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# The use of antibiotics on healthy farm animals and antimicrobial resistance

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## Summary

A Westminster Hall debate has been scheduled for 4.30pm on 18 January 2023 on the use of antibiotics on healthy farm animals and antimicrobial resistance. The debate will be opened by Virendra Sharma MP.

## Antimicrobial resistance

Antimicrobials are agents that “kill” a wide range of organisms including bacteria, viruses, and fungi. Antibiotics are a type of antimicrobial medicine and act on bacteria specifically. [Antimicrobial resistance \(AMR\) occurs when infectious agents \(bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites\) evolve over time and acquire new characteristics which reduce or stop their susceptibility to antimicrobials.](#) This makes infections harder to treat, easier to spread and more likely to cause severe illness and death. The inappropriate and excessive use of antimicrobials contributes to the development of AMR.

AMR is of significant concern to UK and global health authorities. In 2019, the UK Government [published a paper which set out its 20-year vision](#) of a world in which AMR is effectively contained, controlled and mitigated. This is supported by more targeted commitments in the [latest of its five-year plans for AMR \(2019-2024\)](#). These include working with industry to improve diagnostic tools to inform veterinary prescribing and improving the available data on antimicrobial prescribing.

The UK has also committed to global initiatives such as the [World Health Organization’s Global Action Plan on AMR](#).

## How are antibiotics used in livestock?

[Although banned in the UK and the EU from 2006,](#) animals were historically given antibiotics in their feed as a broad preventative measure to promote healthy livestock. There are three situations where antibiotics can be given to livestock. The first is therapeutic use for specific treatment of a diseased animal. The second is control or metaphylactic use – the treatment of a group of animals after the diagnosis of disease has been made in part of the group. The aim is to treat clinically sick animals and control the spread of disease to others in close contact which may already be infected. The third category is preventative or prophylactic – the treatment of an animal or group of

animals before clinical signs of disease. The aim is to prevent the occurrence of disease or infection.

Some [73% of antimicrobials sold globally](#) in 2017 were for use in animals used for food production.

## What action is being taken to reduce antibiotic use in livestock?

[Campaign groups such as World Animal Action have called for greater action](#) at a global scale to cut antibiotic use and mitigate AMR developing through over use of antimicrobials in the animal population.

The [UK's use of antibiotics in farmed animals decreased in 2021 to the lowest recorded, with a 55% reduction since 2014](#). The UK is now [one of the lowest users of antibiotics in Europe](#), and lower than any EU country with a significant livestock farming industry. The [National Farmers' Union has noted that "preventative use has been phased out completely in \[many livestock\] sectors](#), meaning many animals receive no antibiotic treatments at all in their lifetime". None the less, the [Government has policies to further reduce "unnecessary" use of antibiotics in animals and does not support the routine or predictable use of antibiotics](#), "including where antibiotics are used to compensate for inadequate farming practices". Certain antibiotic classes are categorised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as critically important antibiotics for human use, of which several are designated as 'highest priority critically important antibiotics' (HP-CIA) Policies focus on limiting the use in animals of these types of antibiotics, but to support the use of other antimicrobials to prevent disease. [Stakeholders including the British Veterinary Association and farming organisations broadly support this approach](#) and are working with the Government on its implementation.

## Future UK action

In [January 2022, the routine use of antibiotics was banned in the EU, and preventative use was restricted to exceptional treatments of individual animals](#). Antibiotics can also no longer be applied to compensate for poor hygiene and animal husbandry practices. This ban does not apply to the UK, although products exported to the EU must comply with its requirements. The Government's [5-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance published in 2019 said that the UK would align](#) with new EU regulations on veterinary medicines. However, an [addendum to the action plan published in May 2022 replaces alignment with a commitment to "implement similar provisions"](#) to the EU regulations.

The [Government said in January 2023 that it proposed to strengthen the law on unnecessary antibiotic prescribing in animals](#). Farming Minister Mark Spencer said that the UK Veterinary Medicines Directorate had been in dialogue with stakeholders in 2022 about changes to the [Veterinary Medicines Regulations 2013](#) which set out controls on marketing, manufacturing, supply and use of veterinary medicines. A full consultation was being prepared, with legislation expected to be laid in 2023.

# 1

## Antimicrobials and antimicrobial resistance

Antimicrobials are a group of medicines used to prevent and treat infections in humans, animals and plants.<sup>1</sup> This includes antibiotics (for bacterial infections), antivirals (for viral infections), antifungals (for fungal infections) and antiparasitics (for parasitic infections).

Bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites naturally evolve. Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) describes when these infectious agents evolve and acquire new characteristics which reduce or stop their susceptibility to antimicrobials. This makes infections harder to treat, easier to spread and more likely to cause severe illness and death.<sup>2</sup>

Microbes resistant to antibiotics developed in animal populations can also pass to humans through the food chain and contact with diseased animals.

### 1.1

## Growing concern about AMR

There has been significant and growing concern about AMR across the international community, because of:

- Increasing use of antimicrobials, particularly in animal husbandry where they are used not only to improve animal health and welfare, but also to enhance animal growth rates and raise animal productivity.<sup>3</sup>
- Increasing rates of drug resistance, resulting in hard-to-treat infections and death in humans.<sup>4</sup>
- A sustained lack of progress in antimicrobial development; no new classes of antibiotics have been discovered since the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

AMR does occur naturally, but as the World Health Organization explains, the inappropriate or excessive use of antimicrobials accelerates the emergence and spread of AMR:

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<sup>1</sup> WHO, [Antimicrobial resistance](#), 17 November 2021

<sup>2</sup> WHO, [Antimicrobial resistance](#), 17 November 2021

<sup>3</sup> OECD, [Anti-microbial resistance is a global challenge for food systems and public health](#), accessed 16 January 2023

<sup>4</sup> WHO, [Antimicrobial resistance](#), 17 November 2021

<sup>5</sup> Wellcome, [Why is it so hard to develop new antibiotics?](#), accessed 16 January 2023

The main drivers of antimicrobial resistance include the misuse and overuse of antimicrobials; lack of access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) for both humans and animals; poor infection and disease prevention and control in health-care facilities and farms; poor access to quality, affordable medicines, vaccines and diagnostics; lack of awareness and knowledge; and lack of enforcement of legislation.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 AMR spread from animals to humans

There are risks to human health through transmission of resistant microbes from animals to humans, as well as to the environment. Antibiotic resistance spreads as bacteria themselves move, through:

- Direct animal contact (e.g. from livestock to farmers);
- Contaminated materials and housing (e.g. from livestock excretions where the active antimicrobial has not been metabolised);
- Water, food and air;
- People transferring resistant bacteria, for example, on unwashed hands or by coughing.

The [Antimicrobial Review Board reported in 2015](#) [PDF] that 72% of 139 academic studies had reported a link between antibiotic consumption in animals and resistance in humans<sup>7</sup>. The Government's [Five Year Antimicrobial Resistance Strategy \(2013 to 2018\)](#) said however that AMR problems faced in human medicine were “primarily the result of antibiotic use in people” rather than in animals. Nevertheless the Strategy said that “use of antibiotics in animals (which includes fish, birds, bees and reptiles) is an important factor contributing to the wider pool of resistance which may have long term consequences”.<sup>8</sup>

## 1.3 A global response to AMR

Infectious disease does not confine itself to national borders, and the factors which contribute to AMR span across a wide range of policy areas. As such, the international health community has long recognised the

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<sup>6</sup> WHO, [Antimicrobial resistance](#), 17 November 2021

<sup>7</sup> Antimicrobial Review Board, Chaired by Jim O'Neill, [Antimicrobials in agriculture and the environment: reducing unnecessary use and waste](#), [PDF] December 2015

<sup>8</sup> Department of Health and Social Care, [UK 5 Year Antimicrobial Resistance Strategy 2013 to 2018](#), 13 September 2013

importance of a collaborative approach to AMR. Characterised as the ‘One Health Approach’, it seeks to:

[bring] together multiple sectors and stakeholders engaged in human, terrestrial and aquatic animal and plant health, food and feed production and the environment to communicate and work together in the design and implementation of programmes, policies, legislation and research to attain better public health outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

Several international initiatives have been developed to facilitate this joint effort, including:

- WHO, [The Global Action Plan on antimicrobial resistance](#), 1 January 2016
- United Nations, [Interagency Coordination Group on Antimicrobial Resistance](#), 17 March 2017
- WHO, [World Antimicrobial Awareness Week](#)
- WHO, [Global Antimicrobial Resistance and Use Surveillance System \(GLASS\)](#)

## 1.4

## Government policy on the use of antibiotics

The Government set out the UK’s contribution to containing and controlling AMR by 2040 in a 2019 policy paper – [Contained and controlled: the UK’s 20-year vision for antimicrobial resistance](#). The Government committed to a range of actions across nine ambitions, including continued work with global partners, minimising infections, protecting animal health and welfare and minimising environmental spread.

In particular, the Government committed to:

- Design, develop and implement global surveillance and monitoring approaches;
- Improve our understanding of infectious organisms and how resistance to treatment spreads between and among humans, animals, food and the environment and what the impacts of antimicrobial resistance are, including on different communities of microorganisms or microbiomes;

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<sup>9</sup> WHO, [Antimicrobial resistance](#), 17 November 2021

- Reduce the impact of resistance on our animals, including aquaculture, through best husbandry practices that can be shown to achieve low prevalence of infectious diseases.
- Ensure effective waste and waste water treatment and handling.<sup>10</sup>

The Government identified a need for collaboration and called on a range of stakeholders to play a part in delivering its ambitions, including:

- The research community to focus on key areas, including infection prevention and control, transmission pathways, and AMR's impact on microbiomes;<sup>11</sup>
- The private sector to fulfil the commitments of the 2016 Davos Declaration,<sup>12</sup> on AMR to reduce environmental impact, support good stewardship, improve access, and invest in research and development;
- Public agencies to implement the commitments made in the national action plan to ensure progress towards the Government's ambitions;
- Professionals to promote best practice infection prevention and control and antimicrobial use by health workers, veterinarians, farmers and throughout the food chain; and
- Society to act as advocates for action on antimicrobial resistance, promoting key messages and holding public bodies and private organisations to account.<sup>13</sup>

## The UK five-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance 2019-2024

The Government said it would build on its 20-year vision through a series of five-year UK national action plans.<sup>14</sup>

In 2019, the Government published its second national action plan under the 20-year strategy - [UK five-year action plan for antimicrobial](#)

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<sup>10</sup> Department of Health and Social Care, [Contained and controlled: the UK's 20-year vision for antimicrobial resistance](#), 24 January 2019

<sup>11</sup> A microbiome is a community of microorganisms that co-exist in a larger organism

<sup>12</sup> Over 80 international pharmaceutical, biotechnology and diagnostics companies signed the [Declaration on Combating Antimicrobial Resistance](#) (PDF) at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in 2016. It set out commitments in reducing the development of AMR, investing in research and development and improving access to new and high-quality antibiotics. Further information is available at WHO, [Global TB Programme welcomes Declaration on Combating Antimicrobial Resistance and urges inclusion of drug-resistant TB](#), 23 January 2016

<sup>13</sup> Department of Health and Social Care, [Contained and controlled: the UK's 20-year vision for antimicrobial resistance](#), 24 January 2019

<sup>14</sup> Department of Health and Social Security, [Contained and controlled: the UK's 20-year vision for antimicrobial resistance](#), 24 January 2019



[resistance 2019-2024](#) – in consultation with the devolved administrations, professional bodies, industry and academia.<sup>15</sup>

Section 3.2 of the Strategy set out ambitions regarding the optimal use of antimicrobials in animals in agriculture. It explained the need for better antibiotic stewardship and provided examples where innovative practice had delivered this.

The Government committed to:

- Work with industry to develop appropriate training, guidance and other communications for antimicrobial users and prescribers to encourage the uptake of recommended practices and evaluate their impact; and
- Explore, in collaboration with industry, options to develop rapid and reliable diagnostic tools to inform veterinarians' prescribing decisions; and promote the uptake of these tools.<sup>16</sup>

The Strategy also highlighted a lack of available data on antibiotic use in animals, noting that in Europe, the only antibiotic use data available for inter-country comparisons are 'sales of veterinary antibiotics', which do not distinguish between different animal species.

The Strategy explained that the UK continues to develop and coordinate data collection systems to monitor antibiotic use in different animals, with systems in place covering a high percentage of the pig, meat, poultry, laying hen, gamebird, salmon and trout industries, and in development for others (dairy, cattle and sheep). Data are also collected on veterinary sales of antibiotics, which can be used to support antibiotic use data.

The Government set out commitments to improve data and control:

- Improve the data available on levels of antimicrobials used in main livestock sectors and work with industry to review, refine and implement sector-specific targets;
- Explore and work with existing systems that are monitoring the use of antibiotics and AMR in companion animals and horses to refine our understanding of the situation in these sectors; and report on collective use of antibiotics in household companion animals;
- Aligning with EU legislation, we will implement the provisions of the new EU Veterinary Medicines legislation on the use of antibiotics, subject to the official public consultation process and through

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<sup>15</sup> Department of Health and Social Security, [UK 5-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance 2019-2024](#), 24 January 2019

<sup>16</sup> Department of Health and Social Security, [UK 5-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance 2019-2024](#), 24 January 2019

collaboration with stakeholders to agree how it can be applied in practice;

- Work with global partners to build regulatory capacity in LMICs' animal health sectors (by supporting control options for manufacturing, authorising, distributing, marketing, inspecting and surveying use of veterinary medicines).<sup>17</sup>

The Department of Health and Social Care has issued a [call for evidence to inform the next 5-year AMR strategy \(2024-2029\)](#). Submissions are invited until 20 January 2023.

## The Health and Social Care Committee report on AMR

In October 2018, the [Health and Social Care Committee published a report on antimicrobial resistance](#).<sup>18</sup> The report noted that antibiotic use in farming is an important contributor to AMR and said that Defra must ensure that progress in reducing the use of antibiotics in animals “is embedded and in some areas extended, including keeping targets under close review”. In particular, the report highlighted that “serious concerns” remain about the prophylactic or metaphylactic use of antibiotics in animals, and the use of antibiotics of last resort that may “as a result lose their effectiveness for humans more quickly”.

The [Government response to the report, published in January 2019 \[PDF\], agreed that more needed to be done to tackle AMR](#). It noted decreasing sales of antibiotics for animal use and highlighted work by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate and Defra with the veterinary profession and farming sectors to reduce the need to use antibiotics through “improvements to animal health and the prevention of disease”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Department of Health and Social Security, [UK 5-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance 2019-2024](#), 24 January 2019

<sup>18</sup> Health and Social Care Committee, [Antimicrobial Resistance](#), 11<sup>th</sup> Report of Session 2017-19, HC 962

## 1.5

# How are antibiotics used in farming?

Globally in 2017, 73% of antimicrobials were used in animals raised for food.<sup>20</sup>

Antibiotic use in animals can be divided into three categories. The Agriculture and Horticultural Development Board sets these out as:

- Curative or therapeutic – treatment of a sick animal or group of animals after the diagnosis of disease or infection has been made;
- Control or metaphylactic – treatment of a group of animals after the diagnosis of disease has been made in part of the group. The aim is to treat clinically sick animals and control the spread of disease to others in close contact, which may already be infected;
- Preventative or prophylactic – treatment of an animal or group of animals before clinical signs of disease. The aim is to prevent the occurrence of disease or infection.<sup>21</sup>

In the past, it was normal practice across the world for antimicrobials to be added to animal feed to stimulate livestock growth and so maximise productivity. This led to concerns about the impact on human health from the evolution of harmful microbes that were increasingly resistant to pharmaceutical remedies. The rise in multidrug-resistant Salmonella in the 1960 in particular, raised the possibility that growth stimulants were contributing to the problem of drug-resistant infections. A ban on livestock growth promotion with antibiotics normally used for humans was implemented in the EU in 2006 and then in Canada, although the practice continued in the USA. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in its guidance, Codex Alimentarius, specifically advises that antibiotics should not be used in feed for growth-promoting purposes in the absence of a public health safety assessment, and that, in any case, their use should be minimised.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Antibiotics article by Katie Tiseo, Laura Huber , Timothy P. Robinson, and Thomas P. Van Boeckel, Global Trends in Antimicrobial Use in Food Animals from 2017 to 2030, 17 December 2020 [PDF]

<sup>21</sup> AHDB, Responsible use of antibiotics in livestock [Accessed 16 January 2023]

<sup>22</sup> The Codex Alimentarius is a collection of internationally recognized standards, codes of practice, guidelines, and other recommendations published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations relating to food issues including production and safety.

## 1.6

# Is the use of antimicrobials decreasing in farming?

In the UK, the use of veterinary antibiotics has been decreasing. The UK Veterinary Antibiotic Resistance and Sales Surveillance Report (UK-VARSS) 2021 Published November.<sup>23</sup> [Farming Minister Mark Spencer said in answer to a PQ on 9 January 2023](#) that:

To date in the UK, collaborative working between government, the veterinary profession and the agriculture sectors to focus on these issues has resulted in our national sales of veterinary antibiotics reducing by 55% since 2014, and in 2021 we recorded the lowest antibiotic use to date.<sup>24</sup>

Use in animals of the antimicrobials most important for human health is a particular concern. The UK-VARSS report 2021, shows that sales of Highest Priority Critically Important Antibiotics (HP-CIAs) accounted for just 0.4% of total sales of antibiotics for use in food-producing animals.

The [UN Food and Agriculture Organisation \(FAO\) welcomed the UK's progress in reducing antibiotic use in animals](#) in a 2022 report [PDF], produced jointly with the Veterinary Medicines Directorate. It highlighted the voluntary approach adopted and stated that in the UK:

antibiotic sales for food-producing animals have halved since 2014 and over the same period, the use of highest-priority critically important antibiotics (HP-CIAs) has reduced by 79 percent. The United Kingdom's achievement in reducing antibiotic consumption in agriculture makes it one of the lowest users of antibiotics across Europe, and the lowest of those countries with a significant livestock farming industry.<sup>25</sup>

The [Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance \(RUMA\)](#) is an independent non-profit group seeking to promote high standards in food safety, animal health and welfare in the British livestock industry which represents 26 cross-sector organisations.

RUMA established the Targets Task Force to respond to a recommendation in [Lord O'Neill's 2016 Review](#) that "defined targets should be established at the country level to reduce unnecessary use of antibiotics in agriculture".<sup>26</sup> RUMA's website provides a summary of the programme's progress:

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<sup>23</sup> Veterinary Medicines Directorate, [UK Veterinary Antibiotic Resistance and Sales Surveillance Report \(UK-VARSS\) 2021](#), November 2022 [PDF]

<sup>24</sup> PQ 110862 [[on Livestock: Antibiotics](#)] 9 January 2023

<sup>25</sup> United Nations (FAO) and UK Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD), [Tackling antimicrobial use and resistance in food-producing animals: Lessons learned in the United Kingdom](#) [PDF], 2022, pvii

<sup>26</sup> Lord O'Neill, [Tackling drug-resistant infections globally: Final report and recommendations](#), May 2016, page 74, bullet point 3.5

The creation and roll out of the first set of sector specific targets through the RUMA Targets Task Force, published in 2017 and running to 2020, helped focus activity across the UK livestock sectors to achieve a 52% reduction in antibiotic use since 2014. Highest Priority Critically Important Antibiotic (HP-CIA) sales for UK food producing animals have also fallen 79% since 2014, and sales of colistin are virtually nil.

The second phase of RUMA TTF targets (2021 – 2024) shows the ongoing livestock sector commitment to further reduce use where this is sustainable. As a result, only 26% of all the antibiotics used in the UK, are now used in the billion plus poultry birds, laying hens, sheep, cows, pigs, fish and game produced to feed the nation, and for export. This is a downward shift of about 12% since 2014. Levels of antibiotic resistance found through Government monitoring and surveillance are also stabilising and falling in parallel to the reductions in use.<sup>27</sup>

## 1.7

# What is the UK doing to cut antimicrobial use in farmed animals?

The Government's key actions are set out in its [UK 5-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance 2019 to 2024](#),<sup>28</sup> and in an addendum to this published in June 2022. It also has a longer term strategy set out in [Contained and controlled: the UK's 20-year vision for antimicrobial resistance](#).<sup>29</sup>

The [Gov.uk pages on antimicrobial resistance](#) (AMR) provide an overview of Government action in this area across a number of departments.<sup>30</sup> This includes guidelines from a number of key animal health organisations and the [Code of Practice on the responsible use of animal medicines on the farm](#).<sup>31</sup> This code of practice draws on guidelines developed by the [Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture \(RUMA\) Alliance](#). The code advises that farmers, for example, should:

- Use as little as possible – farms should be managed so that the risk of disease developing is minimised. Good husbandry practices such as good hygiene, good ventilation, access to clean water, effective biosecurity, and good herd health planning including suitable

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<sup>27</sup> RUMA, [Goals and infrastructure of the RUMA Targets Task Force. The Goal of the Targets Task Force \(TTF\)](#), accessed 16 January 2023

<sup>28</sup> Department of Health and Social Care, [UK 5-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance 2019 to 2024](#), 24 January 2019

<sup>29</sup> HM Government, [Addendum to the UK 5-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance 2019 to 2024](#), May 2022

<sup>30</sup> GOV.UK collection, [Antimicrobial resistance](#) (accessed 16 January 2023)

<sup>31</sup> Veterinary Medicine Directorate (VMD), [Code of Practice on the responsible use of animal medicines on the farm](#), December 2014

quarantine of stock and appropriate vaccination strategies, will all help to reduce the disease challenge.

- Use as much as necessary – when animals become ill they should be treated in accordance with the medicine label instructions and those of the veterinary surgeon.
- Not use antibiotics habitually to prevent disease, or to compensate for poor hygiene or for inadequate husbandry conditions. All antibiotics, including those administered in-feed, must be prescribed by the veterinary surgeon responsible for the animals to which the treatment will be administered.

Some classes of antibiotic, such as colistin, fluoroquinolones and third and fourth generation cephalosporins, have been classified as critically important antibiotics for use in humans (HP-CIAs). Vets are advised only to use these antibiotics as a last resort, when other antibiotics have been, or are expected to be, ineffective.<sup>32</sup>

The [Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board \(AHDB\) publishes advice for farmers on the responsible use of antibiotics](#) on their livestock. This notes that the key priorities for responsible use are:

- To avoid the use of highest-priority critically important antibiotics (HP-CIAs), only using when no other antibiotic would be clinically effective; and
- To avoid the routine use of preventative or prophylactic antibiotics.<sup>33</sup>

## EU ban on the use of antimicrobials as growth promoters

As an EU Member State, the UK adopted the [EU-wide ban](#) on the use of antimicrobials as growth promoters that came into force on 1 January 2006. The addition of antimicrobials to animal feed for medical purposes (either as prophylactics or as treatment for existing disease) was not affected by this ban.

Since the UK left the EU, the EU has extended the scope of its ban. In [January 2022, the routine use of antibiotics was banned and preventative use was restricted to exceptional treatments of individual animals](#). Antimicrobials can also no longer be applied to compensate for poor hygiene and animal husbandry practices.<sup>34</sup> An EU summary of the

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<sup>32</sup> Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, [Using medicines responsibly As little as possible, but as much as necessary](#) [PDF], 2020, p6

<sup>33</sup> Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, [Antibiotic Resistance](#) (Accessed 11 January 2023)

<sup>34</sup> EUR-Lex, [Authorisation, import and manufacture of veterinary medicine, summary of Regulation \(EU\) 2019/6 on veterinary medicinal products and repealing Directive 2001/82/EC](#)

regulation states that the new rules continue and strengthen the [EU's fight against antimicrobial resistance](#) by introducing:

- a ban on the preventive use of antibiotics in groups of animals;
- a ban on the preventive use of antimicrobials via medicated feed;
- restrictions on the use of antimicrobials as a control treatment to prevent a further spread of infection;
- a reinforced ban on the use of antimicrobials for promoting growth and increasing yield (in addition to the 2006 prohibition of using antibiotics as growth promoters in feed);
- the possibility to reserve certain antimicrobials for use in humans only;
- the obligation for EU [Member States](#) to collect data on the sale and use of antimicrobials;
- various measures aiming towards the careful and responsible use of antimicrobials.<sup>35</sup>

For exports into the EU, non-EU countries will have to “respect the ban on using antimicrobials for promoting growth and increasing yield and the restrictions on antimicrobials designated as reserved for human use in the EU”.<sup>36</sup>

## Will the UK follow the 2022 EU ban?

[Commentators are concerned that the UK will fall behind EU efforts without a similar ban.](#)<sup>37</sup> The Government's [5-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance published in 2019 said that the UK would align with new EU regulations on veterinary medicines.](#)<sup>38</sup> However, an [addendum to the plan published in May 2022 replaces this with a commitment with to “implement similar provisions”](#) to the EU regulations.<sup>39</sup>

Farming Minister Mark Spencer set out [Defra's approach in a PQ on Livestock: Antibiotics answered on 9 January 2023](#), and said that the

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<sup>35</sup> EUR-Lex, [Authorisation, import and manufacture of veterinary medicine, summary of Regulation \(EU\) 2019/6 on veterinary medicinal products and repealing Directive 2001/82/EC](#)

<sup>36</sup> EUR-Lex, [Authorisation, import and manufacture of veterinary medicine, summary of Regulation \(EU\) 2019/6 on veterinary medicinal products and repealing Directive 2001/82/EC](#)

<sup>37</sup> The Guardian, [UK risks falling behind on reducing farm antibiotics after EU ban](#), 28 January 2022

<sup>38</sup> Department of Health and Social Care, [UK 5-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance 2019 to 2024](#), 24 January 2019

<sup>39</sup> HM Government, [Addendum to the UK 5-year action plan for antimicrobial resistance 2019 to 2024](#), May 2022

Government does not support the routine or predictable use of antibiotics, “including where antibiotics are used to compensate for inadequate farming practices”. He said that its approaches to reducing this type of use included “improved biosecurity, stockmanship and good farming practices; disease prevention (including vaccination); and use of diagnostics”. Mr Spencer said that the Government proposed to strengthen national law on unnecessary antibiotic prescribing in animals. The UK Veterinary Medicines Directorate had been in dialogue with stakeholders in 2022 about changes to the Veterinary Medicines Regulations 2013 which set out controls on marketing, manufacturing, supply and use of veterinary medicines. A full consultation was being prepared, with legislation expected to be laid in 2023.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> PQ 110862 [[on Livestock: Antibiotics](#)] 9 January 2023



## 2

# Stakeholder views

## Animal and health campaigners

Stakeholders such as [World Animal Protection](#) are concerned about the [link globally between use of antibiotics in animals and a growth in resistant bacteria affecting human health](#). The campaign group said that:

The overuse of antibiotics is resulting in a [global public health crisis](#), with as many as 3,500 human deaths worldwide from antimicrobial resistant infections (superbugs) [daily](#).

[Around three-quarters of the world's antibiotics](#) are used on farmed animals, especially on cruel factory farms. In contrast, animals living in high welfare farms are healthier and more resilient to disease and are not reliant on antibiotics.<sup>41</sup>

[Campaign groups such as the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics](#) consider that [intensive agriculture is contributing to the problem of AMR](#) as well as to increasing the threat of diseases:

The routine 'mass-medication' of animals enables them to stave off diseases in conditions which are often 'disease-inducing'.

Routine antibiotic use is enabling the continuation of intensive farming systems, and fuelling the antibiotic resistance crisis in people.

The organisation states that it hopes that the UK will adopt the same ban as in force across the EU from 2022.<sup>42</sup>

## Vets and farmers

The British Veterinary Association (BVA) supports Government policies on tackling AMR and is working with it and the farming sector on their delivery. The BVA says that:

In the UK, vets have taken the lead in promoting the responsible use of antimicrobials in companion animals and livestock. Ongoing work by vets, farmers, and industry has already led to significant reductions in sales of antibiotics for use in food-producing animals. We must maintain this momentum.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> World Animal Protection news article, [EU bans the routine use of antibiotics in animals](#), 28 January 2022

<sup>42</sup> Save our Antibiotics website article, [Antibiotic overuse in livestock farming](#), [accessed 16 January 2022]

<sup>43</sup> British Veterinary Association, [Responsible Use of Antimicrobials](#) webpage (accessed 11 January 2023)

The [BVA's position paper on the use of antimicrobials in food producing animals](#) sets out key recommendations:

- Vets should continue to be guided by the [7 principles of responsible antimicrobial use](#).
- In the interests of animal welfare, critically important antibiotics should remain available for veterinary use.
- Vets should work with farmers and stock-keepers to achieve the [RUMA Targets Taskforce antimicrobial reduction targets](#) for their sector.
- Farm assurance schemes should incorporate responsible use of antimicrobials as a requirement.
- Farmers and stock-keepers play a major role in ensuring the responsible use of medicines on farms. They should be empowered to work with their vets to achieve this.
- Government should design a new post-Brexit system of agricultural support to improve husbandry and biosecurity measures on farm.<sup>44</sup>

[RUMA \(the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance\) reported on progress against the Government's 5-year action plan in November 2022](#). It noted that the agricultural sector's voluntary effort in collaboration with government had been praised in a joint Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and UK Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD), report, :

The report recognises the industry's positive antibiotic reduction journey. [...] The successes to date across the industry has put the UK ahead of most EU countries and the current RUMA targets up to 2024 further reinforce the ongoing commitment across all the sectors to achieve sustainable reductions.<sup>45</sup>

The National Farmers' Union (NFU) has supported efforts to cut antimicrobial use, stating that

The UK farming industry has responded extremely well to the targets. Our original aim of lowering overall antibiotic use, and in particular highest-priority critically important antibiotics (HP-CIAs), has been categorically achieved in the face of some challenging external conditions.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> British Veterinary Association, [Position Statement on the Use of Antimicrobials in food producing animals](#), May 2019

<sup>45</sup> RUMA news release, [Latest RUMA targets task force report reveals UK livestock sectors continue to make positive progress on antibiotic use targets, with UK efforts on AMR also praised at a global level](#), 7 November 2022. This refers to the November 2022 report, [RUMA Targets Task Force 2: Two Years On](#).

<sup>46</sup> NFU online, [New targets for antibiotic use in farming as stats show significant reduction](#), 18 November 2020

The [NFU in 2020 outlined sectors where action was being targeted](#) including :

- a focus on disease prevention and ruminant herd and flock health planning, with plans to develop a new network of ‘Farm Vet Champions’;
- an aim that dairy and calf rearing will secure reductions in use of 15% and 25% respectively across the national herd by 2024 as data become available;
- pig sector plans to decrease by a further 30% by 2024, and gamebirds with a goal to cut back by 40%; and
- the poultry meat sector achieved significant reductions in recent years and join laying hens in opting to hold their targets at current levels.<sup>47</sup>

The NFU noted that “preventative use has been phased out completely in these sectors, meaning many animals receive no antibiotic treatments at all in their lifetime”. The NFU however highlights that sectors face “new challenges due to changing production systems, disease threat or warming climate, and will be focusing on managing these effectively through increased vaccine development and availability, surveillance and improved management practices”.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> As a NFU online, [New targets for antibiotic use in farming as stats show significant reduction](#), 18 November 2020

<sup>48</sup> NFU online, [New targets for antibiotic use in farming as stats show significant reduction](#), 18 November 2020

## 3 Parliamentary Material

### 3.1 Debate

**Westminster Hall debate:** [Antimicrobial Resistance](#)

**HC Deb 7 December 2021 | Vol 705 c85WH-**

### 3.2 PQs

[Livestock: Antibiotics](#)

**Asked by: Byrne, Ian**

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, what steps she is taking to encourage farmers to reduce the use of antibiotics on livestock; and if she will bring forward legislative proposals to tackle routine overuse of antibiotics on groups of healthy animals.

**Answering member: Mark Spencer | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs**

Defra is a co-signatory with the Department of Health and Social Care of the UK's Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) 5 year National Action Plan (2019-2024) and the UK's 20 year Vision to Contain and Control AMR by 2040, documents which set out the UK's shorter and longer term goals for mitigating the threat of AMR.

The UK Government is committed to reducing unnecessary use of antibiotics in animals while safeguarding animal welfare. It has been our position for many years that we do not support the routine or predictable use of antibiotics, including where antibiotics are used to compensate for inadequate farming practices. We seek to reduce veterinary antibiotic prescribing through a combination of approaches, including improved biosecurity, stockmanship and good farming practices, disease prevention (including vaccination) and use of diagnostics. To date in the UK, collaborative working between government, the veterinary profession and the agriculture sectors to focus on these issues has resulted in our national sales of veterinary antibiotics reducing by 55% since 2014, and in 2021 we recorded the lowest antibiotic use to date.

Changes to the law on veterinary medicines is one of the tools which can be used to reduce unnecessary antibiotic prescribing in animals and, as one element of a programme of interventions to help deliver the UK's 5-

year national action plan on antimicrobial resistance, it is our intention to strengthen our national law in this area.

Over the past year the Veterinary Medicines Directorate has engaged in a comprehensive dialogue with stakeholders about a broad range of changes that we propose to the Veterinary Medicines Regulations 2013, which set out controls on marketing, manufacturing, supply and use of veterinary medicines. Proposed changes include new measures to help tackle antimicrobial resistance.

We are now preparing to publish a formal consultation paper setting out our proposals which will provide the opportunity for all affected stakeholders to express their views. Following the public consultation, we anticipate laying new legislation in 2023.

**HC Deb 09 January 2023 | PQ 110862**

[Livestock: Drug Resistance](#)

**Asked by: Sheerman, Mr Barry**

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, pursuant to the Answer of 1 June 2022 to Question 6702 on Poultry: Factory Farming, whether she has made a recent assessment of the implications for her policies of levels of antimicrobial resistance in (a) cattle and (b) poultry in UK farms.

**Answering member: Mark Spencer | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs**

Our annual UK report on [Veterinary Antibiotic Resistance, Sales and Surveillance](#) (UK-VARSS 2021) was published on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2022, and presents the findings of our monitoring programmes on veterinary antibiotic sales, usage and resistance.

**HC Deb 07 December 2022 | PQ 98674**

- [Poultry: Factory Farming](#)

**Asked by: Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian**

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, if his Department will make an assessment of the implications for its policies of the Dispatches programme broadcast on 29 November 2021 entitled, The truth about your chicken; and if he will make a statement.

**Answering member: Rebecca Pow | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs**

The Government's view is that farms of all sizes have a role to play in UK agriculture and food production. What is important is not the size of the farm but compliance with our robust domestic standards. Well-established enforcement strategies are in place to ensure compliance with animal health and welfare requirements. Stockmanship is key and farmers of meat chickens are required to be competent and trained in the tasks that they perform.

This Government will continue to take steps to regulate farming practices proportionately and effectively, to safeguard animal welfare, reduce the risk of zoonotic disease and reduce risks to human health. We are making improvements to the existing legal framework and enforcement regime to ensure greater compliance and enhance the health and welfare of farmed animals. We are also working in partnership with the livestock sector and a wide range of academics, non-Governmental organisations and other experts to implement the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway, supporting continuous improvement in farm animal health and welfare.

The Government has no role to play in setting standards for any independent farm assurance scheme.

Defra is a co-signatory with the Department of Health and Social Care of the UK's Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) National Action Plan, and the UK is a global leader on AMR. We do not support the unnecessary use of antibiotics in animals, or farming practices which rely on routine or predictable antibiotic use. However, antibiotics play a role in treating certain animal diseases and are therefore essential to ensure the health and welfare of animals.

Data collected by the British Poultry Council (BPC), which represents 90% of the meat poultry sector, show that antibiotic use in broiler chickens has reduced by 67% since 2014. This has been driven by the BPC's Antibiotic Stewardship Scheme, which is based on the principle of reducing, refining and replacing the use of antibiotics and promoting best practice at all steps of production.

The goal of reducing antibiotic consumption and improving stewardship is to reduce antibiotic resistance. The Veterinary Medicines Directorate has been measuring levels of antibiotic resistance in *E. coli* in poultry since 2014, and the results show that resistance in broiler chickens has decreased substantially, including to antibiotics that are critically important to human health.

The Government is aware of the contribution of faecal contamination, primarily from poultry manure, to the health of the river Wye. Over 60% of the phosphate load in the Wye Catchment is from diffuse agricultural pollution from livestock manure and nutrients washing into the river during rainfall.

The Government is working closely with local stakeholders to address the Wye's specific situation, both through supporting the local Nutrient

Management Board, as well as working towards strategic solutions for both the short-term unblocking of housing and the long-term improvement of the local environment through a cross-government Taskforce. To support this, there are also a host of national actions coming online to address agricultural pollution, which include:

- further investment in the successful Catchment Sensitive Farming programme;
- an expansion of Environment Agency enforcement capacity and funding;
- several grants and incentives aimed to support better farm practises and local recovery;
- a review of current regulatory measures.

Red Tractor is an industry-led farm assurance scheme. Therefore, it would be inappropriate for the Government to comment on the implementation of its guidelines or individual cases. Meeting regulatory requirements is a vital component to bringing improvements to the local Wye catchment. If there are concerns that farmers are breaching regulations, they should be reported to the Environment Agency, which will work with local farmers to bring them into compliance.

**HC Deb 01 June 2022 | PQ 6702**

### [Meat Products: Australia](#)

**Asked by: Thornberry, Emily**

To ask the Secretary of State for International Trade, whether the tariff reductions the Government agreed on the 15 June 2021 for Australian agricultural exports to the UK will apply to meat produced from livestock treated with growth-promoting antibiotics.

**Answering member: Greg Hands | Department: Department for International Trade**

The UK is a world leader in the battle against antimicrobial resistance – significantly cutting its use of antibiotics in farming. The Government have reached agreement with Australia to cooperate on combatting antimicrobial resistance, including a commitment to ensure appropriate use of and reduced need for antibiotics.

Imports to the UK will still have to meet the same UK food safety and biosecurity import standards, including clear controls on limits of veterinary medicine residues in meat and other animal products, as they did before. The use of antibiotics as growth promoters in animal feed remains banned in the UK under retained EU law.

**HC Deb 21 June 2021 | PQ 16810**

[Animal Products: Imports](#)

**Asked by: Hudson, Dr Neil**

To ask the Secretary of State for International Trade, if she will take steps to ensure that produce from animals that have had (a) high use of antimicrobials or (b) use of growth promoters will not be permitted to enter the UK under trade deals.

**Answering member: Greg Hands | Department: Department for International Trade**

All agri-food products imported into the UK under existing or future free trade agreements will, as now, have to meet the UK's food safety and other Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standard requirements for imports. These include clear controls on limits of veterinary medicine residues in meat and other animal products. That will not change under any trade deal.

The UK is a world leader in the battle against antimicrobial resistance – significantly cutting use of antibiotics in farming, with sales of antibiotics for livestock reduced by 40% over the five years to the end of 2018. The UK will ensure that Antimicrobial Resistance remains a global priority by continuing to lead international policy dialogue at the highest political levels through the G7, G20 and other international and regional fora, and as a major supporter of the United Nations and wider multilateral system.

**HC Deb 18 June 2021 | PQ 14084**



## 4

### Useful links

BBC News Online

22 November 2022

[Superbug fight 'needs farmers to reduce antibiotic use'](#)

Times [subscription required]

21 November 2022

[Antibiotic-resistant bacteria found in rivers near pig and poultry farms](#)

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs press release

8 November 2022

[Lowest ever sales of livestock veterinary antibiotics recorded in UK](#)

Guardian

5 July 2022

[Potentially deadly superbug found in British supermarket pork](#)

Nature Communications – Biology

15 June 2022

[Transmission of antibiotic resistance at the wildlife-livestock interface](#)

Nature Microbiology

30 May 2022

[A bottom-up view of antimicrobial resistance transmission in developing countries](#)

PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals)

[Animal Agriculture Compromises Effectiveness of Antibiotics](#)

Antibiotic Research UK

[Antibiotic resistance in farming and agriculture](#)

OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development)

[Anti-microbial resistance is a global challenge for food systems and public health](#)

European Medicines Agency (EMA)

[Antimicrobial resistance in veterinary medicine](#)

RSPCA

[We can't combat the medical timebomb of antibiotic resistance if we don't first change how we farm](#)

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