the farming community itself – the very part of the supply chain it is arguably meant to benefit the most. Our settled view, based on the evidence presented to us, is that the farm assurance system should be retained, but improved. Without a robust farm assurance system there is a risk of damage to retailer and consumer confidence, and a prospect of further fragmentation in the determination of standards in UK farm products. We recognise, however, that because views differ so significantly, it is important that we present both positive and negative aspects of farm assurance arising from submissions made to the Review.

As an early example, from the online farmer survey, some 42% of respondents believed that '*farm assurance schemes are an essential requirement*', but 45% responded '*no*' to the same statement. It is important to note, that 66% of the horticulture sector thought there was a requirement for farm assurance - the highest of all the sectors. Over 50% of potato and pig farmers also agreed with this, however all of the other sectors saw fewer than 50% agree. The sector most opposed to farm assurance was sheep, followed by beef with just 40% and 42% respectively taking the view that farm assurance was required.

**Figure 3:** Is farm assurance an essential requirement in UK farming *(source: Online Survey)*




In the online farmer survey, other comments were made about the essential nature (or otherwise) of farm assurance schemes. Farmers differentiated between a range of stakeholders when they considered whether or not farm assurance was essential - and to whom. Those identified included farmers, consumers, processors, the food service sector and retailers. The essential aspects of farm assurance schemes they highlighted included food hygiene and cleanliness, food safety, food quality, animal welfare, worker welfare, environmental protection and nutrient density.

Overall, however, most farmers did not believe that farm assurance was essential for them, or for many of the other supply chain stakeholders.

One farmer said:

*"….Farm assurance by default cannot be essential, otherwise 100% of food consumed would be farm assured…."*

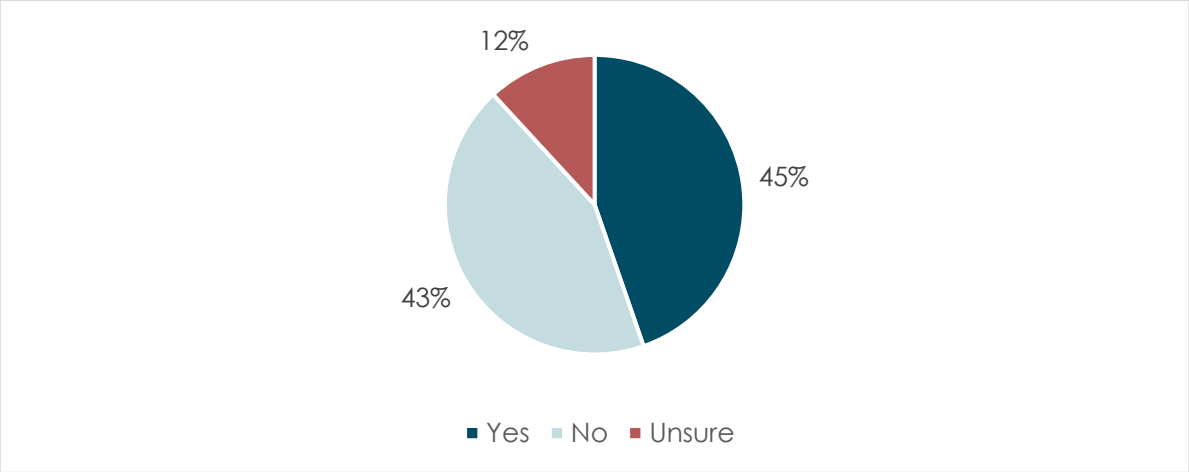
Another farmer stated:

*"….I believe UK food should be produced to UK legal standards and nothing more, I also believe the UK food industry should not import foods produced outside of these laws…."*

There was, though, an underlying belief in all the responses that food must be safe.

Farmers were also asked if they believed that farm assurance schemes are an essential requirement for retailers, food processors and other stakeholders in the UK supply chain. Again, this provided quite an even split with 45% agreeing *they are 'essential for the supply chain'* - whilst 43% said *'no'* they do not believe this to be the case (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4:** Is farm assurance an essential requirement in the rest of the UK supply *(source: Online Survey)*




### Positive views about Farm Assurance

Despite the criticism of the current system of farm assurance by many farmers, positive views about the benefits of the system were often noted. Examples of these comments included:

*"…. If you are fortunate to have an inspector where an understanding has been built, then you can learn from them and make the process much more straight forward…."*

*"…. I believe that they are essential in the sense that it creates a sense of professionalism amongst farmers, but not that they should be compulsory in order to sell your farm production, whatever it is…."*

Farmers often differentiated between what was 'essential' and what was seen as 'necessary'.

They went on to list a number of personal and business benefits from being involved in the farm assurance process. These typically included:

- market access
- providing reassurance to customers
- keeping up to date with changes in legislation or market requirements
- being more aware of the standards that they needed to comply with to supply products into the market
- proof of the standards they maintain
- having 'another pair of eyes' to look at the business
- being benchmarked against other farmers
- providing a framework for their management systems, instilling discipline and professionalism into their own businesses and their sector

One quote from a farmer that sums up these views is:

"…. they *(assurance standards) provide access to all markets. All buyers and market places will accept my produce. They keep me up to date with regulation changes, so that if I get a government inspection, I am less worried about things. I like to know I am doing things well or not so well, having outside eyes come over my farm is a good way to be evaluated*…."

Overall, those who were positive felt that the principle of farm assurance was right, and that it:

- raised the base of the lowest production standards on UK farms
- provided recognition of the standards to which they were producing
- reduced the need for multiple customer audits
- supported better supply chain collaboration

They also felt that in some instances they had received good pre-audit support from the assessment body and that this had helped the whole assurance process to run more smoothly. Many farmers said that they took pride in being farm assured and it *'felt good'* to pass an audit.

Others (as will be seen later in the report) highlighted how pre-audit support could be improved.

Key aspects of the other benefits of farm assurance schemes were that being assured could lead to:

- better access to government funds
- a lower business risk profile
- tangible financial benefits
- being better able to meet the requirements for export markets
- improving the professionalism of farming businesses
- the opportunity to embed continuous improvement in the assessment process

These examples were supplemented with other potential benefits though there were mixed views about the likelihood of them being realised:

### Benefit 1 – Market access

A farmer group described market value as *"another form of value delivered by assurance schemes, but opinions amongst farmers differ as to whether schemes offer access to better value markets, or simply become a licence to trade."* This means that the value of market access is based on regulatory compliance and, where defined, compliance with other market standards.

"…. *what is the benefit of it [farm assurance] for a farmer and I argue it's almost like a licence to operate in a way, isn't it? ….*" (Retailer)

There was general agreement amongst various stakeholders with which the Review engaged that farm assurance now provided a baseline for farm products for which there was little or no financial reward. Some respondents noted that in certain farming sectors there was no difference in the per head price for assured or non-assured livestock, while others reported the case of the pig sector, where the base price for pigs was higher for assured versus non-assured pigs, even if this was not considered to be a 'premium'.

### Benefit 2 - Regulatory compliance and earned recognition

For some schemes certification to a farm assurance standard, demonstrates compliance with given criteria, but also reduces the audit burden by incorporating regulatory compliance inspections within the audit process. The value derived by the farming business is to have fewer audits, but the compliance burden could be higher than compliance with a Benefit 1 standard.

As an example, the FSA is responsible for the inspection and enforcement of dairy hygiene regulations on registered milk production holdings in England and Wales. The frequency of inspections is based on risk, where the criteria for determining risk includes membership of the third-party accreditation scheme, the RT Farm Assurance Dairy Scheme (RTFADS), the compliance history of the farm over time and any other evidence, including local intelligence, complaints or investigations that may warrant an inspection[7].

A supply chain stakeholder noted:

" *….the RT dairy scheme is different from other farm assurance schemes in that it is a processor led scheme. In order to supply milk to nearly all UK processors, dairy farmers must be members of the RT scheme. As dairy farmers have a contract committing to supply all their milk to just one processor, farmers have less influence on standards being inspected. A similar process is not possible in the red meat sector, where farmers can and do supply a number of different processors, who have different requirements for different outlets…. "*

The FSA stated that:

"*…..the conditions for making such arrangements work were clear: the schemes needed to be robust: transparent in their setting and policing of standards: and rigorous about enforcement, including demonstrating willingness to expel members who breached standards….*"

A processor explained the context in more detail, in that the processor underwrites the '*cost of assurance'* by paying for the audits on farm and licencing fees to RT.

A former view of farm assurance schemes, as a type of quasi regulation, was that increasing requirements in farm assurance standards would be of value, because it would lead to less government interference, and the cost of regulatory compliance would be shared with the industry. However, the ever greater number of requirements being embedded in farm

[7] source: www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/chapter-2.9-dairy-hygiene-inspection_3.pdf

assurance schemes as a mechanism to avoid being regulated was summarised in this submission by a supply chain CEO:

*"…. it's got too big, too cumbersome, too expensive and has too much duplication…."*

### Benefit 3 – Proxies for regulation which deliver public good

Another view of the development of public-private partnerships via enhanced farm assurance is that they can deliver public good and cost sharing governance approaches. This shift in governance approach within the policy sphere of public health and safety (e.g. animal disease surveillance and control programmes) has resulted in the evolution of a shared approach rather than a positive set of policy decisions determine by the industry and its regulators.

Drivers for the development of such partnerships have included the 2007/08 global financial crash, and, more recently, the cost of mitigating the COVID pandemic. These, and other cost pressures in the public sector have left many national governments "indebted, struggling to fund all their commitments and more reliant on support from the private sector to help fund and implement government policy"[8].

A good example of best practice in this respect, was provided in the submission from WLBP concerning its work to reduce antibiotic use amongst its members. Measurement of antibiotic use on farms is included in the activities of compliance for the WLBP Farm Assured Welsh Livestock Scheme (FAWL) and is then reported in annual AMU reports. This not only allows farm businesses to monitor their use against industry baselines, but also provides important data for the scheme, others in the food chain and to regulators on progress with the reduction of antibiotic use.

### Benefit 4 – Additional premium price within the supply chain

Whilst additional premium prices for farm assurance were, in the 1990s, an early promoted benefit of farm assurance, it is only really through compliance with higher level, rather than baseline farm assurance schemes, that a market premium can now be derived.

Examples were provided where additional price premiums can be earned, such as with the *Jordans*[9] or *Wild Farmed,*[10] schemes, but the general feeling was that, with most schemes, the value of farm assurance would not necessarily be gained from the market place, nor be realised specifically at the farm gate.

### Benefit 5 – Unintended benefits to farmers

With regard to unintended farm assurance scheme benefits and/or consequences for farmers, supply chain respondents highlighted a number of benefits for farmers and growers from farm assurance schemes, outside the food and feed regulatory and market dynamics.

These focussed, in particular, on finance and insurance. Several submissions suggested that with the 'greening' of finance and the need for farming businesses to demonstrate their sustainability credentials, some farm assurance schemes can provide a ready-made

[8] L Manning, 2024
[9] https://jordanscereals.co.uk
[10] https://wildfarmed.com/pages/about-us

mechanism to demonstrate compliance. They provide a means to judge the degree of business and reputational risk associated with performance in environmental protection, or even a failure to make progress on addressing decarbonisation and delivery of net zero.

One example of this was the link between the HSBC Sustainable Farming Pathway and discounted loan arrangement fees for farming businesses that have completed the LEAF Sustainable Farming Review (LSFR) and so are LEAF Marque assured. Whilst, this approach was not about restricting current lending to farming clients, and was considered to be at an early stage, it was thought that it was only likely to develop in the coming years.

At the same time, the Grounded Research analysis noted that while negative sentiments around farm assurance mainly dominated, there were also some positive perspectives acknowledging the benefits of assurance schemes for market access, consumer trust and sustainability:

- **market benefits**: some farmers see value in assurance schemes for opening export markets and meeting the quality standards demanded by retailers. Assurance is viewed as essential for establishing consumer confidence in British agricultural products, particularly in premium markets

- **technological advances:** the analysis found support for digital tools that simplify compliance tasks, with farmers showing optimism toward innovations like blockchain for traceability and apps that reduce the administrative burden

- **environmental standards:** a subset of farmers supported assurance schemes' role in promoting sustainability, seeing frameworks such as LEAF as pathways to address environmental concerns and to adapt to consumer expectations for responsible farming practices

### Negative views about Farm Assurance

More broadly, the extreme view from farmers was that the demand for farm assurance over and above regulatory compliance, was a form of "*protection money, a cartel or mafia-style*" behaviour and a means to "*control*" farmers and exert power over them. Downstream exertion of power and control was a regular theme expressed in the survey responses. The use of this form of wording is an indication of how strongly and emotionally some farmers feel about this subject.

Farmers also expressed another strong view in the online survey about the lack of retailer and downstream commitment to farm assurance standards - a topic that was echoed throughout the responses.

Respondents also questioned whether farm assurance was actually voluntary in its nature, because many markets open to UK farmers require farm assurance as a pre-requisite to supply (i.e. market access can, in some cases, be denied to UK farmers without farm assurance compliance).

One dairy farmer summed up in their response many of the views of other farmers:

*"…. I believe that an assurance scheme such as RT in the context of 'dairy' has become a requirement for entry to market and nothing more. I believe that there is significant value in assurance, provided that it is done right. At present, there is no premium and the ever increasing requirements add significant cost for little value …."*

The need for market differentiation and thus the proliferation of standards, together with the duplication of inspection/assessment, were also expressed as major concerns. This was especially with regard to the resources that need to be allocated to meet these demands in terms of time and financial costs. Comments were also provided about the pressure of this trading burden on farmer wellbeing.

Some of the key points highlighting other concerns were a combination of the following:

- the market power of supermarkets and price pressures
- management of farm assurance schemes - costs and bureaucracy - and the lack of transparency within them
- at worst – what is seen by farmers as bullying tactics and unfair practices
- the impact of farm assurance on farmers (i.e. financial strain, time commitments and mental health issues)

### The power imbalance

Addressing this issue requires, in the future, a more balanced approach to ensure fair practice and equitable distribution of influence within the farm assurance system between supply chain participants. Farmers listed a number of stakeholder interests that influenced farm assurance and how they had been used:

- benefits for the retailer, including supporting their due diligence defence, earned recognition and offsetting of risk
- benefits to shareholders from farm assurance schemes
- differentiating British products
- outsourcing assessment of supply chain compliance, and
- at times, turning a blind eye, virtue signalling, lacking loyalty or paying '*lip service*' to the need for supply chain assurance

The recent focus on Greener Farms Commitment, the longer term implications of carbon credits and carbon foot printing and the power of the green lobby were also often highlighted in comments.

One typical farmer respondent said:

"….. *assurance schemes are increasingly being used by retailers to 'get stuff for free', the attempted roll out of Greener Farms Commitment (GFC) being a prime example: retailers made environmental commitments, but retailers cannot fulfil these commitments, retailers identify farmland as having the potential to fulfil these commitments, then retailers attempt to make mandatory provision of green assets part of the terms of supply through RT Greener Farms Commitments' 'voluntary' module….*"

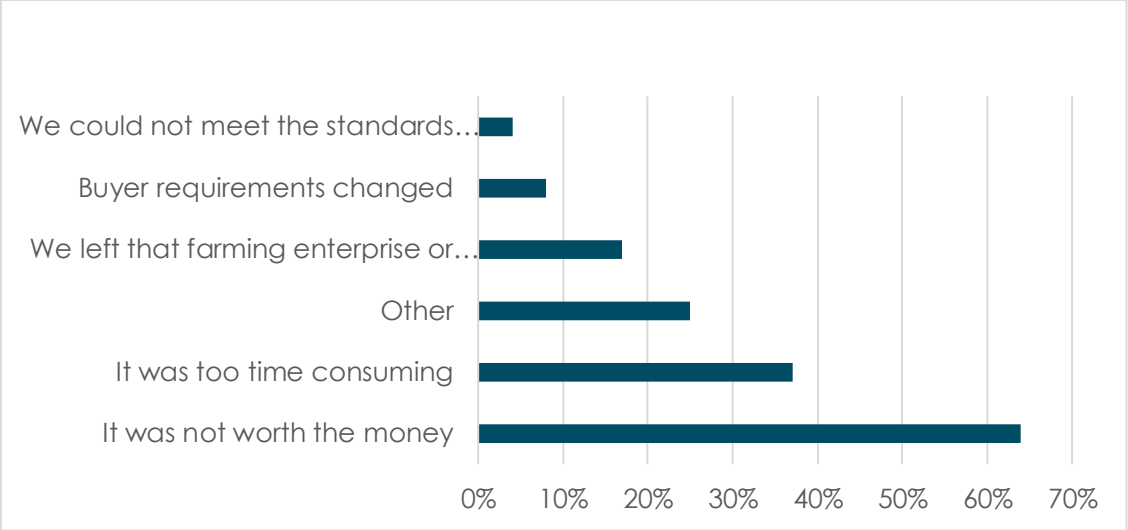
This comment not only highlights concerns over 'mission creep' but also a lack of confidence and trust in the overall relationship with retailers.

### Why do farmers typically leave Farm Assurance schemes?

Of the reasons given why farmers left an assurance scheme in the last 3 years[11] the most common reasons were:

- the time that the audit took to complete (37%)
- the cost of the audit for the value it provided – some 64% of respondents claimed this to be the reason why they left.

**Figure 5:** Why Did You Leave a Farm Assurance Scheme in The Last 3 Years? *(source: Online Survey, with a base of 13% from 3,616 responses)*




Other reasons why farmers left a scheme included:

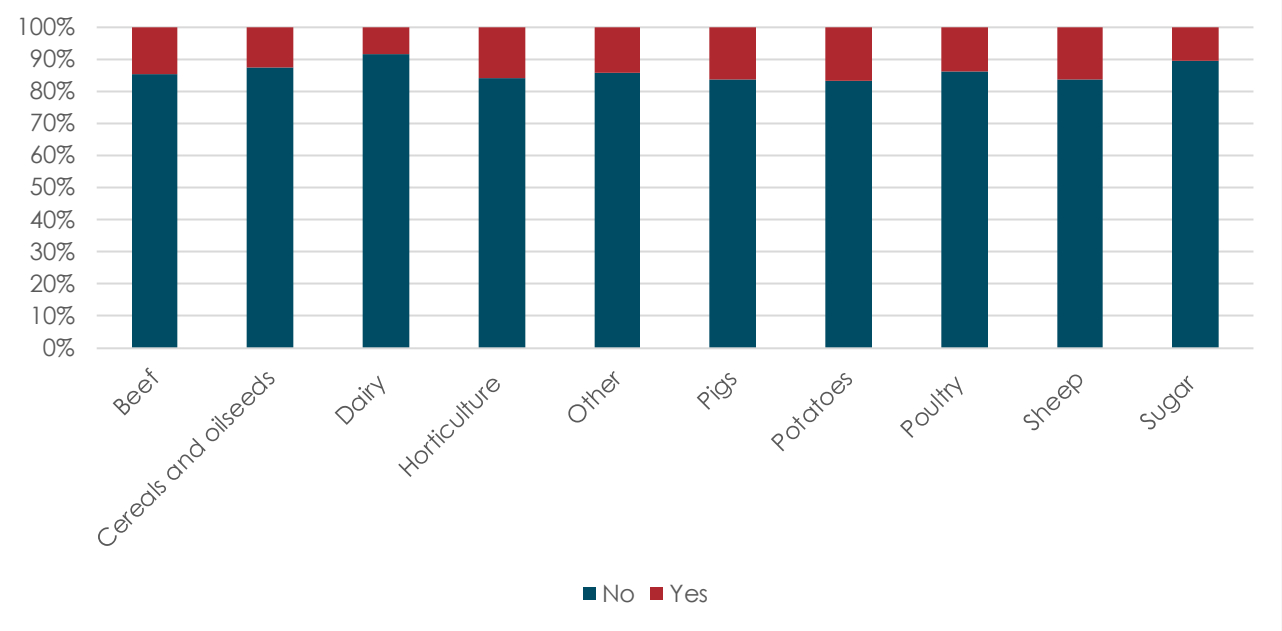
- being suspended from the certification process
- their certification bodies ceasing auditing that particular standard and not transitioning to a new body
- simply letting the registration lapse
- exiting an enterprise, because it meant they did not then need to be inspected or for other reasons
- moving into Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) options so no longer requiring assurance
- having no succession plans
- renting the farm to someone else or retiring.

Some of the examples demonstrated a loss of trust in the assurance process. The situation across the UK is not uniform – as can be seen in Figure 6 below. Farmers were most likely to

[11] 13% based on the online survey (n = 470)

leave a farm assurance scheme in the beef, horticultural, potato and pig sectors - and the least likely to leave were found in the dairy and sugar sectors.

**Figure 6:** Have You Left a Farm Assurance Scheme in the Last 3 Years? *(source: Online Survey)*




Farmers who had left a scheme often felt there was a lack of transparency in its operation, that there had been no consultation and no recognition that, for many farms, there was no administrative support. Others noted that the standards were not fit for purpose and there had been 'mission creep' over their period in a farm assurance scheme.

Some farmers stated they simply left on principle:

"….we *left out of principle. Disappointed [that] imported cereals don't need farm assurance, yet UK producers have had their markets cut off if they won't pay for RT membership. AIC have two sets of intake/assurance standards.... one for UK producers and another for every other country of the world (except the UK). This needs challenging…."*

Farmers also left farm assurance schemes when they found they could sell their produce into non-assured markets (i.e. their buyers did not require the produce to be assured) often for the same or higher value. A number of comments involved the sale of livestock, live rather than deadweight. There was also no perceived financial value from being assured amongst those who had left.

*"…. it felt like a meaningless tick box exercise. The inspector that came was just interested in seeing paperwork. We are a small farm, so the administrative burden is proportionally higher for us to do the actions. We value high standards in farming and strive to achieve them, even past the point of economic return. But we have enough pressures on our time with the agricultural transition, that it's not worth putting time into something that doesn't achieve anything …."*

Other farmers said they would be prepared to rejoin if there was a different approach to farm assurance, for example:

*"…. I would rejoin Lion if they had a transparent mechanism of engaging with farmers on standards and stop exceeding their remit on matters which are not important to food safety and traceability …."*

### The process of receiving a non-compliance

Some farmers said that they were happy with the explanations and the timescales for completing the corrective actions associated with an audit finding of non-compliance.

Other farmers felt there could be a better administration of the process when there was a non-compliance, a better complaint process and better communication. Whilst some commented that the standards had been well explained, when a non-compliance had been raised the relevant farmers often felt that this had not been the case.

The challenges of consistency in audit approach and the resulting audit decision were raised in many of the survey responses. Comments included the need for greater flexibility, a higher degree of fairness and the need to grade the non-compliance sanction more closely with the severity of the non-compliance.

One challenge that was raised was when the farming business was operated by a tenant farmer and they needed to seek the landlord's involvement and consent to address a non-compliance. This added requirement sometimes made it difficult to comply within certain prescribed audit timescales. Whilst some farmers said there had been good dialogue between the auditor and the farmer in the event of such a case, others noted that conflicts had arisen. These farmers saw the non-compliances given as petty, unfair and inconsistent.

Farmers often highlighted the need for a more sophisticated risk-based approach, both to any non-compliances identified (e.g. when a vet had signed the wrong page of a health plan) and in terms of audit frequency. This was a theme expanded upon in the supply chain consultations.

The study by Grounded Research, in this respect, concluded that current assurance frameworks, while beneficial for setting industry standards and promoting consumer trust, are perceived as costly, administratively burdensome, and often misaligned with farmers' needs. Farmers expressed a strong desire for future changes that included:

- **more streamlined processes:** a simplified assurance framework with reduced paperwork, lower compliance costs, and fewer audits, especially for smaller farms
- **greater transparency and farmer representation:** farmers desired more democratic, transparent governance structures within assurance bodies and advocated for organisations that better represent grassroots agricultural concerns
- **flexible, more farmer led models:** farmers suggested exploring tiered or self-assurance schemes that offer flexibility across farm types and regions, allowing smaller and independent farms to comply, with fewer restrictions
- **enhanced support for sustainability goals:** with consumer demand increasingly tied to environmental responsibility, farmers called for assurance frameworks that balanced sustainability with economic viability. There was a push for policies that provide financial and operational support for farms adapting to new environmental standards

- **mental health considerations:** the Grounded Research report also highlighted the need for mental health support, given the significant stress and emotional strain that assurance compliance can sometimes place on farmers

The study concluded that by aligning assurance frameworks with practical needs and supporting flexibility, transparency, and sustainability, assurance schemes could evolve into more equitable systems that bolster UK agriculture's competitiveness and resilience. These comments aimed to foster a more inclusive approach to farm assurance, balancing quality and ethical standards, with the operational realities faced by farmers

## 4.8 Key findings from the Literature Review

Our literature review was prepared after an exhaustive assessment of reports and other documents on the subject of farm assurance and closely related topics – we assessed over 30 documents in all. Most of these covered the UK farming and food sector. A fuller version is provided in Annex VII of this report, but the main findings from this research can be summarised as follows:

- the benefits of using more IT in the whole process of farm assurance including the opportunity to optimise production processes, reduce waste and increase productivity
- the need for more earned recognition in the process of farm assurance
- there are long-standing concerns about the number and type of on-farm inspections – farmers see inspections as time consuming and unnecessarily disruptive to their businesses and their purpose may not always be clear
- there is agreement that there is a need to reduce the burden of inspections on farmers and there have been several attempts to do this
- various degrees of tension between farmers and end users processors/retailers have always been a feature on farm assurance schemes
- the varied views on the role of farm assurance and its expected benefits, between upstream and downstream stakeholders, is long standing and results in a divergence of expectations and resultant tension in trading relationships
- farmers do not often see the value that farm assurance brings to them
- the process of culture change in the operation of farm assurance should be one of continuous improvement and should apply across the board. The governance and management of farm assurance schemes is very much part of this requirement
- farmers often join a scheme as part of their contract requirement with a packing/processing and/or marketing company or a customer. This practice seems to be common amongst farmers in the UK, no matter the type of farm business, because retailers, particularly the large supermarkets, require farmers to be members of a farm assurance scheme
- many farmers feel that consumers are entitled to their opinions, but they often have no real concerns about animal welfare, mainly because they are still often price driven

- there is a need to build more trust and confidence in the farming regulatory system
- farm assurance will need to consider more sustainability metrics in the future
- there is potential to extract additional value from farm assurance. However, this can only materialise if there is much greater communication between farmers, scheme owners and users of farm assurance across the supply chain

## 4.9 A gap analysis between the UK and international case studies

We carried out a series of case studies on how farm and food assurance schemes are organised and implemented in Ireland, the Netherlands, Thailand and Argentina (see Annex VIII for the full case studies).

In 2024, the AHDB commissioned a number of pieces of work to understand how certain international farm assurance systems work, and how they compare to the standards applied in the UK. Whilst not part of this Review, we have taken the findings into account as further international evidence and have provided a summary of the AHDB studies in Annex IX[12].

The completion of the case studies and a GAP analysis (see Table 7) identified models of farm assurance with greater government involvement and coordination. All of these findings have helped to inform our thinking on the characteristics of 'good farm assurance' set out in Table 8.

**Table 7:** *GAP Analysis of Farm Assurance in the UK vs international markets*

| UK | Ireland |
|---|---|
| • Multiple organisations are involved in the management of farm assurance but with no overall single point of control<br>• There is a fragmented approach, with a high number of schemes, management organisations, and different levels of recognition<br>• The UK has a big local market but relatively limited agricultural exports compared to some other nations<br>• The contribution of UK agriculture to GDP is around 0.76%<br>• There is limited use of new technologies in farm assurance schemes<br>• The main farm assurance scheme was developed over 25 years ago and is sometimes now seen as not fit for purpose in the new farming environment<br>• The added value of farm assurance for producers and processors is unclear, and it is uncertain if it is a real differentiator in the markets<br>• Despite efforts to promote farm assurance schemes, consumer awareness and understanding of these schemes can be limited | • Farm assurance schemes are managed by a single organisation, Bord Bia<br>• There is substantial government support in farm assurance and related marketing activities<br>• These schemes are widely recognised and supported across the supply chain and are seen as a differentiator in both local and global markets<br>• Farm assurance schemes underpin exports, which is crucial for the agriculture sector because of the small size of the local market<br>• There is a drive towards digital QA-enabled systems<br>• Sustainability plays a significant role in farm assurance |
| **Thailand** | |
| • The government leads the approach with a strong commitment to food safety<br>• Agriculture plays an important role in GDP, contributing 7%<br>• The private sector not only follows local regulations, but also adopts highly recognised standards. | |

[12] We are aware that a further study commissioned by AHDB on Cereals and Oilseeds Farm and Trade Assurance Processes is in progress but the final report was not available at the time of writing.

- There is a lot of confusion between farm and trade assurance in cereals and oilseeds
- International and domestic cereal and oilseed schemes meet the same food and feed safety compliance
- Overall, RT standards scored higher than most international standards for beef & lamb
- RT's standards are more prescriptive than most other schemes

Private companies develop their assurance schemes to meet global market demands
- Traceability is viewed as a priority, with the use of technology and digital systems such as blockchain
- Standards and QA processes are constantly reviewed to maximize opportunities

**Argentina**

- One organization, SENASA, is responsible for managing farm assurance schemes, and it is heavily supported financially by the government
- The agrifood sector is important, contributing 16% to GDP
- Argentina is one of the main food exporters globally.
- Farm and food assurance are part of the Argentine Food Code, which was enacted by law
- The farm assurance schemes are seen as potential differentiators in both local and international markets

**The Netherlands**

- The framework has been developed by the EU, but with a national interpretation
- The NL farm assurance schemes are very focused on the environment and on animal welfare
- There is a strong commitment to maintaining high standards to compete in global markets
- The country's high standards of agricultural production are globally recognised

**Comparison of International Beef & Lamb Standards – Australia & New Zealand**

- RT scored higher except for biosecurity and disease control
- Agricultural practices vary, as such the schemes and requirements between the UK and these countries also vary
- There are areas for improvement in all of the schemes
- RT audits every 18 months, vs NZFAP which is every 3 years

**Comparison of International Beef & Lamb Standards – EU Countries**

- RT scored higher in most areas
- Beter Leven focuses on welfare, Label Rouge looks to maximise end-product quality

**Comparison of International Beef & Lamb Standards – North America**

- RT scored higher in most areas
- RT & CVS are more detailed and prescriptive than other schemes

**Comparison of International Beef & Lamb Standards – South America**

- RT scored higher in most areas
- GSLP focuses on food safety and worker welfare

CH focuses on high animal welfare

## 4.10 What are the characteristics of 'Good' Farm Assurance

We carried out a full range of research and consultation work in the course of the Review, using online methods, face to face communications and desktop analysis of prior work in this field. The frankness and generosity of all those, in every part of the food system, who contributed their views has meant that we have gathered a wealth of shared experience and evidence - good and bad - on which to draw in preparing this report.

Most importantly, where farm assurance has worked or is perceived to be working well, we have noted from the evidence provided to us a number of common characteristics, which are summarised as follows and in Table 8 below.

**Table 8:** *Characteristics of good Farm Assurance*

- Strong leadership – clarity of purpose
- Regular review
- Transparency
- Collaboration
- A focus on delivering value to participants
- Consistency and continuity
- A clear, transparent and proportionate approach to enforcement
- Healthy competition

- **Strong leadership - clarity of purpose -** those schemes showing greatest success in delivering value throughout the food system had clear objectives - making a well understood and transparent offer on the guarantees offered by scheme membership and maintaining their focus through strong leadership and a refusal to be sidetracked by political expediency. Several respondents we spoke with described this as the importance of a strong 'controlling mind'

- **Regular review -** farmers reported the best experience where schemes were prepared to flex to reflect developments (e.g. to offer best practice in inspections, or to reflect the developing legislative framework). This kind of flexibility is a factor in securing producer confidence and avoiding a sense of 'mission creep', where standards constantly accumulate but those that are no longer relevant are not removed at the same pace

- **Transparency -** we heard a great deal about the importance of transparency - offering clarity about how standards are set at whose request and why, and about the importance of honest engagement of all interested parties, to ensure that standards are practical and to avoid the scope for duplication

- **Collaboration -** we heard very favourable feedback about those instances where different players within the food system had collaborated to share standards and assurance processes – whether this was Government relying on assurance schemes to meet statutory requirements, or retailers relying on established schemes for assurance. Where this had been possible, those involved spoke about the ways in which clarity about standards, implementation, enforcement and transparency had helped to build necessary trust

- **A focus on delivering value to participants** - many of those we spoke to talked about the ability, or otherwise, of schemes to deliver a market premium to farmers. This was especially difficult in those sectors (e.g. combinable crops) for which there is no consumer-facing label, or where there is poor consumer recognition of the value of assurance schemes. The best schemes focus on trying to deliver value - whether through a price premium or through the use of data and advice on best practice to enhance

farm performance. They also focus on the scope for scheme membership to improve market access, and to strengthen product integrity, including in export markets (although we heard from some that there is greater scope to think strategically about assurance in relation to exports)

- **Consistency and Continuity -** scheme participants valued an approach which allowed data to be transferred only once, where inspection practices were clear and predictable and where schemes were able to build a picture of the particular circumstances of individual businesses. Scheme portals have played an important first step in offering this kind of consistency, but there was an appetite for them to go further. And there is a significant appetite for all the players engaged in farm inspections to make greater efforts to co-ordinate their activities and to take proper account of information provided pre-audit to reduce the time burden of audit visits

- **A clear, transparent and proportionate approach to enforcement -** we heard compelling accounts from farmers about the extent to which a binary 'pass/fail' approach to inspection contributed to the overall stress of the farm assurance process. We also heard from Government Departments and Agencies about the importance of clarity about enforcement and penalties in deciding whether to rely on schemes for official/regulatory purposes. Schemes with mature and transparent policies on enforcement and a proportionate approach to penalties fare best on both counts

- **Healthy Competition -** farmers and other consultees favoured a degree of choice over which scheme to join as offering a stimulus to improve scheme conditions for participants. By contrast, where participation in a particular scheme had effectively become a gateway to market participation, farmers often felt less confidence that schemes would carry out this improvement

Our recommendations in Section 6, are designed to help deliver these good characteristics of farm assurance.

# Section 5. Key Themes: Our Evidence Base

## Theme 1: **Issues with the audit process and its impact**

*See Strategic Recommendations 1 & 2*

The role of the audit process and its impact were major themes emerging from the online farmer survey – both in the qualitative and qualitative responses provided by farmers. As such it is the first of our key themes which then feeds into the next section of the report covering associated recommendations.

As can be seen from Figure 7, the farmer survey revealed that whilst just under 30% of farmers found their farm assurance auditor to be 'practical and realistic', and a further 17% regarded them as 'firm but fair', some 48% still thought them to deliver too much variation in the audit process, and to be impractical and overly fussy.

**Figure 7:** How much do you agree with these statements? *(source: Online Survey)*




It can be seen from Figure 8 on the following page that the cost of a farm assurance audit is seen by 39% of farmers as being 'stressful' or 'unbearable'. In terms of the time it takes to complete a farm assurance audit, 31% of farmers find it 'stressful' *or* 'unbearable'.

**Figure 8:** The impact of key factors during a Farm Assurance inspection? *(source: Online Survey)*

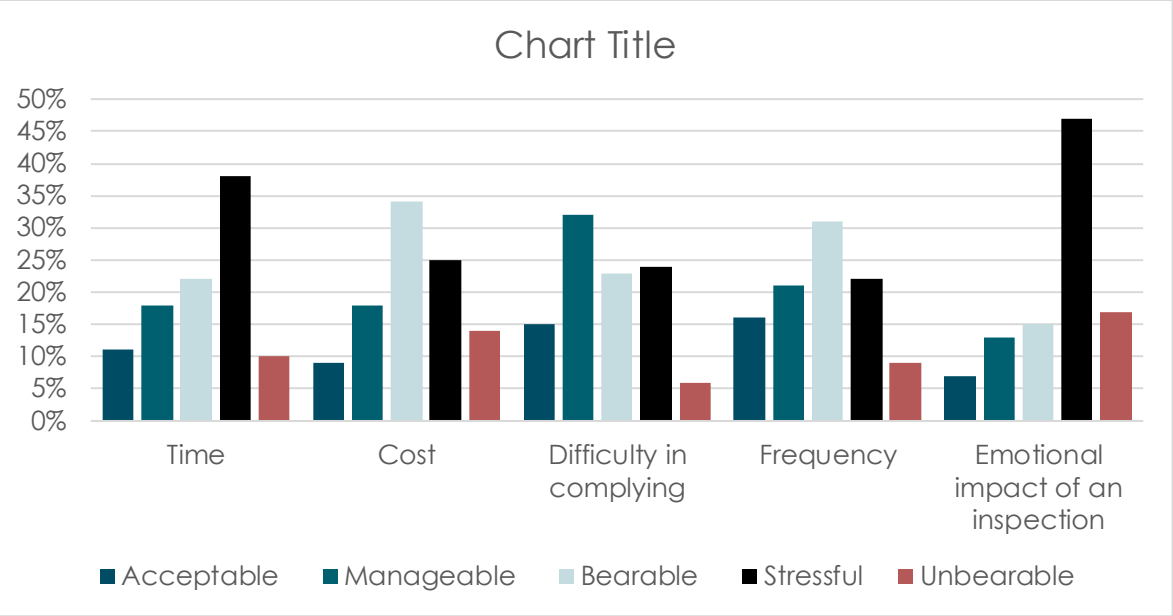
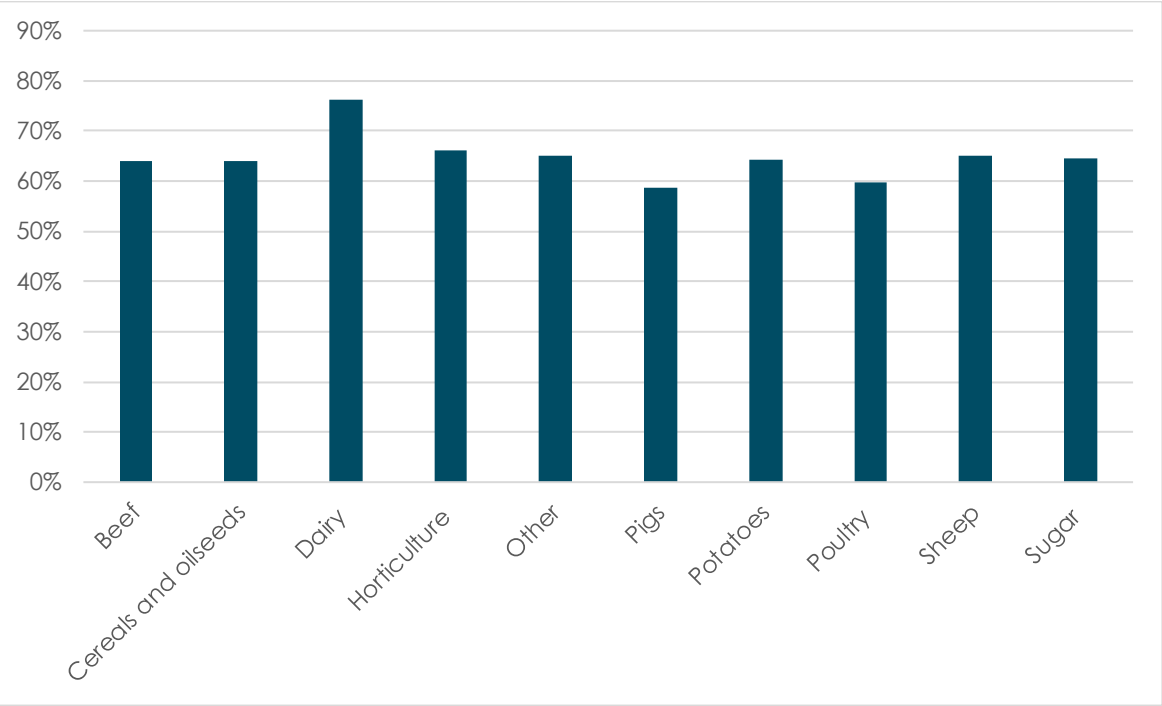



Figure 9 shows those that rated the 'emotional impact of an inspection' as both 'stressful' and 'unbearable', by sector. This indicates that those in the dairy sector (76%) find the audit most stressful, whilst the pig (59%) and poultry sectors (60%) find it least so.

**Figure 9:** By Sector - Those Who Rated the Emotional Impact of An Audit "Stressful" And/or "Unbearable" *(source: Online Survey)*



However, even the data from the pig and poultry sectors show that the level of stress caused by an audit to farmers, is still very high.

From the online survey and the qualitative comments submitted alongside it, there is a consistent underlying sentiment that current farm assurance schemes are 'a hammer to crack a nut'.

One typical farmer quote highlighted this point:

"…. *legislation is in place to ensure we produce food safely. A system to check this is sensible, but the current system is far too onerous* …."

There was a sense that farm assurance, especially as it has evolved today, was a trading burden, and baseline farm production standards are now adequately addressed by legislation. The difference between the desire and/or need for adoption of farm assurance thirty-five years ago and the 'mission creep' reported today was marked in some of the survey responses.

The challenge to small farm businesses, and the cost of compliance with farm assurance standards compared to large businesses, was also noted.

The impractical, inflexible and unrealistic expectations of audits was a further common theme.

Farmers often considered the process was a 'chore', that the cost for compliance was nearly always borne by them (more so than other stakeholders), that there was too much of a focus on documentation (sometimes with the same documentation needing to be produced on multiple occasions) and that there was significant duplication of time and effort in meeting required standards.

This duplication was both in terms of overlap between standards on a multi-standard audit and between regulatory visits and audits. Aspects that were felt to be too onerous were described as 'box ticking', the overall process being cumbersome, impractical, even 'pointless' and this they felt led to significant additional workload.

Many farmers said that they felt that farm assurance was a waste of money and time, and that, as such, farm assurance was 'not fit for purpose'. They added that there was too much gold plating, that they were being made to 'jump through hoops' and that farm assurance schemes were self-perpetuating, too paperwork focused, and unrealistic.

Another example of a typical farmer comment on this topic was that:

"…. *processors quickly realised that they had been gifted a means of putting the cost of improving a product squarely on the farmer, with no obligation to pass any extra revenue, in saved costs or extra sales, back down the line. The processors have a tremendous vested interest in keeping assurance schemes going and supporting any measures that might conceivably help sales, even though they [farm assurance schemes] can be seen to be totally irrelevant to the business of getting milk into a tank or a crop from field to store* ...."

The Grounded Research farmer sentiment analysis revealed a predominantly negative response to farm assurance schemes, with posts often citing compliance costs, administrative burdens and perceptions of unfair practices.

Particular points of dissatisfaction included:

- **financial strain**: farmers highlighted the significant costs associated with assurance schemes, which are perceived as burdensome and, at times, prohibitive, especially for smaller farms that cannot leverage any economies of scale

- **bureaucratic complexity**: many farmers expressed frustration with the administrative load, noting that assurance requirements impose excessive paperwork, frequent audits and rigid inspections that are often seen as unnecessary and misaligned with practical farming operations

From the qualitative responses to the online farmer survey, much of the dissatisfaction with farm assurance which had led to farmers leaving schemes was related to the auditor/inspector and their behaviour during audits. This was summed up as concern over the balance of time between inspecting paperwork and being 'out on the farm' during a visit, especially with livestock farms, 'gaming' of the system, lack of flexibility, irrelevant, unrealistic petty and impractical demands, a focus on what were seen as meaningless aspects of farm management and overbearing auditors/inspectors.

Some of the comments highlighted very negative experiences that still caused distress many years later. Responses included:

"…. *total arrogance and unapproachability of the inspectorate*…."

"…. *the last inspector was just rude and arrogant* …."

A not untypical comment was:

"…. *my mental health was suffering due to the inspections* …."

Other farmers noted that the constant ratcheting up of standards, especially those focused on paperwork, indeed the focus on paperwork rather than getting out on farm left them feeling frustrated, and led to them falling out with the certification body or losing trust and faith with both the certification body and the farm assurance scheme itself.

Many farmer comments highlighted the mental impact of the auditing process together with the conduct of the audit. The words that the farmers used included: *anxiety, cruel, depressed, distressed, dread, humiliation, pressure, shame, stress, suicidal, suicide and worry*.

A farmer commented:

"… *retailers and other stakeholders need some way of knowing that their supply is sourced from reputable farms, however, the cost and mental stress to farmers is considerable*…."

A farmer who had left a scheme said

"…. *I don't think I would ever join a scheme again, the stress was far too high, I have never been so depressed in my preparation, during and after a visit. I'm happier now, with returns just as good*…."

The Grounded Research analysis also showed that the issue of mental health and well-being reflected the psychological toll of compliance pressures on farmers. The demands of

assurance schemes, combined with financial uncertainties and regulatory scrutiny, all contribute to heightened stress levels. The analysis highlighted the need for some form of mental health support, given the significant stress and emotional strain assurance compliance places on farmers.

The supply chain consultation, on the other hand, concluded that attempts to reduce the audit and compliance burden need to be considered from multiple viewpoints - and not just as a way of increasing efficiency and reducing cost. For some schemes, such as those focused on dairy, pigs and poultry, it was their view that relevant regulatory inspections and compliances can, and should, be incorporated within farm assurance schemes.

For farmers in this situation, this has created a 'double jeopardy' during a single audit, should an issue of non-compliance arise. Firstly, they may potentially be found to not meet market, but non-regulatory requirements, but secondly, they may also be found to not meet regulatory conditions. A finding of non-compliance raised in such circumstances may lead to differing requirements to implement appropriate corrective action within a given timeframe. This has potentially serious consequences for the farm business.

Where such an outcome is determined by an individual who is not working for the regulator, but is, in part, auditing on behalf of the regulator, who may not, for example, be a trained veterinarian, and with the ISO related restrictions on what the auditor can discuss (i.e. they cannot offer any advice or support), the experience can leave the farm team in a high state of emotional, physical and ultimately financial stress.

There were multiple examples from the supply chain consultation that highlighted the emotional and financial stress this can create, especially where the farmer(s) concerned found it difficult to identify the routes for appeal or complaint about an audit decision, or even potentially faced the loss of their business.

To address this point, pig and poultry farms, which due to their number of livestock fall within the Environmental Permitting Regulations (EPR), can join the Pig and Poultry Assurance Scheme. They have one annual inspection by their nominated certification body, as a joint inspection with RT Assurance or the Lion Code for two years, with an Environment Agency audit in the third year. This separates the element of audit outcome risks into those with a potential market impact against those with a regulatory impact.

Other points from farmers around this theme addressed:

- the need to improve governance of farm assurance standards
- the need for better stakeholder engagement
- the need to improve communications on farm assurance standards

Supply chain consultees highlighted particular aspects of audit activity that could be improved. These included the better co-ordination of work on pre-audit submissions, combined visits, so that audits for multiple farm assurance schemes could be undertaken in 'one sitting', improving consistency between audits and auditors, moving away from 'one size fits all' and coordinating both 'light touch visits' and then 'deeper dives' on particular issues or greater focus on particular aspects of the standard. Finally, increasing the resources that were available for audits, and increasing their transparency were also regarded as important areas for development.

In terms of how standards could be improved, suggestions included:

- more and better standards equivalence across farm assurance schemes
- standards should be streamlined
- better assessment of proposed changes before new standards are adopted

With regard to streamlining standards to reduce the audit and compliance burden, comments included the better aligning of standards and avoiding further proliferation, having a 'core module' and then 'bolt-on' modules to address different market requirements and reducing duplication and simplifying the language used, so that the requirements within the standards were easier to understand.

In terms of impact assessment, the responses from the consultation were quite wide ranging from determining the economic cost of new requirements and whether the market was prepared to pay for them, to better understanding the potential vulnerabilities associated with technology adoption. Some consultees felt it was very important that the requirements should be more evidence or science based and that the source of the evidence for a standard developed by a farm assurance scheme should be more transparent.

## Theme 2: **The role of technology**

*See Strategic Recommendation 2*

Evidence from the online farmer survey revealed the top three priorities on which respondents would like farm assurance schemes to focus, if they were to change. These were:

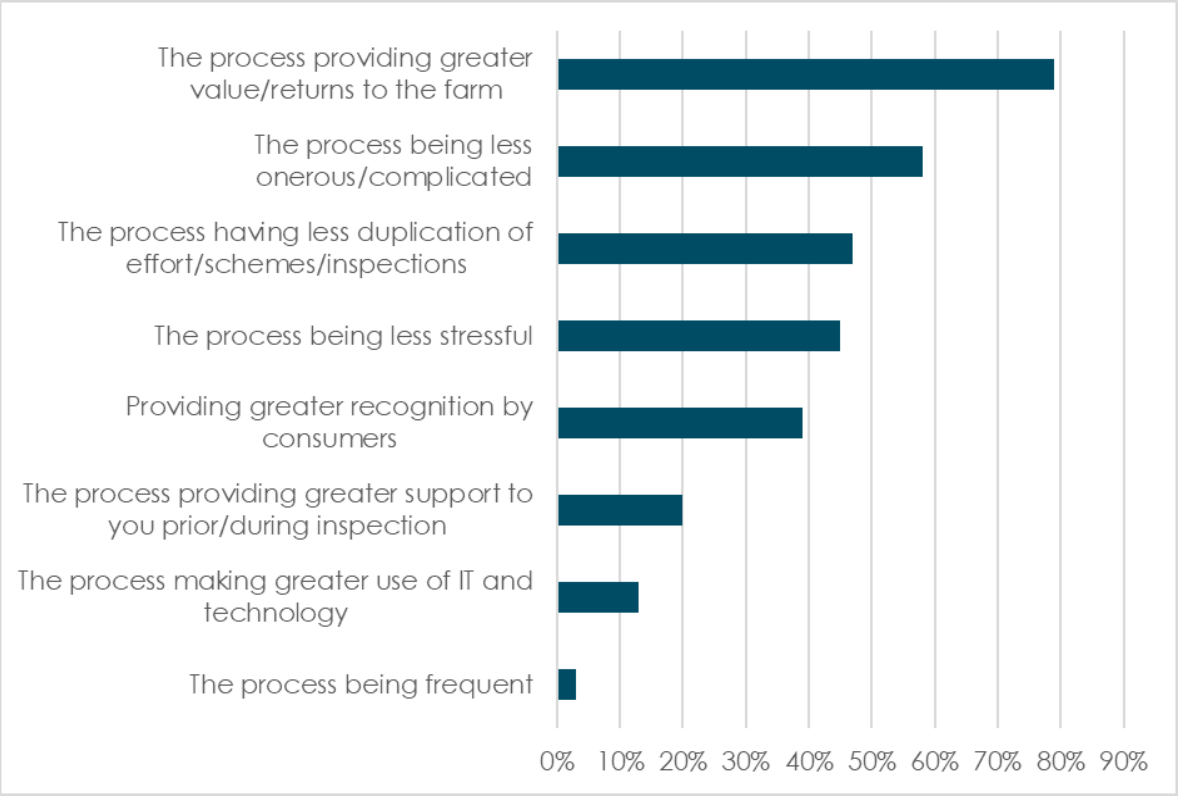
- the process providing greater returns and/or value to the farm
- the audit process being less complicated
- the overall process having less duplication of effort/schemes/audits

Reducing the associated stress with the process was also seen as being very important.

Audits making more use of IT in the future, and using other technologies in the farm assurance process, were, however, seen as being relatively unimportant from the evidence gathered by the online farmer survey.

The fact that some farmers often do not see the use of technology as a major priority, contrasts sharply with the views on this from the rest of the supply chain, described in more detail later in this section.

**Figure 10:** If Farm Assurance Was to Change, What Would You Like It to Focus On – Top 3 Choices? *(source: Online Survey)*




While becoming more conversant with IT based solutions often takes a combination of time and money, the end result of using more technology could achieve many of the things that farmers are asking for, including for audits to be faster and for there to be less duplication of effort. As a result, the greater use of technology could have the potential to reduce stress levels associated with the farm assurance system.

This will require a change of mindset amongst farmers. Some of the uses of technology do not need to be over complicated. In fact, they might be relatively easy (i.e. signing up to access a portal and using it routinely to capture information required by an audit).

As an example of the scale of the task in hand, however, only c25% of farmers who are part of the RT scheme currently make use of its online portal.

From the supply chain consultation there were many views on the future use of technology in farm assurance activities. However, there was still a range of responses, even from those that fully embed the use of technology in the collection, sharing, integration and use of data.

The need to consider in more detail how data driven farm assurance systems could be developed was touched on by many of the supply chain consultees. The responses covered a range of topics, from concerns about avoiding a 'Big Brother' system, to how more transparency could be developed, giving visibility of ongoing compliance, rather than a 'snapshot' audit approach, by moving to more automated 365 24/7 data collection providing real time evidence.

The opportunities to streamline auditing through the use of digital systems, especially the use of portals, platforms and websites, where information could be uploaded pre audit and where templates could be available to reduce the compliance burden on farmers, were commonly discussed.

The relevance of many different technologies was highlighted. These included the use of Application Programming Interfaces (API's), mobile phone apps, increased on-farm automation, AI, QR barcodes, behavioural software, blockchain, CCTV and the use of chatbots to support farmers when they were preparing for audits or needing to ask questions about farm assurance. The use of farm management software, digital medicine books and digital grain passports were often explored, as was the use of livestock monitoring technology.

Supply chain respondents also identified multiple benefits that could arise from the better use of technology. These included:

- the benefit to society of better management of land and food supply
- improved production efficiency
- enhanced data collection and, as a result, better business decision making
- greater integration of systems along supply chains
- improved management, traceability, transparency and visibility within these systems

The most common barriers to technology adoption were seen as those linked to cost, farmer concern over the use of technology, lack of digital skills amongst farmers, the lack of wider digital infrastructure in some rural areas and a lack of the tools needed to derive the greatest benefit from technology adoption.

One supply chain respondent summarised a number of views:

*"…. there's definitely a role for technology, but don't underestimate the number of people who will sit down at a computer and go 'I can't remember my login, I can't find how to access this technology' or you haven't got enough bandwidth to download properly. Technology isn't always the answer to everybody's prayers. Sometimes it makes life more rather than less difficult…."*

Data management and governance of data was explored in detail throughout the consultation process. The governance of data, especially the need to better understand how data will be used and shared in supply chains, was still a concern for many farmers.

Supply chain consultees sometimes commented on whether there should be a centralised data management system, the potential role of a 'data custodian' and how this might link to agreements on data ownership, data security and protocols for sharing data. The newly formed Farm Data Principles Ltd, which is continuing the work of the former British Farm Data Council, may have a role to play in this respect (see: https://farmdataprinciples.com).

One supply chain academic said:

"…. *technology could play a so much better role, but this will require a mindset change for all stakeholders, and some farms may not be able to afford to invest in the technology. There is a lot of vested interest in keeping the status quo. Transitioning to a smart food supply chain, smart assurance and smart auditing will not be easy, but it is achievable ….*"

A respondent from the banking sector linked the use of technology to earned recognition:

"…. earned *recognition through data sharing to Government, the purchaser and the financier will help to benchmark, to recognise progress and to reward it. The wider question of who owns the data is a more tricky one ….*"

The FAWL scheme, as noted earlier, is a good illustration of the benefits of adopting technology within a farm assurance approach.

A farmer group said:

"…. *a full and detailed discovery process to understand how new technology could improve and facilitate the assurance auditing process should be commissioned. This could potentially include a single online portal that gives users clear visibility of all assurance schemes and standards of relevance to a given sector and enables them to be linked together in a single audit requirement by one accredited auditor ....*"

A supply chain respondent noted that:

"…. *technology use plays a huge part in assurance schemes and continues to develop, some areas being…online portals so data can be added by the participant or auditor, use of data up and down the supply chain to add to transparency, use of AI for smarter use of data and analysis, [and] applications of API's for traceability and transparency. Look to other industries and see what best practice looks like ....*"

A further comment from a grain supply chain stakeholder considered how technology could be more linked to risk-based farm assurance schemes, with regard especially to the use of technology to better monitor and drive decarbonisation and environmental protection, with the view that:

"…. *the future will have to be based on carbon and the environment. I believe as much as there is a place for multiple farm assurance bodies, one database is key, as is the data it holds. It would also help with the environment and food security ….*"

## Theme 3: **The voice of farmers within Farm Assurance**

*See Strategic Recommendations 3, 4, 6 & 10*

Farmers strongly believe that farm assurance schemes are valued most positively, and recognised most, by retailers. They do not feel that the value and recognition of farm assurance by farmers is high at all - with 70% of farmers giving a negative response when asked about these factors (see Figure 11 on the following page).

**Figure 11:** Are farm assurance schemes valued/recognised by stakeholders? *(source: Online Survey)*

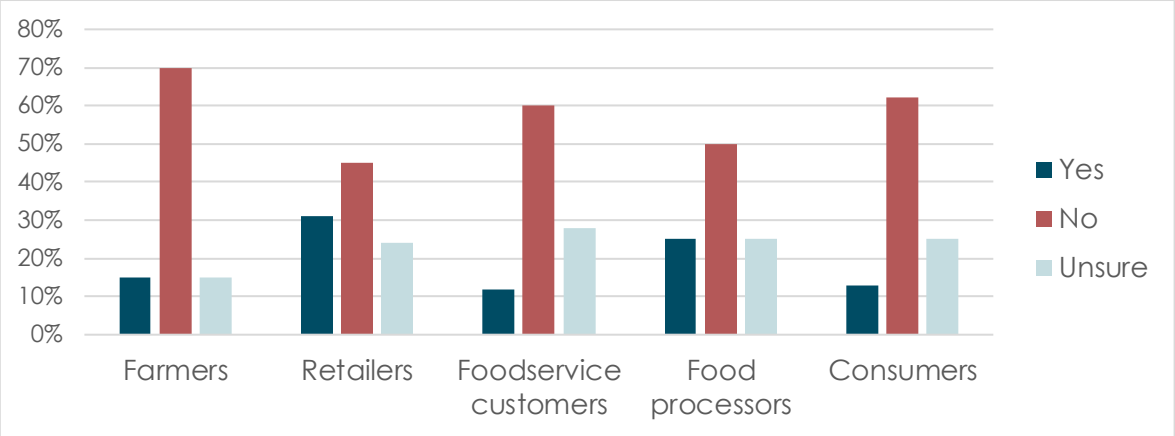



Figure 12 shows that 79% of farmers believed that they should be 'heavily involved' in the development of farm assurance standards in the UK.

Our analysis indicates, in Figure 13, how respondents to the online survey thought farmers could become more involved.

The majority (63%) considered that this could be made possible through farming bodies, such as the farming unions and the AHDB - with 59% considering 'farmer groups' also to be appropriate, in order to achieve this objective.

**Figure 12:** Who Should Be Most Involved in Development of Farm Assurance Standards? *(source: Online Survey)*

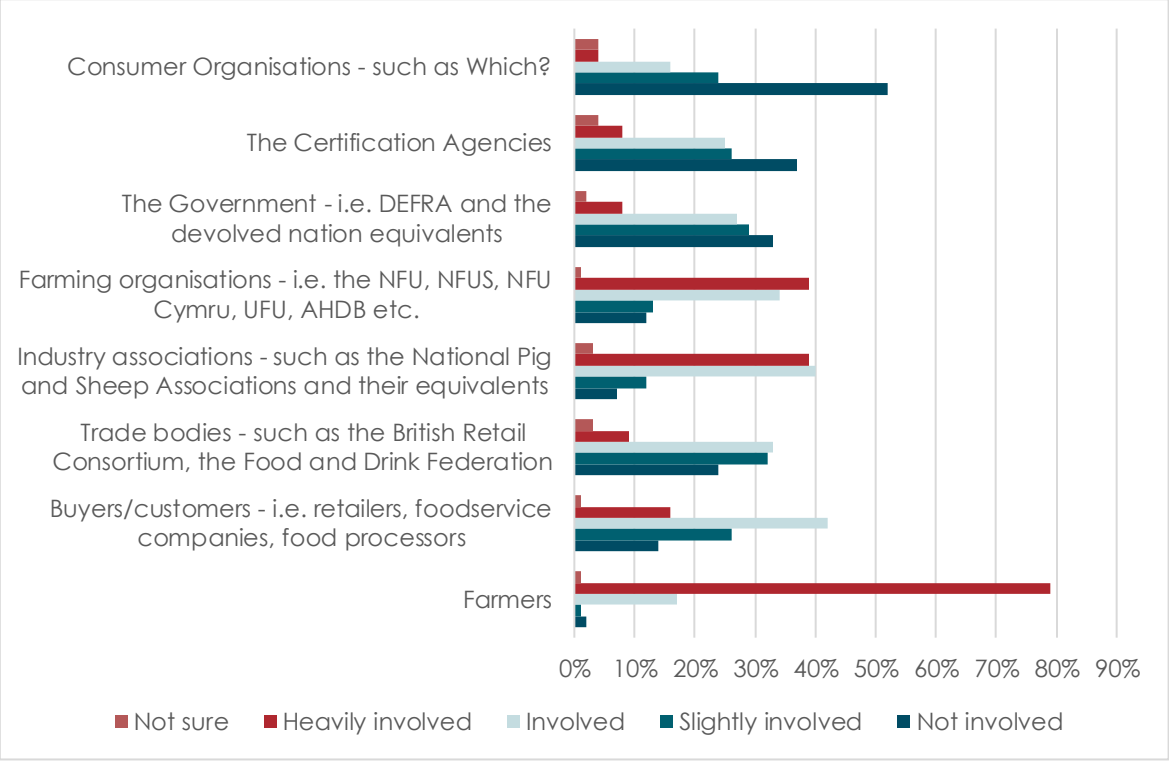
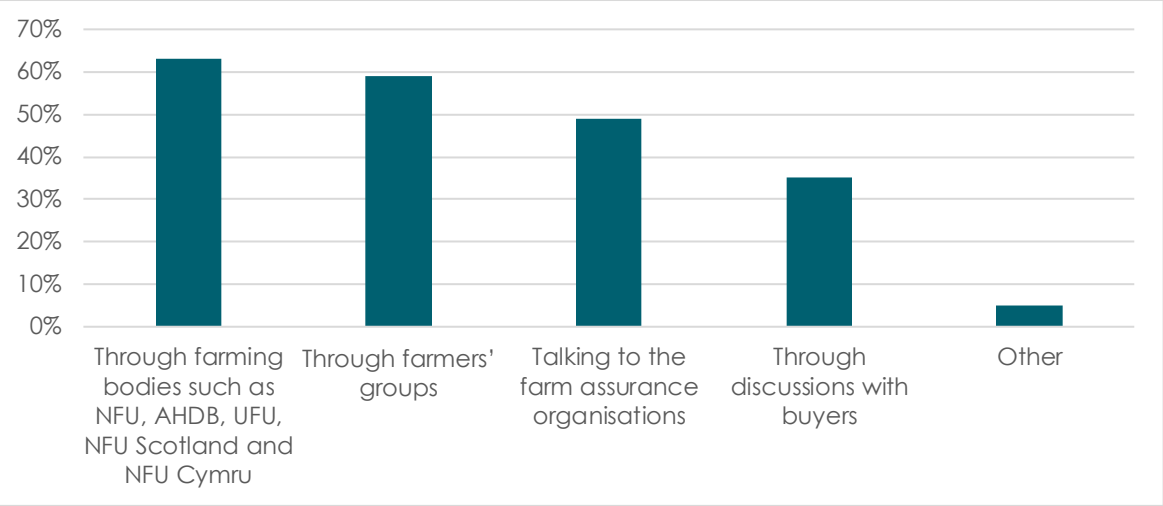


**Figure 13:** How Can Farmers Can Be More Involved in Developing Farm Assurance? *(source: Online Survey)*




It can be concluded from Figure 13 that farmers clearly feel that they should have a much bigger say in how farm assurance standards should be developed.

The analysis from Grounded Research also showed that, amongst farmers, there is a widespread distrust of assurance bodies. Farmers particularly voiced distrust towards organisations like RT and the NFU (which is somewhat contradictory to our online survey) citing a perceived prioritisation of corporate interests over farmers' needs.

This distrust extends to concerns about transparency and the belief that assurance bodies lack accountability and grassroots representation. The Grounded Research study concluded that there was a need for greater transparency and farmer representation: farmers want more democratic, transparent governance structures within assurance bodies, together with organisations that better represent grassroots agricultural concerns.

The online survey of farmers, and, in particular, the qualitative survey responses, revealed other ways in which they might be more involved with farm assurance. These included:

- consulting on farm assurance via farming organisations
- farm assurance schemes engaging more directly with farmers
- better communication with farmers

Supply chain consultees commonly felt that there should be a wide range of stakeholders involved in the development of farm assurance schemes.

An agronomist supply chain stakeholder stated:

"*…. all relevant stakeholders should have an input: consumers, retailers, food processors, growers, veterinarians, agronomist/advisors, supporting technology companies ….*"

It was noted that better stakeholder engagement for farm assurance schemes needed '*better minds*' to develop the standards, with a more joined up way of thinking and also upstream thinking, integrating the standards between farms all the way to the consumer.

It was felt that the whole process of stakeholder engagement should be more collaborative, involving co-creation of standards by retailers and farmers, and that it should also involve farming unions and government, especially where there were concerns over mutual recognition of international standards and the embedding of earned recognition. Involving wider expertise from other disciplines was also thought to be beneficial.

In summary, there should be more cross industry support for how standards are developed.

A supply chain stakeholder in the grain industry provided the following three statements:

"*…. people who actually get their hands dirty.... real people who deal with real daily issues and have a full understanding of the following.... what's important, what's expected, contract law - sale of goods act, trade contracts, divergence between EU and UK legislation, those who can understand data, I would also engage with the FSA, HSE, Defra, APHA, Department of Trade and Industry and then the supply chain….*"

"*….confidence in the supply chain comes with understanding that everyone is doing what they should be doing — farming isn't an old stuck in the mud industry — we should want to raise the game and be the best globally….*"

"*…. too many meetings are full of people who really don't know their subject and sit taking notes rather than arrive ready to input and find solutions. I believe this is one of the main reasons the recent friction has evolved. Too little knowledge.... flamed by social media. Confidence, credibility and communication are all vital….*"

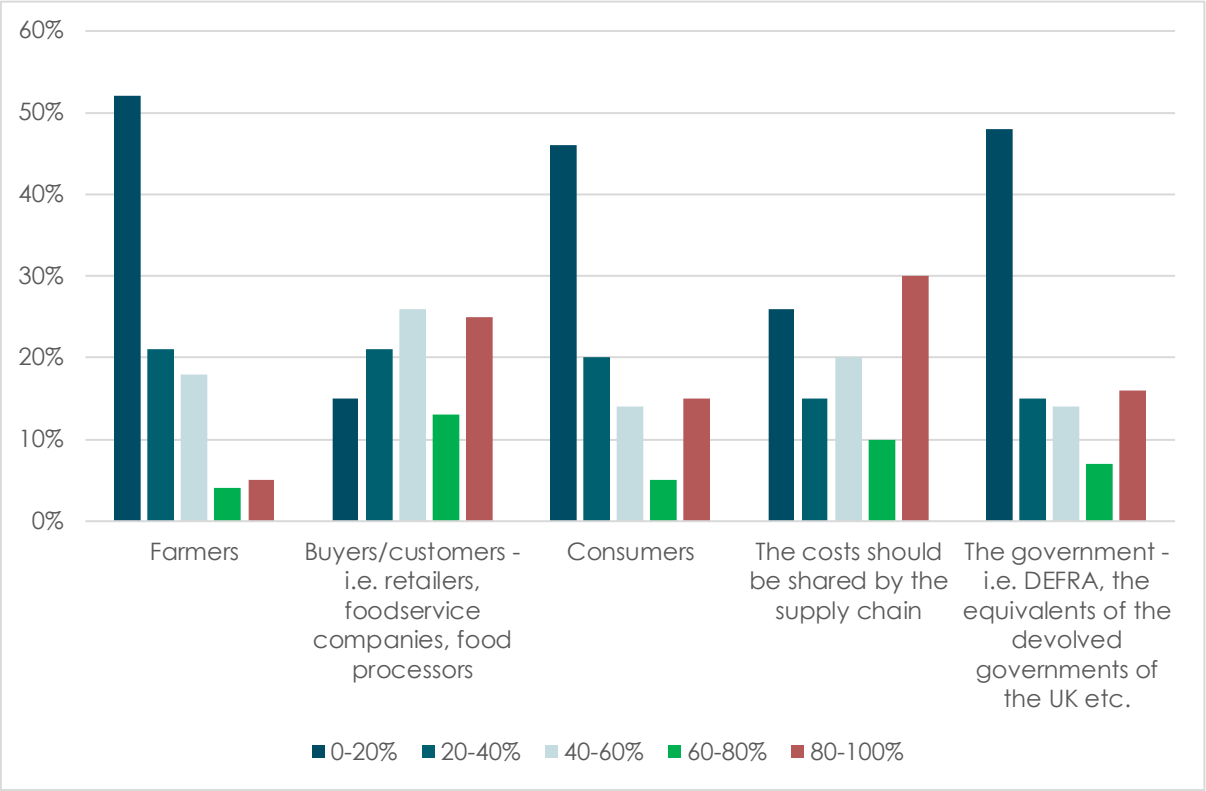
## Theme 4: **Who should pay for Farm Assurance?**

*See Strategic Recommendations 4, 5 & 6*

It can be seen from Figure 14 (on the following page) derived from the online farmer survey, that farmers believe that meeting the costs of farm assurance should be mostly borne by the customer base (i.e. retailers, food processors, foodservice buyers etc.) or, alternatively, costs should be distributed on a more equal basis across the supply chain.

Farmers acknowledge that they should be responsible for some of the costs, as should consumers and, in their view, government, but by no means the majority of them.

**Figure 14:** Who should pay the cost for the work involved in meeting the requirements of farm assurance schemes? *(source: Online Survey)*




Supply chain consultees, expressed a somewhat mixed view as to who should pay for farm assurance, noting that:

- it was simply a cost of doing business for farmers and was down to them to pay for this
- the costs should be borne more equitably across the supply chain

The comments below, from different parts of the supply chain, illustrate these points.

An agricultural consultancy company said:

*"…. the whole food supply chain should bear the cost of assurance schemes, alongside government. There are opportunities to streamline the inspection regime approach to avoid unnecessary inspections and paperwork…. "*

A devolved nation organisation commented:

*"…. the cost of assurance schemes should be spread proportionately across the supply chains, including retailers and consumers. Members feel that a membership fee to an assurance scheme should guarantee a minimum added value to their products that at minimum, equals the cost of the added work involved in achieving assurance standards. It is felt that if the cost burden is shared proportionally across all involved, then there would be an added incentive to work more efficiently to keep costs to a minimum. It would also promote transparent food supply chains through which the benefits and risks would be shared throughout…. "*

A farmer stated:

"…. *most farmers accepted a basic level of assurance and that, in my view, should be the starting point, which I think most farmers would [still] accept. But we are way beyond that point now and it gets worse every year. The supply chain must accept and cover the cost of enhanced QA that is above the basic level*…."

A food processor explained:

"…. *ultimately consumers are the drivers for principled choices, so supermarkets tell us. If supermarkets demand assurance, as it drives sales, then the consumers should pay a premium for this food*…. "

A supply chain stakeholder noted:

"…. *the cost of meeting quality assurance standards is part of the production cost of all industries. It's inevitably an element in the cost of production of farms. In the red meat sector, it's a necessary cost in persuading consumers to carry on buying meat when there is pressure to reduce consumption because of environmental and welfare concerns*…."

A farmer explained:

"…. *I genuinely believe that farmers have had enough, times are very tough right now, with significant production costs and reducing commodity prices and they will not tolerate this situation much longer. The danger is that once farmers start to leave schemes, it will snowball very quickly and the supply chain will be left short of 'critical mass'*…."

A different supply chain stakeholder said:

"….*shared costs of farm assurance so we get a proper buy in along the chain*…..."

Some of the cost of assurance schemes, for example, paying to be a licensee with RT (based on a percentage of sales value), amongst other schemes, also falls on the wider supply chain. Retailers need to support these costs, when an assurance logo appears on a pack.

Other costs sit with standards owners, i.e. the cost of governance and operating of the standards themselves, which are met by stakeholders within the supply chain.

Another view was that, ultimately, the consumer will pay for the costs, either via the price of the final product or through their tax for funding provided directly by governments to farmers. Another point raised was that a more detailed cost-benefit analysis should be undertaken when new requirements were added within a farm assurance standard. Yet others questioned who would pay for the cost of digitising food supply chains, if there was a move towards greater use of technology in demonstrating either regulatory compliance or compliance with farm assurance schemes.

A food processor noted:

"…. *the industry/supply chain, but this could also be supported by Government by using funds for farm payments by recognising participation in schemes. Costs could be minimised by technology and sharing data/resource between schemes where there is cross over to ensure value for money and ensuring schemes do not become elitist*…."

## Theme 5: **How can Farm Assurance be improved?**

*See particularly Strategic Recommendations 1, 3, 7, 8 & 9*

Theme 2 has already identified that farmers feel that farm assurance can be best improved by a combination of:

- the process providing greater returns and/or value to the farm
- the audit process being less complicated
- the overall process having less duplication of effort/schemes/audits

Reducing the overall stress brought about by the assurance process was also seen as being very important.

From the qualitative comments contributed to the online farmer survey on how farm assurance standards have evolved - and what could be done to improve them further - many returned to the initial reasons for farm assurance and noted that different factors were seen as issues today.

Examples of farmers comments included:

"…. *it may well be argued that following BSE, F&M etc., there was a need to re-establish trust in the supply chain, however assurance schemes have now morphed into a 'power over the supply chain' mechanism, heading towards a 'license to trade' situation and actually doesn't represent any value in terms of reassurance whatsoever*…."

"…. *in its early days, producers felt a loyalty in supporting their products and wanted to show this at the point of sale. Today, there is no loyalty from the supermarket retailers in terms of procurement and their customers have no understanding of what assurance stands for, and with most not caring, are driven by price, and price alone*…."

It was felt that the current approach was out of date - and needs to evolve. One farmer said:

"…. *years ago, they were good to ensure there was a paperwork trail at a time when few records were kept. Now that the paperwork trail is good on farm, but is lost in manufacture and imports, it is a waste of time and money. The last straw was a subjective clause on farmyard tidiness* …."

Another farmer said:

"…. *out dated, over prescribed and reach far beyond their remit. They provide an unfair competitive advantage to imports who don't match our standards* …."

Future changes to farm assurance schemes were suggested by farmers. They fell into four key improvement areas:

- strategic direction and governance of farm assurance standards
- operational delivery of farm assurance standards

- the need to reflect on the introduction of whole life assurance for livestock, where this is not already the case

- communication around the farm assurance development process

### (a) Strategic Direction and Governance

There were various suggestions by farmers on how the strategic direction and governance of farm assurance could be improved, providing a broad spectrum of views.

One group of suggestions involved the alignment of UK standards with those accepted for imports or, failing that, with basic legal requirements. '*Bolt-on*' additional requirements could then be developed and premiums paid to those farmers who were producing to higher standards.

Better governance structures were proposed to enhance communication processes, disclosure, and transparency. There were other comments that suggested Defra should run the schemes and an approach similar to that in Ireland, should be adopted.

The concept of farm assurance being similar to an 'MOT', because it is not a continuous assessment, arose in a number of responses. Options for streamlining this process included:

- earned recognition (but a reverse form, where regulatory inspections and assessments would reduce the farm assurance audit burden)

- extending the inspection interval for compliant farms

- focusing schemes solely on food safety and hygiene, traceability, animal welfare and product quality

- introducing a more risk-based audit approach

- introducing elements of self-audit, self-certification, self-declaring or peer-assessment

- reflecting the approach to animal welfare in the context of recent developments (e.g. animal welfare pathways, VAN)

These options, amongst others, also featured in the supply chain consultation responses. The need for proportionate fees, and a more equitable distribution of the cost of farm assurance, was also highlighted by farmers and some elements of the wider industry.

Another suggested strategic change was to consider life-long assurance for all livestock. The potentially contentious aspect of this proposal was commented on by farmers and also further explored in the supply chain submissions.

### (b) Operational Delivery

A number of themes were highlighted in the comments from the online survey, which included:

- aligning visits more to the farming year

- engaging more with regulatory data for the farm to avoid duplication
- implementing approaches to enable better preparation (and also pre-sign off of documentation) by the farmer and pre-audit analysis by the auditor
- implementing easy to use software, portals, digital forms of data recording, and video audits, building on some of the approaches developed during COVID
- improvements to audits to ensure greater consistency, credibility of auditors and standardised approaches to the audit process

**(c) Communication Around the Farm Assurance Development Process**

Areas that were highlighted by farmers included:

- better consultation before the revision of standards
- better promotion of farm assurance schemes and their benefits
- improved credibility of the schemes and improved recognition
- more interaction between certification bodies and farmers

## Theme 6: **Duplication of schemes & Earned Recognition**

*See Strategic Recommendations 5 & 6*

The level of duplication of effort for farmers to meet the requirements of farm assurance schemes, as well as to comply with inspections carried out by government organisations, such as the RPA, FSA, EA etc was a very strong feature of the farmer responses we received and was also recognised by many supply chain respondents.

The main point often made was that for each audit, much of the same information was being asked for on a regular basis. Multiple audits are therefore a very common feature of farm assurance and audit work. The most extreme example we heard of from a farmer was when they had been subject to some 17 inspections over the course of 20 months.

As a result, there was often a good deal of discussion about how the concept of '*earned recognition*' might be able to reduce this duplication of effort:

- between individual farm assurance schemes
- between farm assurance schemes and organisations such as the RPA, EA and FSA as well as between these organisations

While there are some good examples of schemes that have developed and use systems of earned recognition, it is relatively easy to conclude that much more could, and should, be done in the future to deliver the objective of making the whole process of farm assurance less complicated and onerous for farmers. It will also be necessary to deliver a level playing field for 'earned recognition' between regulators in different parts of the UK. In some cases,

for example if cross compliance is retained in Northern Ireland, the concept may be easier to apply than in other national policy environments.

Advantages, and perhaps some disadvantages, of earned recognition schemes are summarised in Table 8.

**Table 8:** *Advantages and disadvantages of earned recognition*

| Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|---|
| • Reduce audit burden, compliance burden and cost burden<br>• Less duplication<br>• Rewards compliant businesses<br>• Increased efficiency of assessing regulatory compliance<br>• Introduces risk based auditing | • Lack of trust between stakeholders<br>• Mission creep for the farm assurance schemes as the regulatory scope of earned recognition is increased<br>• Schemes could become a tool for government and/or their agencies<br>• Less ability in identifying problems if audit frequency is reduced<br>• Certification bodies could have varying demands for auditing resources based on differing compliance levels |

The use of farm assurance schemes as a proxy for some regulatory inspections was noted in various submissions and was thought by regulators to be beneficial to the farming industry in reducing the inspection burden. As the FSA explained:

"…. *the FSA has introduced a reduced inspection frequency (earned recognition) for compliant businesses who are members of FSA approved assurance schemes in the areas of primary production, dairy hygiene, and animal feed. When the FSA is satisfied that an assurance scheme meets the approval criteria for earned recognition, they will approve the scheme and agree a MOU along with an appropriate data sharing agreement. The scheme will then have the benefit of being an 'FSA approved assurance scheme'….* "

One such MOU has been agreed with RT Assurance. The FSA went on to note that:

"…. *robust UK farm assurance schemes allow earned recognition by Competent Authorities (CAs). This allows CAs to target their resources at those who are highest risk and to focus on non-compliant businesses. When working optimally, this results in a more efficient inspection/intervention system, reducing burdens on business and CAs….*

Close collaboration between the FSA, Food Standards Scotland and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate also strengthened governance of FSA approved assurance schemes.

In addition:

*"…. FSA approved assurance schemes have a further element of external, independent scrutiny and verification for the [farm assurance] assessments carried out to ensure the standards are being maintained and policies followed. At present, the FSA approved assurance schemes must have UKAS accreditation to ISO 17065…."*

The supply chain consultation also showed that earned recognition has already been considered, with the development of MOUs between regulators and standards owners to recognise their alignment with regulatory and official controls requirements.

RT is the UK's largest food chain assurance scheme. It encompasses 46,000 farmers, who supply primary produce to 600 licensees, operating across more than 800 sites. RT has six different earned recognition agreements in place, some of which have been discussed in this report.

One farmer in the horticultural sector explained their thoughts:

"…. *this would be hugely advantageous and reward businesses that maintain high standards and will help push businesses to find more issues to improve on. Audit burden is a huge issue and reduces competitiveness and efficiency. Reducing audit burden would improve profitability and UK growth….*"

Whilst enhanced data sharing through this approach to auditing and inspection has benefits for a range of stakeholders, aspects of data governance, as noted earlier, also need to be considered.

Others commented on the market and non-regulatory benefits of earned recognition. A supply chain consultant noted that:

"…. *earned recognition should not involve the government or their agents. Assurance premium reductions or market price premiums from buyers should suffice. Try selling non-assured goods in some sectors, if you think you are not obtaining a premium ….*"

*An accreditation body said:*

"… *Advantages: Fewer audits based on risk and level of compliance - reward those who do well. Disadvantages: There can be a sudden change at the farm, but this wouldn't be picked up as previous audits went well. On a longer inspection interval this provides difficulty for managing audits and staffing levels if audits are on varying frequencies….* "

## Theme 7: **The environmental challenge**

*See Strategic Recommendation 4*

Achieving a more environmentally friendly and sustainable supply chain, covering all of its stages, is clearly going to be a key driver for change, not only at the moment, but for the foreseeable future. It represents a considerable challenge to the supply chain, farmers, regulatory bodies and others with an interest in the farming industry. It will also present opportunities.

In the words of a major food processing company:

"….. *sustainability and the environment…? This used to be a top 3 business issue for us – now, a few years later – it's really by far and away, the only game in town for us…… and we have to address it ….*"

They continued:
"…. *if we don't start including issues around the environment and sustainability in our (farm) standards, we will in the end get left behind compared to the likes of Ireland and others on the Continent*…."

The Grounded Research study provided evidence of the emergence of concerns amongst farmers over environmental compliance. From 2021 onwards especially, environmental mandates within farm assurance schemes, such as carbon auditing under the proposed RT Greener Farms Commitment (GFC), became more prominent. Farmers often expressed increasing scepticism about such initiatives, viewing them as financially burdensome and questioning their practical benefits, while also acknowledging the importance of sustainability. The global emphasis on climate change mitigation, reinforced by events such as recent COP conferences, placed additional pressure on the agricultural sector to adopt sustainable practices.

In 2024, discussions across the farming community revealed a sustained and deep-seated dissatisfaction with the current farm assurance system. Farmers were calling for a comprehensive reassessment of assurance schemes, advocating for a model that reduced financial strain, enhanced transparency, and genuinely supported the farming sector. There was a strong desire for a streamlined, farmer-centric approach that levelled the playing field, respected farmer autonomy and removed unnecessary bureaucratic burdens while empowering UK agriculture in a challenging economic and regulatory environment. These ambitions included the way in which environmental standards were managed within farm assurance schemes.

Our farmer survey and the supply chain consultation elicited many comments about the failed attempt to bring in a stronger element of sustainability standards to the RT scheme via the GFC. This became a major issue of debate in UK farming during the end of 2023 and early 2024. Throughout 2024, neutral sentiment posts concerning farm assurance schemes, particularly RT and the GFC, often reflected the need for a more practical approach to the subject.

Other views varied from broadly supportive of the GFC (but with adverse comments on the way its introduction was managed) to outright criticism.

The general consensus from many within the supply chain was that:

"…. *sustainability is the main feature that [the retailers] are looking for. Issues such as H&S are seen as important, but not the key focus going forward as it has less impact overall for them [the retailer]*…." (Retailer)

"…. *the Greener Farms Commitment – it crashed and burned – but it will be needed again in the future*……." (Meat Processor)

"….*the experience of the Greener Farms Commitment to the entire supply chain resulted in huge damage to the [RT] scheme*……." (Dairy Processor)

Devolved assurance schemes noted:

"…. we were *very cross about the Green Tractor [GFC] as there was no consultation and no communication and the episode showed the RT structure was shown to be wrong*…."

A farming group representative said:

*"…. I think broadly I'm not uncomfortable with it. I think I then said that I was surprised at the Greener Farm bit kicking off this year. But again, I think it's to do with standards and farmers, having had a particularly rough time of late, going hang on a minute we're signing up for a load of standards here and yet at the same time, stuff is coming in from all over the world, not produced to the same standards. Why would we do this…?"*

*Another farming group stated:*

*"…….it (the Green Tractor) should have been something that was a good thing, but it ended up being something that was a bad thing because it was poorly thought through…"*

A further farming group respondent said:

*"…. producers have little choice if they wish to supply British supermarkets – they demand it and the farmer has no choice. Assurance shouldn't diverge from government standards. Green Farmer Commitment is a good example of divergence – it included the WWF Basket with % of land set aside – but that wasn't in SFI…."*

A policy maker commented:

*"…. there is a learning to be taken from the attempt by RT to implement the Green Tractor. It is important that those who wish to engage with 'above and beyond' measures for food safety, animal welfare or environmental protection should see a benefit to making that extra effort ...."*

Retailers stated:

*"……the Greener Farms Commitment was a missed opportunity – GLOBAL GAP will be used instead of RT – the point being that there will be development in FA. If RT doesn't have a position, it will be replaced in specific markets. A green approach to farm assurance is needed and is the reason behind the increased use of LEAF."*

*Another retailer commented:*

*"….to be fair, maybe RT was 12 months too early, but that was what RT was starting. What they started was very, very basic. It didn't even touch the sides of what we really needed."*

*A further comment from the retailer was:*

*"…. I think it's a real shame because I think 'greener farms' is needed and was actually delivering on issues around farm assurance. It was basically going to stop duplication and bring a lot of different environmental 'asks' across different schemes all under one…. it was going to basically give everyone an opportunity to source from all one standard…."*

Despite the negativity shown by the Grounded Research analysis, it also reported there to be enhanced support for achieving sustainability goals, on the basis that with consumer demand increasingly tied to environmental responsibility, farmers will, in time, call for assurance frameworks that balance sustainability with economic viability.

There is also a push for policies that provide financial and operational support for farms adapting to new environmental standards.

While some farmers see environmental standards as a necessary progression, others view them as overly demanding, costly, and sometimes impractical to implement effectively, especially without additional support.

In 2023 and 2024, again from the Grounded Research analysis, farmers often expressed frustration with evolving environmental standards, especially carbon audits. There was, however, cautious optimism for streamlined processes and more transparent governance structures on environmental standards, should assurance bodies seek to address farmers' concerns more directly.

## Theme 8: **Collaboration between Farm Assurance schemes**

*See Strategic Recommendation 6*

From the qualitative farmer responses we received it is evident that there are multiple positions on what farm assurance means today – ranging from for whom it is expected to deliver and who ultimately benefits, to who carries the cost and what is expected of farm assurance in the future.

Whilst there is a basic agreement that the origins of farm assurance were based on the need to assure food was safe for consumption, of the quality required and that there were appropriate protection measures for animal welfare and the environment, there is now often now a complete lack of consensus across stakeholders on the overall vision for farm assurance and how it should develop.

Supply chain respondents felt the role of farm assurance had changed over time, providing both a general background as to how farm assurance had originated and evolved, as well as some of the reasons for its evolution. These drivers included an appreciation of '*mission creep*' with the approach becoming more complicated; the system being driven down from the top and increasingly subject to NGO demands; there being a proliferation of schemes; there being, in some sectors, a return to second audits; and an overall widening of farm assurance scope.

The common agreement among supply chain respondents, however, was that to enter certain markets being farm assured is a pre-requisite to supply and the schemes being positioned as '*voluntary*' was not always helpful in this respect. There were concerns over the cost of farm assurance, with this reducing competitiveness for assured suppliers, and greater differentiation creating confusion for consumers.

One agricultural consultancy body reflected on this view:

"*…. an assurance scheme that increases its standards in response to one customer's requirements (e.g. retailers) and is universally applied across all suppliers to all customers, risks taking value out of the market. However, while tiered, segmented or 'bolt-ons' to a baseline assurance scheme may help reduce over-delivery against market requirements in some sectors and facilitate users to access market premiums in others, it could also risk confusing consumers and diluting assurance brand integrity if not done well together ….*"

On the other hand, a processor from the supply chain consultation, noting the need for a more coordinated approach from farm assurance schemes, said that:

"…. *rather than having multiple different schemes within a sector, it was important to have one that promoted consistent standards across the board and also promoted British agriculture*…."

Some schemes have evolved to demonstrate national provenance, something which is absent with the English standards because they are a 'British' rather than an English designation.

One processor respondent, said:

"…. *farm assurance has been a requirement in the UK for many years and the devolved regions use it as a way to market their produce whereas RT is more of an umbrella standard that does not promote English produce when it comes to beef and lamb*…."

In terms of continued evolution of farm assurance, they then explained:

"…. *in the world farmers now inhabit, there are more and more demands on them and many struggle with the pressure they now feel under. More than ever, farm assurance has evolved to be something farmers fear. The future could include data/technology on farms, a reduced number of standards and a reward system for better farmers and other ways of proving compliance (e.g. data sharing and random sampling and checks)*…."

Another respondent from a devolved nation, looking to the future, noted that:

"…. *the standards contained within any assurance scheme are critical. They need to strike a balance between integrity, traceability, safety, the environment etc. and ensuring that they are practical and achievable in practice. As the challenges facing Scottish and UK agriculture have increased, assurance standards have inevitably become more complex, numerous and, arguably, onerous*…."

Collectively, the assurance schemes in the devolved nations do not see themselves as being in competition with each other and were willing to work together and to share what might be seen as '*best practice*'. As reported earlier, however, while a MOU existed for agreeing equivalence, it had taken two years to settle on how to operationalise it within a Framework Agreement for beef and lamb products. These consultees also stressed the need for such agreements to operate on an equal basis whilst respecting the autonomy of their schemes.

Some respondents took a cautious view about how equivalence and complementarity could be delivered within such Framework Agreements if some schemes believed that they should take the leading role, rather than be seen as an equal partner in the process. The RT submission did not address this question explicitly, but other schemes voiced this concern.

Questions were also raised about the difference in audit cycles between nations which made aligning audits across different farm assurance schemes difficult. A red meat processor respondent reported that they needed to interface with national standards in each nation which increased complexity.

Amongst some respondents, there was confusion in thinking that RT encompasses everything, and uncertainty about the roles of the other schemes. There were some calls for a single set of standards across the UK, but there were other responses that said devolved nation differentiation, with equivalence agreements, were just as likely to provide better coordination of assurance standards whilst reflecting the unique nature of production in

these countries. Nevertheless, the submitted evidence highlighted some challenges that need to be addressed with regard to the Common Framework Agreement and how it is operated, even though there was appreciably stronger support for these schemes than for other national farm assurance providers.

The issue of non-assured farm products was mentioned often by supply chain consultees querying how standards could be assured for food products that are not part of an assurance scheme. The topic of 'a level playing field' with home produced (non-assured) and imported products, led to a wealth of commentary, and, again, some confusion.

One supply chain stakeholder commented:

"…. *standards for food products that are not assured just cannot be assured! That's the whole basis for setting up assurance schemes in the first place. Self-certification is not acceptable for food production and doesn't work. There cannot be a level playing field between assured and non-assured products, because the first has validated compliance with food industry standards, while the other hasn't. That's why there is a premium in general for assured stock and consumers would expect that ....*"

The responses highlighted that the situation is not seen as binary (assured is good versus non-assured is bad) and that the reality is much more nuanced, including whether there always is a premium for assured products. In the wider discussion on non-assured imported food there was a lack of engagement by some respondents with the processes of mutual recognition, equivalence and complementarity. The responses were much more based on the fairness of practices or requirements in given standards or regulations.

One supply chain academic who discussed this issue said:

"…. *the challenge for UK farmers is to compete with non-assured food, which is imported - where the standards may be lower. In some countries, you could not produce livestock without antibiotics because of endemic disease. But if you compare the Beef Sustainability Framework in Australia to the UK - this would not be deemed a lower standard….* "

A respondent from a bank summed up many other responses by noting that the Government has a role to play in ensuring a level playing field and the industry needs to be more persuasive in its engagement on this issue:

*"…. importing at a lower standard is not seen as sustainable and [is] a 'race to the bottom'. Imports coming into the UK at a lower standard to the UK doesn't sit comfortably. The industry needs to be more persuasive to government on this point…."*

One market where non-assured products were accepted, that of halal meat, was highlighted in several responses. One meat association said:

"…. *a large market that operates which doesn't need farm assurance, and this is a challenge for the lamb industry, is the halal market particularly. Halal do have a form of assurance, but they have a different one, to ensure animals are processed in a particular manner, but don't worry about farm assurance. The halal market is changing though and getting closer to standards…."*

Overall, there is not a level playing field between assured and non-assured products. However, there is also a market driver, which when financially or logistically required, leads to an 'elasticity of approach', towards the requirement for assurance.

## Theme 9: **Farm Assurance and positioning the UK Agri Food sector**

*See Strategic Recommendation 7*

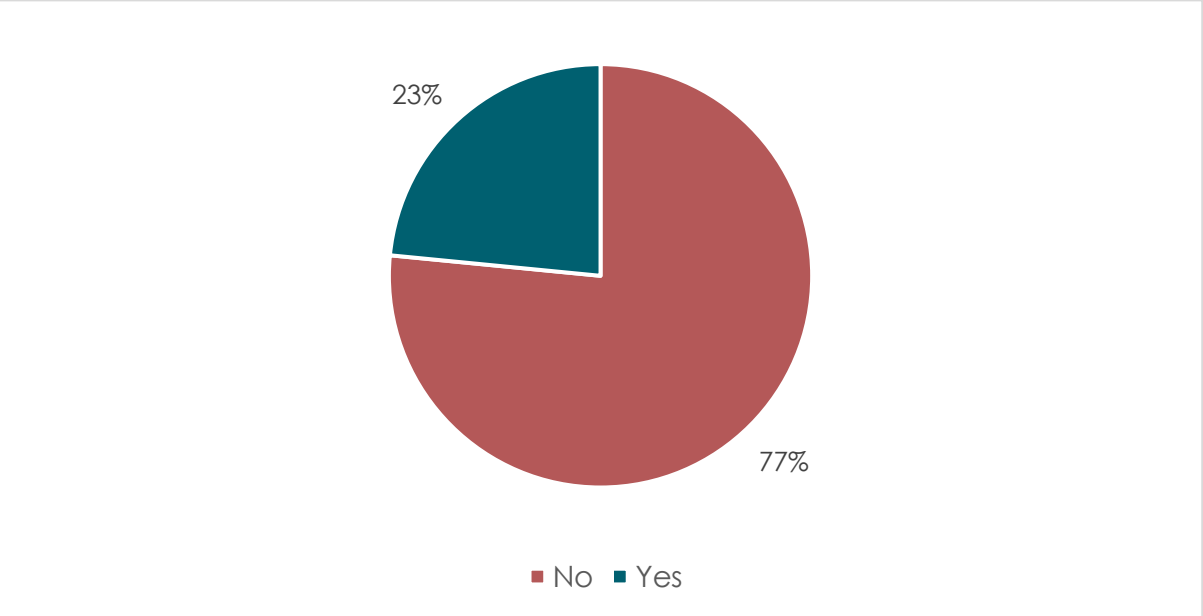
The use and role of farm assurance standards can act as an important part of the positioning of UK food in the domestic market, acting as a defence against imported products, whilst also helping develop export markets. In terms of developing export markets, this might be especially important for the meat sectors of the devolved countries.

In either case, the quality of the farm assurance system is only one ingredient of a recipe for success and just having robust farm assurance standards, while a good starting point, is not, on its own, enough.

The wider picture will depend to an extent on how good the standards are in other countries that want to sell into the UK or compete against the UK in international markets.

In the online survey of farmers, respondents were asked about their awareness of farm assurance schemes in other countries beyond the UK (Figure 15). Considering the apparent strength of feeling amongst UK farmers about imports - and an underlying sense that farm standards from overseas are often at a lower level than the UK, it was surprising to see that almost 80% of respondents said that they were not really aware of international standards.

**Figure 15:** Were farmers aware of farm assurance schemes operating outside of the UK *(source: Online Survey)*




When it came, however, to how UK farm assurance standards compared to international standards, there was a strong feeling that UK standards are in some way 'better' in areas such as animal welfare and food safety.

In many other areas, farmers seemed to be far less sure as to the comparability of UK farm standards with other international standards, especially in areas such as whether they provided an export price premium to UK farmers, provided better opportunities to sell to customers, demonstrated better traceability, enabled better compliance with government rules and regulations, improved health and safety on farms, achieved productivity gains, ensured environmental enhancement and delivered better produce than that in the UK (see Figure 16).

At the same time, the farming industry should not fall into the trap of believing that standards in the UK are automatically, in some way, 'better' than those from abroad. A farmer noted that:

*"….. we grow products here of course, but when we import from Germany, the standards they produce to are far higher than us …."*

whereas a supply chain respondent said:

*"……we source from around the UK as it's what our consumers want, but if we had the opportunity to do this from Ireland or Brazil…. we would do it without hesitation - they are highly competitive on price of course but are very switched on and their standards are very good…."*

**Figure 16:** How do these elements of UK farm assurance standards compare to other countries? *(source: Online Survey)*



In responses to the online farmer survey, other qualitative responses were provided:

- many farmers felt that UK legislation and statutory requirements (i.e. for food safety, animal welfare, environmental protection, health and safety, worker welfare etc) were strong enough, there were sufficient regulatory inspections in place, and they questioned why this had to be checked again as part of farm assurance

- this was especially when imported food products were often believed to not require such levels of assurance[13]. It was felt, in the current market environment, that farm assurance certification did not provide any financial value pre farm gate, did not protect UK farmers from unfair competition from imported products and that it simply provided access to specific routes to markets

Another strongly expressed opinion was that whilst farm assurance may be important to UK retailers, it was not essential. This view was held because one supermarket retailer had moved away from labelling its product as RT assured and other retailers were willing to sell non-assured products, or mixed assured products, for example, milling wheat. This practice meant, in their view, that the UK farmer was often disadvantaged.

Examples of other typical farmer comments included:

"…. *we have legislation, assurance may be helpful but clearly not essential as non-assured products are successfully sold*….."

"…. *retailers are already selling products made with non assured ingredients from around the world, so UK farmers are disadvantaged with farm assurance scheme costs which others do not have*…."

The two-tier approach to food standards was also expressed in terms of wider trade within markets and the belief that imported products were not produced to similar UK standards, and then were marketed as equivalent to UK food produce.

One farmer stated:

"…. *assurance is clearly not essential to retailers, processors etc, because they will freely substitute UK compulsory assured grain with imported non assured grain*…. "

The perception of a two-tier approach to food standards was echoed throughout the comments in many aspects of the farmer survey. These views were concerned, in particular, with assured versus non-assured products, and home produced versus imported food, and the assurance standards used to produce and regulate them.

The lack of a level playing field between assured and non-assured products was a strong sentiment expressed by farmers. There were also many insights into what farmers thought that consumers perceived as the value of farm assurance, compared to other considerations, when buying food.

[13] As noted earlier, despite almost 80% of farmer respondents said they were not aware of non-UK standards

One farmer's comment summed up these thoughts:

"…. *unfortunately, the consumer doesn't care one jot, if it's farm assured or not. In their head they'd like to know the provenance of the food they eat, but in reality, it's the price on the shelf that sways them…. "*

The fact that a two-tier approach to market access for home produced food versus imported produce was also voiced by farmers:

*"…it's just a market access tax, pure and simple…."*

The Grounded Research study showed that as well as the recurring theme of the overall financial strain felt by farmers caused by the need for farm assurance (with farmers questioning whether the compliance costs justified the benefits) the disparity in standards between domestic and imported products also highly exacerbated a sense of frustration. It was felt that imports often do not meet the same assurance criteria, creating a perception of unfair competition.

The supply chain consultation - in which most of the respondents focused on the domestic market - saw a range of strengths and weaknesses in the current UK farm assurance process, on which to build further and improve the reputation of the UK farming and food sector. In general, while farmers felt a sense of frustration over the role of farm assurance standards, the supply chain respondents were generally more positive about them.

However, in terms of the major weaknesses surrounding farm assurance in the UK, the following typical comments were made by supply chain respondents around the lack of industry leadership, transparency and reward:

One respondent from a bank noted:

"…. *well, it's leadership really. And as I say, you've got 100,000 businesses if that's still the number we're using for how many farming businesses there are in the UK. So, you've got 100,000 businesses all doing their own thing, but the farming unions tend to take collective leadership for those 100,000 farmers, whether they're paying a sub or not…. "*

A consultancy organisation said:

"…. *one weakness is the lack of visibility of individual farm performance - consumers will trust an assurance scheme more if they can look for themselves how an individual farm performs - they lack trust in a simple logo…. "*

One large farmer group also stated:

*"…. all farm assurance schemes should provide a financial benefit to the farmer. This has been the Achilles Heel of the need to have a single assurance scheme, with all farmers as members. It has become the base requirement to access markets. It can never achieve a price premium under this structure…."*

In terms of the positioning of British farming, in domestic and international markets, there is a need to consider what value farm assurance can really provide and to make this clear to all parts of the UK food chain.

## Theme 10: **A need for better supply chain communication**

*See Strategic Recommendations 8 & 9*

We found in the course of our work, many examples where various aspects of farm assurance were misunderstood or miscommunicated - including, despite surrounding publicity, the extent and intention of *this* Review:

*"…. we have been aware of the review taking place, but had only understood this to be about RT. Now you have outlined to us the scope of the review, we can see it is a much wider and more comprehensive piece of work …."*

Miscommunication and misunderstanding was evident in all parts of the supply chain, with examples in areas such as:

- the original purpose of farm assurance when it was first instigated
- how standards are developed and who is involved in this work
- the benefits of farm assurance to farmers as opposed to all that appears to be negative
- how areas such as earned recognition could operate
- the potential for more use of IT in farm assurance
- the way that farm assurance schemes in the devolved nations operate
- the way that farm assurance schemes in other countries operate
- how farm assurance schemes interact with farmers in the UK about what they are doing
- how farm assurance schemes might develop in the future
- the outcomes of the Campbell Tickell report on RT governance

During discussions with farmers, food processors, retailers, trade associations, stakeholder organisations and others, we lost count of the number of times we were told that:

*"….to move forwards in farm assurance, it all comes down to a need for much better communication between all the various stages of the supply chain…."* (Farmer)

*"…. more communication needed across the supply chain especially on why it (farm assurance) is so important, a better understanding of needs and reducing negative publicity."* (Supply chain organisation)

*"…. much better communication across the supply chain to win more hearts and minds of those involved and reduce any negativity……."* (Membership organisation)

*"…. The cereals sector has a vocal minority that undermine and are dismissive of farm assurance. [We need] to build confidence and collaborate with this group…. agri-food supply chain meetings to discuss common areas of interest – we are all on the same side…."* (Supply chain organisation)

It is clear that there is scope for improvement in communications between some farm assurance schemes and their members across the above range of topics.

### The Campbell Tickell Review

With regard to the Campbell Tickell Review, in particular, we found that a number of the key recommendations made in its report had already been actioned by RT, especially in the sphere of improved governance structures and around the role of key staff and positions within the organisation. However, the work on rebuilding trust and confidence with farmers has only just started.

This is maybe the most challenging of all the tasks facing RT and will be part of a long term effort. We understand that RT has enlisted the assistance of a specialist PR agency to help with this work[14].

This is encouraging, but it needs to be communicated better to the outside world which, in a worst case scenario, could be led to believe that since the report was published not much has happened to directly benefit the farming community.

## Theme 11: **Farm Assurance training and development**

*See Strategic Recommendations 1, 2 & 4*

During the supply chain consultation, in particular, we investigated whether there should be more help with training and development to enable farmers to comply with assurance schemes. We also looked at who should be responsible for the provision and funding of this training.

There were very mixed responses on whether help should be provided for farmers and if so, where that help might come from. Furthermore, the scope of the responses extended beyond complying with assurance schemes to upskilling at farm level more generally.

Some responses noted that the farmers who most needed the training were already a 'hard to reach' group and many of the voluntary interventions to improve understanding of farm assurance schemes would find it difficult to get them to engage.

More support in understanding what documentation is required and how to complete it, together with the provision of templates and exemplars were suggested as useful approaches. The continued and extended use of online materials and portals was proposed, as a means to engage with farmers, to reduce the audit and compliance burden and to develop skills to better meet farm assurance standards.

As the scope of farm business management widens, to include environmental aspects, such as decarbonising, net zero and farming more sustainably, several processors noted that they had a role in upskilling their farmer members so that they would better understand what was required of them.

[14] https://oxtale.co.uk

Enhancing awareness of animal health (e.g. Johne's disease) with scientific and practical knowledge provided through workshops was also given as an example of continued upskilling and development at farm level.

Other responses noted that the training sessions needed to be appropriate and affordable. Peer to peer knowledge exchange and developing a 'Train the Trainer' programme were also suggested. LEAF has run a number of these programmes for many years and there would be merit in their use by other schemes where this is not already the case.

A membership organisation summarised the situation with regard to training and development beyond immediate farm assurance requirements by noting that:

"…. *the industry needs quality skilled labour, regardless of what sector or schemes they are working in. It would therefore be beneficial for all schemes to have a universal standard for personnel, which stated an appropriate level of training depending on the role, ensuring managers have the right experience and skills to effectively manage a business, including [whether] its people and technicians are fully competent….*"

A producer organisation went on to explain:

"….*in Scotland, QMS periodically run contact days at auction markets for farmers, but the uptake is not high. Unfortunately, those in most need of the support are often the ones least likely to ask for it ....*"

A dairy processor said:

"…*a mixture of training methods needs to be employed to reach out to more people. Additionally, training should be localised, smaller farms can only have limited time away from the farm…*"

### Industry approaches

The use of a training portal such as the Poultry Passport was mentioned by many people in the poultry sector.

"…. *the Lion Training Passport is part of the Lion Code and is aimed at upskilling and developing the workforce. This is administered by Poultec, and LANTRA*[15] *provides the technical support….*" *(Scheme owner)*

The BEIC also conducts Lion Code training workshops and roadshows at multiple locations across the UK to support scheme members. In addition, training is provided to pullet rearing farmers to ensure that salmonella vaccines are administered in accordance with the manufacturer's guidance.

Another processor stated:

"…. *we invest in farm assurance compliance by providing specialist, tailored on farm support to assist with all areas of regulation. This has helped enormously in compliance and removed some of the stress of audit burden. This also ensures that all regulation areas of compliance are up to date and provides that 'critical friend' approach where needed,*

[15] LANTRA provides the platform for recording training which can also be used to produce management updates on training requirements

*over areas that may be regarded as contentious, or subjective. The whole area of training in the dairy sector needs improvement. As an industry, we fail to recognise the importance of staff and updating training ...."*

A dairy processor organisation said:

*"….in Northern Ireland, our dairy processors have invested heavily in staff resource and time to help prepare their farmer suppliers for upcoming RT dairy inspections. This preparation work is absolutely essential in order to maintain a 100% supply of assured milk for processing. Farmers do get very anxious ahead of inspections and our processors have found that this preparation work has to be done with farmers on a one-to-one basis, to be effective. If the RT portal was more accessible and widely utilised, it could help to ease some of the anxiety and time taken for farm inspections…."*

### Standards Owners

Some consultees felt that most farmers were already aware of the requirements within farm assurance schemes but standards owners, as part of their communications plans, should still develop awareness programmes for farmers, especially when standards were updated. Existing standards owner helplines were also identified as being examples of good practice.

One standard owner, from a devolved nation, commented:

*"…. scheme owners need to provide more training for farmers, e.g. working groups, workshops etc, courses, videos, and 'how to' guides to assist with paperwork. Liaison staff to help with the* non-compliance *and the best way to manage these….and prevent them from happening again…."*

GLOBAL GAP reported that, as a standards owner, they offered training:

*"…. GLOBAL GAP are already invested in providing training for the implementation of their standards. They provide direct training to farmers as well as other levels. Training is currently around the environmental goals…."*

A food manufacturer commented about Bord Bia (from Ireland):

*"…. from a beef sustainability perspective, Bord Bia offers the most value to the beef industry, as this provides assurance that the product has been produced in a sustainable way, it is measurable and farmers are actively working towards personalised actions. Knowledge transfer and support is available…."*

### Universities and Colleges

Numerous respondents mentioned that universities and colleges had a future role in developing knowledge and understanding of farm assurance schemes for existing farmers, but even more so to current students, who could be working in the industry in the future.

*"….in order to build a foundation for the future of agriculture, the agricultural education establishments should integrate an element of the requirements of farm assurance schemes and government regulation into their curriculum ...." (Devolved farming union)*

*"…. if you're an academic institution and you know that most your guys are actually going back onto farm. rather than into the supply chain then it'll be a bit of a strange thing, probably, not to have, in your curriculum, farm assurance…."(Retailer)*

### Wider Agricultural & Food Organisations

While it was recognised that farm auditors can be prevented by ISO requirements from giving advice or training to farmers within the audit process, one scheme owner commented that:

"…. *the likes of NFU, AHDB, The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (TIAH) could get involved, [adding as a general comment] …. farmers need to be more professional ...."*

The AHDB was highlighted as a relevant source of information which needed to be communicated to farming businesses to improve knowledge of farm assurance standards.

One processor stated:

"…. *levy bodies would be the obvious source to provide the training and development needs for farmers, though this should not be presented as training to achieve compliance with farm assurance requirements, but as training and support in operating good practice standards in food safety, animal welfare, etc. Assurance schemes can then independently re-affirm these are in place ….*"

A membership organisation noted that:

"…. *Defra has invested significant funds in the online service developed by TIAH. This online service has the capability to identify training needs, host online learning or signpost to physical trainers across the country. TIAH's work to date demonstrates that many non-compliances found at audit are repetitive and do not change significantly which means there would be benefit in developing learning around these areas of standards to improve compliance…."*

TIAH is already working with assurance schemes to ascertain training needs/information requirements for schemes to help improve compliance, which it is hoped will result in the provision of accredited courses, offered by training providers, and the development of essential skills, based on information from a variety of reliable sources.

One potential benefit of this system is that such training, when provided online, could be automatically recorded at an individual level and collated to farm business level. These records could then be made available to any assurance scheme to comply with the relevant training requirements and to demonstrate action to improve compliance.

Face to face or online training activity provided by other organisations, such as Lantra, could also be uploaded into these records. This central service would be accessible, regardless of the scheme or number of schemes a farmer is in and therefore would reduce administration for both auditor and farmer.

It was also recognised that others had a role to play – not least retailers and food processors, with a supply chain stakeholder stating:

*"…retailers and processors are well placed to offer information and advice and many hold training events and seminars that are very useful. Assurance schemes can contribute more*

*by supporting farmers and not just be thought of as an inspection process. Mechanisms need to be developed that enable schemes to offer help and advice (perhaps with others) while maintaining the integrity of their UKAS accreditation…."*

### Government Help

Governments could have a role in upskilling, for example through Defra initiatives such as their farm resilience funding[16] and wider rural development schemes. Other examples of good practice that were identified included Farming Connect in Wales.

One scheme owner commented:

"…. *Yes - and this should be developed through…schemes in England [to match] the three devolved countries which already provide incentives for training and development…. "*

The use of facilitation funds could also support veterinary groups to provide support and training to upskill people working on farms.

A Veterinary respondent stated:

"…. *loads of farmers have been delighted to understand that they can get free consultancy for vets to come and talk to them about their calf health or their fertility management or whatever, under the banner of the Defra Resilience Fund. I see no reason that they wouldn't be delighted to get this for their herd health plan visit every year...."*

One supply chain stakeholder, in particular, summarised many of the others:

"…. *as the marketplace becomes more demanding and with more regulation (for example to deal with measuring agriculture's carbon footprint or improving water quality) farmers will need a lot more support and training. This is especially true in Wales where we have a lot of smaller farms, many now part-time farms, that have fewer resources and need more help…."*

[16] We understand that the Defra Farm Resilience Fund is due to finish in the first quarter of 2025 and at this stage, it is not clear what scheme might replace it

# Section 6. The Commissioners' Recommendations

## 6.1 Introduction

From the work carried out for this Review, and the evidence provided to us, the Commissioners have made nine strategic recommendations. These are set out in more detail in this section of this report, but as an initial summary, they are as follows:

1. On-farm audits must be reduced, simplified and delivered more consistently

2. There must be a transformational step forward in embracing technology and managing data to deliver more effective farm assurance with greater added value for all

3. Farm assurance schemes need to reset and/or restate their decision-making structures to establish farmers as the driving voice in standards development

4. A new industry-led initiative must set out the future environmental ambitions for farm assurance, establishing this as an area of competitive advantage for UK farming

5. The inclusion of regulatory requirements within farm assurance standards and audits should be conditional on government and regulators agreeing a form of 'earned recognition'

6. There must be greater coordination in the way in which farm assurance operates across the UK nations

7. Farm assurance schemes must better position the UK farming industry in world food markets and in competition with imported food

8. All farm assurance schemes must review, and, where necessary, improve their methods of communication with the farming industry

9. The RT scheme must complete the implementation of recommendations in the Campbell Tickell report

For each of the strategic recommendations we have provided a rationale and related recommendations, each with a timescale for completion. We have also indicated who should lead on the implementation of the related recommendations (see Table 9 in section 6.3 for a summary of actions and lead roles). The timescales are intended to provide a period in which the action should be implemented. We recognise that this will require a number of bodies to work together, in good faith, and at a reasonable pace, to ensure that our recommendations are addressed in a timely and collaborative manner. To this end, we expect organisations to which tasks have been allocated to nominate lead individuals or teams who can represent their organisation in the delivery of the implementation plan.

## 6.2 The UK FAR Recommendations in More Detail

### Strategic Recommendation 1:

### On-farm audits must be reduced, simplified and delivered more consistently

**Rationale**

A. The audit load resulting from farm assurance must be reduced and simplified. This will save time and money throughout the farm assurance system, reduce stress, focus efforts on the core purpose of farm assurance identified earlier in our report and help reduce duplication of audit requirements. It is vital that the process for simplification is communicated effectively with the farming industry and that it involves direct engagement with representatives of that industry to secure commitment to the simplification process and outcomes. We recognise that simplification will be required at varying levels by different farm assurance schemes, but we can point to good practice set out earlier in our report to assist in this work.

B. There is a requirement for greater consistency in the way in which farm audits are conducted. Some aspects of this can be addressed through our recommendations on the use of technology in farm assurance, but this is not the only factor that needs to be dealt with. We recognise that auditor training is a requirement of complying with ISO accreditation, but farm assurance schemes should revisit (where appropriate in tandem with the certification body) the requirement for auditor training to ensure that it takes account of our recommendation for a simplified audit environment, new standards, relevant farming practice and communication/interpersonal skills. Farm assurance schemes must publish their training programme and provide evidence that farm assurance auditors have satisfactorily completed this training. We also recognise that farm audits are subject to a plan that includes a time allocation, but every effort should be made to make audits time limited and must involve an assessment of farming practice, not just the paperwork associated with farm assurance compliance.

**Related recommendations**

**Short term**

**Clarity about purpose**

1. The purpose and scope of farm assurance must be clarified and reset, based on the good practice statement set out in this report. Agreement should be sought from bodies across the food supply chain on this restatement so that there is a clear understanding of the need for, and objectives of, a high quality UK farm assurance system.

   **Action**: NFUs and AHDB to lead

   **Timescale**: 6 months from the publication of the UKFAR report

**Revising standards – focusing only on what is necessary**

2. There is an urgent need to remove or reduce the complexity of standards. Each farm assurance scheme must undertake a deep dive of existing standards to provide a publicly available plan setting out which, in due course, will be removed, replaced or

improved. Each scheme must, thereafter, report publicly on the rationale for keeping or removing a standard, be that, for example, added value or due diligence delivered. Each new standard introduced to a scheme must have a publicly identified sponsor/sponsors to provide greater transparency on the catalyst for its inclusion. This work will provide the basis for applicable UKAS scheme reviews, which we recognise take place on a longer cycle, but will enable time to be provided for improved communication with the farming industry on the steps to standards simplification being pursued by farm assurance schemes.

**Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

**Timescale**: 6 months for the production of a review plan from publication of the UKFAR report

**A right of appeal**

3. There must be recourse for farm businesses to refer an audit outcome to an independent arbitrator, outside the farm assurance scheme, who is capable of making binding decisions in instances where that outcome could restrict market access (for example in the dairy sector). Each farm assurance scheme must publicly restate its approach to having a transparent complaints and appeals procedure that takes account of the need for external arbitration. Unless non-compliance relates to an issue of food safety, or some other serious breach of standards, it should not result in immediate suspension of market access. Each farm assurance scheme must also publicly restate the timescales within which an appeal process will be completed.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Proportionate sanctions**

4. Each farm assurance scheme must revisit the sanctions imposed for non-compliance to ensure that they are proportionate and do not unduly impact upon the viability of a farming business. To this end, standards should continue to be graded, but schemes must work together to ensure that there is greater consistency between their standards, grading and any sanctions imposed for non-compliance.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Risk based, coordinated inspection**

5. Each farm assurance scheme must adopt a risk-based approach to audit visits, based on previous audit outcomes, so that the timing of visits, and their content, can be adjusted to enable more focussed audits to be undertaken, possibly over a longer time period between visits where this is permissible under the accreditation arrangements pertaining to the scheme. The risk assessment must be clearly communicated to the farm business so that it is aware of the timescales and areas of focus that will form the basis of future audit visits. Prior to a farm audit, the certification body must continue, as currently expected, to contact the farmer to set out an audit plan on how the process will work and offer the opportunity for the farmer to ask questions or raise any concerns.

However, this should, henceforth, be conducted as a supportive contact to reduce the stress associated with an audit. It should also be a mechanism by which advice about the audit process can be offered on a non-prejudicial basis. If an auditor is unable to conduct their audit in accordance with the timing in the agreed audit plan, they must set out their reasons for not complying with this requirement and provide a written statement to this effect to the farmer. If the farmer does not agree that the time taken for the audit was compliant with the audit plan, through no fault of their own, the farm assurance scheme must review the matter to ensure that the auditor's work is being conducted as effectively and efficiently as possible and inform the farmer of the outcome of its review.

**Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

**Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Medium Term**

**Learning lessons: using experience to support members**

6. Whilst recognising the nature of audit requirements, farm assurance schemes must establish processes to make the lessons learned from audit visits available to their membership in an anonymised form so that best practice, and the means to develop that practice, can be shared across the scheme. This should recognise the role that farm assurance plays in helping to maintain and improve standards across the farming industry and auditors should be tasked with the requirement to identify best practice to feed into these processes.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Working in tandem: collaboration and cooperation between schemes**

7. Additional work is required to secure collaboration and cooperation between farm assurance schemes to allow for multiple scheme audits to be conducted at the same time, reduce duplication and encourage 'earned recognition' between schemes, with the aim of reducing the time required from farm businesses in preparing for, and participating in, their audits. In due course there must be a common scale of standards (or at least a 'read across' between scheme standards) – with minimum standards and additional requirements related to customer requirements only where they are strictly necessary to obtain particular or specialist market access.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes, led by AHDB

   **Timescale**: 9 months to 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

**Joint training for inspectors**

8. Farm assurance schemes must revisit their induction and training programmes for both new and existing auditors to create and publish a common 'framework' that is mandatory for all scheme auditors to follow to address the simplified assurance structure sought in this report. There must be a renewed focus on training to develop interpersonal skills amongst the audit community so as to better understand and

improve communication and relationships between the audit process and the farm business. To this end, farm assurance schemes should engage with The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (TIAH) as a means to capture and recognise the completion of continuing professional development of farm assurance auditors and for TIAH to help signpost farm assurance schemes, and their auditors, to appropriate training providers. Farm assurance schemes must publish data on auditor training and completion on an annual basis.

**Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes, working with TIAH

**Timescale**: 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Transparency between schemes and regulators**

9. Farm assurance schemes must instigate a training programme/awareness raising exercise with farming industry regulators to better explain the purpose and scope of good practice farm assurance, and to help improve understanding of the respective roles of farm assurance versus regulatory requirements. Ideally, this process should be coordinated between the farm assurance schemes, though it is recognised that it will need to take account of the devolved nature of certain regulators and the schemes most relevant to their respective territories. This exercise must be repeated on a routine basis (we recommend once every two years) to ensure that the exchange of information is up to date. Account must also be taken of the regulatory review being undertaken by Defra to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of its regulatory landscape. Each year, under each farm assurance scheme, auditors should come together alongside key stakeholders to walk through mock inspections to improve two-way dialogue and learning. We are aware this happens under QMS/SQC schemes and strongly encourage all farm assurance schemes to adopt such an approach.

**Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes and industry regulators

**Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

**Addressing the impact of audit on farmer wellbeing**

10. We have been told about the pressure placed on some farmers by participation in farm assurance schemes, and of the impact on their level of stress and mental health. We are also aware of the wide variety of farms undergoing schemes audits, and the fact that farming is an industry where there are reported to be high levels of neurodiversity. There is a need for auditors to be aware of these factors and to be able to take them into account in their auditing approach, so farm assurance schemes must pay particular attention to audit style and approach in their auditor training programmes. Training and support is available on mental health awareness from, for example, FCN, RABI, RSABI and Rural Support and we encourage farm assurance schemes to engage proactively with these charities and support mechanisms.

**Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes and relevant farming support organisations

**Timescale**: 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Promoting consistency in inspections**

11. Where possible, there must be greater consistency in the appointment of an auditor to a particular farm business, to enable a better understanding of that business to be generated in the audit process. It is recognised that this will be subject to accreditation requirements and that a term of appointment may be necessary, but that term should be sufficient to enable an auditor to get to know the farm they are auditing.

    **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

    **Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

**Inspection as a career path**

12. Farm Assurance schemes must collaborate to secure and improve the pipeline of experienced and trained farm auditors. This may require greater engagement of farm assurance schemes with external bodies (such as colleges and universities), and publication of how this is done, to raise awareness of farm assurance as a potential role of interest (even if part time) to the next generation of farmers, and could involve work experience placements, student projects on farm assurance and discussions with course tutors on the latest developments in farm assurance and how they can be built into educational curricula.

    **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

    **Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

**Long Term**

**Risk-based inspection**

13. There must be a reduction in the frequency of farm assurance audits for those farm businesses that are consistently compliant, building upon the risk-based audit approach that we recommend should be adopted by farm assurance schemes. Farm assurance schemes must also consider having a focus on particular topics while auditors are on site, which, alongside the greater use of technology to deal with remaining audit requirements that can be reviewed before the farm visit, could release more time for the auditor to assess more aspects of farming practice rather than assembled paperwork.

    **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

    **Timescale**: 2 years from publication of the UKFAR report

## Strategic Recommendation 2:

**There must be a transformational step forward in embracing technology and managing data to deliver more effective farm assurance with greater added value for all.**

**Rationale**

A. Most farm assurance schemes already have systems in place to act as a repository for documents and other material associated with farm assurance scheme compliance. These systems (often known as portals) must be reviewed by the farm assurance auditor before their farm visit, and evidence provided to the farmer by the farm assurance scheme (via their system) that this has been done. Where relevant documentation is missing this will allow the auditor to focus on that aspect of the audit when on farm and will also allow time for the auditor to discuss aspects of farming practice rather than simply review documentation. In the longer term, farm assurance schemes must develop more sophisticated methods for using technology in farm assurance, taking account of emerging disrupters to the farm assurance system and new methods (in some farming sectors) to conduct farm based assessments.

B. The mental health impact of assessments/inspections is significant and has been growing. There should be a transformational move towards embracing technology, including remote assessments, to reduce the emphasis and make-or-break nature of a periodic inspection. The culture should be one where assurance is a 365-day a year rolling activity. Assessments should, in time, become a spot-check on that activity, not an audit.

**Related recommendations**

**Short/Medium Term**

**'Tell Us Once': making good use of data**

1. Farm assurance scheme auditors must be mandated to review their scheme's online portal prior to their audit visit and to conduct a 'tell us once' review of the documentation placed on the portal by the farm business. This is to enable the audit visit to focus more on any essential missing documentation and a review of farming practice during the course of the audit visit. Farm assurance scheme auditors must be required to provide written evidence that the pre-visit portal/repository review has been conducted.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Data ownership: the need for resolution**

2. Any outstanding issues surrounding the ownership, holding and use/sharing of data required by farm assurance schemes, following the review and streamlining of current standards recommended earlier in this report, must be clarified in conjunction with farming industry bodies and the results communicated to the farming industry as soon as practicable. It is recognised that certain farming data may be seen as valuable by assurance scheme members, but it is essential that value creation by a farming business is not conflated with the use of anonymised data that can help direct improvements in

farming assurance and farming systems. This distinction needs to be 'written in' to an industry compact about data ownership, custodianship and use that will be vital if the longer term benefits arising from the wider use of technology in farm assurance systems are to be realised.

**Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes, NFUs and AHDB

**Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Creating a data co-op**

3. Farm assurance schemes, working together, should support the feasibility work into a data co-op, building on activities already started by Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society Ltd (SAOS), whereby data could be shared across the private and public sector to reduce duplication and improve efficiency. However, through a co-operative mechanism farmers should retain control of the commercially sensitive data, managing consent and protecting any commercial value associated with it. Consideration must also be given to replicating the approach seen in Wales for the development of data hubs that can be used to pull data sources together to provide guidance and resources for the farming industry and inform the development of farming practices and policies.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Supporting farmers in a digital world**

4. Farm assurance schemes must publish information about the training programmes they have put in place to help improve farmer take-up of current technologies used within their scheme and must ensure that future system developments include relevant training for end users at cost to the scheme, not to the farm business.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Future possibilities: harnessing collective expertise**

5. The farming industry should seek to facilitate a regular 'hackathon' – inviting subject matter experts and institutions to help gather relevant businesses/academics to address the question of the longer term use of technology in farm assurance. The literature review for this report shows that the topic of technology is often raised as a solution but there has been little collaboration and focus on building solutions that will help reduce the burden of assurance on farming businesses whilst satisfying the information needs of those who rely upon farm assurance for wider business or regulatory purposes.

   **Action**: NFUs, AHDB and the Defra Data Group, working with Agri-Tech E and/or the UK Agri-Tech Centre and participating Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report and annually thereafter

**Medium Term**

**'Tell Us Once': collecting and storing data**

6. Farm assurance schemes must ensure that they have a portal or similar data repository which can be used by scheme members to host information required during their audit visit. The format of that data should be flexible (for example, data provided from farm management systems, relevant images, scanned copies of certificates etc) to better provide for data collection during the course of the audit cycle rather than during the period immediately before the audit visit. Information provided via a portal/repository should be a mandatory element of data collection and, to this end, farm businesses must be positively incentivised by farm assurance schemes to use these basic technologies as part of the audit process. Furthermore, farm assurance schemes must publish annually the take-up of their respective portal/repository by scheme members so that a record of progress towards universal use of such systems is publicly available.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

**Alternative approaches**

7. The AIMS/Vetaverse scheme, along with other schemes under development using new technological approaches, should be explored further, with support from others, to provide a strong focus on their governance structures, data ownership and funding models. Whilst not an immediate replacement for accredited farm assurance schemes as they currently stand, technology-based approaches, such as that proposed by AIMS, may have the longer term potential to disrupt current methods of farm assurance in the livestock sector, and could bring non-assured livestock products into farm assurance scope. Like similar initiatives, it will need to move from concept to coordinated application with the support of other actors in the food supply chain, the government and the wider farming industry.

   **Action**: New scheme developers to work with AHDB to support the development and delivery of novel approaches to farm assurance

   **Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

**Keep it live: reviewing standards**

8. As new approaches to farm inspections are created, either as a result of emerging legislation or other regulatory requirements, a dynamic approach to implementing related exemptions in current farm assurance systems must be taken. One example might be the impact of Vet Attestation and how this might be applied, or used as an equivalent method, to help reduce audit requirements in some farming sectors. We expect current farm assurance schemes to use data on a 'tell us once' principle to avoid duplication of effort by farm businesses and to deliver greater efficiency in farm assurance processes.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

**Long Term**

**Investing in technology**

9. The intended outcome from the above recommendations is to deliver a technology and data environment, within the medium term, which is embedded within all farm assurance schemes and where farm business take-up is greatly improved. However, it is recognised that technological developments are moving at a fast pace and farm assurance schemes will need to maintain, at their cost, a comprehensive strategy for innovation and investment in this element of their work. The aim should be for farm assurance schemes to work together, using the results of the proposed Hackathons, to develop real time, mobile (i.e. farm friendly), data collection systems on which a rolling assurance system could be based. Research by Zhou et al on Intelligent Food Assurance Systems (IFAS) shows that food assurance/food transparency/food waste and sustainability and business value can benefit from collaboration and improved data use. The technology for some aspects of this approach, enabling real time data collection for example, is already employed on many farms, but greater coordination of effort, and engagement with the farming community, will be required to deliver a shift in farm assurance towards these methods and to enable aggregated data to be better used for best practice identification and feedback to farm businesses.

   **Action**: AHDB to coordinate with Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 2 years from publication of the UKFAR report

## Strategic Recommendation 3:

**Farm assurance schemes need to reset and/or restate their decision-making structures to establish farmers as the driving voice in standards development.**

**Rationale**

A. In some schemes there is an imbalance of power between the farming community and others involved in setting the standards for farm assurance. This needs to be addressed, to improve the level of trust between these schemes and the farming community, and to promote a better understanding of the purpose of the farm assurance system. To achieve this objective, it will be necessary for all schemes to review and/or restate their decision making structures, to take account of our earlier recommendations for a reassessment of the need for some standards and transparency concerning the source of new standards. There may also be benefit in schemes working together to produce a more prescriptive, and inclusive, framework for consultation processes with the farming industry.

B. It was clear from the evidence submitted to us by retailers and other customers of farming businesses that there was no common understanding amongst them of the purpose and operation of farm assurance. Retailers, for example, had different reasons for using farm assurance, including as a means of providing a recognisable standard for food products, meeting external reporting requirements or differentiating their offer in the market. These requirements were often couched in terms of meeting 'consumer demands' yet it was unclear to what extent these assertions had been tested against other consumer concerns (for example, price or perceived market position of the retailer). There was a greater degree of consistency in the view that retailers, and other

food businesses, were unable to conduct routine farm assurance directly, so assurance schemes, where they are used, have been employed as a proxy for ensuring that food meets threshold standards for their business, or to provide a 'threshold plus' level for a particular market segment (for example, in terms of environmental or animal welfare standards).

C. We appreciate the need for all parts of the food chain to be involved in the farm assurance system, and for the audit process to give reassurance to the supply chain. We are concerned that the system is being used for market access and differentiation and for meeting shareholder and/or public reporting requirements further up the food chain without the impact of these demands on the farming industry being fully taken into account and without adequate financial support for additional assurance requirements. This position is unsustainable and requires a thorough reset of the farm assurance system to deliver good practice in farm assurance whilst avoiding undue demands being placed on farm businesses for the benefit of others in the food system.

**Related recommendations**

**Short term**

**Creating and amending standards**

1. We recognise that farm assurance schemes have different ways in which they engage with the farming community, but it is essential that farmers are involved in the process of creating or amending farm assurance standards. Initially, each farm assurance scheme must publish the way in which it achieves this objective so that the routes for farmers to make their views known are clear. In the longer term, farm assurance schemes must collaborate to set out an agreed framework for the way in which consultation with the farming industry, beyond scheme board members, for example, is conducted.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Appointments to sector boards**

2. It is also essential that the process for appointing farmers to sector boards (or similar) as representatives of their sector are transparent and that those acting in this capacity are clear that they must engage with the wider farming community to act as a representative voice for that community. The process for appointment should be independent of the scheme's senior executive team so that those selected are able to appropriately challenge that team on the operation and development of the farm assurance scheme. Furthermore, there must be a clear role description for farmer appointments which sets out their obligations to act as a representative for the relevant industry sector and in the wider interests of the farming industry.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Medium term**

**Board structures in farm assurance schemes**

3. All farm assurance schemes must review their structures and board composition to ensure that their skills mix is balanced and equitable across the food supply chain and should use the Campbell Tickell report as a guide to ensuring that their governance arrangements deliver best governance practice.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes
   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Balancing scheme demands**

4. The statement of good practice for farm assurance set out in this report must be revisited periodically by farm assurance schemes to ensure that the demands placed on various parts of the food supply chain represented in the farm assurance scheme remain balanced, and that additional farm assurance costs arising from new or enhanced standards are shared across the food chain on an equitable basis. We suggest an annual review of this nature, with published outcomes, would provide the necessary assurance that such an assessment has been conducted and the results enacted.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: Annual Review

**Using impact assessments**

5. The publication of an impact assessment for either the creation or removal of a farm standard must become a matter of course for each farm assurance scheme. In this way the origin and rationale behind the standard/removal of the standard, and the way in which the farming industry has been consulted about this change can be publicly reported to help improve communication and levels of trust between the relevant scheme and its members.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Long term**

**A federation of farm assurance schemes**

6. Farm assurance schemes should reflect on the need to establish a loose federation of farm assurance schemes which can act as a locus for knowledge transfer/thought leadership/best practice in the operation and development of the UK's farm assurance system. The federation would not be a new body, but a forum for agreeing common approaches to farm assurance across the UK. The secretariat for the federation should rotate between different schemes on an annual basis. Other governance arrangements for such a federation would need to ensure that no single farm assurance scheme would predominate and that the objective would be to support the farming industry, and wider food chain, in maintaining high standards in farm assurance to enable the UK to continue to compete in international food markets.

**Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

**Timescale**: 2 years from publication of the UKFAR report

### Strategic Recommendation 4:

**A new industry-led initiative must set out the future environmental ambitions for farm assurance, establishing this as an area of competitive advantage for UK farming.**

**Rationale**

A. There is no escaping the fact that environmental standards in farming need to be improved and that farm assurance will need to take account of these developments, sooner rather than later. However, it is not acceptable for environmental standards to be driven by other actors in the food chain to satisfy their public reporting requirements without there being some form of compensation to their farmer suppliers for this additional work. There is also an urgent need to agree a menu of actions that farms can take to meet farm assurance requirements in this area, rather than adopting a one size fits all approach. Furthermore, it should be for the farm to determine how it will meet the necessary standard thresholds, if necessary, in negotiation with their customers, rather than by the imposition of certain methods of assessment. Indeed, evidence provided by the Grounded Research analysis commissioned for this report suggested that many farmers would support "assurance frameworks that balance sustainability [measures] with economic viability. There is a push for policies that provide financial and operational support for farms adapting to new environmental standards".

B. To achieve this outcome will require industry leadership from outside the farm assurance system to articulate what is, and what will be, required of the farming industry in terms of legislative requirements, to identify the gaps and then to work with the industry, government, regulators and the farm assurance system to ensure that there is clear understanding of how farms can meet the necessary obligations to achieve improved environmental standards. In addition, industry leadership is required to develop a consensus on the action required beyond minimum legal compliance to support the industry in accessing markets and securing additional economic returns.

C. The scope for 'earned recognition' from government support schemes should be explored as part of this work. We have found there to be a reluctance for such support schemes to rely on a farm meeting farm assurance standards as a means to access that support, but there is also no clear path for a farm that is drawing down environmental support funding (for example) to have that recognised as part of their farm assurance, to simplify this aspect of the audit process. And yet, some regulators will enable farm assurance compliance to be used as a means to reduce the regulatory inspection burden. We believe that joining up these aspects of farm compliance would be beneficial for the farming industry and for government and recommend that there should be an open-minded approach to addressing this aspect of earned recognition to help reduce the burden of the reporting and audit requirements of farm assurance.

**Related recommendations**

**Short term**

**Developing acceptable environmental standards**

1. The RT scheme has made clear that it will not revisit the Greener Farms Commitment (or its successor) unless and until the farming industry asks it to do so. Other schemes will be progressing their own environmental standards in consultation with their respective members. In these circumstances there is no firm leadership around the issue of establishing a consistent framework for environmental standards that can act as a guide for farm businesses, nor is there clarity around how emerging legislation, with which the farming industry will be expected to comply, will be incorporated in farm assurance, other than in a very fragmented way. This issue must therefore be taken out of the hands of the farm assurance system and addressed by farming representatives, working with the relevant regulators, to provide a 'foresight' style approach to the conversion of environmental legal expectations into a code for use by farm assurance providers and farm businesses. This process will require the respective central and devolved government ministries and their agencies, to work with the industry to establish as common a framework as possible so that anomalies will not be 'baked into' farm assurance standards in different parts of the UK. To begin this process, the AHDB/NFUs must clearly articulate what is currently required by each of the 7 industry sectors to be legally compliant with current environmental legislation and conduct a gap analysis of methods for compliance and requirements of emerging/anticipated legislation for discussion with the ministries and their agencies.

   **Action**: AHDB, NFUs, Government Ministries and relevant agencies

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**How can farmers implement environmental standards**

2. In taking the above approach there must be clear and regular communication with farm businesses about the steps they can take to meet the necessary environmental legislative baseline and any agreed farm assurance standards related to that baseline. This should be on the basis of a menu of options for farming businesses to adopt, so that a 'one size fits all' approach for farm businesses is avoided.

   **Action**: AHDB and NFUs

   **Timescale**: 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Medium term**

**Rewarding the use of environmental standards**

3. If businesses elsewhere in the food chain wish to see enhanced environmental or animal welfare standards (above the legal baseline) to help meet their public reporting requirements or to differentiate their position in the market this must be accompanied by a clearly identified premium paid to the farm business for the collection of the necessary data, the implementation of different farming practices or the adoption of new technologies to enhance animal welfare and/or environmental protection. This will recognise the benefit to the food chain business in delivering enhanced environmental and welfare standards whilst also compensating the farm business for any additional work required and for the use of farm data associated with these additional standards. Food chain businesses must report publicly on the steps they have taken to implement this recommendation to provide assurance to the farming industry, and to their customer base, that farm businesses are being, and will continue to be, adequately

compensated for the additional work required to comply with enhanced farm assurance standards.

**Action**: Food chain businesses beyond the farm gate

**Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

**Telling the wider world what farming delivers for the environment**

4. Farm assurance schemes, in conjunction with the NFUs and AHDB, must collaborate to develop and implement a communications/PR plan for the wider public to highlight farming practices that are helping to deliver enhanced environmental standards. It is recognised that this approach may not be as straightforward when addressing animal welfare standards, because of the position towards UK farming taken by some animal welfare organisations, but consideration should nonetheless be given to highlighting good practice in farm animal welfare to better inform and allay potential concerns in the general public about UK farming standards.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

**Long term**

**A 'foresight' exercise on future environmental standards**

5. Farm assurance schemes must work with the whole food supply chain to look at emerging trends to help the food sector be current and less defensive on environmental issues. We propose a further 'foresight' exercise to begin this process. It will be necessary to continue to monitor the UK's farming performance on environmental standards and to benchmark this performance against competitor farming nations and international farm assurance standards. The review process must be driven from the perspective of farming businesses, taking longer term changes in environmental regulations as a baseline, whilst continuing to enable farms to determine how they will meet new standards from a menu of sector-appropriate farming measures.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes with farming and food chain industry representatives
   **Timescale**: 2 years from publication of the UKFAR report

## Strategic Recommendation 5:

**The inclusion of regulatory requirements within farm assurance standards and audits should be conditional on government and regulators agreeing a form of 'earned recognition'.**

**Rationale**

A. We have considered the use of the farm assurance system by some industry regulators. We understand that, in certain cases, the lack of regulatory resources means that reliance can be placed on a farm assurance scheme to achieve 'earned recognition' and to avoid a further farm inspection by the regulator. This is not necessarily a bad thing, because it can avoid duplication, but the terms of such engagement between the regulator and the farm assurance scheme should be clear and publicly available. Of greater concern is the potential ability of a regulator to notify a farm assurance

scheme about non-compliance with the regulator's standards which could result in scheme sanctions, rather than the regulator pursuing their own approach to sanctions. In the former case, in some industry sectors, this could prevent the farm from trading, while the latter would enable the farm to provide a defence to the allegations of non-compliance. We address this issue in our recommendations.

B. It is not the role of voluntary farm assurance schemes to provide a regulatory inspection service for government. However, there can be benefits of doing so in terms of reducing the number of different inspections on farm. Crucially though, realising that benefit is contingent on government and regulators agreeing to reduce inspection frequency for businesses that demonstrate compliance with legal requirements through farm assurance. Schemes should have in place a MOU with regulators, shared transparently with farmers, that sets out the form of earned recognition agreed. Where this is not in place, farm assurance standards and audits should not include regulatory conditions which would simply duplicate the work and responsibilities of regulators.

**Related recommendations**

**Short Term**

**Creating points of contact in government departments**

1. There is no clear principal point of contact for farm assurance within government departments. They should address this as a matter of urgency, to ensure that governments across the UK are taking a more strategic view of how and when assurance schemes should feature as part of the regulatory landscape. We anticipate that responsibility for engagement with farm assurance schemes, the development of relevant policies (such as 'earned recognition') and coordination with regulatory agencies using farm assurance accreditation would form part of these roles. The assignment of these responsibilities would also enable greater coordination to take place between central and devolved governments, and with the farming industry, on the future landscape for farm assurance and the maintenance of standards to enable the UK to compete in international markets.

   **Action**: Government departments

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Consistency of regulatory use of farm assurance**

2. There are a variety of ways in which government departments and agencies employ farm assurance, ranging from the concept of 'earned recognition' resulting in reduced inspections from an agency, or a laissez-faire approach where farm assurance has been outsourced to private providers and left to the market, to the engagement by a devolved government department in the co-development of farm support systems involving the industry and a farm assurance scheme. This patchwork approach to the use of farm assurance in the regulatory environment is no longer viable. A more strategic view is required, where the respective government departments, and their agencies, must determine how, and when, they expect to use farm assurance in their regulatory systems, and a consistent approach to its use is negotiated and agreed with farm assurance schemes and relevant industry bodies. An early part of these

negotiations should be to properly define the term 'earned recognition' so that the concept is employed consistently across the farm assurance landscape.

**Action**: Government departments, regulatory agencies and NFUs

**Timescale**: 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Agreeing how regulatory sanctions and farm assurance work together**

3. There is scope for farm assurance schemes to continue to be used as a proxy for regulatory inspections, but the terms of such engagements must be publicly available and an approach must be agreed for the way in which sanctions resulting from non-compliance will be reported. This is intended to avoid the charge (sometimes reported, but for which we have found no evidence) that farm assurance schemes used by regulatory agencies are not serious about maintaining standards and applying appropriate sanctions.

   **Action**: Regulatory agencies working with farm assurance schemes

   **Timescale**: 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Medium Term**

**Extending 'earned recognition'**

4. There is also scope for government bodies to extend the concept of 'earned recognition'. Whilst we do not support the suggestion that farm assurance accreditation can be used as a gateway to government funding schemes (such as SFI or SFS), it is possible that participation in a government funding scheme could be used to fulfil the relevant aspects of a farm assurance audit. In this way duplication in the audit process can be avoided, or at least reduced, and with the focus on current farming support schemes being largely on environmental measures this approach may go some way to determining part of the requirements for environmental standards discussed earlier in our recommendations.

   **Action**: Farm assurance schemes in consultation with government departments

   **Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

**Using farm data to determine the impact of policy changes**

5. A better coordinated and resourced UK Farm Assurance system could provide a considerable source of information about farming across the UK, together with evidence on the implementation of major policy changes on farm operations. One example would be the longer-term assessment of the impact and effectiveness of environmental management schemes, using suitably anonymised data from across the farming industry. To this end, central and devolved governments should work with farm assurance schemes to develop a commercial method of payment, in exchange for the release of relevant data from farming businesses, to support longitudinal studies on the outcomes of the UK's post-Brexit farming support schemes.

   **Action**: Government departments

**Timescale**: 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Long term**

**Improving government understanding of the role of farm assurance**

6. It follows from our recommendation for the allocation of clear responsibilities for farm assurance that, within Defra, there must be close liaison with its Farming and Countryside Programme. The aspiration of FCP is to transform the way central government regulates and supports agriculture and the countryside environment – and without better engagement and a focus on farm assurance the opportunity will be lost to deliver recognition of the role of farm assurance schemes and how regulation and farming support mechanisms might be better aligned to the farm assurance system.

   **Action**: Defra

   **Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

## Strategic Recommendation 6:

### There must be greater coordination in the way in which farm assurance operates across the UK nations

**Rationale**

A. It was clear from evidence submitted by the farming community, and from our discussions with other stakeholders, that views about farm assurance schemes differ across the UK. Assurance scheme members in England generally raised more concerns than those in Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland. Whilst farm assurance schemes in the devolved nations still have room for improvement, there is a willingness in those schemes to work together to learn about best practice from other schemes and to see this as a collaboration of equal partners. To support the farming industry it would be beneficial for this model of collaboration to be extended across the UK and for no one scheme to predominate in these activities. Our recommendations address this issue.

B. We are not suggesting that there should be complete harmonisation of farm assurance models or standards. We were told that schemes in different parts of the UK needed to address different legislative requirements and farming environments and therefore had to be flexible enough to deliver positive outcomes for their farming members. Nonetheless, this should not preclude a greater 'read across' in some farm assurance scheme standards, delivery methods, or other aspects of farm assurance, so that the work involved in their creation can be shared and economies of scale can be achieved.

**Related recommendations**

**Short Term**

**Consider a new approach for combinable crops**

1. There are particular issues with the combinable crops sector, where evidence from the industry suggests that the RT model is not effective and where trust, in some cases, has broken down between the scheme and its members. We recognise that RT is working on a new entry level grain standard, but we still believe that the cereals sector must take

stock of farmer feedback and decide if a new comprehensive model for the sector should be adopted. To this end, an exercise to compare and contrast the RT assurance scheme for this sector with the Scottish Quality Crops assurance scheme and the Food Fortress programme in Northern Ireland would provide a means to begin a thorough review, which should be time limited and which should engage widely with the combinable crops industry, and the AIC, to co-develop a new approach. The review must take account of the mixed nature of many farm businesses to ensure that a new approach, if adopted, does not increase farm assurance requirements or cost.

**Action**: Crops supply chain organisations, coordinated by AHDB

**Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Improving Red Tractor understanding of farming in Northern Ireland**

2. There are also particular issues pertaining to Northern Ireland and the complexities arising from its soft border with the European Union. These need to be taken into greater account by RT, which should establish a Northern Ireland governance board to focus on the particular farming circumstances found in this part of the UK. It is envisaged that the board would have strong farmer representation so that it can best understand the operating environment and trading arrangements that apply to Northern Ireland farm businesses.

   **Action**: Red Tractor

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Medium Term**

**Creating 'one voice' for UK farm assurance**

3. We recognise that efforts have already been made to find ways in which assurance schemes can collaborate to achieve greater coordination of effort across the UK. However, we understand that whilst some schemes have continued with a positive approach to this endeavour, not all schemes have participated to the same level. New overarching structures to deliver greater coordination are unlikely to be required, not least because of the cost this would entail. Instead, farm assurance schemes must take part in our earlier recommended federation if it is to yield benefits for the schemes and their farming members. This network of farm assurance schemes must, in particular, seek to deliver economic benefits from collaboration in scheme developments, sharing of best practice and in representing farm assurance schemes to other elements of the food industry, as well as to their respective governments in seeking 'earned recognition' in their farming regulatory systems. A 'one voice' approach must be adopted when representing UK farm assurance to external bodies. To this end, as we note earlier, every scheme taking part in the federation must have an equal standing, there should be formal agreement as to how the network will operate, chairing of network meetings should be rotated between members and the arrangements for the network should be subject to periodic review.

   **Action**: All Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Long Term**

**The role of whole life in farm assurance**

4. Livestock farm assurance schemes that do not deliver whole life assurance should establish a plan to do so. We recognise that this will disrupt elements of the farming industry, but it is essential to the longer-term delivery of consumer confidence in product standards and to maintaining the assurance link between product origin and the consumer.

   **Action**: Relevant Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: Within 1 year of publication of the UKFAR report

## Strategic Recommendation 7:

### Farm assurance schemes must better position the UK farming industry in world food markets and in competition with imported food

**Rationale for this theme**

A. We received a great deal of evidence saying that the UK farming industry could not operate in the food market on a level playing field because imported food was not held to the same standards as those required by UK farm assurance schemes. There are three aspects in this theme that need to be considered. The first is that the argument that imported food is always of a lower standard than that produced in the UK is not true. Some international standards are higher or are simply different. Whilst we recognise that some imported food may be below the standards required by UK farm assurance schemes it may still comply with legal baselines to enable it to be sold in the UK, and there is no overriding case, in regulatory terms, for such imports to be precluded from the UK market. In the second instance, based on the belief that international food standards are always inferior, some have called for there to be a mirror scheme for imported food that meets the standards required by the UK farm assurance system. This is likely to be impractical, costly for the food industry and seems unlikely to achieve the level playing field sought by the UK farming sector because it would be seen as introducing a tariff that would be contrary to existing trade agreements, where these apply, and could damage prospects for UK exports.

B. The third aspect is that the evidence is contradictory. Whilst the call for imported food to be subject to higher standards is seen throughout the submissions we received, the farmer survey revealed that around 80% of respondents claimed not to have a good knowledge of international standards of food production. A level playing field for UK farming should therefore begin with a better understanding of what is trying to be levelled, and a greater degree of awareness of international standards of food production would provide a helpful starting point.

C. The role of UK government in this process cannot be ignored. Despite its positive earlier work, the Trade and Agriculture Commission has not been in a position to publish advice on trade agreements since late 2023, yet a number of trade agreement negotiations were in progress or awaited (10 in total) when a report on this topic was submitted to the House of Commons Library in September 2024. Furthermore, the position of the Commission, which can only review a free trade agreement (FTA) after it has been

signed and can therefore (again with limitations) only provide advice to the Government on changes required to UK legislation to comply with an FTA, does not offer a route to ensuring a level playing field for UK farming. This position should be changed, because such legislative alterations could also impact on the operation of the farm assurance system. Advice provided by the Commission on the negotiated agricultural elements of an FTA would be a more helpful way to ensure that those conducting negotiations had in mind the particular concerns of UK food producers and the impact of different international production standards on achieving a level playing field for the UK farming industry. The re-establishment of the Commission, which was in progress at the time of writing, would provide a timely opportunity for this change to be considered.

**Related recommendations**

**Short Term**

**Standards for imported food**

1. There is a need for greater clarity on the food production standards of importing food nations and for these to be directly compared with the standards used by UK farm assurance schemes. To this end, the work begun by the AHDB to provide these assessments must continue and address other farming sectors and other nations. The UK farm assurance schemes must cooperate fully with these exercises to ensure that there is comprehensive information available to inform these assessments.

   **Action**: AHDB

   **Timescale**: Commencement of an ongoing programme within 6 months of publication of the UKFAR report

**Informing UK farming about food standards in other nations**

2. The AHDB and NFUs must use the information obtained via the ongoing programme of comparative assessments of international food standards to provide the farming industry with an evidence base of how UK food production really compares with that of competitor nations. The information in these assessments should provide clear comparisons for ease of interpretation and should highlight major differences where international standards either exceed or fall below those employed in the UK.

   **Action**: AHDB and NFUs

   **Timescale**: Commencement of a communications programme within 9 months of publication of the UKFAR report.

**Farm assurance for combinable crops**

3. The combinable crops sector has particular issues with the use of assurance standards when imported products can be mixed with those produced in the UK. There is a view that this can distort the presentation and consumer understanding of a product so that it is thought to solely meet UK farm assurance standards. Whilst it is recognised that only a limited number of consumer products based on such crops carry the RT logo there is no equivalent trade labelling for products mixed with imported combinable crops. This practice must be changed so that clear labelling is employed to identify the origin of

component materials in a combinable crops product, in order to provide a complete picture for others in the food chain, and for consumers, about the nature of a product and, with the comparative studies we have previously recommended, the standards to which it has been produced.

**Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes working with Combinable Crops Sector representatives and their customer base

**Timescale**: 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Medium Term**

**Reviewing international standards by government**

4. All government departments with responsibility for the farming and food industries should ensure that they reconsider their approach to ensuring that standards for imported food are equivalent to those of UK farm assurance schemes, and that movements in international standards are kept under close review to assist in the export of UK food products. The work we propose must be conducted by the AHDB and NFUs, to maintain oversight of international food assurance standards, should be used as evidence to support this recommendation and it should be seen as a refocus by government departments on developing and supporting a new, comprehensive, UK food export strategy.

   **Action**: Relevant government departments, together with AHDB and NFUs

   **Timescale**: 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Long Term**

**The Trade and Agriculture Commission**

5. The UK Government should reconsider the way in which the Trade and Agriculture Commission operates so that it can provide advice during the negotiation process on free trade agreements where those agreements cover aspects of agriculture and food production, not just on the post-agreement impact of an FTA on the UK farming and food industry. The advice provided by the Trade and Agriculture Commission may be regarded as non-binding, but it should at least be taken into account to help inform the UK Government's negotiating position.

   **Action**: UK Government

   **Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

## Strategic Recommendation 8:

### All farm assurance schemes must review, and, where necessary, improve their methods of communication with the farming industry

**Rationale**

A. A common theme emerging from this Review is the perceived distance that has emerged between some farm assurance schemes and their farming members. This is

not the case with every scheme, some of which are performing well in this area, but the problem in others is so pervasive that it risks damaging the credibility of the UK farm assurance system. Some of our earlier recommendations address the way in which farm assurance schemes can help tackle this issue, but it is such an important element of the evidence that we have gathered that it merits attention in a specific set of recommendations.

B. We are aware that some farm assurance schemes, notably RT, are already taking steps to renew their communications strategies to improve the way in which information is relayed to, and feedback is obtained from, the farming community. Whilst we welcome the steps being taken, we firmly believe that a renewed communications strategy will not be enough to repair the lack of trust felt by some in the farming industry towards the farm assurance system. Again, we emphasise that this position does not apply to all farm assurance schemes, but where it does, particular attention will need to be paid to institutional culture to ensure that farming members are at the centre of the scheme. A 'farmer first' approach is required to ensure that farm assurance schemes adequately support the development of the industry, understand the impact of farm assurance activities on farm businesses and focus more on a risk based approach to farm assurance.

C. We are concerned that the 'mission creep' evident in the wider farm assurance system is imposing additional requirements, uncertainty and cost on farming and horticultural businesses. One example is the recent introduction by Sedex, of the SMETA 7.0 audit standards, which aimed to address aspects of the recruitment and employment of seasonal workers. Without complying, farmers and growers would risk not being able to meet applicable retailer/customer requirements. There must be proper consultation with the industry, and appropriate cost-sharing arrangements for such requirements, if the ultimate beneficiary of these standards falls, in part, beyond the farm gate, and changes of this nature should not be introduced without the benefit of a full impact assessment undertaken by an independent body.

**Related recommendations**

**Short Term**

**A 'farmer first' approach to communications**

1. Farm assurance schemes must continue to review the way in which they communicate with farming members to ensure that their institutional cultures deliver a 'farmer first' approach to the delivery and development of their farm assurance scheme. This process should be revisited on a regular basis to ensure that scheme staff understand the importance of farm member communications and that their means of communication remain effective.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 3 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Implementing the Commission's Recommendations**

2. All farm assurance schemes must publish an initial report on the implementation of recommendations contained in the Commission's report and ensure that this is made available to farming members and to the wider farming community. Where certain recommendations have not yet been implemented a clear timetable for their completion must be provided in the report, and updates made available to the farming industry on a quarterly basis until the implementation work is complete.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: Initial Report within 6 months of publication of the UKFAR report and quarterly thereafter

**Using features/Advantages/Benefits statements**

3. The finance and insurance sectors produce a Features/Advantages/Benefits (FAB) statement for each of their products, setting out in plain English, and in a consistent way, the particular nature of the product and the way in which it will operate. Using the statement on good practice in farm assurance provided in this report as a starting point, farm assurance schemes must produce a similar FAB statement to make clear what is required from farmers by the scheme, the standards in the scheme's operation that farmers can expect, as well as aspects that the scheme will not cover. This will establish a clearer understanding of what it is that farm assurance is expected to deliver, and, importantly, what the farm assurance scheme will not provide.

   **Action**: Farm Assurance Schemes

   **Timescale**: 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Avoiding 'mission creep' to address third party requirements**

4. We have already recommended changes to the way in which farm assurance standards are introduced to ensure that their origin is clearly stated. In cases where changes to farm audits that purport to relate to farm assurance requirements fall outside the accepted purpose and scope of farm assurance contained in this report, they must be subject to full industry consultation, an independent impact assessment and an agreed method to share the cost of implementation and operation. These actions must be undertaken collaboratively to achieve a collective decision on whether, and how, such changes are to be implemented, and how the costs will be shared across the wider food chain.

   **Action:** BRC with NFUs and AHDB

   **Timescale:** 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Medium Term**

**Implementing culture change**

5. Where farm assurance scheme boards do not already do so, they must implement culture change programmes with their respective senior management teams to ensure that the 'farmer first' approach advocated in this review is followed through to all levels

within their organisation. This could take one of a number of forms, including the use of leadership coaches and/or 360 degree appraisal. The outcome of this programme must be measured with farmer member feedback at routine intervals so that scheme boards are kept appraised of progress in developing greater levels of trust between farm assurance schemes and their farmer members.

**Action**: Farm Assurance Scheme Boards

**Timescale**: 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report

**Long Term**

**The ownership of Red Tractor**

6. We considered the current ownership arrangements of RT, and the merits, or otherwise, of changing to a more independent structure, as suggested in the scheme's evidence submitted to the Commission. We recognise that this scheme can be caught between the requirements of its owners and need to implement change or address issues that might prove difficult with one of the industry sectors it serves. This means that the scheme is sometimes held to account for matters beyond its immediate control, or that change can take much longer than necessary. Coupled with some shortcomings in its approach to communications with farming members this has contributed to the largely negative feedback we have received from farmers about the scheme and its operation. However, because we have concluded that the scheme exists to serve its farming members, and that there would be the possibility of a farm assurance landscape driven by other industry sectors rather than with the full contribution of farmer members, a change to a more independent structure is not appropriate at this point. It follows that the current ownership arrangements should remain in place but these must be balanced by the RT Board being reaffirmed as the primary governing body for the organisation. The owners of the scheme must show greater and more active leadership, to help shape its future direction and organisational culture, but without straying into issues of setting strategic direction and overseeing operational delivery, which should remain with the RT board. The terms of this arrangement should be established by the Board and the scheme owners and published so that they are clear to members of the scheme.

   **Action**: Red Tractor Board and Ownership Organisations

   **Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

### Strategic Recommendation 9:

**The Red Tractor scheme must complete the implementation of recommendations in the Campbell Tickell report.**

**Rationale**

A. It is vital that momentum is maintained in dealing with the changes in the governance of the RT scheme recommended in the Campbell Tickell report. Whilst the way in which this is being accomplished is not a direct concern of the Commission, the impact of these changes on the relationship between the scheme and its farming members is a direct concern of this Review. We are aware that progress is being made with the implementation of the Campbell Tickell recommendations, and it is vital that the outcomes of this process, most notably those concerning organisational culture and

leadership, are communicated effectively, and in a timely manner, to the farming community.

B. The Campbell Tickell report left some issues to be addressed as part of this review, and some of the recommendations we make pick up these items. However, it is not clear how external action will be taken to assess whether satisfactory progress has been made with the implementation of the Campbell Tickell report, and we consider this to be an important topic that should be followed up by the report's sponsoring body with the RT scheme.

C. The Campbell Tickell report suggested that there could be more wide ranging changes for the RT scheme emerging as a result of this review, including to the ownership structure, which we have addressed in our earlier recommendations. We have also built upon a number of the Campbell Tickell recommendations, such as on the appointment of sector board members, and communications with farmers, because they were strongly represented in the evidence presented to us and needed, in our view, to be reiterated. Campbell Tickell pointed to the possible emergence, post our review, of a RT 2.0. We do not go so far as to suggest that new ownership structures are put in place but support the governance proposals set out by Campbell Tickell for the RT 2.0 model. Rather, if RT is to continue to deliver benefits for the farming community it will need to revisit the fundamental principles for good practice farm assurance set out in this report, amend its organisational culture to be more responsive to its farming members and their concerns and rebalance the way in which demands are placed on farmers from other parts of the food industry. The owners of the RT scheme must take a proactive stance, with the RT Board, to provide the leadership to ensure that these changes to RT's organisational culture are made. Our earlier recommendations tackle these, and many other issues relating to the operation of the RT scheme. They must be seen as a package of measures which, together, should place farm assurance, operated by RT, on a firmer footing for the future.

**Related recommendations**

**Short Term**

**Reviewing progress with the Campbell Tickell report**

1. RT must publish a report on the way in which it has implemented the recommendations of the Campbell Tickell report and ensure that this is made available to farming members and to the wider farming community. Where certain recommendations have not yet been implemented a clear timetable for their completion must be provided in the report, and updates made available to the farming industry when these elements have been addressed.

   **Action**: Red Tractor Board

   **Timescale**: Initial report within 3 months of publication of the UKFAR report.

**Medium/Long Term**

**A formal assessment of changes to Red Tractor**

2. Even though the Campbell Tickell report may address current issues concerning the governance of the RT scheme it remains to be seen if, in the longer term, the measures

in that report, together with those in this review, have successfully repaired the levels of trust necessary to create a more positive relationship between the scheme and the farming community. To this end, the sponsoring bodies for this review must conduct a formal assessment of the outcome of both reports, to determine how farmer sentiment towards the scheme has changed as a result of this programme of work.

**Action**: NFUs and AHDB

**Timescale**: 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report

## 6.3 Recommendations Gantt Chart

**Table 9:** *Timescales & ownership Recommendations Gantt Chart*

Milestones

| | | | | Months | | | | | | | | | | | | Years | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 1+ | 2+ | 3+ | 4+ | 5+ |
| **Strategic Recommendation 1: The on-farm audit must be reduced, simplified and delivered more consistently** *(Themes 1, 5 &11)* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Clarity about purpose** | NFU and AHDB to lead | 6 months from the publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Revising Standards** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 months from the publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **A right of appeal** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 months from the publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Propotionate sanctions** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 months from the publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Risk based, coordinated inspection** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 months from the publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Learning lessons: using experience to support members** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Working in tandem: collaboration and cooperation between schemes** | Farm Assurance Schemes, led by AHDB | 9 months to 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Joint training for inspectors** | Farm Assurance Schemes, working with TIAH | 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Transparency between schemes and regulators** | Farm Assurance Schemes and industry regulators | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Addressing the impact of audit on farmer wellbeing** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Promoting consistency in inspections** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Inspection as a career path** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Long | **Risk-based inspection** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 2 years from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Strategic Recommendation 2: There must be a transformational step forward in embracing technology and managing data to deliver more effective farm assurance with greater added value for all** *(Themes 1, 2 & 11)* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **'Tell Us Once': making good use of data** | Farm assurance schemes | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Data ownership: the need for resolution** | Farm assurance schemes, NFUs and AHDB | 6 Months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Creating a data co-op** | Farm assurance schemes | 6 Months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Supporting farmers in a digital world** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 Months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Future possibilities: harnessing collective expertise** | NFUs, AHDB and the Defra Data Group, working with Agri-Tech E and/or the UK Agri-Tech Centre and participating Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 Months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **'Tell Us Once': collecting and storing data** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Alternative approaches** | New scheme developers to work with AHDB to support the delivery of this novel approach to farm assurance | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Keep it live: reviewing standards** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Long | **Investing in technology** | AHDB to coordinate with Farm Assurance Schemes | 2 years from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Strategic Recommendation 3: Farm assurance schemes need to reset and restate their decision-making structure to re-establish farmers as the driving voice in standards development** *(Themes 3 & 5)* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Creating and amending standards** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Appointments to sector boards** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Board structures in farm assurance schemes** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Balancing scheme demands** | Farm Assurance Schemes | Annual Review | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Using impact assessments** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Long | **A federation of farm assurance schemes** | TBA | 2 years from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Strategic recommendation 4: A new industry-led initiative must set out the future environmental ambitions for farm assurance, establishing this as an area of competitive advantage for UK farming** *(Themes 3, 4, 7 & 11)* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Developing acceptable environmental standards** | AHDB, NFUs, Government Ministries and relevant agencies | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **How can farmers implement environmental standards** | AHDB and NFUs | 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Rewarding the use of environmental standards** | Food chain businesses beyond the farm gate | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Telling the wider world what farming delivers for the environment** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Long | **A 'foresight' exercise on future environmental standards** | Farm Assurance Schemes with farming and food chain industry representatives | 2 years from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

| Milestones | | | | Months | | | | | | | | | | | | Years | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 1+ | 2+ | 3+ | 4+ | 5+ |
| **Strategic Recommendation 5: The inc, 5lusion of regulatory requirements within farm assurance standards and audits should be conditional on government and regulators agreeing a form of "earned recognition"** *(Themes 4 & 6)* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Creating points of contact in government departments** | Government departments | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Consistency of regulatory use of farm assurance** | Government departments, regulatory agencies and NFUs | 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Agreeing how regulatory sanctions and farm assurance work together** | Regulatory agencies working with farm assurance schemes | 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Extending 'earned recognition'** | Farm assurance schemes in consultation with government departments | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Using farm datat to determine the impacy of policy changes** | Government departments | 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Long | **Improving government understanding of the role of farm assurance** | DEFRA | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Strategic Recommendation 6: There must be greater coordination in the way in which farm assurance operates across the UK nations** *(Themes 3, 6 & 8)* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Creating a new Red Tractor approach for combinable crops** | Red Tractor | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Improving Red Tractor understanding of farming in Northern Ireland** | Red Tractor | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Creating 'one voice' for UK farm assurance** | All Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Long | **The role of whole-life in farm assurance** | Relevant Farm Assurance Schemes | Within 1 year of publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Strategic Recommendation 7: Farm assurance schemes must better position the UK farming industry in world food markets and in competition with imported food** *(Themes 5, 4 & 9)* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Standards for imported food** | AHDB | Commencement of an ongoing programme within 6 months of publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Informing UK farming about food standards in other nations** | AHDB and NFUs | Commencement of a communications programme within 9 months of publication of the UKFAR report. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Farm assurance for combinable crops** | Farm Assurance Schemes working with Combinable Crops Sector representatives and their customer base | 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Reviewing international standards by government** | Relevant government departments, together with AHDB and NFUs | 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Long | **The Trade and Agriculture Commission** | UK Government | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Strategic Recommendation 8: All farm assurance schemes must review, and, where necessary, improve their methods of communication with the farming industry** *(Themes 4, 5 & 10)* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **A 'farmer first' approach to communications** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 3 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Implementing the Commission's recommendations** | Farm Assurance Schemes | Initial Report within 6 months of publication of the UKFAR report and quarterly thereafter | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Using Features/Advantages/Benefits statement** | Farm Assurance Schemes | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Avoiding 'mission creep' to address third party requirements** | BRC with NFU & AHDB | 6 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **Implementing culture change** | Farm Assurance Scheme Boards | 9 months from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Long | **The ownership of Red Tractor** | Red Tractor Board and Ownership Organisations | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Strategic Recommendation 9: The Red Tractor scheme must complete the implementation of recommendations in the Campbell Tickell report, publish a report on how it has responded to these recommendations and address remaining conclusions drawn by Campbell Tickell but left to the Commission to consider.** *(Themes 3, 5 & 10)* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Short | **Reviewing progress with the Campbell Tickell report** | Red Tractor Board | Initial report within 3 months of publication of the UKFAR report. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Medium | **A formal assessment of changed to Red Tractor** | NFU & AHDB | 1 year from publication of the UKFAR report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

# ANNEXES

# Annex I: A View of Red Tractor

We recognise there has been a separate governance review of Red Tractor (RT) by Campbell Tickell. This report takes on board the findings of that informative review and has not sought to duplicate its work. That review also raised issues for our own work that we have sought to address.

At the outset of this review, we were clear that our remit was to consider broad issues around the principles of farm assurance as a whole. This has included an examination of how schemes operate across different sectors of the industry and in different parts of the UK. We have also adopted a forward-looking mindset, anticipating future issues and identifying opportunities for farm assurance to adapt to this changing future in a way that continues to provide reassurance to consumers and which adds value for farmers.

However, whilst our scope has been broad, there is no escaping the fact that the extensive evidence we have gathered in the course of our work has been dominated by views on – and issues relating to - RT. These views are not uniform, however the balance of evidence is clear.

A significant proportion of farmers and growers have lost confidence in the operations of RT. The gap between those involved in the delivery of the scheme and scheme members has grown wider in recent years.

Whilst tensions arose publicly in relation to the GFC, our view is that this merely acted as the catalyst for issues to come to the surface. Had it not been GFC, there would inevitably have been another trigger in the near future which would have exposed the lack of ownership farmers feel of RT and its future direction.

Too many farmers, feel that RT is not 'owned by them' but rather 'done to them'.

It is important to stress that the evidence we gathered on RT was not uniform. There is strong support for the scheme from many, notably in the pigs sector.

However, if successful farm assurance can be defined as having advocate farmers, working in close collaboration with the industry and providing open and transparent communication then RT is failing in some key sectors, in particular beef, sheep, dairy and cereals.

None of this is to say that the current situation need become an existential threat to RT. Indeed, when we explored views with those contributing to our review, it is clear that the principle of a UK-wide farm assurance scheme is well supported. Indeed, many farmers across all sectors want RT to be successful and want to feel invested and involved in its future development. That is an excellent platform for a reset.

That said, unless action is taken quickly to rebuild bridges with key sectors, the threat may become existential.

Central to strengthening RT will be a board and senior executive team that recognises the scale of concern that exists and the urgency of action. We are concerned that is not the case.

We have found an organisation that is somewhat entrenched and defensive. It believes it has been unfairly characterised, criticised and is broadly misunderstood. Whilst there will be

examples to justify that view, the overwhelming call from our work is for a new leadership approach and culture.

RT is keen to emphasise that its main customer is consumers, not farmers. We believe that is overly simplistic and symptomatic of the culture which has led to distrust by, and distance from, the farming industry.

Of course, the responsibility for action does not just rest with the RT Board and leadership team. The Ownership Body has a critical role here. The farming unions and AHDB have a collective leadership responsibility to be both agents of change and strong advocates for RT.

The current issues relating to RT risk damaging farm assurance as a broad concept. There are schemes operating in other sectors and in devolved parts of the UK that are successful and enjoy higher levels of confidence and trust from the farming community. Whilst there are improvements required for these schemes too, they are concerned that they may become collateral damage in the dysfunction affecting RT. We share that view.

Understandably, given the prominence of RT as the UK's largest farm assurance scheme, we have found that issues relating to RT and farm assurance more broadly can be blurred in discussions. It is important that those reading our report do not fall into that trap. The situation for different sectors and different parts of the UK is very different and nuanced. Therefore, our recommendations are too.

In the recommendations we have provided, we have been clear to separate where they are directly relevant to RT and where they are relevant for farm assurance more broadly.

As Commissioners, we see RT being a central part of the future of food and farming across the UK. Our analysis and call for action, alongside specific recommendations for change, are designed to help secure that future.

# Annex II: Commissioner Biographies

The four Commissioners were:

**Dr David Llewellyn CBE FRAgS FIAgrE** - was the Principal of Harper Adams from 2009 to 2012, and then when Harper Adams received university title, its first Vice-Chancellor, from 2012 until his retirement in 2021. From 2018 to 2021 he was Chair of Guild HE, one of the two higher education national representative bodies.

He is Chair of the LANTRA Board, Patron of the Douglas Bomford Trust and he was a member of the Expert Panel for the recent Independent Review of Labour Shortages in the Food Supply Chain. David is a Fellow of the Royal Agricultural Society and a Fellow of the Institution of Agricultural Engineers and was the recipient of the 2022 IAgrE Award for Contribution to the Land Based Sector.

In 2022, David was also awarded a CBE for services to Higher Education, the Agri-Food Chain and Rural Industries.

**James Withers** - James is the former Chief Executive of Scotland Food & Drink and NFU Scotland. In 11 years as CEO at Scotland Food & Drink (SF&D), James co-ordinated an industry and government collaboration to drive forward a growth strategy for the £15 billion Scottish food and drink sector. He has also sat on the Scottish Government's National Resilience Group, the National Trade Board and co-chaired, with the Cabinet Secretary, the Food Security Taskforce.

In 2022, James was appointed as a Global Scot and he has a number of non-executive director roles, including being on the boards of the Scottish Tourism Alliance and Abbey Group, working to grow the UK and Irish tourism industries. In 2022, he was appointed by Scottish Ministers to lead an independent review of Scotland's £3.5 billion skills system. He presented proposals for reform in 2023 which have been accepted by Scottish Government with new legislation now in train. He is a Fellow of the Royal Agricultural Societies (FRAgS).

**Katrina Williams** - Katrina had a long career in the civil service in policy making and the shaping and implementation of legislation: a large part of her career was spent in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and then in Defra. From 2008 to 2013 she was Director-General Food and Farming at Defra and her last role in the Civil Service until 2023, was as the Director-General leading all of Defra's international work.

Katrina's career had a strong international and EU component – from 2017 to 2020 she was the UK's Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU. Katrina now advises companies on influencing the EU, and trains people in international negotiations.

**Mark Suthern ACIB PFIAgrM ARAgS FRSA** - Mark previously worked for Barclays plc for over 35 years and was Managing Director and National Head of Agriculture focused on Farming, Landed Estates, Agri-tech, Sustainability and the Environment.

He now has a portfolio of roles and these include Chair and Trustee of Farming Community Network (FCN); Non-Executive member of the Rural Payments Agency Advisory Management Board; Non-Executive Director for the Environment Agency; Member of the Defra Farming Innovation Programme Strategy Group; Trustee and Vice Chair of the Institute of Agricultural Management; Chair and External Advisor for FixOurFood - (University of York); Co-chaired the

Green Finance Institute Finance for Farming Report; Organiser for St Georges House - Windsor Castle Farming Consultations and Lay-Canon and Vice Chair of the Chapter at Lincoln Cathedral.

# Annex III: Operating Principles of the Review

**STRATEGIC REVIEW OF UK FARM ASSURANCE: OPERATING PRINCIPLES**

**Independence**

1. The Review, and its conduct, must have, and maintain, independence from the commissioning bodies (the farming unions (NFUs) and AHDB). The Commissioners have been selected for their independence, and maintaining the independence of the process and results will be key to the credibility of the Review and of the commissioning organisations.

**Protecting the interests of the NFUs and AHDB**

2. The bodies which have commissioned the Review have legitimate interests in the following area:

- **Cost, financing and value for money**. As the funding bodies for the review, the NFUs and AHDB will need to be assured that the work is affordable, that the funding requirements are predictable and that they offer value for money

- **Coverage, stakeholder engagement, timeline and direction of travel**. It will be important to offer full transparency on these points: although the conclusions of the Commissioners and the Review must be independent, the bodies which have commissioned the Review will need to understand the process by which those conclusions have been reached, the breadth of stakeholder coverage, and the expected timeline for completion of the Review

**Operating Principles**

3. With points 1 and 2 in mind, the Review should follow these rules:

- The NFUs and AHDB should be involved in the process for the selection of the Review Secretariat (the major cost component of the Review) although the final decision/choice of Secretariat shall remain with the Commissioners

- The Secretariat, once selected, will report monthly to the NFUs and AHDB on f**inancial outgoings and commitments,** but other aspects of reporting will remain the responsibility of the Commissioners

- The Commissioners will report monthly to the **FARLG** on their activities. The role of the FARLG will be to provide assurance and observations: given the independence of the Review, it is not intended that the FARLG will steer the Commission's work. Although it is intended that the FARLG shall be the main vehicle for contact with the Review and the Commissioners, the **Boards and Office Holders of the commissioning bodies** may at any time request updates from the Commissioners

- The Commissioners will liaise with the respective communications teams of the NFUs and AHDB to ensure that they remain aware of the Commission's activities and contacts with the press and other media, but such contacts, and their contents, will not be prescribed by the NFUs and AHDB and will remain the responsibility of the independent

Commissioners. Information about the Review released by the NFUs and/or AHDB will make clear that the Review is independent of the commissioning bodies, but that it will receive evidence to support its conclusions from, amongst others, the commissioning bodies and their members

# Annex IV: Shows and Events Attended

During the review, the commissioners and/or secretariat attended the following shows and events:

- Royal Bath & West Show
- Cereals
- Royal Three Counties
- Arable Event
- Lincolnshire Show
- Royal Highland Show
- Great Yorkshire Show
- Fruit Focus
- Royal Welsh Show
- National Sheep Association (NSA) Sheep Event
- UK Dairy Day
- Potato Day
- The Dairy Show

# Annex V: Demographic Breakdown of Farm Survey Respondents

The farmer survey was developed using JISC surveys and was published 'live' for a period of 11 weeks, from week commencing 8 July 2024 until 7 September 2024. There were 3,616 submitted responses.

Some of the main results of the data from the survey have been used as part of our evidence base to support the Review's key recommendations, but the main demographic data from the survey are presented here for background information.

### Respondent Profile Data

The geographic split of respondents was as follows:

**Figure 1:** Where the respondents' 'business/enterprise was located

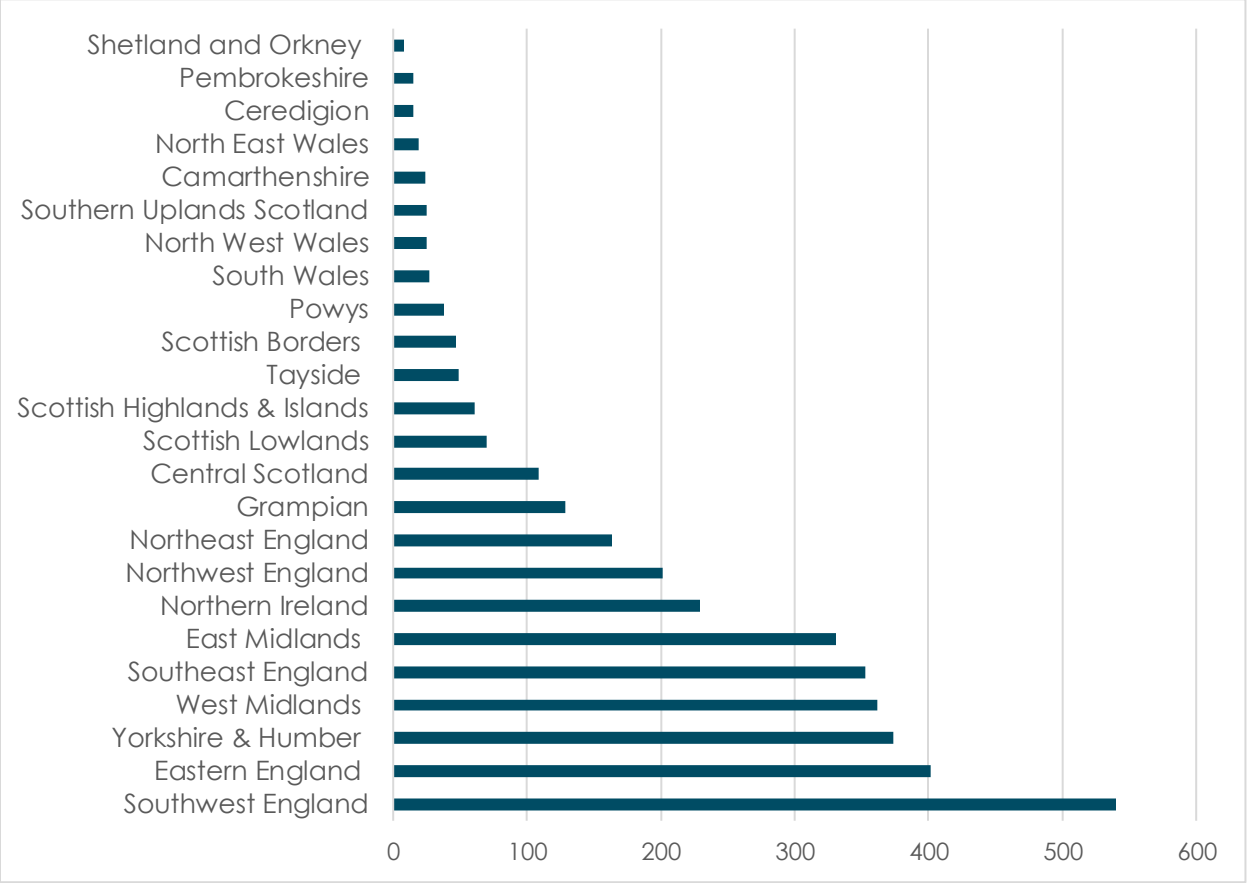



Figure 1 shows that most respondent businesses were located in the Midlands and Southern England. A good proportion of the respondents were also based in Northern Ireland, with the smallest number of enterprises being located in Wales and the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

In Figure 2, it can be seen the share of responses across the 4 nations of the UK corresponded reasonably well with national scale. The majority of respondents, 75%, were based in England, with 14% from Scotland, 6% from Northern Ireland and 5% from Wales.

**Figure 2**: Share of respondents across the UK nations

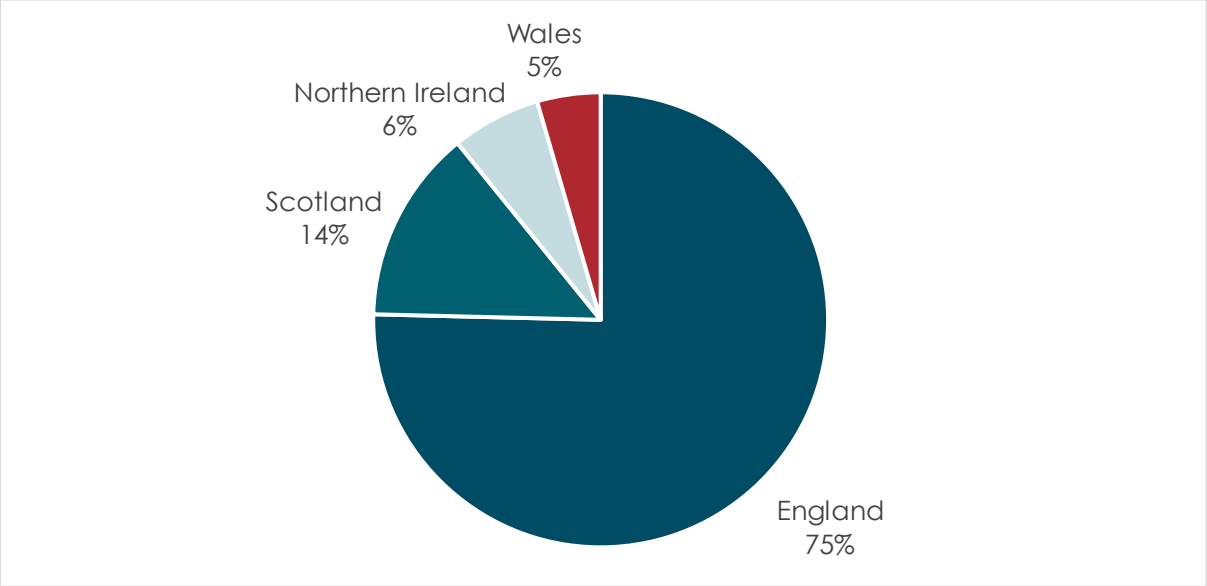
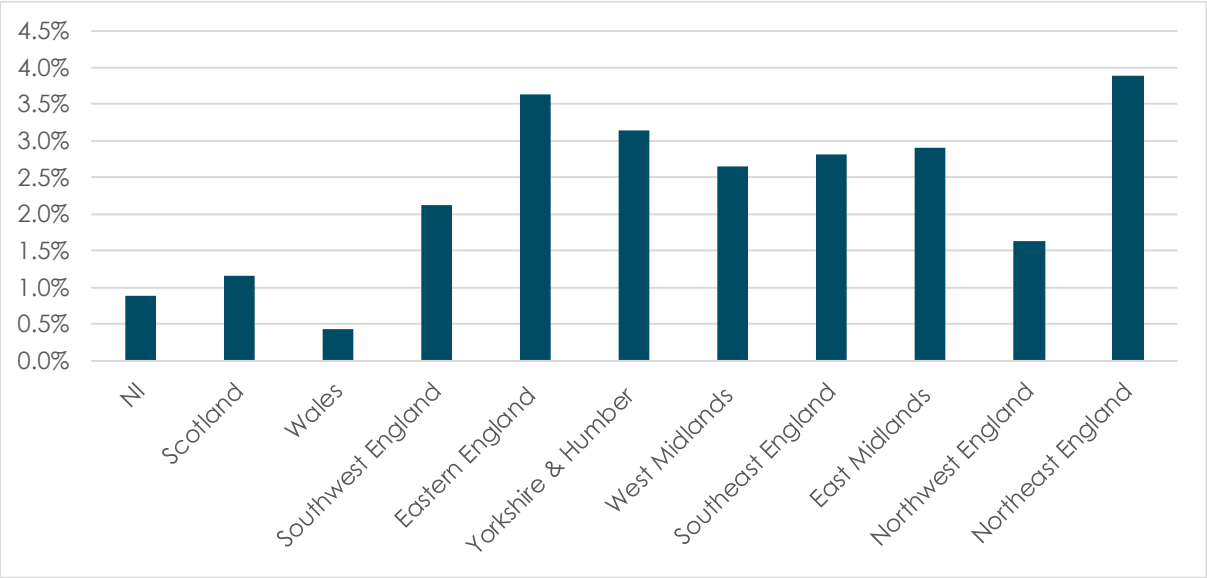



Figure 3 shows the respondent representation by region compared with farmer holdings registered in those regions, based on government data. This allowed us to identify any regional bias. It can be seen that the devolved nations had the lowest response, especially in Wales. Despite southwest England having the highest number of responses, compared to farmer numbers in that region, it had the second lowest response of the English regions.[17].

**Figure 3:** % of respondents within the different UK nations




[17] Agriculture in the UK 2023 & Defra June Survey of Agriculture, March 2024

**Figure 4:** Regional representation

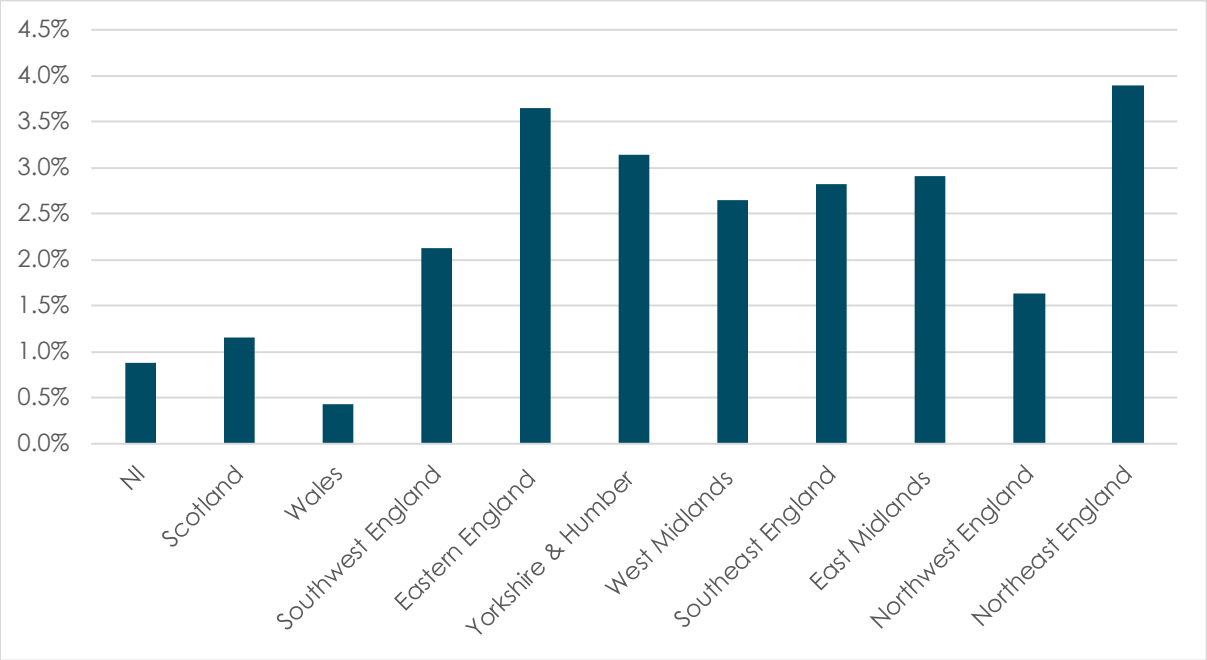
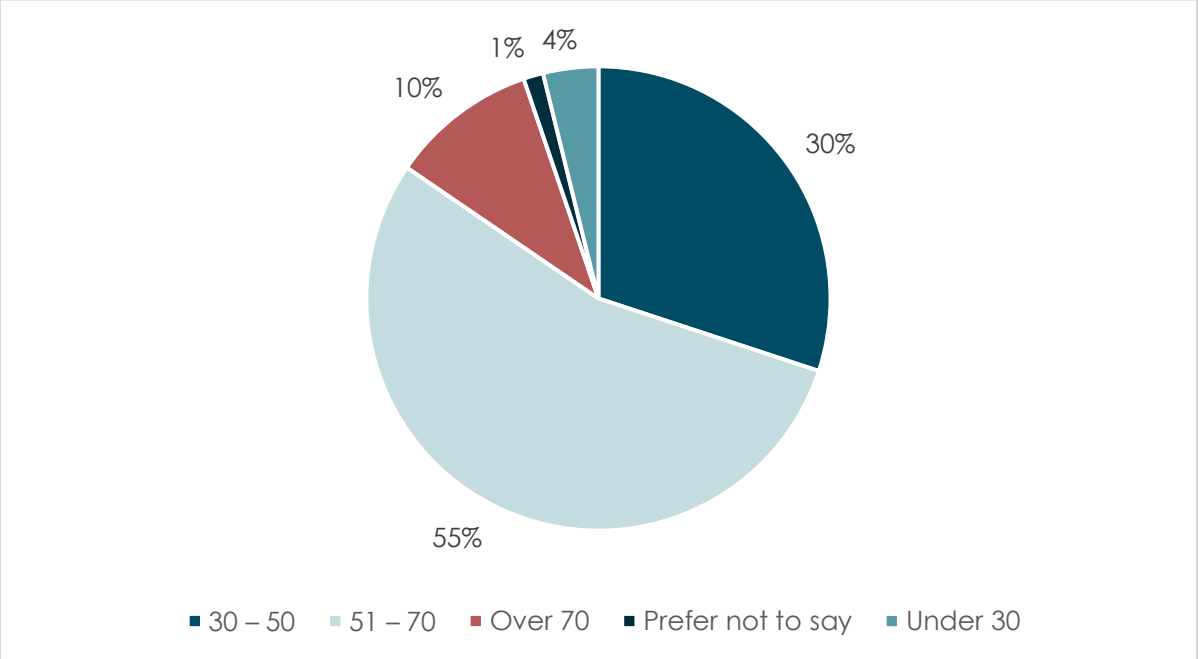
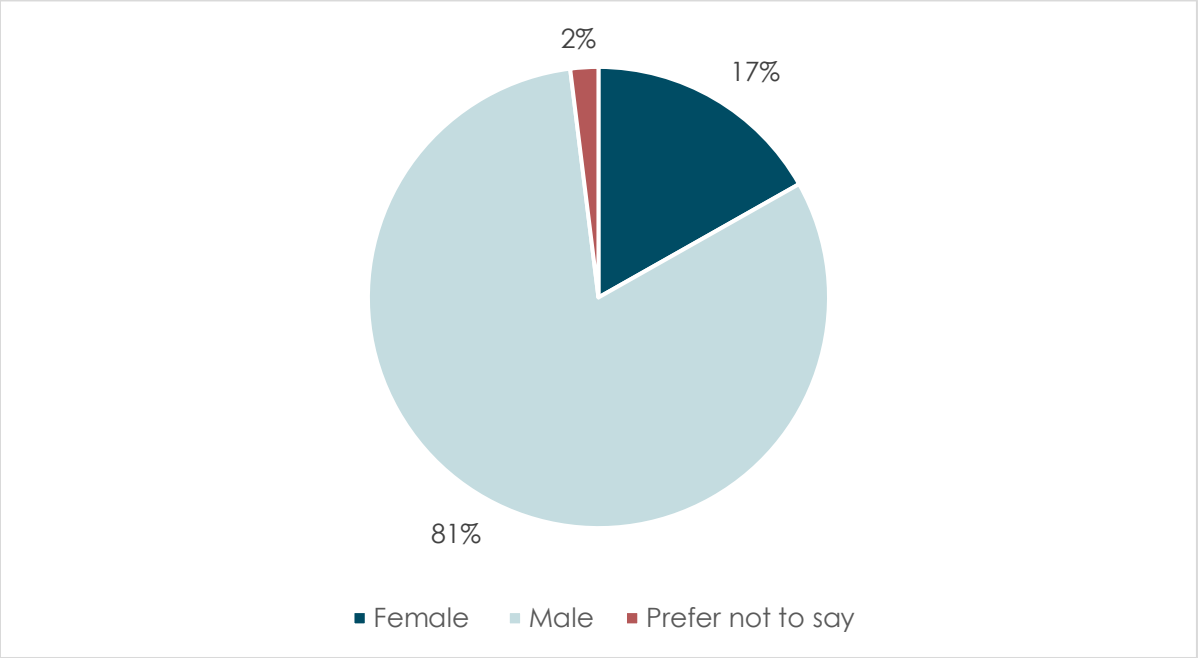



**Figure 5:** Respondent age



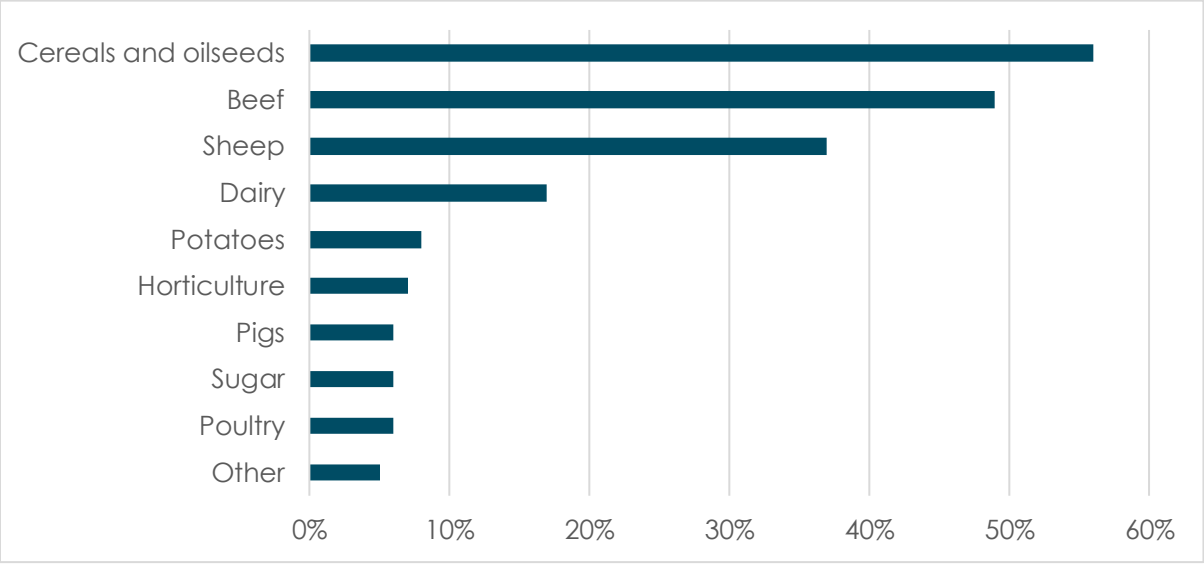

The majority age group of the respondents, at 55%, fell in the 51-70 category while 30% fell in the 30-50 category. A small proportion, just 4%, were under the age of 30, with 10% over the age of 70.

**Figure 6**: Respondent Gender




The majority of respondents who completed the survey were male (81%).

**Figure 7**: Distribution of Farm Enterprises




The most common type of enterprise was cereals and oilseeds, with 56% of respondents farming this type of business. Beef production followed a close second at 49%. It was also common for these enterprises to be running alongside each other. Sheep enterprises were also common, at 37% of respondents, also often combined with a range of other enterprises. Dairy enterprises were less common within the respondent group at just 17%.

For those who selected the other enterprise category (5%) the range of businesses that responded most commonly included vining peas, renewables, environmental schemes and equestrian activities (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8**: Respondents who selected the 'other' category for enterprises

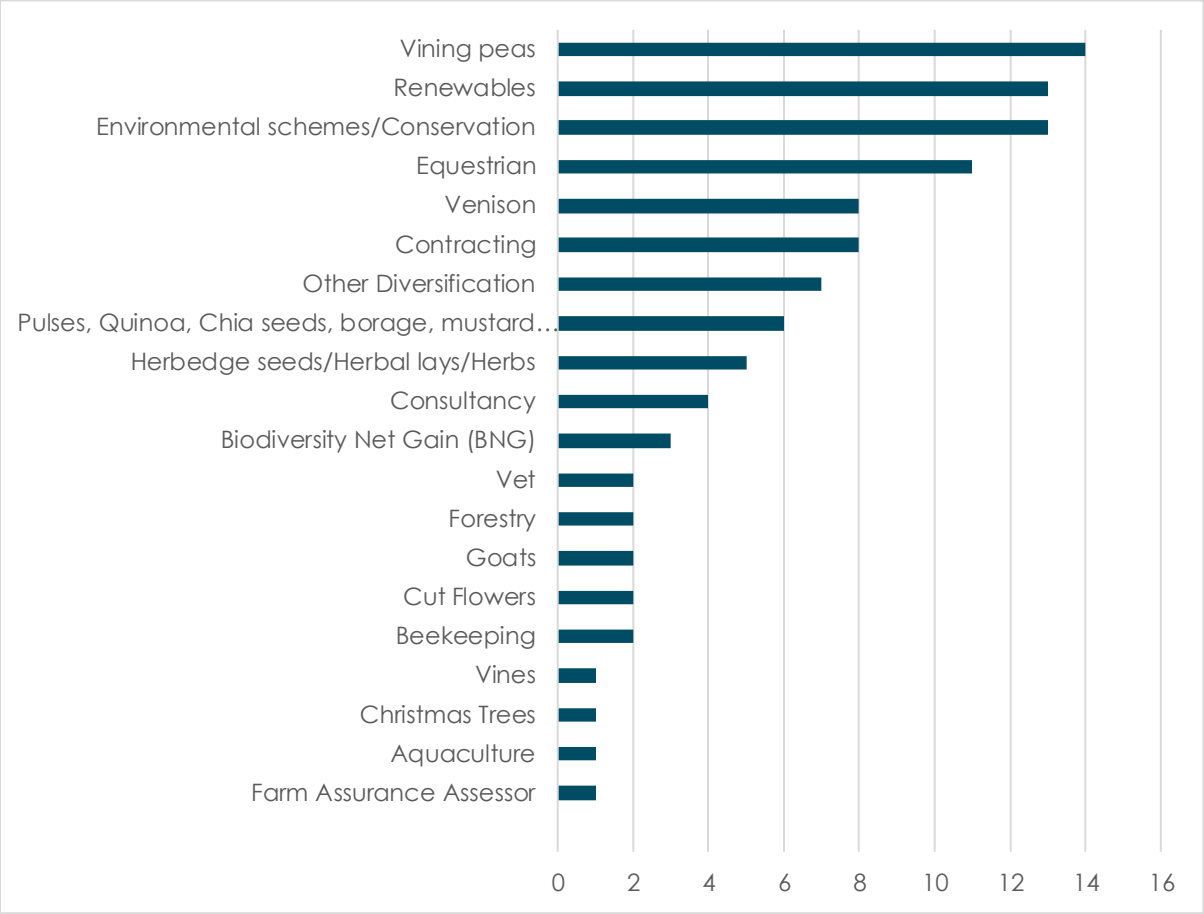



**Figure 9**: Respondents' role within the farm business

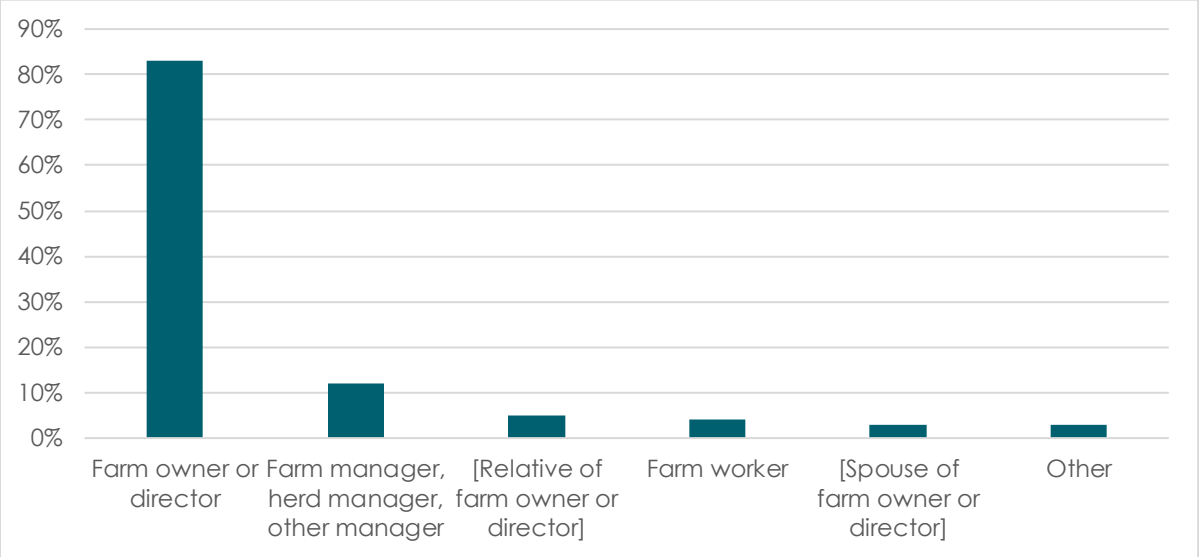



Figure 9 shows that 83% of respondents were either a farm owner or director. Those who selected the 'other' category included roles such as Technical Manager, Agent, Tenant Farmer Grain Merchant, Agronomist, Farm Compliance Manager, Farm Vet and part-time worker.

# Annex VI: Supply Chain Consultees

This Annex provides a list of the stakeholders that participated in the supply chain call for evidence. Please note that individual names have been removed from the list, with only company/organisation names provided.

Some of these organisations participated both by interview and via written submission.

| | |
|---|---|
| 2 Sisters Food Group | ABP Food Group |
| ADAS | Agricultural Industries Confederation |
| Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board | Anchor Nurseries |
| Anglia Free Range Eggs | Animal Health & Welfare Northern Ireland |
| Arla Foods | ASDA |
| Aviagen | Barbers Cheese |
| Barclays | Bartlow Estates |
| Belfast University | Bigham's |
| BQP | Branston Ltd |
| British Cattle Breeders Club | British Egg Industry Council |
| British Farmers Union | British Growers Association |
| British Independent Fruit Growers Association | British Meat Processors |
| British Meat Processors Association | British Retail Consortium |
| British Sugar | British Veterinary Association |
| British Wool | Central Association for Agricultural Valuers |
| Chesterfield Poultry Ltd | Cotteswold Dairy |
| Country Landowners Association | Cranswick |
| Dairy Council NI | Dairy UK |
| Davidstow Creamery | Delamere Dairy |
| Department of Environment, Farming & Rural Affairs | Dewing Grain |

| | |
|---|---|
| Dunbia | Duynie Feeds |
| Environment Agency | European Food & Farming Partnerships |
| Evesham Vale Growers | Farm Animal Welfare Consulting Ltd |
| Farmacy | Farmers for Action NI |
| Farmers Union of Wales | First Milk |
| Food & Drink Federation | Food Fortress Northern Ireland |
| Food Standards Authority | Food Standards Scotland |
| Food, Farming & Countryside Commission | Fresh Produce Consortium |
| Frontier Agriculture | Global Gap |
| Halal Certification Organisation Ltd | HSBC |
| Hutchinson's | Hybu Cig Cymru |
| Institute of Agricultural Auctioneers | International Meat Trade Association |
| IOM Dairy | Joseph Heler |
| Kepak | Kite |
| Lactalis | LEAF |
| Lidl | Marks & Spencer |
| Morrisons | MSD |
| Nantwich Vets | National Beef Association |
| National Farmers Union | National Farmers Union Cymru |
| National Farmers Union Scotland | National Pig Association |
| National Sheep Association | Natural England |
| Nature Friendly Farming Network | Northern Ireland Livestock & Meat Commission |
| Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association | Northern Ireland Food & Drink Association |
| Northern Ireland Food Chain Certification | Northern Ireland Government |
| Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association | Northern Ireland Pork & Bacon Forum |
| Northern Ireland Veterinary Association | NSF |

| | |
|---|---|
| Openfield | Organic Herd |
| OSI | Pasture for Life |
| Pig Veterinary Society | Red Tractor |
| Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers | RSPCA Assured |
| Rural Payments Agency | SAI Global |
| Sainsburys | Scotland Food & Drink Federation |
| Scottish Association of Meat Wholesalers | Scottish Auctioneers Association |
| Scottish Government | Scottish Association of Meat Wholesalers |
| Scottish Auctioneers Association | Scottish Government |
| Scottish Pig Producers | Scottish Quality Crops |
| Soil Association | St Ewe Free Range Eggs |
| Tenant Farmers Association | Tesco |
| The Co-operative | The Dairy Council |
| The Institute for Agriculture & Horticulture | Trade & Agriculture Commission |
| UKAS | Ulster Farmers Union |
| University of Nottingham | Virgin Bank |
| Viterra | Waitrose |
| Welsh Government | Welsh Lamb & Beef Producers |
| Which? | Wyke Farms |
| XL Vets | |

As well as responding to our formal call for evidence, the following organisations submitted additional information:

- Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board
- Agricultural Industries Confederation
- National Farmers Union
- Red Tractor

# Annex VII: Literature Review of Selected Key Documents

This annex has been prepared after a review of reports and other documents covering farm assurance and closely related subjects. We assessed over 30 documents in all, most dealing with the UK farming and food sector.

We have provided summaries of those publications we believe to be most relevant to this Review. They are presented in date order, beginning with the most recent

## *Progress Towards Achieving Intelligent Food Assurance Systems*

**Jiaqi Zhou, Paul Brereton, Katrina Campbell - Institute for Global Food Security, School of Biological Sciences, Queen's University, Belfast**

**Date: 2024**

**Key Points**

The potential benefits of integrating digital technologies in Intelligent Food Assurance Systems (IFAS) in the field of agriculture are mainly in the areas of production monitoring and resource utilisation efficiency, which may be beneficial in terms of reducing resource wastage and sustainable development.

New food analytical technology has clear abilities to ensure food quality and safety, and when combined with existing risk systems can have the potential to ensure food authenticity and food defence.

Intelligent food systems are characterised by the integration of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things (IoT) and big data analytics, which have the advantage of being quick to respond, helpful in decision-making, and allowing knowledge to be gained from previous experiences.

In summary the potential benefits of IFAS can be summarised in the following 4 main points:

- **Food assurance:** Among the key benefits of IFAS can be the ability to detect and prevent food inauthenticity, contamination and other safety issues in real time. By using data analytics, machine learning and artificial intelligence, these systems can analyse large amounts of data to enable early detection of safety issues and fraud attempts. At the same time, concerns about food safety and risks associated with food consumption are key factors in consumers' decisions, but they may have difficulty assessing food risks on their own, so they must rely on the expertise and information provided by retailers, manufacturers or health authorities (Liana et al, 2010). IFAS will selectively make key food data transparent due to its control of supply chain data, making it easy for consumers to monitor the quality and safety of food

- **Food transparency:** An easy-to-understand information system that brings more transparency and builds consumer trust, thus the future research on Internet of Food seems promising for the food industry and is seen to bring about a paradigm shift in the farm-to-

table approach (Kodan et al, 2020). This increased transparency and traceability can increase consumer trust and confidence in food and provide valuable information to regulators and other stakeholders. In addition, the implementation of IFAS will increase transparency and traceability in the supply chain, as the system is proposed to involve information from stakeholders across the supply chain. Through the use of smart sensors, blockchain technology and other tools, food can be monitored from farm to fork, providing detailed information on each link in the supply chain

- **Food waste and sustainability**: In addition to the aforementioned benefits demonstrated by precision agriculture, digital technologies such as IoT are likewise playing a role in the area of sustainability. Jagtap et al (2021) proposed an IoT-based framework for monitoring food waste generation as well as energy and water use in the food industry in order to optimise the resource efficiency of food manufacturing, leading to significant environmental and economic benefits. Sharma et al (2020) argued that blockchain technology could significantly benefit the creation of greener IoT ecosystems, potentially helping to reduce the greenhouse effect and fostering sustainable ecosystems by optimising energy use and increasing bandwidth utilisation

- **Business value:** Implementing an IFAS can also help businesses cope with risk in an unpredictable economic environment. Early detection not only helps to protect consumers, but also minimises the risk of product recalls, lost revenue and damage to brand reputation. For businesses, as well as increased efficiency which will be the main benefit, IFAS can serve as a marketing strategy to increase consumer trust and enhance core competencies

Another benefit of IFAS is their ability to optimise production processes, reduce waste and increase productivity. Park and Li (2021) demonstrated through a literature review and case studies that blockchain technology has the potential to improve supply chain sustainability performance. By using real-time data, these systems can identify inefficiencies and areas for improvement, enabling companies to make data-driven decisions about their operations, which can lead to cost savings, improved resource utilisation and productivity.

### *Red Tractor Independent Governance Review - Campbell Tickell*

**Date: 2024**

**Key Recommendations**

The report regarded the current situation as serious, and potentially damaging for RT and made recommendations largely relating to the scheme's governance. The review, irrespective of the ongoing second review [by this Commission] or its outcome, was to be seen as an opportunity for a reset. But for this opportunity to be taken successfully would require commitment and timely action not just by RT but also by the Ownership Bodies. The more immediate recommendations were presented in a summary form, as follows:

i. Create and publish a Governance Handbook: To address issues around lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, we recommend that RT create and publish a Governance Handbook, explaining how its governance operates, and the roles played by each component of its governance structure. This need not be a lengthy, or complex document, and having it available, and maintained will assist both those participating in RT's governance processes and its stakeholders

ii. Such a handbook can be used as part of new Board and Committee members' induction and could be incorporated in a regular training programme for participants in RT's governance. Clearly, addressing the level of misunderstanding about the roles of all the different entities within RT governance structure must be a priority going forward

iii. It should also help to address other issues of perception. For instance, we heard from some survey returns and interviewees that the members of the Sector Boards had been selected with a view to minimising any serious challenge to RT. We cannot say whether this is or is not the case, but we would comment that such perceptions can be reputationally damaging

iv. A clear process set out in the handbook, would help to counter such perceptions. This would need to cover such matters as the role of the Nominations Committee, how vacancies will be publicised, the process for applications or nominations, how the skills required will be established, and the interview and selection process

v. Introduce a formal process of appraisal for Board and Committee members: We recommend that RT introduces a formal process of appraisal, both of individual directors and members of committees and sub-committees, and also of the overall operation of each element of its governance hierarchy. Such a process can help foster a culture of continuous improvement within the governance of the organisation and enable opportunities for ongoing simplification and streamlining to be identified and acted upon

vi. Develop and adopt a Board Member Code of Conduct: There is inevitable tension inherent in the role of a Director who is appointed because they are a senior representative of, for example, a farming union or levy body

vii. Company law requires directors to act in the best interests of the company. Those interests can sometimes conflict with the interests of the body the director represents. However, as this report has already made clear, the composition of the Board of RT is deliberately representative

viii. To depart from this principle would require some major recasting of the governance model and, again, should be something revisited once the second [this] review has reached its conclusions.

ix. Many companies find it helpful to reinforce their legal duties with an explicit Code of Conduct adapting the general legal provisions to the specific circumstances of that company

x. Such a code would also be an opportunity to express the values of RT and the behaviours expected of Board Members as leaders and representatives of the Company

xi. We recommend that RT develops and adopts a Board Member Code of Conduct, including clear provisions on declaration of and dealing with, conflicts of interest

xii. Ensure that relevant aspects of the Code of Conduct have application to the wider RT governance community (Committees, Sector Boards and TACs)

xiii. Address stakeholder engagement and relations as a priority: We understand that RT intends to commit resource and time to engaging with farmers in coming months

explaining its work and purpose, effectively a communications campaign. This should also be able to address the misunderstandings about the roles of the Sector Boards and TACs

xiv. This campaign will need to be carefully timetabled, planned, guided and monitored by the AFS Board. At the risk of stating the obvious, such an effort will need to start in evident listening mode, so that the engagement is widely perceived to be real. Given that much of what we heard from interviewees and survey comments suggests that RT's communications to date have not always succeeded in their objectives, at least with some sections of the intended audience, we recommend that the Board consider whether it may be desirable to obtain strategic specialist advice on the proposed campaign

xv. We recommend that this be done as soon as practicable. This effort needs to be matched by the Ownership Bodies. If they do not engage with their respective constituencies and advocate for RT to continue its work pending the completion of the second review, they run the risk of a very damaging hiatus and continuing uncertainty which can only benefit those who wish to compete with UK food and farming

xvi. Review and revise the RT risk map: so that it can be fit for purpose in the new environment in particular in relation to the second review

### *Computers and Electronics in Agriculture: Smart agriculture assurance: IoT and blockchain for trusted sustainable produce*

**Haya R. Hasan, Ahmad Musamih, Khaled Salah, Raja Jayaraman, Mohammed Omar, Junaid Arshad, Dragan Boscovic: Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, Department of Management Science & School of Computing & Digital Technology, Birmingham City University and ASU Blockchain Research Laboratory, Arizona State University**

**Date: 2024**

**Key Conclusions**

In this research, we introduce a blockchain-based solution designed to promote food sustainability by harnessing the intrinsic features of blockchain technology. This solution effectively monitors the entire crop planting process, spanning from seed planting to harvest.

Sensors and IoT eliminate the necessity for third-party intermediaries by continuously monitoring crop health and environmental conditions. The data is conveyed to participating entities through smart contracts, fostering a transparent and trustworthy ecosystem. The synergistic integration of IoT with blockchain along with IPFS [Interplanetary File System for peer-to-peer file sharing] eradicates the prevalence of misleading food labels and deceptive practices, contributing to enhanced food sustainability and security.

Sustainable food certification authorities remain updated on anomaly resolutions and farming methodologies, enabling a thorough assessment for certification. While our solution incorporates well-known sustainable agencies such as organic, non-GMO, and GAP, it is adaptable to other sustainable food agencies based on specific application requirements.

The implemented framework demonstrates the integration of blockchain with IoT using sensors to enable the continuous monitoring of crop, soil, and environmental conditions, fostering the cultivation of sustainable and eco-friendly crops. This framework encompasses food

sustainability and certification in a transparent and traceable manner, instilling trust among consumers across the agricultural chain, from farming to consumption.

Leveraging the intrinsic features of blockchain, such as immutable on-chain data provenance and logs, ensures the authenticity, originality, and traceability of produce. Additionally, the framework emphasizes transparent, accountable, and reliable decision making by participating entities on the chain regarding farming practices, handling agriculture anomalies, and food certification, facilitated by smart contracts and tamper-proof logs. This promising solution instils consumer trust and provides transparent methods for easily tracing and tracking the agriculture supply chain of food on retailers' shelves. Future work entails broadening the solution to delve more deeply into the intricacies of the sustainable food certification process and conducting additional comprehensive analyses.

### *Understanding The Impact of Consumer Oriented Assurance Schemes (OECD Food, Agriculture & Fisheries Paper)*

**Date: 2023**

**Conclusions**

Assurance schemes based on voluntary sustainability standards, and their associated labels, can provide a solution to the asymmetric information problem that plagues the market provision of 'credence' attributes (i.e. attributes which cannot be observed by the consumer, even after consuming the product).

By defining requirements through voluntary sustainability standards, assessing the conformity of products or producers against these requirements, and then communicating the results to consumers through a label, a credible assurance scheme can in principle transform a 'credence' attribute into a 'search' attribute: consumers can simply search for products whose label communicates the sustainability characteristics they are looking for (e.g. environmentally friendly, Fairtrade). Voluntary sustainability standards in the agri-food sector typically cover several domains (e.g. environmental, social, and ethical aspects); environmental requirements appear especially common.

Schemes are often based on private standards, using independent third-party assessment, and traceability or chain of custody requirements.

Among the many standards and labels, a dozen leading schemes such as organic standards, Fairtrade and UTZ/Rainforest Alliance are particularly important in terms of the number of producers and production area certified globally. These schemes have shown strong growth in terms of the certified area, even if growth rates have slowed down in recent years.

A new trend is the growth of environmental impact labels, which communicate environmental impacts rather than conformity with process or production requirements, with both public initiatives (e.g. the EU Product Environmental Footprint, French policy initiatives) and private ones (e.g. Foundation Earth).

To send the right signals to consumers, farmers, and other supply chain actors, these schemes should ideally communicate actual environmental impacts rather than product averages. A key question is how this can be done in a cost-effective manner.

In theory, two conditions should be fulfilled if assurance schemes and labels are to play a positive role in reducing environmental impacts from food systems. First, consumers should actually use these schemes in guiding their consumption decisions; second, the schemes themselves should have positive effects on environmental outcomes.

On the demand side, while consumers generally affirm the importance of sustainability in surveys and experimental settings, the impact of labels on actual shopping behaviours is limited. Retail market shares for organic food products – one of the best-known schemes, which has been around for decades in most countries – are generally below 10%, and market shares for other schemes are likely to be even smaller in terms of the overall market of food products (even if some schemes may have high market shares for specific products such as coffee or cocoa).

Evidence generally shows that labels only have a limited impact on consumers' purchasing decisions, although effects appear larger for some consumer segments (particularly consumers who are already motivated or informed about sustainability).

Survey data for Canada confirms that taste, health, and price are more important to consumers than whether a product has a sustainability label. The survey data also suggest that while consumer confusion over labels may not be the most important obstacle, consumers may simultaneously not be convinced that sustainability labels are a reliable signal.

Regarding farm-level effects of sustainability standards on economic, social, and environmental dimensions, not all crops, standards, and geographies have been equally well studied. A considerable share of available studies finds no discernible impact. However, when an effect is found, it is usually positive.

For organic agriculture, environmental performance is highly context dependent, but generally affected by persistent yield gaps of organic versus conventional methods: while organic agriculture often shows improved environmental outcomes per unit of land, this is not necessarily the case per unit of product.

Several actions can improve the effectiveness of both existing and proposed new schemes, as well as guaranteeing greater inclusiveness. For example, governments can provide greater clarity on the meaning of different schemes (e.g. through public websites). Governments and retailers can also work together to improve the food environment, providing nudges to consumers to improve the sustainability of their purchases. Schemes impose extra costs on supply chain actors, which could potentially exclude resource poor farmers (particularly in low-income countries) and SMEs; targeted interventions (e.g. technical assistance) can help here.

On the demand side, existing schemes often imply price premiums, which may put these out of reach for lower-income consumers. However, experimental evidence suggests that there may be some scope for improving the environmental impact of food consumption choices without necessarily increasing household expenditures, given the potential to encourage consumers to shift between and within product groups by basing their decisions on environmental impact labels.

### *Green Finance Institute - Financing a Farming Transition, 2022 (on behalf of Defra)*

**Date: 2022**

**Key Findings**

In July 2022, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) commissioned the Green Finance Institute (GFI) as part of a broader work package on financing UK nature recovery to explore how private sector sources of finance can be more swiftly unlocked at scale to support a farming transition. While the private sector is committed to financially supporting a transition, significant barriers were identified that are preventing private sector finance from moving at scale. These included:

**Data Access and Availability**

Public field parcel and environmental data should be made accessible and available at a common access point. Farmers and land managers should also be supported in accessing the data they need to help make environmental decisions through access to premium mapping software such as Ordnance Survey Master Map. This would help farmers, banks and the private sector in sourcing accurate data to integrate natural capital into their businesses and decision-making processes. These recommendations should be implemented UK wide.

**Priority Environmental Outcomes Metrics**

There are multiple environmental targets set out by government with differing ambitions and timelines that are resulting in confusion. The private sector and farming community are seeking a clear vision from government so that they know what direction to move and where to invest their time and resources.

A government-defined set of simple, priority environmental outcomes, complemented by best-practice measurement guidance, would help clarify for farmers and the private sector the environmental data they may want to collect.

Metrics including soil health, water quality and nutrients, net emissions, biodiversity and flood risk have been identified as supporting both government and private sector needs.

A clearer vision with a specific set of priority outcomes will also help incentivise and support farmers in this data collection.

**Environmental Markets Guidance and Principles**

Providing greater clarity and formal guidance on how environmental markets will operate would help to give farmers and other possible market participants the confidence to engage and would help support the development of higher integrity markets leading to increased flows of private finance into the farming transition.

The role of insetting, the ability to stack or blend ecosystem services, the need for overarching standards for emerging codes, the inclusion of different forms of tenure in agreements and tax treatments of ecosystem services have all been highlighted as key areas for which guidance and clarity should be provided by government.

**Aggregation Model Support**

Further funding for early-stage development of aggregation models, the development of a Community of Practice to encourage peer-to-peer learning, as well as the establishment of principles for models would encourage widespread take-up of aggregation models. This would ensure that the opportunities offered by the agricultural transition can be accessed by a variety of farm sizes and that farmers and land managers can come together to deliver the landscape scale environmental outcomes required by government, society and the private sector.

Within each of these key enablers there is much to consider, such as data privacy, governance, and impacts of costs for government, farmers and the private sector. Cross-sectoral collaboration and open discussions will be essential in ensuring these enablers - and the flow of finance towards the farming transition at scale they are intended to unlock - are delivered.

There are further considerations to be made beyond these enablers, as the farming transition begins:

- the need for a cross-sector working group or forum consisting of the farming sector, finance sector, the food value chain and water utilities
- knowledge sharing among farmers should be supported
- consumer awareness of farmers' delivery of environmental outcomes and the true cost of food needs to be improved
- conflicts of interest within farm advisor roles need to be kept in check
- capacity for monitoring, reporting and verification needs to be built into farm advice
- continued dialogue with the financial sector is needed to ensure that long-term environmental schemes do not impede banks' appetite to lend to farmers
- a harmonised approach to a farming transition across the entire UK would create a smoother transition and unlock broader opportunities
- the creation of a meta-registry of environmental credits

Several of these enablers and additional considerations are being addressed by government and the private sector, and there is a willingness on the part of farming organisations, and the financial and agrifood sectors to further work with government to support their adoption.

### *The Path to Sustainable Farming: An Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024, Defra*

**Date: 2020**

**Key Points**

By 2028, our aim is that all farmers will be:

- running sustainable businesses that do not need to rely on public subsidy
- managing their whole business in a way that delivers profitable food production and the recovery of nature, fusing the best modern technology available today with the rediscovery of the traditional art of good farm husbandry
- able to access public money to help them deliver environmental and animal welfare outcomes on the land they manage and to help their businesses become more productive and sustainable
- meeting clear, relevant and outcome-focused legal standards that champion UK food internationally, prevent environmental harm, protect biosecurity and protect animal welfare

This will include building trust and confidence in the regulatory system: We will make improvements where we can to the existing regulatory system; alongside building something better for the future. We will start with improving the approach to cross compliance (where some of our domestic legal requirements sit as minimum standards that recipients of direct payments must meet). These include greater use of warning letters rather than defaulting to penalties.

### *Farm Inspection and Regulation Review (Dame Glenys Stacey Review)*

**Date: 2018**

**Key Recommendations**

1. Create a new independent regulator for farming and land management as soon as possible, with the Statement of Purpose and range of powers proposed for it in this report. The government should consider establishing the regulator under shadow arrangements pending legislation, given our anticipated date for leaving the EU.

2. The government should retain responsibility for agricultural strategy and public policy, with the regulator responsible for detailed standard-setting and for operational delivery. Funding arrangements for the regulator should be well-aligned to the government's strategic aims and support effective regulation of the sector, in the public interest.

3. Ensure that the design principles we propose and the mature regulatory approaches we describe underpin the regulatory system, to bring about culture change. On leaving the EU, the government should adopt a sophisticated and balanced view of regulation, beyond a mere set of binding rules, so that regulation *maximises opportunities* (for example, to enhance the environment) as well as *minimising risks of harm*.

4. Vest responsibility for incentives-based regulation (including Environment Land Management scheme incentives) with the regulator, so that regulation is efficient, effective, joined-up and seamless for farmers and land managers. The regulator should be responsible for ensuring on-farm, holistic advice is available to farm and land managers.

5. Decide (as a matter of public policy) whether those who consistently do not comply with a binding rule can apply for public funds, for example, through an Environmental Land Management scheme, to build on opportunities on the farm or land, without adequately dealing with harms.

6. Consider (during the agricultural transition period) the provision of financial incentives to farmers with poor or insufficient slurry storage facilities.

7. Ensure as far as possible that regulatory requirements to support international trade (e.g. a common rulebook) are not unduly constricting and allow for effective regulatory approaches in England. The government should develop its UK-wide agricultural strategy liaison arrangements, as responsibility and authority is repatriated from the EU to England and the devolved administrations.

8. Require the regulator to report periodically and comprehensively on the extent to which the government's stated priorities are being met. The regulator should develop, in consultation with the government and the sector, measures that enable farmers, land managers and the regulator to jointly track progress and areas of concern, and to help farmers and land managers make key business decisions day-to-day.

9. Legislate to rationalise farm and land registration requirements and to allow for the creation of a single land-keepers' register, to be held by the regulator. The government should assess and simplify the current requirements for registering land parcels as soon as possible. The new register should draw on Ordnance Survey mapping capabilities and reference land using the OS grid, removing the need for more precise measurement. Current arrangements for registering land parcels should be carefully assessed and simplified as soon as possible.

10. Simplify and standardise animal registration, while retaining the use of CPH numbers (for disease control purposes). All poultry should be registered, given exotic disease risks, and the government should consider whether South American camelids and horses should be registered, for endemic disease control or welfare reasons. The Livestock Information Service should be aligned with land-keeper registration and be able to support exotic and endemic disease strategies.

11. Review the Defra group configuration. The government should ensure any decisions that are made do not compromise the vision for regulation. The government should retain sufficient field staff with the Environment Agency to enable it to deliver its future remit, but otherwise consolidate and create one field force under the auspices of the new regulator.

12. The government should develop a transition plan and robust transition arrangements. The government should protect the country's ability to detect and respond effectively to outbreaks of exotic animal disease and maintain or improve bovine TB controls during the transition to the new regulator.

13. Empower the regulator to commission elements of farming and land management regulation from individual local authorities and other suitable bodies and individuals, where the regulator judges such arrangements are likely to be efficient and effective. The government should review local authority statutory obligations relating to the health and welfare of farmed animals in the light of the new regulator's remit.

14. We also recommend that the new regulator should:

    i. Regulate in accordance with the design principles we propose and using the full range of mature regulatory approaches we describe

    ii. Develop the capabilities, competencies and functions necessary to regulate well

### *Farmer Perspectives on Welfare Outcome Assessment: learnings from four farm assurance scheme consultation exercises*

**L van Dijk, S Elwes, DCJ Main, SM Mullan and J Jamieson, Cambridge University,**

**Date: 2018**

**Key Findings**

This study presents the results from four different consultation exercises conducted by three farm assurance schemes as part of their review process. In this paper, we present the findings of four consultation exercises that examined farmer perspectives on planned or implemented changes to their current certification visits as members of UK-based dairy and laying hen schemes. This study also explores the challenges that arise when schemes are aiming to adopt a scheme-level continuous improvement approach to promote welfare improvement on participating farms.

The key challenges fall under three themes: the purpose and value for the farmer of the assessment of welfare outcomes as part of a farm assurance assessment process; the potential conflict rather than concordance with the role of the farmer in caring for their animals; and finally the technicalities of the assessment process, such as sample sizes for assessment being calibrated for gauging welfare prevalence at a scheme rather than farm level and the role of the farm assurance assessors, both to assess impartially compliance against the standards and to provide welfare advice to support improvement.

This study also highlights that the involvement of farmers at all stages in the development and in the evaluation of outcome assessment initiatives is likely to be beneficial for welfare improvement on-farm.

Even though the consultations were undertaken in different species, across different schemes, using different methodological approaches, and at different stages of introduction, it is striking that the farmers' comments tended to focus on similar issues.

Three common themes [were noted] relating to the purpose and value for the farmer of the assessment of welfare outcomes as part of a farm assurance assessment process, the potential conflict rather than concordance with the role of the farmer in caring for their animals and finally the technicalities of the assessment process, such as sample sizes and the role of the farm assurance assessors. For many farmers, the principle of endeavouring to evaluate a farm

based on physical and behavioural observation of animals, rather than relying upon the assessment of resources and husbandry facilities provided to animals, was well received.

### *Defra Red Tape Challenge*

**Date: 2014**

Following a rigorous challenge process involving policy teams, lawyers, social researchers and regulators, incorporating 73 crowd-sourced comments and email submissions as well as views from our Sounding Board of business representatives and environmental and animal welfare organisations, the Animal Health and Welfare Board for England, our Strategic Regulatory Scrutiny Panel, the Farming Regulation Task Force Implementation Group and Devolved Administrations, we are pleased to present the results.

- of 516 regulations, Defra proposes to scrap or improve 56%
- 156 obsolete regulations removed (30%)
- 134 improved to simplify the regulatory landscape or reduce burdens on business (26%)
- 226 kept as they are, mainly to uphold important animal health and welfare protections or because they are due to be superseded by new EU legislation (44%)

**Key Points**

**Farm Inspections - you said that the burden of farm inspections should be reduced**

Defra will review opportunities to improve further the targeting and coordination of inspections to reduce the burden on farmers who have a strong track record of reliability and adherence to standards. A further announcement on the details of this review will be made by end February 2014.

**Farm Inspections - you said that earned recognition should be used more to reward compliant farmers through fewer inspections or reduced costs**

No members of participating farm assurance or organic certification schemes were selected for animal welfare inspections by the risk model in 2012. Defra is funding research into whether the 17 principles of earned recognition in the animal welfare context can also be applied to producers who are part of a herd health (or similar) scheme. The project will also look at post-mortem indicators at abattoirs to see whether they can be used to identify compliant producers. It is estimated that at least 14% of UK cattle holdings are covered by herd health schemes and 1200 pig units. Although some of these will already benefit from earned recognition through their membership of farm assurance or organic certification schemes, the rest have the potential to benefit if the research results prove positive.

**Farm Inspections for the livestock and produce sectors - you said earned recognition isn't being used enough to reward compliant farmers through fewer inspections or reduced costs**

In recognition of high compliance rates, we are reducing the frequency of on-farm egg marketing inspections to at most one per year for an 18 - 24 month trial period. This means that on-farm egg marketing inspections will fall from 2,876 to 1,776 per year, a 38% reduction.

**Minimising burdens - you asked us to minimise burdens on farmers from the reformed Common Agricultural Policy**

Defra will work to ensure that implementation of the reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) will minimise burdens for farmers. This will include a single application system which will replace existing outdated and costly systems and allow farmers to manage all their CAP transactions in one place. On 19 December Defra announced its response to the recent public consultation on the Implementation of CAP Reform. The package of measures we have announced is fair to English farmers, delivers better value for taxpayers and supports this Government's commitment to improving our natural environment. We aim to respond to the few remaining issues by mid-February.

**Simplifying Legislation - you said that the regulatory landscape could be made simpler so it is easier to follow**

Three redundant Acts and 26 redundant regulations will be removed by the Third Session Deregulation Bill. We have identified another 13 redundant regulations which can be revoked immediately and a further 13 which can be revoked with effect from 1 April 2015, following the final day of operation of the EU Milk Quota regime. In addition, eight pieces of legislation on the British Wool Marketing Board can be consolidated and updated following the Board's next review in 2014 and three regulations on olive oil marketing standards can be consolidated to simplify the legislative landscape.

**Animal Feed - you said that the requirement for farms mixing certain additives in animal feed to apply Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) was disproportionate**

The FSA has issued guidance to clarify the requirements farmers should apply commensurate with farms" operations and risks. This means that most farmers will not be required to apply a full HACCP system and can apply a lighter, less resource intensive system in line with the size of their operations and risk. It is understood that the guidance will be included in the RT's assurance scheme standards.

**Inspections - you also called for earned recognition to be used to reward compliant businesses by fewer inspections for those involved in activities such as animal by-products and feed**

We propose to extend the use of earned recognition in areas such as animal by-products and feed, including medicated feed, to reduce the burden of inspection on compliant businesses. The estimated effect of introducing a formal system of earned recognition, whereby enforcement authorities will take into account businesses" assurance scheme membership and their record of compliance with feed law, will be an overall 53% reduction in official interventions per year in England.

### *Assessment and Comparison of Third Party Assurance Schemes in the Food Sector: towards a common framework - the Food Standards Agency*

**Date: 2013**

**Key Findings**

Broadly speaking, most schemes have well established approaches to developing standards, conducting assessments of businesses and clear requirements regarding the competence of assessors. Many approval organisations are UKAS accredited and adopt appropriate

standards for certification (approval) bodies. Therefore, the study concluded that the Agency could consider increasing the number of schemes to be taken account of in setting the frequency of inspections by local authorities and other enforcement organisations.

However, the study identified a range of issues that indicated that the Agency may need to further consider the role of these schemes and the process for recognising them (for sake of taking them into account in setting inspection frequencies and alternative interventions), especially if the number of recognised schemes is significantly increased.

Most third party assurance schemes have been developed in response to demands from supermarkets for independent verification rather than to perform the functions associated with inspections and other interventions by regulators.

Some of the functions of regulatory inspections may not be covered by the typical third party assurance process. These issues do not indicate that the schemes are flawed but they do indicate potential limits to their role as an alternative to inspection by local authorities and other enforcement organisations. The issues include:

- many assessment bodies do not provide advice to food businesses on solutions to their specific conformance problems by their approval organisation as they think that this conflicts with the requirements of EN450114

- many of the schemes do not have systems for communicating news of common safety or hygiene problems (found during assessments) across an industry; ·The approval bodies do not carry out tests of food samples or seek to use the results of food surveillance or local authority and other enforcement organisation inspection results to check the outcomes of their schemes or to detect emerging problems, although Agency surveillance results have been used for this purpose in a few cases

The current data sharing agreement with Assured Food Standards allows local authorities and other enforcement organisations to check the approved status of food businesses.

However, the arrangement does not require that assessors advise enforcers in the event that the assessor finds serious non-conformance representing a serious or imminent risk to public or animal health that has not already been rectified by the assessed business. In the event of a reduced frequency of inspection and there being no requirement for assessors to report to local authorities and other enforcement organisations unresolved imminent risks at a food business, the ability of local authorities and other enforcement organisations to detect and act on these risks could be reduced.

The Agency has to date reviewed third party assurance schemes on an ad hoc basis. It is noted that whilst third party assurance schemes have been developed by the private sector for the sake of satisfying industry needs, if the schemes are to be taken into account when deciding on inspection frequencies by local authorities and other enforcement organisations, then the schemes also need to satisfy Agency requirements.

Feedback from the Agency indicated that it does not have a declared or formalised process for reviewing schemes for the sake of considering them for earned recognition or to monitor their subsequent performance. The potential need for a defined process for approving and monitoring third party assurance schemes was reinforced by the finding that there was little objective evidence regarding the level of food borne disease at approved businesses, other than Agency surveillance results for some food products. Previous reviews of schemes have

focused on their content and process, with few considering their outcomes in respect of contamination and food borne disease.

Therefore, the researchers outlined some options for how the Agency or a joint sector committee could further develop and operate an ongoing process for recognising schemes and reviewing their ongoing status with respect to scheduling of inspections. Finally, most schemes apply to primary production, processing and distribution, with limited application to import, catering, retail and hospitality activities. Also, schemes were not identified for the production of some products, such as spices and nuts. Thus, there was scope for broadening the application of third party certification schemes.

Food third party assurance schemes are voluntary schemes which verify, through regular independent assessments, that organisations are meeting stated standards. They arose in the 1990's in response to retailers need for verifiable and independent audit and certification of the food business's ability to produce safe consistent products, in part to demonstrate due diligence in their procurement and fulfilment of the Food Safety Act 1990.

### *Macdonald Review - Report of the Independent Farming Regulation Task Force. Striking a balance: reducing burdens; increasing responsibility; earning recognition*

**Date: 2011**

**With regard to farm assurance in particular:**

- We consider long - standing concerns about the number and type of on - farm inspections. Farmers see inspections as time consuming and unnecessarily disruptive to their businesses and their purpose may not always be clear. There is little benefit in official inspection of low - risk, normally compliant premises. We provide principles to improve the way that inspections are planned and carried out. Inspections must be clearly risk - based, targeted and, where possible, organised so that they work with normal business practice, rather than disrupting it

- To achieve this, and to remove duplication, the principle of earned recognition must be developed and used. Under this, regulators take account of a wide range of information about the likely risk of each business. This includes membership of an accredited private-sector assurance scheme or other evidence that farmers have chosen to invest in, and which may duplicate official inspection. Local Authorities should not inspect the same requirements that are checked by Defra agencies and delivery partners as part of cross-compliance inspections. Finally, the Government should provide a web-based platform to help farmers and regulators share information to help determine risk and direct inspection efforts

- We say to private-sector assurance schemes that the process of culture change is one that should apply across the board. Our recommendations on earned recognition and sharing information will be of little benefit if official inspections are simply replaced by equally bureaucratic and process-driven private sector audits.

**Other comments:**

- The Government should better understand farming and farmers in order to influence behaviour, agree outcomes, and develop and implement ways of achieving change without recourse to regulation

- We set out the principles which Defra, its agencies and delivery partners should adopt when considering forms, data collection, online tools and guidance. We draw together the numerous changes to paperwork, record-keeping and process that are needed to simplify specific regulatory frameworks

- The question should not be 'if' Government should do this, but 'by when?'. In many cases, we offer recommendations on two timescales. We make short-term proposals on the current process (e.g. for change over the next year or two). We often complement these with an alternative medium-term vision that takes into account the difficulties and timescales involved in EU negotiations. These may take many years to achieve, but unless they are pressed for now, they will remain forever

- The time is right to make change happen. The onus will be on Ministers to lead from the top. During our work, we often heard that our recommendations would contravene EU law or would be difficult to implement. From our perspective, this is over cautious and evasive

- To really make progress, to set and lead the agenda, you will need to break a few eggs. The attitude must be 'can do, will do', not 'can't, won't'

### *The Contribution of UK Farm Assurance Schemes Towards Desirable Environmental Policy Outcomes*

**Kathy A. Lewis, Andrew Green, John Tzilivakis and Douglas J. Warner**
**Agriculture and Environment Research Unit, School of Life Sciences, University of Hertfordshire**

**Date: 2010**

[An] earlier 2002 review concluded that the assurance schemes offered good potential to deliver a range of benefits to the consumer but raised concerns regarding the involvement of consumers and the transparency of consumer information.

This study sought to evaluate the content of a range of UK primary production assurance schemes and their potential to support selected desirable agri-environmental policy outcomes. The schemes reviewed included those that fall under the Assured Food Standards umbrella, plus eligible UK equivalents and examples of retailer and supplementary schemes.

The assessment was based on scheme documentation (2008/2009), associated published literature and historical comment. The analysis showed that assurance schemes, generally, do not meet all the desired policy outcomes but this should not necessarily be expected or sought.

However, such schemes are ideally placed to help the industry respond to changing demands, by changing or raising the scheme standards.

## *Value Perceptions of Farm Assurance in the Red Meat Supply Chain*

**Rachel Duffy and Andrew Fearne, Centre for Supply Chain Research, Kent Business School, University of Kent,**

**Date: 2009**

**Key Conclusions**

i. The assessment of the value of farm assurance is problematic, not least due to the paucity of data upon which rational comparison of alternative market scenarios can be based. However, our stakeholder analysis of the perceived value of farm assurance in the red meat industry demonstrates: the problems that arise when industry initiatives are poorly communicated to different stakeholders; and the potential to extract additional value downstream from an instrument widely perceived upstream as delivering little benefit but significant costs to primary production

ii. The former is symptomatic of the lack of vertical co-ordination in the UK red meat industry and the latter can only materialise if there is much greater co-ordination with respect to the marketing and merchandising of fresh meat by UK supermarkets

iii. The results show that there are varied views on the role of farm assurance and its expected benefits between upstream and downstream stakeholders and a divergence in expectations and resultant tension in trading relationships

iv. The argument is that the adoption of farm assurance schemes provides a mechanism for strengthening the competitive position of scheme members (Fearne, 1999; Leat et al,1998) and improving relationships in the food chain (Policy Commission (2002) on the future of food and farming)

v. This leads us to our views on the future and how producers might yet be able to achieve more than a position of relative neutrality from subscribing to UK farm assurance schemes. The consumer research provided strong evidence to support the view that if made aware of what is currently on offer in certain supermarkets and what farm assurance and the little RT stand for, many consumers would be likely to switch to a known British, farm assured product and some would be willing to pay a premium

vi. These findings are likely to be challenged by supermarkets, who might argue that consumers are not interested in farm assurance and are pre-occupied with price as a key purchase cue. To some extent they make a valid point as their view is supported in part by our consumer research, which indicated that meat-purchasing decisions are based largely on visual cues, experience and value for money. It is also recognised that further research is needed to better understand how consumer concern is translated into actual changes in purchase behaviour and willingness to pay

vii. However, it is important to note and recognise that these consumer views have been founded in a context of limited promotion and advertising of farm assurance and therefore limited awareness and understanding of it and the differences between British and imported products on supermarket shelves

viii. Also important is the fact that while credence attributes associated with farm assurance were not the key influences on the purchase decision, they are issues that

concern consumers with regard to food production. In particular, the research showed that after being told the meaning of farm assurance the majority of consumers said that they would expect supermarkets to inform them if not all of the meat they were selling was farm assured or did not meet UK baseline standards

ix. Therefore, even though the majority of consumers trust supermarkets to provide them with safe food, they would expect to see meat that does not meet the standards set out in the British farm standard to be clearly distinguishable, which the British Farm Standard could do if the supermarkets agreed to use it for that purpose

x. In conclusion, the research suggests that there is potential to extract additional downstream value from farm assurance. However, this can only materialise if there is much greater coordination with respect to the marketing and merchandising of fresh meat by supermarkets

xi. Therefore, it is our contention that the interests of all stakeholders in the UK red meat sector would be best served by a re-alignment of the value associated with farm assurance, from farm to fork

### *Quality Assurance: a study of the primary poultry producers' perspective*

**L. Manning. LJM Associates Ltd, Ledbury, UK, and R.N. Baines and S.A. Chadd Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, UK**

**Date: 2007**

**Key Findings**

- Producers generally agreed that a QA model or benchmarking model could assist producers to improve their performance and agreed that they had all the information they required in terms of food safety and quality standards, business performance, bird welfare, health and safety

- The results also indicated that there was a significant difference between the responses in 2003 and 2006 with regard to animal welfare standards. 34.7 % of respondents in 2006 determined that animal welfare standards should not exceed legislation

- There had also been a significant change in respondents' views on whether a farm assurance standard should address environmental concerns. In 2003, 66.7 per cent of respondents agreed they should be addressed compared with 41 % in 2006. The responses indicated that 66.7 % of correspondents in 2003 and 90.5% of correspondents in 2006 felt that farm assurance standards actually gave an assurance of farm production methods rather than the inherent quality of the finished product

- Producers implied that they were members of a farm assurance scheme to secure or maintain the market for their poultry products as market access was only possible for those compliant with the scheme

- Over 50% of respondents felt confident that being a member of a farm assurance scheme would continue to maintain the market for their products in the future. However, only 21.8% of the respondents in 2006 had felt they had seen a positive benefit to their business as a result of complying with a farm standard

- Producers indicated (as has been demonstrated in other studies) that at the point of purchase whilst food safety and value for money were important considerations for consumers, only 13% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed in 2006 with the statement that compliance with farm assurance standards was important consideration for the consumer which had reduced from 31.8% of respondents in 2003

- Therefore, this study suggests that in the current UK commodity poultry meat market, organisational or financial benefits have yet to be realised by primary producers from membership of poultry farm assurance schemes other than being able to continue to supply retail customers

### *Beliefs, Attitudes, Marketing and Communication Strategies of British Producers Engaged in Farm Assurance Schemes - Poultry Producers*

**Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle**

**Date: 2007**

**Key Findings**

This report focused on British poultry farmers' attitudes, views and opinions with regard to animal welfare issues. It reports findings of a survey of 56 laying hens and broilers producers, who are or not members of the major poultry farm assurance schemes within the UK.

As the UK poultry industry is concentrated mainly in England, the survey included only English farmers under the assumptions that farmers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would have the same behaviour and that similar farm assurance schemes operate across the UK.

Three major farm assurance schemes operate across the UK: Lion Quality Scheme and Freedom Food for egg producers and Assured Chicken Production and Freedom Food for broiler producers. Soil Association is the most renowned organic scheme for both eggs and chicken meat producers.

**Participation in farm assurance schemes**

The findings show that most (large) eggs or broilers producers joined a scheme as part of their contract requirement with an egg packing station/marketing company or a customer (e.g. processing companies for chicken meat). This is practice seems to be common amongst farmers in the UK, no matter the type of farm business, as retailers, particularly the large supermarkets, require farmers to be members of a farm assurance scheme. Thus, for battery cage eggs producers who wants to sell to supermarkets it is compulsory to be in Lion Quality.

For free range eggs producers, the situation is somewhat different. Although not compulsory to be in two schemes, most packing stations require farmers to be members as well, as the scheme is well known for its animals' ethics and high welfare standards. The only clear difference between farmers across the schemes is related to organic producers. These joined an organic scheme (mainly Soil Association) because they wanted to become organic.

They saw the opportunity of an increased demand for organic products, particularly eggs and chicken meat. Although not always very clearly stated but linked to the customers' requirement, membership motivation (no matter battery cage, free range, barn or organic) is

mainly based on economic/commercial reasons. These are large producers who need a market for their products.

For laying hens farmers particularly, the increase of British consumers' awareness for animal welfare and the announced ban of battery cage production in 2012, have an impact on their attitudes towards production systems. This is recently reflected in the changes of patterns of egg production, respectively a decline of battery cage eggs output and a rise in the number of eggs produced in alternative systems (i.e. free range and organic).

**Motivation for non-membership.** The majority of these poultry farmers are small scale producers. They have started this business activity as a hobby or for some additional income. Only three out of fifteen farmers were previously a member of a farm assurance scheme and left the scheme for various reasons (e.g. a disease outbreak which forced to cull off the entire flock and finding clients who do not require assurance).

Most of these farmers sell their products locally (e.g. at the farm gate, local shops and hotels), are well known with an established reputation, and see no need to be part of a 'bureaucratic organisation' which dictates what it is allowed or not to do on the farm.

Moreover, most of these farmers feel there is no link between scheme membership and animal welfare. In their views becoming a member implies to become a larger producer who will need to find a market (usually a retailer) for their products, and this change will rather harm the welfare of animals than necessarily improving it.

**Advantages/disadvantages of membership.** Overall, the majority of poultry farmers consider that the main benefit of membership is market access, particularly to ensure sales. This finding does not necessarily come as a surprise, given farmers' views regarding motivation for membership. Large producers (particularly broilers) have to be assured if they want to sell their products to large retailers.

Other advantages are 'promotion of your own produce/brand' and, despite not being very clearly stated when farmers (excepting organic) were asked to motivate scheme membership, the receiving of a price premium and improvement of farm management. Without doubt the increase of costs, particularly transaction costs (the volume of paperwork) are viewed as main disadvantage.

This can be explained to some extent by the nature of farm assurance schemes in the UK, i.e. various schemes for various farm enterprises. Farmers in accordance with their farm enterprise end up being members in more than one scheme. Each scheme has its own standards and all require very strict record keeping. Farmers are audited (at least one per year) for each enterprise by individual schemes.

**Opinions about schemes.** Farmers, no matter the scheme or production system, have similar views about schemes. In general, these are well organised and properly run, with sensible and practical standards. Schemes are essential to ensure food safety and assure consumers that the food they buy is produced under high standards of animal welfare. Hence, they play an important role for animal welfare and influence farmers' behaviour. Farming in general is a very competitive business and high animal welfare represents (in some farmers' opinion) a competitive advantage.

Nonetheless, too many schemes confuse consumers and increase transaction costs for farmers. Farmers feel that all schemes have the same objective, but there is a degree of records duplication, when a farmer belongs to more than one scheme. The existence of one single farm assurance scheme, which to cover the entire farm mix enterprise, is desirable. As regards the future of the schemes, the majority of producers believe that they will be compulsory, and standards will increase. Currently only small-scale farmers selling locally are able to avoid membership. This finding is enforced by the views of farmers who do not belong to any scheme.

**Higher prices: A decisive factor for implementing higher animal welfare standards?** Most interviewed poultry farmers (members and non-members) stressed that in the UK farmers in general practice already high animal welfare standards, but most farmers are not sufficiently financially rewarded for their efforts. Despite the importance of high prices for the finished product, farmers feel that this is not a sufficient motivation, and high prices do not necessary imply high animal welfare.

Producing under high animal welfare standards implies (in farmers' view) higher costs of production. Hence a balance between costs of production and levels of return will be desirable. Some retailers accept to import products from countries (including some in the EU) which are considered to produce to lower standards than those in the UK. Retailers are seen as using farm assurance schemes for their interest only.

There is indeed a premium price for free range and organic chickens, which some farmers acknowledged, but retailers are happy to take on board the animal welfare issue as long as it will not damage their image. The opinions of farmers not in schemes about retailers-animal welfare are not unexpected, as these farmers cannot sell their products to supermarkets. In these farmers' view retailers are not really concerned about animal welfare; they are mostly profit-driven and impose high standards for farmers with no interest of paying a fair price for British products.

### *Beliefs, Attitudes, Marketing and Communication Strategies of British Producers Engaged in Farm Assurance Schemes - Pig Producers*

**Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle**

**Date: 2005**

**Main Findings**

**Participation in farm assurance/animal welfare schemes**

The motives for applying to one scheme or another vary in accordance with the type of scheme and the type of farm/business. There is a clear distinction between farmers' motivation in top quality schemes and farmers' motivation in the other schemes. Whereas all organic farmers joined mainly because they wish to become organic and comply with organic standards, most other farmers joined the schemes in order to ensure the selling of their products and remain in business. Animal welfare is an important motivation to join the schemes for farmers.

As regards the views of non-participants, the majority of them see no advantage in joining a scheme, and their perception is that the schemes are a "waste of money" and "clearly a rather crude form of confidence trick, used to limit the markets open to producers" which bring

"no benefit". These farmers would join the schemes for two main reasons: (i) to be told by their buyer and (ii) a better market price for farm assured pigs.

Farmers, no matter the type of schemes, are generally satisfied with the way their scheme is organised and operates, and they are pleased with the support received from the scheme staff. Nevertheless, the majority of farmers (87%) complained about the volume of paperwork (transaction costs) which has increased considerably since they became members. A difference can also be identified between organic farmers' perceptions and the other farmers regarding the advantages/disadvantages of membership.

There are no major differences between farmers' views as regards the possibility of staying out of these schemes and the future of the schemes. Farmers, in general, think that it is "almost impossible" or "extremely difficult" to stay out of the schemes if they want to sell their products to "reasonable slaughterhouses", and if the farmer is a large-scale producer.

Most of the abattoirs and retailers in the UK ask farmers to be assured, and in the future, it is very likely that this will become a national requirement. Farmers across the schemes agree that they could stay out of the schemes if they are small-scale and if they are able to ensure a market for their products, by selling locally to small abattoirs, local farmers market or directly to clients.

These views are shared also by farmers who are not involved in any schemes. Most farmers think that the in the future their schemes will change with stricter rules and regulations, and more paperwork being imposed on farmers either by the Government or supermarkets.

As regulations and restrictions become tighter, some farmers see the farm assurance schemes as merging in one major integrated national scheme, which will include all food chain stakeholders from farmers to retailers. Organic farmers are the exception.

They hope that the future will not bring major changes for their scheme. However, if changes will take place, more restrictive rules should be imposed and the scheme should not lower its standards. There is no difference between farmers' perceptions (participants and non-participants in schemes) with regard to the definition of animal welfare.

Most farmers perceive animal welfare as encompassing the quality of animals' life; freedom from hunger, thirst, pain and injury, discomfort, stress and fear; freedom to express normal behaviour; animals' health and good stockmanship practice/husbandry, with the well-being of animals as dominant.

Farmers across the schemes have the same views and made similar suggestions as regards the improvements on their farms from an animal welfare point of view. These were grouped into two categories: a) one related to physical assets, such as buildings, climate control, pen size, outdoor yards, shades and paddocks, water system, stream in the fields; handling and loading facilities; and b) another related to the current animal welfare practices and regulations.

**Farmers' views regarding consumers**

There are no significant differences across the various groups of farmers, as regards consumers' concerns for animal welfare. Most farmers feel that consumers are entitled to their opinions, but they have no real concern about animal welfare, mainly because they are price driven.

Additionally, the lack of knowledge regarding the British assurance schemes and what they mean for animal welfare, accompanied by bad publicity in the media, influence farmers to think that consumers are, in general, ignorant and have little idea about farming practice.

Farmers think that consumers should be given more information about animal welfare schemes, but at the same time many believe that consumers should be prepared to pay the extra costs which occur when producing under higher standards.

**Farmers' views regarding retailers**

Across the four groups of farmers, retailers are seen as not having real concerns regarding animal welfare, but rather using it to maximise their profit and promote their image. The issues of cheap imports and double standards applied by large retailers are mentioned by almost all farmers, no matter the group.

The fact that most retailers are not prepared to pay a higher price for British products, but rather to import cheaper products from abroad and produced at a lower standard of welfare, represents the main argument that farmers bring when stating that retailers concerns regarding animal welfare are not sincere. Retailers "could do much more to publicise what farmers are doing to produce welfare friendly meat" by using a proper system of labelling which will help to identify easily the source of production.

**Farmers' views regarding animal welfare campaigners**

There are no differences amongst farmers when asked about their view regarding the role of animal welfare campaigners. Farmers, in general, have a low opinion about them. Most farmers believe that animal welfare lobbyists have the right to campaign and agree with them in some respect, but they do not agree with the way they act. They should try to speak with farmers and understand their business, but they should respect farmers' views, protesting legally without breaking the rules and promoting extremist views.

# Annex VIII: International Case Studies

## Ireland

### *Background*

Agriculture and food plays a very important role in Ireland's economy. The agri-food sector includes primary production in farming, fishing and the processing of food and drinks products. In 2023, sector exports reached a record value of some £16 billion, accounting for 9% of all the goods exported from Ireland.

The Irish agri-food sector is highly export orientated, with approximately 90% of Irish beef, sheep meat and dairy produce exported annually, to numerous countries, with the UK, and various EU countries being key markets. There are increasing exports to other areas as well, such as North America, West Africa, China and SE Asia. Quality assurance plays a fundamental role in the trade and consumption of Irish food and horticulture products.

### *Sustainability & Origin Green*

*Origin Green* is the Bord Bia national sustainability programme. It claims to be the only one in the world which operates at a national level. It is characterised by farmers and primary producers, processors and retailers working together with the aim of "*leading the way to create a better future for all involved*".

Sustainability criteria have been incorporated into more recently developed standards and any future review of existing standards will see the further inclusion of more sustainability criteria around carbon and climate change mitigation.

Farmers who are certified members of the Bord Bia Quality Assurance programme and who participate in farm sustainability assessments, as part of their audit, are the essential first link in *Origin Green*. In essence, the Bord Bia Quality Assurance schemes are *Origin Green* operating at farm level.

*Origin Green*'s system of measuring and feedback helps to identify steps to increased efficiency. Irish farmers have increasingly recognised that improved sustainability practices are good not only for the environment, but for Irish business too.

Origin Green IRELAND Ireland's food and drink sustainability programme

Bord Bia operates a series of quality assurance schemes for the food industry. The schemes are built on best practice in farming and processing, current legislation, relevant industry guidelines and international standards - and are accredited to ISO17065/2012, which covers the conformity assessments and requirements for bodies certifying products, processes and services.

The standards are developed through a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC). This committee is made up of representatives from the industry, Bord Bia itself, farm organisations, the national advisory service, Teagasc, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI), the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and other technical experts. Food safety, traceability, welfare, and environmental protection are the cornerstone of the standards.

Quality assurance schemes exist for the following product sectors: beef, lamb, dairy, pigmeat, poultry, eggs, feed, fresh produce, mushroom compost & casing manufacturers, and ornamental plant producers.

Based on data from Bord Bia's annual accounts, some £8.3 million is spent on farm assurance work per annum.

### *Sustainable Beef and Lamb Assurance Scheme (SBLAS)*

The Sustainable Beef and Lamb Assurance Scheme (SBLAS) was developed primarily to meet the growing market demand for sustainably produced Irish meat. It ensures that beef and lamb are produced on farms certified under a Quality Assurance Scheme that incorporates environmental, social, and economic sustainability principles.

The SBLAS aims to:

- prove to customers that quality beef and lamb are produced sustainably
- provide a standardised system for recording and monitoring quality and sustainability criteria on beef and sheep farms
- establish best practice criteria for Irish beef and lamb farming
- offer continuous feedback to farmers to help them improve their sustainability performance

### *Sustainable Poultry Products Assurance Scheme (SPPAS)*

The SPPAS is a programme that ensures processors collaborate with breeders and production farms to deliver sustainable and high-quality poultry products. It outlines key sustainability and quality assurance standards for chicken, turkey and duck production, covering all stages from breeding farms and hatcheries to processing and final dispatch. Additionally, the scheme specifies extra standards at each production step, to meet customer expectations.

### *Retail Butcher Assurance Scheme (RBAS)*

The RBAS is designed for retail butchers who want to source and sell meat products that are quality assured by Bord Bia. The scheme ensures that all products come from processors and farms that are Bord Bia Quality Assured, guaranteeing traceability from the butcher counter back to the producer. This scheme covers various meat products, including beef, lamb, pigmeat (pork and bacon), and poultry, and aims to enhance the integrity and traceability of the supply chain for customers seeking assurance of product origin.

### *Sustainable Dairy Assurance Scheme (SDAS)*

The Sustainable Dairy Assurance Scheme (SDAS) was developed collaboratively with milk producers, processors, and regulatory authorities. It ensures that milk production protocols meet Bord Bia standards. The SDAS has been designed to assess and record data to demonstrate the sustainability of Irish dairying in a systematic way at individual farm level. It will therefore provide the necessary evidence to customers that milk has been produced under the Sustainability and Quality Assurance criteria.

The farm visit is conducted by an independent auditor on every member's farm at 18 month intervals and a comprehensive report is produced on the performance of the farm under the Sustainability and Quality Assurance criteria.

The primary objectives of the SDAS are:

- to show that milk from certified farms meets Bord Bia standards for animal welfare, traceability, environmental protection, and food safety
- to provide proof that milk is produced under an ISO accredited sustainability and quality assurance scheme
- to offer a uniform mechanism for recording and monitoring dairy farm quality assurance criteria and the sustainability criteria of the farm
- to establish criteria for best practices in dairy farming

The two main components of the SDAS are sustainability and quality assurance. This standard applies to milk produced from bovines only. Membership of the scheme is open to all dairy producers that have valid herd registration with the competent authority.

The SDAS in Ireland is not mandatory, but it is highly encouraged and widely adopted. While participation is voluntary, many dairy farmers have chosen to join to underline their commitment to sustainability and to meet customer demands.

### *Feed Quality Assurance Scheme (FQAS)*

The Feed Quality Assurance Scheme (FQAS) outlines the requirements for participants to ensure the safety of food produced from animals, such as meat, eggs, and dairy products. Both Feed business operators and farmers must comply with regulations to control the safety of animal feed.

Key points include:

- compliance with legislation: participants must adhere to relevant laws regarding feed safety and hygiene
- core standards: specific criteria for sourcing, handling, and managing animal feed are detailed in Bord Bia's standards for various livestock
- sustainable sourcing: participants are encouraged to source feed from sustainable regions of the world and avoid sourcing from areas with ongoing deforestation

- responsible chemical use: There is an emphasis on using chemicals like herbicides and pesticides responsibly to protect the environment and wildlife

Compliance with these standards is verified through regular audits.

### *Sustainable Horticulture Assurance Scheme (SHAS)*

Bord Bia's Sustainable Horticulture Assurance Scheme (SHAS) has been developed to provide certified members with a means to prove to customers (consumers and retailers) that produce has been grown, handled, packaged and transported to the high standards of quality and hygiene, in a sustainable manner.

The requirements of the SHAS are based on current legislation, relevant industry guidelines, international standards and established best practice. The SHAS was developed with representatives and stakeholders of the horticultural industry along with technical experts.

Producers who participate in the scheme must abide by the requirements of the SHAS covering issues such as food safety, product quality, traceability, environmental protection, staff welfare, biodiversity, resource efficiency, social sustainability. Compliance is determined by a detailed farm audit.

### *Food Processor Standard (FPS)*

The principles of the FPS are grounded in legislative compliance and best practices in food processing. They include strong requirements for animal and plant health, animal and staff welfare, environmental protection, traceability and food safety.

Members of the FPS are required to participate in a sustainability programme, such as *Origin Green*, which sets targets for improvement and tracks progress over time, proving the sustainability credentials of the operation. Certification to this standard underpins the objective of producing safe, legal products and meeting standards for animal and food processing in international markets.

### *Sustainable Egg Assurance Scheme (SEAS)*

The SEAS is a voluntary code of best practice for egg production and packing. Eggs meeting the code's standards can display the quality assured logo, indicating high-quality production from farm to consumer. Key aspects covered include sustainability, flock sourcing, hygiene, biosecurity, disease control, flock welfare, and environmental protection. Membership is open to all registered egg producers, pullet rearers, and egg packing centres.

### *Pigmeat Quality Assurance Scheme (PQAS)*

The PQAS outlines best practices for pig production at the farm level. It provides a standardised way to record and monitor pig quality assurance criteria, aiming for continuous improvement in production standards. For consumers and retailers, the scheme ensures that pigmeat is produced to high standards at the primary production level. The scheme is voluntary and open to all producers with a valid National Pig Identification and Tracing Scheme herd number who wish to participate.

### *Bord Bia Quality Assurance & Grass Fed Logos*




*Logo 1: Origin Ireland*




*Logo 2: Grass Fed Verified*




*Logo 3: Origin Northern Ireland (NI)*




*Logo 4: Produced & Processed in Ireland & Northern Ireland*




*Logo 5: Reared & Processed in Ireland*




*Logo 6: Origin Ireland (meat content only)*




*Logo 7: Origin Northern Ireland (NI) (meat content only)*




*Logo 8: Produced & Processed in Ireland & Northern Ireland (meat content only)*




*Logo 9: Reared & Processed in Ireland (meat content only)*




*Logo 10: Certified Member*




*Logo 11: Grass Fed Certified Member*

### *What can the UK learn from Ireland?*

- In Ireland, unlike the UK, farm assurance schemes are managed by a single organisation, with a single identity which receives substantial government support for all its activities. Bord Bia has a total budget of some £ 82 million of which direct government funding accounts for £54 million
- Bord Bia's schemes are widely recognised and supported across the supply chain
- Farm assurance schemes underpin exports, which are crucial for the agriculture sector due to the small size of the local market
- The Irish industry believes that Bord Bia's farm assurance schemes and *Origin Green* are key differentiators in both local and global markets
- The Irish industry is seen as an early adopter of sustainability standards as part of their Farm Assurance Schemes

# Thailand

### *Background*

Despite contributing only about 7% to the national GDP, the agriculture sector in Thailand plays a crucial role in the country's economy and society. Agriculture employs around 30% of Thailand's labour force, making it a significant source of livelihood for many of the Thai population. Approximately 41% of Thailand's total land area is used for agricultural activities.

Thailand is a major exporter of agricultural products and is the 12th-largest food exporter in the world. Key export products include rice, rubber, canned tuna, canned pineapple, and other major exports include poultry, shrimp, sugar, and pig meat. The main markets for Thai agricultural exports include China, Japan, the US, Vietnam, Indonesia, South Korea, and Australia. Thailand's main food export to the UK is processed chicken.

### *Farm Assurance Schemes in the Private Sector*

Charoen Pokphand Foods PLC (CP Foods), part of the Charoen Pokphand Group, is a major agro-industrial and food conglomerate based in Thailand. The company operates extensively in livestock and aquaculture, with significant revenue coming from overseas operations. It is one of the world's largest producers of animal feed and shrimp and ranks among the top three global producers of poultry and pork. Total turnover is £13 billion per annum.

Approximately 65% of its revenue comes from overseas operations, with 30% from its home market and the rest from export operations. It recently acquired Bellisio Foods, one of the largest frozen food suppliers in the US, for £0.75 billion, as well as Westbridge Foods, a British poultry producer, with turnover of over £340 million.

CP Foods is a very good example of how the Thai private sector can adopt international standards within local frameworks to ensure product quality and safety. It appears to have a deep commitment to a whole range of assurance measures which includes:

- in 2022, CP Foods became the first Thai company to secure the UK's Farm First certification for its chicken production process. This was to confirm its commitment to food security and a safe supply chain that prioritises animal welfare. This certification elevates Thailand's poultry production to international standards

- the company's chicken production process also received QS certification from Germany in 2022, the highest food safety standard recognised in Germany and across Europe

- CP Foods has also obtained several international standards for its poultry products, including GLOBAL GAP and 'Raised without Antibiotics', Additionally, the Welfare Outcome Measures (WOMs) have been implemented for livestock in Thailand to assure global customers of the safety of CP Foods' products

  CP Foods also integrates international standards such as HACCP/CODEX, ISO 9001, and ISO 22000 into its business model, enhancing its production technology and risk management

- the company has also applied blockchain technology to develop a digital traceability system, aiming to build customer trust and stakeholder recognition

In addition to adopting widely recognised farm and food assurance schemes, CP Foods provides development programs to help small suppliers meet global food industry quality and safety assurance standards. The company also practices regenerative agriculture to improve soil health and nutrient balance.

However, CP Foods have encountered challenges:

In 2014, after a several-month-long investigation, *The Guardian* claimed that CPF had purchased fishmeal, which it then fed to its farmed prawns, from suppliers that own, operate, or buy from fishing boats manned with slaves.

Subsequently, the President and CEO of CPF posted a '*Statement to Shareholders*' vowing to purchase "only from certified processing plants, only acquire product from certified Thai fisheries, and that supply chain fishing vessels, fishmeal processing plant must be certified by Thailand's Labour Standard or have been audited by an external agency".

### *The Role of Government*

Thailand joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in December 1994 as a founding member. By joining, Thailand committed to lowering customs tariffs and other trade barriers. To fulfill its WTO obligations, a new government infrastructure was needed. In a restructuring of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives in 1997, the Bureau of Agricultural Commodity Standards and Inspection was established under the Office of the Permanent Secretary.

The Bureau needed to tackle non-tariff trade barriers and serve as a national focal point to coordinate with national and international partners, as well as to develop national agricultural commodity standards, in line with international standards.

The major non-tariff barriers involving the agriculture and food trade were those mandated under the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) and the Technical Barrier to Trade (TBT) agreements. The Bureau worked to provide well-coordinated and high-quality services to the Thai agricultural and food industries.

In a major government restructuring in 2002, the National Bureau of Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards (ACFS) was established, replacing the Bureau of Agricultural Commodity Standards and Inspection. The ACFS is the focal organisation for controlling agricultural products, food, and processed agricultural products by enforcing standards along the entire food supply chain. ACFS is also responsible for accrediting Certification Bodies of agricultural commodities and food.



### *Thai Agricultural Standards*

Established under the Agricultural Product Standards Act B.E. 2551 (2008) these are divided into two types:

### *Mandatory Standards*

These are standards that are prescribed by Ministerial regulations requiring agricultural products to comply with the standards and include:

- **Good Agricultural Practices for Pig Farms:** this standard was announced by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives in 2015. It aims to update technical information to align with international standards and to improve pig farming practices, focusing on food safety, animal health, animal welfare, and environmental considerations. The Agricultural Standards Committee decided to revise the standard to ensure acceptance for both domestic and international markets. The standard is based on TAS 6403-2015: Good Agricultural Practices for Pig Farms and ASEAN 2018: ASEAN Good Animal Husbandry Practices for Pigs

- **Good Agricultural Practices for Layer Farms:** this specifies good agricultural practice for layer chicken farms that produce for commercial purposes, with a minimum of 1,000 chickens. It covers farm components, farm management, feed, water, personnel management, animal health management, animal welfare management, management of pullets, laying hens, and eggs, environmental management, and record-keeping

- **Code of Practice for Mushrooms:** Thailand has the potential to produce many kinds of mushrooms. Good practice for the production of mushroom culture which yields the correct strains of fungi, free of other fungi contamination and pests are seen as vital. This standard is based on TAS 2507-2013, the Thai Agricultural Standard entitled Good Manufacturing Practices for Spawn

- **Good Manufacturing Practices for Milk Collection Centres:** the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives issued the TAS 6401-2005 in 2005. This establishes requirements for good manufacturing practices of milk collection centres, starting from the reception of raw milk, reducing the temperature of milk, storage and transportation in order to obtain raw milk with quality suitable for processing

- **Code of Practice for Sulphur Dioxide Fumigation of Fresh Fruits**: fresh fruit fumigation with sulphur dioxide is one of the processes for post harvest management to extend the shelf life of produce for their freshness and quality. This standard establishes a code of practice for sulphur dioxide fumigation of fresh fruit which are safe and of a quality suitable for consumption and to reduce any impact to the environment

In addition to the described mandatory standards, there are others, including standards for the maximum level of aflatoxin in peanut kernels, good agricultural practices for hatcheries of disease-free Pacific White Shrimp (*Lit Penaeus Annemie*) and good manufacturing practices for frozen durian

### *General Standards*

There are about 423 general standards covering products such as meat, dairy, horticulture and seafood. These types of standards are not mandatory, under the current law and regulations, but they contain measures that go beyond the legal requirements. Therefore, individual producers may decide to adopt these standards voluntarily, in order to meet both market and internal organisation requirements.

In this respect, several voluntary standards are used in Thailand, such as:

- **Thai GAP**

This private food safety standard is operated by Board of Trade of Thailand and in collaboration with the National Food Institute (NFI) and Kasetsart University.

Thai GAP aims to raise the standard of Thai fruit and vegetables throughout the production chain from upstream to downstream and takes into account the welfare of growers and the safety of consumers through a traceability system. Thai GAP is influenced by GLOBAL GAP but is tailored to local conditions and requirements.

- **GLOBAL GAP**

This covers a comprehensive range of agricultural products, including fresh fruit and vegetables, propagation material, livestock, dairy, pigs, poultry, combinable crops, flowers and ornamentals, tea, coffee and aquaculture.

- **Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP)**

GMP rules provide basic criteria necessary for food production to ensure high levels of food safety. These focus on preventing and eliminating risks that may cause food poisoning, harm, or unsafe conditions, and are enforced as law for producers to comply with.

- **Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP)**

The Codex Alimentarius Commission, joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme established the Recommended International Code of Practice: General Principles of Food Hygiene. This Code of Practice is well accepted internationally. It has been implemented successfully in Thailand.

- **ISO 22000**

This sets out the requirements for a food safety management system and can be certified to it. It maps out what an organisation needs to do to demonstrate its ability to control food safety hazards in order to ensure that food is safe. Again, it is widely used in Thailand.

### *What can the UK learn from Thailand?*

- In Thailand, the government's main role is to develop and set a clear and comprehensive framework for companies to operate within
- The country's ambition to develop its export activity in agri-food products, and adhere to WTO protocols, has underpinned and driven its adoption of quality and assurance standards for agriculture and food production
- Leading companies, such as CP Foods in Thailand, adhere to this government framework to comply with mandatory regulations
- However, as seen in the case of CP Foods, efforts to enhance and utilise farm assurance schemes now go well beyond these requirements
- Private companies develop their assurance schemes to meet global market demands to remain internationally competitive
- There is a strong focus on issues such as food safety and good manufacturing practice
- The private sector not only follows local regulations but also adopts highly recognised standards such as GLOBAL GAP, ISO 9001/22000 and HACCP
- This is seen as good practice and a sign of their commitment to compete against other leading international food companies, not just in SE Asia, and also meet the expected requirements of their international customer base

# Argentina

## *Background*

Argentina's agrifood sector is an important part of its economy, accounting for about 16% of the country's GDP. Argentina is one of the largest food exporters[18], which, in 2023, were valued at almost £40 billion.

These exports include a wide range of products such as soybeans, corn, wheat, and beef, which are key contributors to the country's revenue. Some of the main export markets for Argentina are Brazil, China, the US, Chile and India.

Exports of agricultural products from Argentina to the UK are quite significant. Argentina is the fourth largest supplier of corn to the UK, accounting for about 10% of British corn imports. Additionally, Argentina exports other agricultural products, such as peanuts, soybean meal, wine and fruit, to the UK.

## *The Role of Government*

In Argentina, farm and food assurance are part of the Argentine Food Code, which was enacted by Law 18.284 - regulated by Decree 2126/71.

This is a technical regulation that is routinely updated and establishes hygienic-sanitary, food science and commercial provisions that must be complied with by any commercial firm or organisation that produces, processes transports, imports, or exports food, condiments, beverages, or raw materials and food additives.

All activities related to the Argentine Food Code are carried out by the National Service of Agri-Food Health and Quality (SENASA). This is a decentralized body with economic/financial and technical/administrative autonomy and its own legal identity, within the Secretariat of Bioeconomy and the Ministry of Economics

It is responsible for implementing national policies on animal and plant health and food safety, as well as verifying compliance with other relevant current regulations

It is also responsible for controlling the import and export of agri-food products, by-products, and derivatives of animal and plant origin, veterinary drugs and agrochemicals, fertilizers, and other agri-inputs.

SENASA has almost 6,000 employees across its 14 regional centres and 360 local offices throughout the country. SENASA's budget in 2024 was £70 million.

Quality control and management systems in the agri-food sector are based on four areas:

- Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP)
- Standardized Sanitation Operating Procedures (SSOP)
- Integrated Pest Management (IPM) in the agri-food sector

[18] Based on World Bank data, Argentina is ranked 3rd in the world

- Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP)

### *Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP)*

The Argentine Food Code (CAA) includes, in Chapter II, the obligation to apply Good Manufacturing Practices for Food (GMP).

In addition, under Resolution No. 80/96, Mercosur Technical Regulation on Hygienic and Sanitary Conditions and Good Manufacturing Practices for Food Processing, states the need for the use of GMP standards by food processing businesses for international trade, focusing on food safety, food hygiene and handling practices.

GMP is required for the use of HACCP systems such as Total Quality Management (TQM) programmes, or an international quality system, such as ISO 9000.

### *Standardized Sanitation Operating Procedures (SSOPs)*

These are standardized operating procedures that cover sanitation functions. They are applied before, during, and after processing operations. SSOPs are mandated by SENASA Resolution No. 233/98, which states:

"……*all establishments where animals are slaughtered, food is processed, and/or stored are required to develop Standardized Sanitation Operating Procedures (SSOPs) that describe the daily sanitation methods to be followed by the establishment*……."

The implementation of SSOPs is also a fundamental requirement for the implementation of systems to ensure food quality. For the implementation of SSOPs, as with quality systems, training of responsible personnel is of high importance.

### *Integrated Pest Management (IPM)*

This involves the use of standardised operating procedures, to minimize hazards, in a proactive fashion, from the prevalence of pests.

IPM is a proactive system to assess the impact of pests on production processes and is a fundamental pre-requisite for the implementation of HACCP systems. Pest management in and on dairies, farms, grain silos, and other businesses involved in primary production is seen as important for raw materials that will later be used in food processing.

As the design, implementation, and verification of an IPM programme considered to be fundamental for the food industry, it must be accompanied by the records for each task carried out in the farming process.

Documentation of these steps is important for recording the type of activities performed, the products used etc.

With this information, data can be generated to develop preventive measures. This is intended to achieve greater control over the system of farming and to provide a reference point for audits and inspections.

### *Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP)*

The HACCP system, according to the FAO, is:

*"…. a systematic approach aimed at the prevention and control of biological, chemical, and physical hazards through anticipation and prevention, rather than inspection and testing of final products and ensuring the production of safe food."*

The HACCP system provides for the identification and evaluation of hazards and the establishment of control systems that focus on prevention, rather than relying on inspection and testing of the final product.

The use of HACCP systems is compatible with quality management systems, such as the ISO 9000 series. To implement an HACCP system, a programme of prerequisites (GMP and SSOP) must also be met

### *GLOBAL GAP*

GLOBAL GAP is seen as crucial for agricultural producers involved with international markets. Although there are no specific government incentives for GLOBAL GAP certification, the Argentine government supports agricultural exports and sustainable practices through various programmes and policies.

These include tax benefits, subsidies, and financial support for exporters. National programmes promote sustainable practices that align with GLOBAL GAP, aiming to improve resource management, reduce environmental impact and enhance food safety.

Additionally, the government collaborates with industry associations and international organisations to offer training and educational programmes to help farmers implement good agricultural practices.

### *Argentine Foods, a Natural Choice*

In addition to certifications such as GLOBAL GAP and Organic Argentino, since 2005, the 'Argentine Food, a Natural Choice' seal has been a voluntary brand for quality assured food and drinks.

The 'Argentine Foods, a Natural Choice' programme aims to differentiate products identified through a seal granted by the Ministry of Agroindustry.

The seal recognises the wide variety of Argentine foods, together with product authenticity linked to the origin of raw materials, manufacturing practices, assurance systems and cultural and social factors.

It is intended to ensure high quality Argentine foods are produced under a national image, enabling their use in both domestic and international markets. The seal is considered to add value to the product(s).

The programme can be used by any Argentinian producer and/or manufacturer that complies with Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), and/or HACCP. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, more than 2,000 products have the seal.

### *Sectoral Vision Gran Chaco (VISEC)*

Argentina has introduced a certification system to prepare for EU regulations requiring beef imports to be guaranteed as deforestation-free. Starting in December 2024, Argentinian shipments to EU markets must come from non-deforested livestock establishments, in compliance with EU Regulation 2023/1115.

The VISEC (Sectoral Vision Gran Chaco) system ensures traceability from the origin of bovine livestock, including breeding and fattening stages, through the entire commercialisation process, up to processing and export to the EU.

Certificates are issued to confirm the (sustainable) origin of the meat, using geo-referenced technology for greater accuracy and reliability. For each shipment of beef to the EU, a deforestation-free product certificate (CLD) has to be issued as evidence that the biomass meets the requirements established in European regulations. The scheme is supported by a rigorous documentation and a validation system using blockchain technology.

### *Farm Sustainability Assessments (FSA)*

The Farm Sustainability Assessment (FSA) is a voluntary scheme run by the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) that monitors various sustainability metrics in farming. The SAI Platform is a non-profit network with over 180 members worldwide.

It is based on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and follows the three pillars of sustainability: *People, Planet, and Profit*.

The programme supports companies across the food and drink supply chain, allowing them to achieve SAI Bronze, Silver, or Gold status based on their sustainability performance.

### *Animal Welfare*

As a member of the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), Argentina is expected to follow OIE's animal welfare standards. Argentina has regulations requiring the stunning of animals before slaughter and has developed partial legislation on animal welfare.

SENASA defines animal welfare as measures to reduce animals' stress, suffering, trauma, and pain during various stages, including transfer and slaughter. They have outlined five key welfare principles: freedom from hunger, thirst, malnutrition, fear, distress, physical and thermal discomfort, pain, injury, disease, and the ability to express normal behavior.

Law 14346 addresses ill-treatment and cruelty to animals, defining acts such as inadequate feeding, overworking, unnecessary vivisection, and abandonment as cruelty. However, current Argentinian legislation is outdated and does not fully address modern animal welfare concerns, particularly for pigs. Most laws are basic and over 15 years old.

Farm assurance schemes are linked to organic farming, with certification requiring suitable housing and compliance with animal welfare laws, known as the ARGENCERT programme

Currently, it is actively developing a 'roadmap' to reduce beef cattle methane emissions. This project aims to support the development of evidence-based policies and measures that address short-lived climate pollutants in the livestock sub-sector. It also aims to accelerate the adoption of methane mitigation measures through training beef cattle producers at the farm level.

Additionally, this project plans to improve Argentina's monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV) system for the livestock sector by incorporating short-lived climate pollutants monitoring and supporting the transition to the requirements of the Enhanced Transparency Framework (ETF).

### *What can the UK learn from Argentina?*

- The Argentinian Government has established a framework to provide companies with minimum operating standards
- These standards focus on four areas: Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), Standardised Sanitation Operating Procedures (SSOP), Integrated Pest Management (IPM) in the agri-food sector, and HACCP
- In Argentina, there is one organisation, SENASA, in charge of dealing with Farm Assurance Schemes, and this organisation is heavily supported by the government
- In addition to adopting the Government framework, the Argentinian industry widely uses international certifications, which are seen as important, especially for exporters
- The Government is actively working to increase standards that can be recognised internationally and mitigate concerns about major issues, such as those around deforestation and climate change
- The Government is also trying to develop schemes such as the '*Argentine Foods, a Natural Choice*' programme which aims to differentiate products in local and international markets

# The Netherlands

## *Background*

The agrifood sector in the Netherlands is known for its innovation, efficiency, and approach to sustainability.

It contributes significantly to the Dutch economy, accounting for nearly 10% of national income and employment. This sector includes primary production, processing, marketing, and distribution. The Netherlands is a leader in agrifood and ag tech innovation, utilising advanced farming techniques and smart food technology. The country has world-class research institutions such as Wageningen University.

Despite being a small country by land mass, the Netherlands is a major player in global agricultural exports, with key products including flowers, vegetables, dairy products and meat.

The main markets for Dutch agricultural exports are Germany, Belgium, France, and the UK.

## *The Role of Government*

In The Netherlands, food and farming quality is regulated by the government. The Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) ensures the safety of food and consumer products, animal welfare and the protection of nature.

The NVWA works on behalf of the Ministries of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) and Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature (LVVN).

Together, they form the policies and rules with which companies must abide. NVWA carries out inspections and holds companies accountable for their role in complying with the applicable rules.

All EU Member States are obliged to draw up such a control plan. This obligation is set out in EU Regulation 2017/625. The Dutch plan is called the Multiannual National Control Plan (MNCP). The NVWA draws up the MNCP.

## *Regulation (EU) 2017/625*

This regulation sets out common rules for European Union (EU) official controls to ensure that agri-food chain legislation protects human health, animal health and welfare and plant health, and is correctly applied and enforced.

The regulation has introduced a more harmonised and coherent system of official controls and enforcement measures along the agri-food chain and strengthens the principle of risk-based controls.

The key points of the regulation can be summarised as follows:

## *Agri-food chain*

The regulation includes rules on official controls for all food and feed businesses, from primary producers to retailers and caterers, including plant and animal breeders, growers and traders.

### *Scope*

The regulation covers official controls carried out by national enforcement authorities to verify compliance with agri-food chain rules on:

- food and food safety and integrity throughout production, processing and distribution
- the (non) use of GMOs for food and feed production
- feed and feed safety throughout production, processing, distribution and subsequent use
- animal health and welfare
- organic production and labelling

The regulation also covers imports of certain animal products and goods:

- from outside the EU which must be checked at EU border control posts
- sold via the internet
- with official controls to check compliance of imported animals and products of animal origin with certain rules on the use of veterinary medicines

### *Risk Based Systems*

This sets out a risk-based control system so that national enforcement authorities can carry out official controls where they are most needed. In general, to ensure their effectiveness, these controls will be unannounced.

### *Animal Welfare*

Official controls apply to animal welfare rules, including during farming, transport and slaughter. The European Commission can adopt legislation to adjust official control rules to meet the specific needs of animal welfare.

There are EU reference centers for animal welfare which:

- assist EU Member States with their official controls by:
    - carrying out scientific and technical studies
    - conducting training courses
    - sharing research findings and information on technical innovations
- provide scientific and technical expertise on methods to assess and improve the welfare of animals

### *Cooperation between Member States*

This clarifies rules on the cooperation and administrative assistance between Member States. Member States must ensure information is exchanged between national authorities and other enforcement authorities, public prosecutors and judicial authorities on possible cases of non-compliance.

An integrated management system for official controls will integrate all existing (and future) computer systems managed by the Commission.

### *Transparency*

National authorities must publish annual reports.

### *Financing*

Rules for calculating fees for official controls ensure that Member States properly finance their control system and that the fees do not exceed the cost of performing official controls.

### *Multiannual National Control Plan (MNCP)*

This contains the three-year planning of the official controls in the Netherlands for the ten areas of the Control Regulation (Regulation (EU) No 2017/625, from now on, 'CoVo').

These are official controls and other official activities carried out to ensure the application of food and feed law, as well as rules on animal health, welfare, plant health and plant protection products.

The MNCP describes the structure and organisation of the system of official controls in the Netherlands, with reference to the 'Country Profile' where the Dutch supervisory landscape concerning the CoVo is described in detail by 'Health and Food Audits and Analysis' protocol of the European Commission (Directorate-General Health and Food Safety).

The MNCP supports all competent authorities in the implementation of their official controls throughout the agri-food chain in the Netherlands, in accordance with the CoVo.

The MNCP also provides insight into the strategic and operational objective(s) for the ten CoVo areas for the next three years, the coherence of the official controls for the CoVo and the (provisional) planning of these controls. The MNCP is updated annually.

The NVWA is the coordinating body, also known as the 'single body', for the establishment of the MNCP. The NVWA is also the competent authority that carries out (by far) the most official controls. This is the reason why the NVWA predominates in the MNCP. However, with this MNCP, all competent authorities now provide a three-year schedule of their official controls and more, covering a number of areas of regulation:

**Areas of regulation:** food and food safety, release of GMOs into the environment, feed and feed safety, animal health, animal by-products, animal welfare, plant health, plant protection products and organic production (the competent authority for implementation is SKAL), Protected designations of Origin, imports and exports.

### *Quality Marks/Labels*

In addition to the mandatory processes under EU Regulation 2017/625 and the MNCP. farm and food assurance in The Netherlands is guaranteed by the so called 'keurmerken', 'Quality Marks/Labels', voluntary standards for producers.

These are not regulated by the government, apart from in the organic sector.

A quality mark is seen as a tool on the packaging of food products to enable sustainable or healthy consumer choices. For example, a quality mark indicates that the product has been made with extra attention to the environment or animal welfare. Food and drink labels are usually in the form of a recognisable logo on the packaging.

In recent years, more and more quality marks have been added. As a result, it is no longer always clear what is the most sustainable choice. In addition to being a useful tool, however, labels are considered to be a good way to encourage manufacturers to develop healthier and more sustainable products.

### *Quality marks can be divided into:*

- **Sustainability labels:** these labels make it easier to choose in 3 areas: on animal welfare, people and work and on the environment. Specifically for animal welfare, there is Animal *Welfare Shopping Help*. This gives consumers who are interested, insight into what a quality mark tells you about the life of an animal

- **Quality marks**: based on origin and quality: these labels allow consumers to know where a product comes from and how it is produced. For example, a product can be given a quality mark if traditional production methods or regional culture have been taken into account. Halal and Kosher are quality marks that take into account a certain philosophy of life and production methods

- **Health labels**: these labels can help consumers choose products with certain functionality, for example gluten free

Supermarkets or companies also often have their own logos. This can be an umbrella logo that follows the requirements of other quality marks. For example, 'Fairglobe' (used in Lidl) is subject to the same requirements as Fair Trade /Max Havelaar.

### *Examples of Quality Marks*

#### *Meat*

**EU Organic:** the EU organic label sets out requirements for the use of natural resources and pesticides. Animals are fed organic food and have sufficient space to exhibit species-specific behaviour. There are no specific requirements for greenhouse gas emissions, but there is a fertiliser ban.

**Better for Chicken, Nature and Farmer:** used for non-organic chicken meat from *Albert Heijn*. The programme sets conditions for all supply chain partners, from poultry farmers and feed suppliers to chick hatcheries and slaughterhouses. The quality mark requires *Better Life 1 star* certification for all poultry farmers.

**Sustainable Pork Chain:** the label is a partnership between Dutch pig farmers and various partners in the supply chain. The label sets environmental requirements such as a maximum energy consumption and the use of RTRS-certified soy in the feed. Animal welfare requirements go beyond the law, with more room provided for pigs.

**The Better Life:** was set up by the Dutch Society for the Protection of Animals and focuses on animal welfare. The highest level (3 stars) means that significant improvements have been made to the living conditions of animals, such as more space, access to the outdoors and better bedding. The label does not impose any environmental requirements.

**Demeter:** is a label for meat and is for biodynamic agricultural products. This label requires additional sustainability steps in addition to the EU organic standards, such as reserving 10% of the land for biodiversity, green electricity and stricter manure standards.

**EKO:** this label for meat meets European organic standards but goes further with additional sustainability measures. Producers do not use synthetic pesticides or artificial fertilisers. Animals are fed organic food and have plenty of living space - both inside and outside. Green electricity is used. The requirements for animal welfare are strict.




*Fruit and Vegetables*

**EU organic:** the label for fruit and vegetables meets the EU agricultural standards. These include crop rotation, limited use of fertilisers and plant protection products, and a ban on nitrogen fertilisers. It does not impose specific requirements for water use or greenhouse gas emissions, although these will be indirectly lower due to the ban on nitrogen fertiliser.

**On the way to Planet Proof:** the quality mark for fruit and vegetables sets requirements to ensure sustainability. This includes monitoring greenhouse gas emissions, preserving natural elements, promoting biodiversity and using renewable energy.

**Climate Neutral Certified:** focuses on reducing the climate impact of products, in line with the Paris Agreement. For fruit and vegetables, producers must map their greenhouse gas emissions and achieve a 25% reduction by 2030.

**Knorr Sustainability Logo:** requires monitoring of greenhouse gas emissions, water use and nitrogen in the soil. There are optional measures for reducing emissions and using sustainable resources. The logo can be found on Knorr products where at least 50% of the vegetables are sustainably grown.

**Rich in flavour & made with sustainably grown vegetables:** requires monitoring of greenhouse gas emissions, water use and nitrogen in the soil. There are optional measures for reducing emissions and using sustainable crop protection products.

**GLOBAL GAP IFA standard:** GLOBAL GAP's Integrated Farm Assurance (IFA) for fruit and vegetables is a global standard for farming practices at primary production level. It is built on an approach that covers the key topics of food safety, environmental sustainability, workers' well-being, production processes, and traceability.

*What can the UK learn from The Netherlands?*

- In the Netherlands, there is a framework developed by the EU with a national interpretation called the Multiannual National Control Plan (MNCP), developed by the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA)
- The Farm Assurance Standards are part of the so-called 'keurmerken' (Quality Marks/Labels) and are very focused on the environment and animal welfare
- Private standards are also commonly used
- Organisations are required to submit annual reports to improve transparency
- There is a strong commitment to maintaining high standards because of the importance of the export market
- There is global recognition of the country's high standards of agricultural production, with The Netherlands seen as an example of good practice, a developing contribution to sustainability and strong innovation in the agri-food sector

# Annex IX: A Review of AHDB Studies

## AHDB Comparison of International Beef and Lamb Standards

The AHDB developed and published a series of studies in 2024 to compare farmgate production standards in England with key international markets around the world. These independently reviewed reports compare beef and lamb production standards in England - at both regulatory and voluntary levels - with those in four regions globally. The reports will support wider industry assessments of the current farm assurance landscape.

The review compared standards in England with those in:

- Australia and New Zealand
- Key EU countries
- North America
- South America

### Methodology

To enable the analysis, and as a direct result of each assurance scheme containing its own modules and categories which did not facilitate straight comparison, a series of fourteen categories were devised, and each of the schemes were scrutinised to understand and report their performance in each of these categories:

1. Traceability, Documentation and Assurance
2. Personnel
3. Food Safety
4. Housing and Shelter
5. Feed and Water
6. Husbandry Procedures
7. Youngstock Management
8. Animal Health and Welfare
9. Animal Medicines
10. Biosecurity and Disease Control
11. Livestock Transport
12. Vermin Control

13. Fallen Stock

14. Environmental Protection

Scores were awarded to each scheme on the basis of how well it addressed the questions in each category, and the question scores were then weighted within each category. The total section score was then weighted between the categories, and between the different countries in the study.

## Australia and New Zealand

Comparison of Sheep and Beef standards in England (RT), Australia (Livestock Production Assurance (LPA)), and New Zealand (New Zealand Farm Assurance Programme (NZFAP)), as well as a high-level outline of the legislative framework in each country in which the assurance schemes operate.

### Key Findings:

- RT scores higher than the LPA and NZFAP schemes in most areas, except for biosecurity and disease control
- A lower overall weighted score for a scheme does not necessarily indicate it is sub-standard
- Agricultural practices and requirements vary between countries, leading to different assurance schemes and requirements
- Livestock housing is highly important in the UK, resulting in higher scores for UK schemes compared to countries where animals are rarely housed
- The study accounted for these differences through country-specific weightings
- RT is more prescriptive and detailed, allowing for a clearer review of each category's requirements
- There are areas of potential improvement for every scheme in all categories
- All schemes provide some degree of customer reassurance, but this varies by scheme and category
- Audit frequency and type were used as indicators of scheme effectiveness
- RT audits are the most frequent, conducted in-person every 18 months
- NZFAP requires in-person audits every 3 years, with more frequent audits possible to meet customer demand
- The effectiveness of the LPA scheme is harder to determine due to a lack of published data on farm enrollment and inspection frequency. LPA inspects around 3,001 farms annually, with two-thirds selected randomly from all members

### Summary of Legislation

- The legislative framework in each country was researched to uncover the broad base legislation against which farms operate
- Legislation forms part of the requirements within assurance schemes but is rarely inspected on its own
- Farm assurance schemes provide assurance around adherence to legislation as part of the inspection process
- Legislation was found for almost all categories except 'biosecurity and disease control' and 'vermin control'
- While legislation goals and provisions are similar across countries, there are some variations, though not substantial

### Conclusions

- RT scored higher than LPA and NZFAP, but there are areas for improvement in all schemes and categories
- Legislation provides a good base for standards in almost all categories
- All schemes offer some degree of customer reassurance, but this varies significantly by scheme and category

## EU Countries

The schemes compared include:

- Quality Scheme (QS) from Germany
- Quality Meat Poland (QMP)
- Sustainable Beef and Lamb Assurance Scheme (SBLAS) from the Republic of Ireland
- Label Rouge (LR) from France
- Beter Leven (BL) 1, 2, and 3 from the Netherlands
- Some schemes (QS, QMP, and Beter Leven 1, 2, and 3) only cover beef production, which is accounted for in the comparison.

### Overall Findings

- RT scores higher than most other schemes in most areas
- Different schemes have different focuses, leading to specific areas where other schemes may score higher or take a different approach
- A lower overall weighted score does not indicate a scheme is sub-standard; assurance requirements vary by scheme focus
- Beter Leven focuses on welfare, while Label Rouge aims to maximize end-product quality through effective animal management

- RT is more prescriptive and detailed than other schemes

### Customer Reassurance and Audit Frequency

- All schemes provide some degree of customer reassurance, varying by scheme and category
- Audit frequency and type are indicators of scheme effectiveness
- Beter Leven and QMP audit annually
- RT and SBLAS conduct in-person audits every 18 months
- QS Germany uses a risk-based approach, with audits every six months for higher-risk farms and every two years for lower-risk farms

### Summary of Legislation

- The legislative framework in each country was researched to uncover the broad base legislation against which farms operate
- All countries operate against European Union legislation, with some (Netherlands, UK, Ireland) adding additional requirements
- Legislation is rarely inspected on its own; farm assurance schemes provide assurance around adherence to legislation as part of the inspection process

### Conclusions

- RT achieved a higher total score than any other scheme in the report
- All schemes provide some degree of customer reassurance, varying by scheme and category

## North America

Provides a forensic comparison of sheep and beef standards in England, RT, with various North American assurance schemes.

Schemes compared include:

- Animal Welfare Approved (AWA)
- Canada Verified Sheep (CVS)
- Global Animal Partnership (Five Step)
- Verified Beef Production (VBP)

AWA and Five Step cover beef and lamb in separate standards, while VBP and CVS cover single species only.

Includes a high-level outline of the legislative framework in each region where the assurance schemes operate.

### Overall Findings

- RT scores higher than most other schemes in most areas
- Different schemes have different focuses, leading to specific areas where other schemes may score higher or take a different approach
- A lower overall weighted score does not indicate a scheme is sub-standard; assurance requirements vary by scheme focus
- RT and CVS are more detailed and prescriptive than other schemes

### Customer Reassurance and Audit Frequency

- All schemes provide some degree of customer reassurance, varying by scheme and category
- Audit frequency and type are indicators of scheme effectiveness

### Summary of Legislation

- The legislative framework in each country was researched to uncover the broad base legislation against which farms operate
- Legislation is rarely inspected on its own; farm assurance schemes provide assurance around adherence to legislation as part of the inspection process

### Conclusions

- RT achieved a higher total score than any other scheme, covering a wider range of factors in greater depth
- All schemes provide some degree of customer reassurance, varying by scheme and category

## South America

Provides a forensic comparison of beef and sheep standards in England, RT, with various assurance schemes used in South America.

Due to the scarcity of home-grown systems in South America, some schemes originate from other regions but are used in the reviewed regions.

Schemes covered in the report include:

- Certified Humane (CH)
- INAC Meat Certification Programme (INAC)
- Global SLP (GSLP)
- Both beef and sheep standards are reviewed where contained within one standard, but only the beef standard for CH is included.

### Overall Findings

- RT scores higher than other schemes in most areas
- Different schemes have different focuses, leading to specific areas where other schemes may score higher or take a different approach
- A lower overall weighted score does not indicate a scheme is sub-standard; assurance requirements vary by scheme focus
- GSLP focuses on food safety and worker welfare, while CH focuses on high animal welfare
- Customer Reassurance and Audit Frequency
- All schemes provide some degree of customer reassurance, varying by scheme and category
- Audit frequency and type are indicators of scheme effectiveness

### Summary of Legislation

- The legislative framework in each country was researched to uncover the broad base legislation against which farms operate
- Legislation is rarely inspected on its own; farm assurance schemes provide assurance around adherence to legislation as part of the inspection process.

# Annex X: Abbreviations

The following acronyms are used throughout the report:

AHDB - Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board

AIC - Agricultural Industries Confederation

APHA - Animal and Plant Health Agency

BEIC - British Egg Industry Council

BRC – British Retail Consortium

BSE - Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

CB - Certification Body

DEFRA - Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

EA - Environmental Agency

EU - European Union

FARLG - Farm Assurance Review Leadership Group

FSA - Food Standards Agency

GFC - Green Farm Commitment

GI - Graphical Indication (of the UK)

HACCP - Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points

IPPC - Integrated Pollution Prevention Control Permit

ISO - International Standards Organisation

LEAF - Linking Environment & Farming

MOU – Memorandum of Understanding

NFU – National Farmers Union

NFU Cymru - NFU Wales

NFUS - National Farmers Union of Scotland

NI – Northern Ireland

NIBL FQAS - Northern Ireland Beef & Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme

NSA - National Sheep Association

O F & G - Organic Farmers & Growers

QMS - Quality Meat Scotland

RPA - Rural Payments Agency

RSPCA (Assured) - Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

ROI – Republic of Ireland

RT - Red Tractor

SAOS – Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society Ltd

SMETA – Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit

SFI - Sustainable Farming Incentive

SQC - Scottish Quality Crops

TIAH - The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture

TOR - Terms of Refence

UFU - Ulster Farmers Union

UKAS - United Kingdom Accreditation Service

UKFAR - UK Farm Assurance Review

WLBP - Welsh Lamb & Beef Producers

WTO – World Trade Organisation

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