

Debate Pack
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Future of sheep farming

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Summary

There will be a Westminster Hall debate on the future of sheep farming on Wednesday 4 September 2024 at 2:30 pm. This debate will be led by Joe Morris.

1 Background

1.1 Sheep farming in the UK

Sheep farming is a [significant part of the UK agricultural sector](#), shaping both landscapes and rural economies in the four parts of the UK. Sheep are predominantly, but not exclusively, found in the north and west of the UK. These are typically hillier areas with high levels of rainfall. This provides excellent conditions for growing grass and these areas are less well suited to other types of farming.¹

The [UK uses a three-tier breeding structure](#), which involves systematic crossbreeding. This system allows sheep farming in a variety of climates and environments. The UK is made up of a range of terrains and landscapes, with around 90 different sheep breeds and crosses, each suited to different purposes and environments. Common breeds include the Suffolk, Texel, and Scottish Blackface.²

The primary product of sheep farming today is meat, particularly lamb. The [UK exports a significant amount of sheep meat](#). Although less dominant than meat, wool is also produced. The UK produces a variety of wool types. Milk and sheepskin are also produced, though they represent a smaller portion of the industry.³ The UK also imports sheep products and new free trade agreements negotiated since the UK left the EU (for example, with Australia and New Zealand) include tariff concessions for a range of products, such as lamb meat.

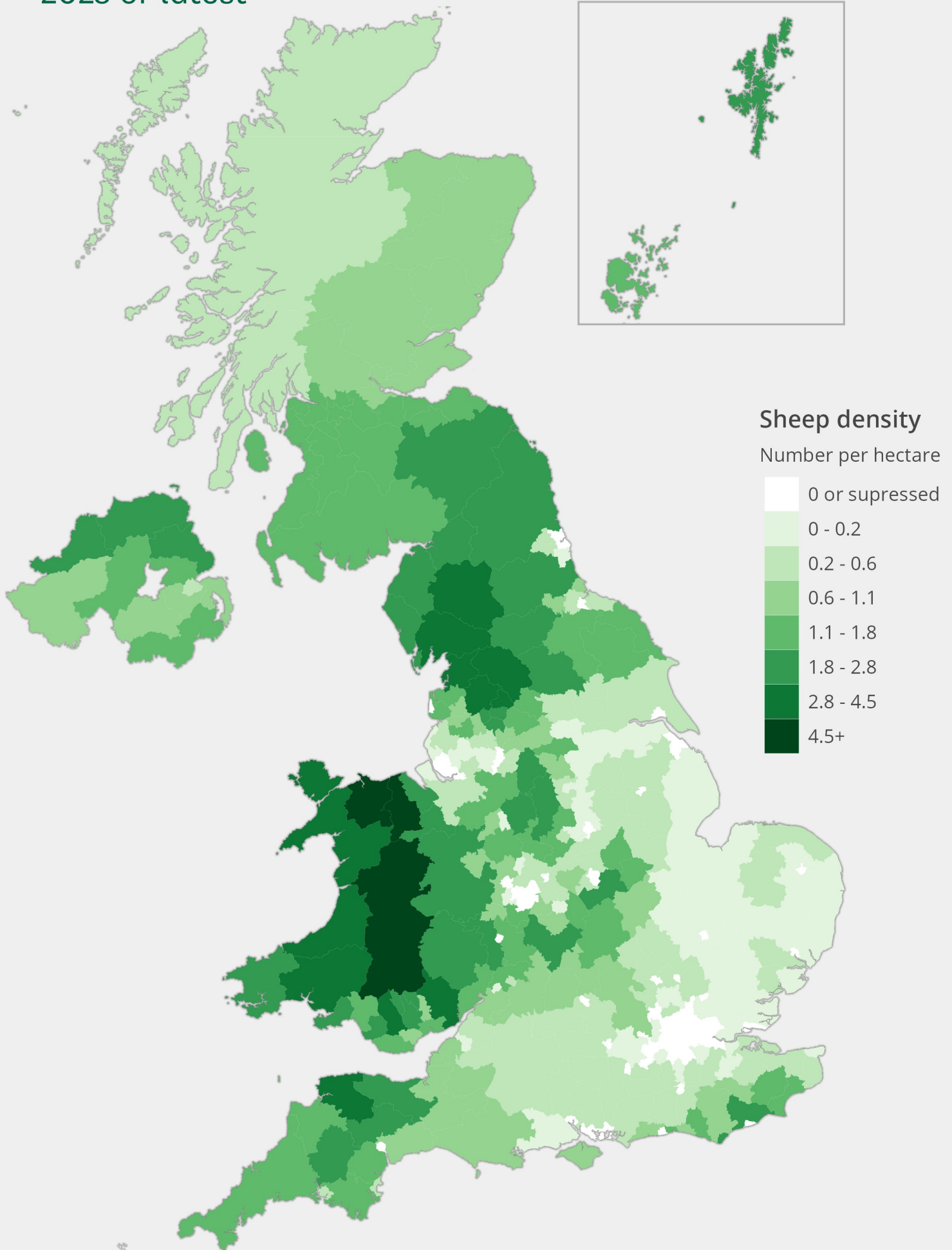
¹ Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, [Opportunities for the sheep sector](#) 2021

² National Sheep Association, [UK Sheep Farming](#) (accessed 14 August 2024)

³ Agricultural and Horticultural Development Board, [UK facts and figures on the sheep market](#)

Distribution of Sheep across the UK

2023 or latest

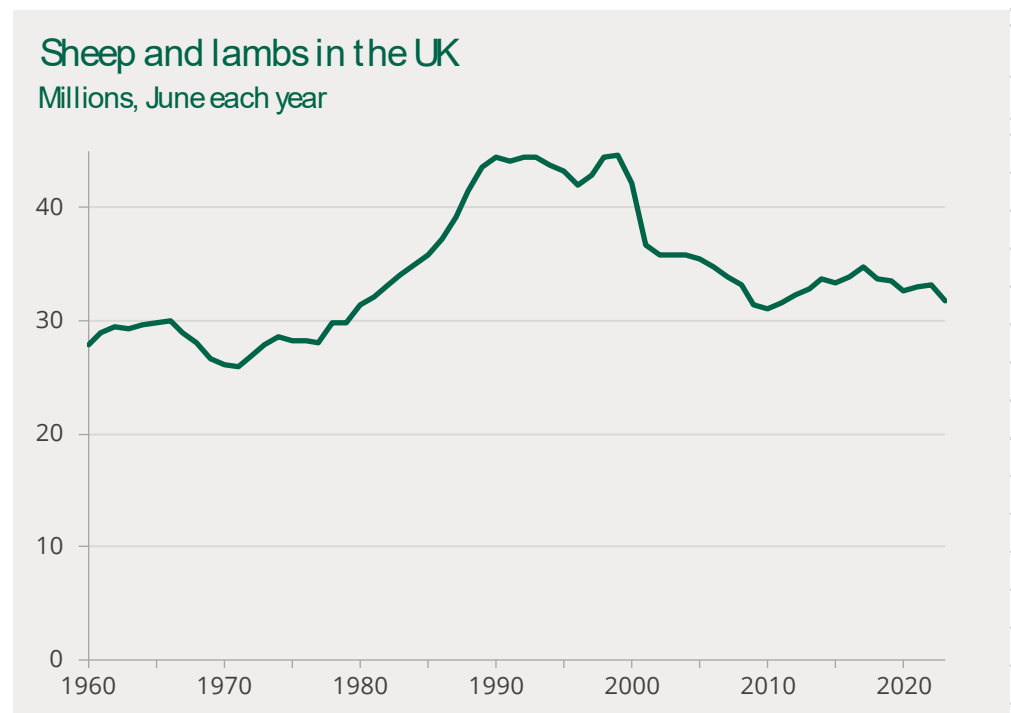


Sources: Defra, Structure of the agricultural industry in England and the UK at June (Local authority); Scottish Government, Results from the Scottish Agricultural Census: June 2023; Welsh Government, Agricultural small area statistics: 2002 to 2020; NISRA, Farm Census local authority district data

Key statistics

1.2 Number of sheep

In June 2023 there were 31.8 million sheep and lambs in the UK. Just under half of this number was made up of the female breeding flock. The total number of sheep and lambs has fallen by around 3 million since the recent high of 34.8 million in 2017. The chart below shows that the largest change in recent decades was a sharp drop of around 5.5 million sheep in 2001, due to the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak.



Source: Defra, [Historical timeseries: United Kingdom key results by country \(1866 to 2023\)](#)

Sheep farming is important in all four parts of the UK. In 2023, 14.5 million sheep and lambs (45% of the UK total) were on farms in England, 8.7 million (27%) in Wales, 6.6 million (21%) in Scotland and 2.0 million (6%) in Northern Ireland. There has been a similar reduction in the number in each country since 2000; all were in the 22-28% range.⁴

England

The main proportion of the sheep flock and sheep meat production in the UK is in England, concentrated in the south west and north of the country (20% in each region).⁵

⁴ Defra, [Historical timeseries: United Kingdom key results by country \(1866 to 2023\)](#)

⁵ Defra, [PowerPoint Presentation](#) p2.2, September 2022

Wales

Over 90% of the land area of Wales is given over to farming with some 85% of that under grassland, with only 6% arable. The number of sheep and lambs in Wales began to grow during the 1970s, reaching a peak of 11.8 million in 1999. There was a gradual drop in numbers over the following 10 years, possibly reflecting changes to the operation of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) when schemes based on the number of livestock kept were phased out. Numbers then began to rise again but for the last 10 years have fluctuated. The current total is the lowest since 2011.⁶

Sheep are more prevalent in the uplands of Wales where, according to the Welsh Government “they may be the only feasible business option. While sheep tend to have relatively low maintenance and capital costs, they also show relatively low returns to the farmer. Thus, on better land other activities may take precedence”.⁷

Northern Ireland

There are over 25,000 farm businesses in Northern Ireland (NI). Sheep production is a significant contributor to over 9,800 of these. Four in ten farm businesses in NI contribute to sheep production. The Ulster Farmers Union notes that threats to sheep enterprise viability affects the sustainability of more than one third of NI farms.⁸

Scotland

Some 55% of Scotland’s agricultural land is dedicated to upland sheep farming and mixed sheep and beef cattle farming. Hardy breeds of sheep and cattle that are adapted to a harsh climate, long winters and less fertile pastures are used. Animals are often sold as store stock to be fattened and finished in lowland livestock farms.⁹

1.3

Sheep meat production and trade

Around 14 million sheep and lambs were slaughtered in both 2022 and 2023. Total home-fed production was around 300,000 tonnes¹⁰ of sheep meat in 2022 and 2023. The value of this production was £1.6 billion in 2023. The total has increased over time; it was £1.0 billion ten years earlier. The main driver of this increase has been higher prices for sheep

⁶ Welsh Government, [Survey of agriculture and horticulture: June 2023](#) (updated 23 November 2023)

⁷ Welsh Government, [Survey of agriculture and horticulture: June 2023](#) (updated 23 November 2023)

⁸ UFU NI, [Industry release vision for NI sheep sector](#), 2023

⁹ Nature Scotland, [Hill farming](#), (accessed 21 August 2024)

¹⁰ Dressed carcass weight

meat. It was an average of £5.78 per kg in 2023. This was its highest ever level in cash terms and around 40% higher than in 2013.¹¹

The UK is the world's sixth-largest lamb producer and third-largest exporter, with the EU, particularly France, being our primary market.¹² The UK has been self-sufficient in sheep meat in each year since 2017. Exports have been greater than imports over this period. In 2023, home-fed production was 114% of supply for use in the UK.¹³

In the period from the mid-2010s to present, UK exports have generally fallen, but imports have fallen by a greater amount and UK consumption of sheep meat has also fallen.¹⁴ Imports of lamb and mutton from EU countries declined by 31% between 2022 and 2023. However, this decrease comes after a large increase in the previous year. Total UK imports of lamb have decreased by 18% and now stands at 56 thousand tonnes, the majority of which comes from non-EU countries,¹⁵ such as Australia and New Zealand.

1.4 Farm income

Official data on farm incomes does not separately identify farms which predominantly farm sheep. They are included within the broader 'grazing livestock farms' category which is itself split into those in lowland and [Less Favoured Areas](#) (LFA). LFAs are areas where the natural characteristics (such as geology, altitude and climate) make farming the land difficult. They are often referred to as upland farms.

In 2022/23 average UK farm business income, defined as the output generated by business minus farm total costs and excluding any funding from government, was £21,000 for lowland areas and £25,000 for LFA grazing animal farms. The average across all types of farms was £86,000.¹⁶ The chart below shows that average income for grazing animal farms has been erratic over the past decade.¹⁷ The fall in 2022/23 was largely due to higher input costs, especially fodder, fuels and oil.¹⁸

¹¹ Defra, [Agriculture in the UK 2023](#) (chapter 8)

¹² Farmers Weekly, [Hannah Reddaway: British consumers remain key for lamb market](#), 15 July 2024

¹³ Defra, [Agriculture in the UK 2023](#) (chapter 8)

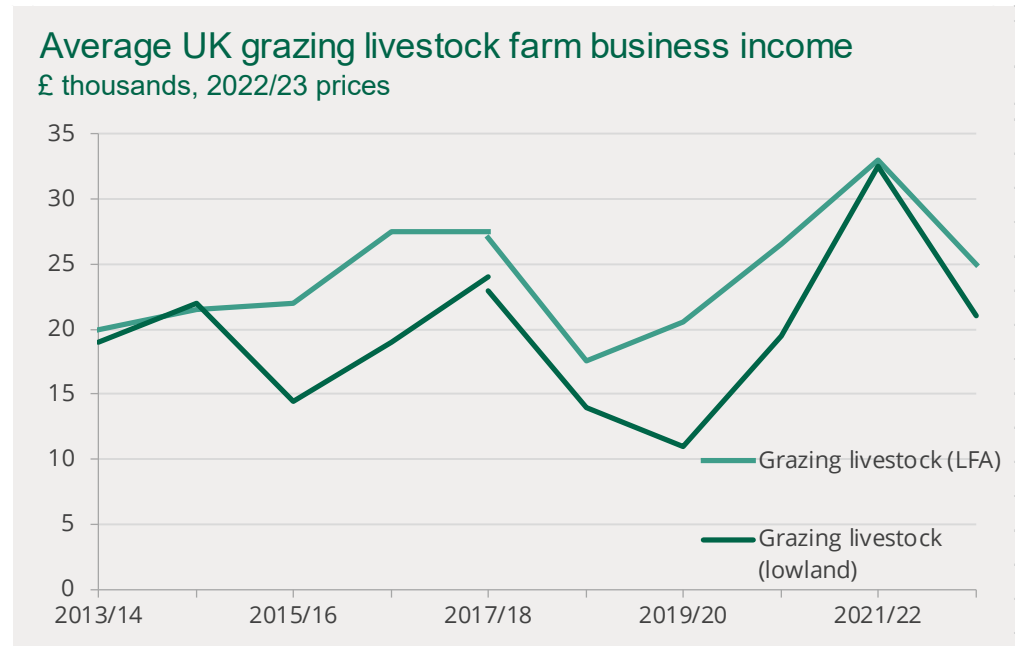
¹⁴ Defra, [Agriculture in the UK 2023](#) (chapter 8)

¹⁵ Defra, [Agriculture in the UK 2023](#) (chapter 8),

¹⁶ Defra, [Agriculture in the UK 2023](#) (Table 3.1a)

¹⁷ The break in the data in 2017/18 is due to a change in farm typology from 2010 to 2013 Standard Output coefficients.

¹⁸ Defra, [Farm Business Income by type of farm in England 2022/23](#)



Source: Defra, [Agriculture in the UK 2023](#) (Table 3.1b)

In 2022/23 average farm business income for grazing livestock farms was slightly lower than the UK average in both Scotland and Wales. Data for Northern Ireland has not yet been published for 2022/23, but it was 30% below the UK figure in 2021/22.¹⁹

In England, income on lowland grazing livestock farms is forecast to increase in 2023/24 by 5% to £23,000 while on less favoured area (LFA) grazing livestock farms average income will be marginally higher (1%) at £26,000. For both types of farm, increased output from sheep enterprises will be one of the main drivers reflecting firm prices for finished and store lambs across the period.²⁰

1.5 Farm support

The EU [common agricultural policy](#) (CAP, a system of farm subsidies and other programmes) included an area-based '[direct payments](#)' scheme (Basic Payment Scheme, BPS), which paid farmers based on the amount of land they farm. CAP is ending now the UK has left the EU.

In England, payments are being phased out progressively and will end completely in 2027. From 2024 (the last BPS scheme year) up to 2027 'de-linked payments' may be claimed. These are based on a farmer's previous direct payments but do not require claimants to continue to farm or produce food. Direct payments made up more than 80% of government support for farmers under the common agricultural policy;

¹⁹ Defra, [Agriculture in the UK 2023](#) (Table 3.1a)

²⁰ Defra, [Agriculture in the UK 2023](#) (chapter 3)

the rest was paid mainly to support [rural development and agri-environmental schemes](#).

The Agriculture and Horticulture development Board (AHDB) has noted that basic payments have been important in underpinning the profitability of farming businesses in England, particularly in the livestock sector. It also noted that for the average farm business the basic payment received in 2019/20 was £27,800, which accounted for 60% of its income. In the case of livestock farmers the average farm made a loss from their agricultural activities, relying on basic payments to provide a business profit.²¹

New farm funding arrangements

Following the UK's departure from the EU and CAP the government is changing how it supports farmers financially. Agriculture is devolved so each part of the UK is developing its own approaches.

Under the [Agriculture Act 2020](#), a [new farm support policy](#) is being rolled out in England between 2021 to 2027 to replace or develop schemes set up under the CAP.

A key part of this new approach in England is paying farmers for providing 'public goods' such as environmental improvements rather than for farming an area of land as under CAP schemes. There are three main tiers of [Environmental Land Management schemes \(ELMS\)](#) in the new policy, with the majority of farmers able to benefit from the [Sustainable Farming Incentive \(SFI\)](#) which pays farmers to adopt and maintain sustainable farming practices that can protect and enhance the natural environment alongside food production. Examples include improving soil quality or planting hedgerows. [Countryside Stewardship](#) pays for more targeted actions relating to specific locations, features and habitats, with an extra incentive through 'Countryside Stewardship Plus' for land managers to join up action across local areas. [Landscape Recovery](#) pays for bespoke, longer-term, larger scale projects to enhance the natural environment.

Separately, the [government is providing grants](#) to improve farm productivity, innovation, and research and development, as well grants to improve animal health and welfare.

The National Sheep Association (NSA) has welcomed the development of the new schemes but has some concerns the "perceived complexity" of SFI.²² The ADHB has concluded that replacing the basic payment with ELMS "will present a significant challenge to livestock farmers!

²¹ AHDB, [Opportunities for the sheep sector](#) (p4), April 2021

²² NSA, [National Sheep Association responds to update on the Sustainable Farming Incentive](#), 27 June 2023

More information on changing farm support can be found in the Library briefings [New approaches to farm funding in England](#) and [How do farming schemes in Wales and England compare?](#)

1.6 Economic challenges

In recent years sheep farmers have faced a number of economic challenges including higher input costs, particularly in fuel and feed costs following the invasion of Ukraine.²³ Domestic producers face competition from imports, including those agreed under new free trade agreements. At the same time, the structure of farm support in parts of the UK is changing. However, there are positive indications with the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) predicting raised lamb prices during 2024. The Board's forecast for the sector is mixed but indicates some negative trends (June 2024):

- Total sheep meat production is expected to fall by 3% to 278,000 tonnes in 2024.
- Retail and food service demand for lamb will remain pressured by consumer budgets despite the strong start to 2024, as consumption is set to decline by 1% compared to 2023.
- Imports have grown in the first quarter of 2024 but are expected to slow for the remainder of the year.
- Exports have seen a slight yearly decline in the first quarter of 2024 and are expected to remain in decline given our falling domestic production.²⁴

Supermarkets and sheep meat products

The promotion of British products supports UK sheep farmers. Around 70% of all lamb sales, including imports, go through the UK's major supermarkets.²⁵

[Farmers](#) and many consumers highlight the need for retailers to stock UK produce. British lamb is available all year round. Most lambs are born in spring and are ready for the food chain around six months later – meaning British lamb is most plentiful in autumn. However, some producers rear lambs earlier to supply higher demand at Easter.

Many supermarkets, including [Waitrose](#) and [Morrisons](#) have committed to selling only UK produced lamb. There was criticism from farmers

²³ House of Commons Library briefing, [The effect of the war in Ukraine on UK farming and food production](#), July 2022

²⁴ AHDB, [Lamb market outlook](#), June 2024

²⁵ NFU, [UK lamb – how is lamb selling in the supermarkets?](#) 20 January 2023

when in 2023 Aldi changed its policy on sourcing only British lamb.²⁶ NFU Cymru said that:

While it is important to state that Aldi will continue to stock British lamb and [...] as well as maintaining 100% British lamb mince, the retailer's decision to resile on its commitment to stock only British lamb, replacing some of its home grown-climate friendly lamb with products with significant food miles is, nevertheless, very disappointing.²⁷

Demand for lamb and sheep meat

Lamb is seen as a treat meal, with nearly two-thirds of consumers considering it to be too expensive to eat regularly. The AHDB reports that lamb has a heavy proportion of older consumers, with 60% of retail sales from those aged 55 or over (compared to 51% for all meat/fish/poultry). It considers that:

“the current consumer profile points to continued contraction of the domestic market. As such, widening appeal to young consumers is important in the longer term”.²⁸

Demand both in domestic and export markets for halal sheep meat has provided a growth market for UK products. The AHDB reported that although Muslims account for just under 5% of the UK population, they account for an estimated 20% of lamb consumption in England. More than 60% of halal consumers eat lamb weekly, compared with just 6% of the general UK population. It notes that:

The halal sector presents many opportunities for farmers and processors to diversify their livestock production to cater for the growing demand for halal beef and lamb in the UK.²⁹

This market is particularly important because it uses parts of the sheep carcass, which have traditionally been less in demand in the UK domestic market. To balance carcasses economically, it is helpful to promote markets for other cuts such as offal and for mutton. Currently, 90% of the mutton farmers produce in the UK ends up in the halal market.³⁰

Eating less red meat

Some environmental commentators support a change to a less meat-based diet to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Commentators have also focussed on the potential for reducing the least profitable sheep grazing areas to increase biodiversity and restore natural habitats (see section 1.7 on environmental issues below). Studies have found that, overall,

²⁶ Farmers Weekly, [Aldi drops UK lamb pledge amid mixed support from retailers](#), 14 February 2023

²⁷ NFU Cymru, [Challenges and opportunities facing the lamb sector](#), 3 March 2023

²⁸ AHDB, [Understanding the lamb consumer and evolving eating habits](#), 29 March 2021

²⁹ AHDB, [Understanding the halal market](#), 5 January 2023

³⁰ Farmers Weekly, [Halal lamb: 'A market farmers can no longer ignore'](#), 20 March 2024

animal-based foods tend to have a higher greenhouse gas footprint than plant-based ones. Lamb and cheese both result in more than 20 kilograms of CO₂-equivalents per kilogram of product. Beef results in 60 kilograms whilst, in contrast, peas emit just 1 kilogram of CO₂-equivalents per kg.³¹ The independent advisory committee to the government, the Climate Change Committee (CCC), recommended a 20% reduction in meat and dairy by 2030 and 35% reduction for meat by 2050, “eating better meat and plant-based alternatives” as part of the UK strategy for meeting its emission targets.³²

The National Sheep Association (NSA) does not support reduction of the national flock to ‘cool’ the climate. It argues that:

Sustainable food security is equally important and sheep production based on grass could hardly be more sustainable. But there are efficiency improvements that can reduce our carbon footprint to work towards net zero.³³

It also argues that farmers could increase carbon sequestration by locking more organic matter in soils to store more carbon.³⁴

The AHDB has stated that, in recent years, concerns about the environment, together with health, have become the “key reasons why those consumers who limit the amount of meat in their diets choose to do so”. It says that the supply chain should introduce new sheep meat products which appeal to consumers and addresses concerns around the environment.³⁵

New trade deals

Farmers are concerned that new free trade agreements (FTAs) such as those with [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#) could significantly increase the volume of lamb products imported tariff-free to the UK. The National Farmers’ Union (NFU) is concerned this could undercut UK producers because Australian farmers have some 65% lower,³⁶ and New Zealand farmers some 63% lower costs of sheep meat production. They say that this is because of geographical advantages and lower animal welfare

³¹ Our world in data, [You want to reduce the carbon footprint of your food? Focus on what you eat, not whether your food is local](#), 20 January 2022

³² The CCC, [Government’s Food Strategy ‘a missed opportunity’ for the climate - Climate Change Committee](#), 13 June 2022

³³ NSA, [Can –and should – UK sheep farming contribute to net zero?](#) 12 October 2021

³⁴ NSA, [Can –and should – UK sheep farming contribute to net zero?](#) 12 October 2021

³⁵ AHDB [Understanding the lamb consumer and evolving eating habits](#), 29 March 2021

³⁶ Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Australia FTA: food and agriculture](#), First Report of Session 2022-23, para 11

standards.³⁷ It has called for core animal welfare standards to be included in trade deals.³⁸

The previous government argued it had protected sensitive agricultural sectors under new FTAs. Increased access for imports have been phased in over time for some products. It also pointed to increased export opportunities, such as exports of lamb to Mexico under the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership (CPTPP).³⁹

Commons Library briefings provide further information:

- [UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement](#) (chapter 4)
- [UK-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement](#) (chapter 5)
- [The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership \(CPTPP\)](#) (chapter 2)

1.7

Environmental challenges

There is an ongoing debate in environment and farming circles about the need to balance food production and environmental aims, such as restoring nature and species as well as tackling climate change. Academics such as Hollie Riddell, from Bangor University, have argued that [livestock systems, such as sheep farming, can cause a variety of environmental impacts](#), including biodiversity loss, greenhouse gas emissions, ammonia emissions, soil erosion and water pollution caused by leaching and run off.⁴⁰ [Benefits can exist](#), if grazing is managed in ways that supports plant species richness and reduces environmental impacts as explained by [the Nature Friendly Farming Network](#).⁴¹

Sheep farming has been the focus of debate amongst environmental stakeholders who consider that sheep grazing land is often very degraded and would benefit from more nature friendly farming. Upland sheep farming has been of particular focus because it is considered marginal financially, and as set out above, often depends on government support to be viable.

³⁷ NFU response to [International Trade Committee inquiry: UK New Zealand trade negotiations](#), April 2022, p1

³⁸ NFU, [NFU responds to CPTPP trade agreement](#), 31 March 2023

³⁹ Department for Business and Trade, [CPTPP: impact assessment](#) (updated 13 August 2024)

⁴⁰ Hollie Riddell, Bangor University, [Lamb Production and Wales: A Holistic Environmental Footprint](#), 1 April 2020

⁴¹ NFFN, [Grazing management to preserve pastures and grasslands](#), 11 October 2023

Natural England published a report as far back as 2006, [Sustainable grazing in the English uplands](#), which set out some of the concerns. The report defined environmentally sustainable grazing as follows:

Environmentally sustainable grazing does not suppress or cause the loss of valued moorland vegetation. It can be achieved by appropriate stocking levels, increasing shepherding, and/or introducing summer-only grazing.⁴²

It also set out changes in farming practices, which have reduced the levels of sustainable grazing in upland farms:

The introduction of agricultural subsidies, based on headage payments, resulted in many more animals grazing the uplands throughout the year. For example, from 1951 to 1981, the total number of sheep in Less Favoured Areas of England and Wales increased by 88%. At the same time, there has been a social change with fewer people farming the land and, in particular, shepherding.

The shortage in manpower has increased people's reliance on the use of All Terrain Vehicles, resulting in the creation of new access tracks. Changes in technology, in particular the development of different methods of feed and delivery, have also increased the ability to overwinter stock on the hill. Many farmers no longer keep traditional breeds of sheep or cattle, often because they do not make suitable profits or they take too long to mature. Most livestock breeds used now are usually not hardy and need additional feeding and housing.⁴³

The NSA and the Harper Adams School of Sustainable Farming published a report in July 2024 which discussed the need for a balanced policy approach to food production and environmental aims. The report highlighted areas where changes could result in improved environmental outcomes:

The UK approach to farming sheep aligns with regenerative interests both in the uplands and lowlands. Sheep are free to enjoy a life close to nature; farmers are focusing on reducing inputs and striving for responsible medicine use; and management practices aim to build soils and sequester carbon while reducing emissions and delivering for the environment. Most sheep farmers are involved in ways to improve their systems, through a combination of genetics, nutrition and health, reducing waste and adding value.⁴⁴

But it also recognised that there needed to be an increase in the adoption of good practice in the sector:

But for all the positives we still have a long way to go. We need to encourage adoption of good practice and efficiency measures, and the use of basic records providing data to support evidence-based decisions.

⁴² Natural England, [Sustainable grazing in the English uplands](#), 2006

⁴³ Natural England, [Sustainable grazing in the English uplands](#), 2006

⁴⁴ Farming News, [New report underlines UK sheep sector's role in sustainable agriculture](#) News, 5 August 2024

There is more we must do to reduce energy use, methane emissions and carbon footprints. There are many opportunities to make more space for nature and improve water quality. Our ecosystems are best supported from the ground up and while there is talk of reintroducing apex predators around the country, this would only work with a clear mitigation strategy. There are plenty of non-contentious species we can support.⁴⁵

The report calls for strategic action in number of areas, including:

A clear long-term vision and strategic direction for UK agriculture, food and land use, including species introductions, at a national and local level, within broad sustainability targets and with agreed goals and adequate funding.⁴⁶

Rewilding Britain's view is that large-scale grazing over centuries has suppressed the growth of trees and other vegetation, dramatically reducing biodiversity. It argues for landscape-scale rewilding but recognises that grazing animals play an important role in functioning ecosystems (for example by browsing they encourage new tree and shrub shoots and dung fertilises the land and provides invertebrate habitats), although its view is that sheep grazing is more suited to lowland areas.⁴⁷

Managing protected sites

The [Environment Improvement Plan](#) sets out the government targets for the environment in England and includes the following:

New interim targets for all sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) to have an up-to date condition assessment; and for 50% of SSSIs to have actions on track to achieve favourable condition by 31 January 2028.⁴⁸

The aim is to achieve this in a number of ways including by “paying farmers and land managers to take care of the natural countryside environment, alongside food and other production”. The aim is for them to contribute to “at least 50% of the target of bringing protected sites [which includes SSSIs] into favourable condition by 2042”.⁴⁹

Management of SSSIs requires balancing any environmental impacts of sheep with the farmers' requirements to access grazing land, which has been [recognised by Natural England](#).

A report published by Natural England in 2020, [Grazing Regimes for Nature Recovery \(PDF\)](#), summarising experience from long term agri-

⁴⁵ NSA, [UK Sheep Farming and the Sustainability Agenda Full Evidence Review.\(pdf\)](#), p44, 30 July 2024

⁴⁶ NSA, [UK Sheep Farming and the Sustainability Agenda Full Evidence Review.\(pdf\)](#), p44, 30 July 2024

⁴⁷ Rewilding Britain, [What does rewilding look like?](#) (accessed 21 August 2024)

⁴⁸ Defra, [Environment Improvement Plan](#), January 2023

⁴⁹ Defra, [Environment Improvement Plan](#), January 2023

environment schemes in the Lake District high fells. This concluded that low sheep stocking densities were needed for SSSI to recover from overgrazing:

- Habitats have recovered best under low grazing pressure. Recovery of existing SSSI habitats has been universally good below a year-round average of 0.4 ewes/ha. Good recovery has sometimes been seen up to an annual average of about 0.5 ewes/ha. No sites stocked at or above an annual average of 0.6 ewes/ha have fully recovering habitats. Habitat response varies between sites; factors affecting this are discussed in this report.
- To achieve different objectives, for example to restore scrub, woodland, tall herb vegetation or radically alter vegetation structure, it is necessary for sheep grazing to be at even lower levels (or excluded for a period of time). The responses of a range of habitats to altered grazing regimes is reviewed.
- A variety of management regimes is welcome. Changes to grazing by hardy cattle (instead of just sheep) have been highly beneficial and light pony grazing may also have similar effects.⁵⁰

Dartmoor National Park

Stock densities and winter grazing are an ongoing point of contention, most recently in Dartmoor National Park. Natural England, which is responsible for SSSIs, has recognised that grazing is an important part of site management in Dartmoor, many which are grazed by farmers with commons right.

Natural England has previously noted in its report on, [Sustainable grazing in the English uplands](#), difficulties involved in resolving concerns over SSSIs with commoners grazing rights:

An analysis of the causes of damage to Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England has identified that overgrazing is the biggest cause of damage. Many of the worst affected sites are Common Land, where the establishment of sustainable management depends upon agreement by all Commoners.⁵¹

In [2023 Natural England announced that new agri-environment agreements](#) would have to consider adjusting grazing to reduce the impact on heathland vegetation in Dartmoor SSSIs.⁵² Farmers would have to comply with a new regime, which included reduced or no winter grazing, to continue receive enhanced funding under the Rural Payments Agency's Environmental Stewardship scheme (ES). Specifically, the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) which is aimed at "more complex types of management and agreements tailored to local circumstances".

⁵⁰ Natural England Lake District Team, [Grazing regimes for nature recovery](#), 2020

⁵¹ Natural England, [Sustainable grazing in the English uplands](#), 2006

⁵² Natural England blog, [Nature on Dartmoor](#), 14 March 2023

[Farmers concerns](#), which were raised in a [parliamentary debate on farming in Dartmoor](#) on 18 April 2023, resulted in the government commissioning an [independent review of protected site management on Dartmoor](#). The review's report was published in December 2023. It included a wide set of recommendations on how to improve management of Dartmoor. On sheep management it suggested approaches to reduce grazing impacts:

Sheep are an important part of Dartmoor's hill farming system. They contribute to the moor's biodiversity and its cultural heritage. Maintaining 3 species grazing [cattle, horses and sheep] should be a key part of the vision for the future of Dartmoor. We believe that a holistic strategy should be implemented to increase the grazeable area of the moor and reduce the amount of Molinia and gorse. This will increase the palatable area available for grazing by sheep and therefore reduce the amount of localised over-grazing of heather and dwarf shrubs.⁵³

It called for an extension to the HLS scheme to allow sheep keepers the opportunity "to demonstrate that they can shepherd their flocks to protect vulnerable heather and dwarf shrubs".⁵⁴

It also recognised that Dartmoor's hill farmers and commoners would need to commit to a "new way of working" while calling for the concept of SSSIs "to be reviewed, to ensure they are compatible with a vision to be delivered at landscape/eco-system level".⁵⁵

1.8

Sheep health and welfare

There are a number of diseases which can impact sheep flocks. The AHDB highlighted the following as potential threats in 2024:

- **[Schmallenberg virus](#)**: depending on the timing of infection, it can increase barren rates at scanning, cause abortions, and lamb malformations. There is no vaccine for the disease and the last outbreak was detected in the UK in 2012/13.
- **[Bluetongue virus](#)**: the risk of this will depend on the strain of virus, scale of any outbreak, and the timing of a disease incursion. The virus can reduce milk yield, cause sickness, reduce reproductive performance, and cause death. Mortality from bluetongue is variable and may be high for some flocks, so this could have a significant impact if a large-scale outbreak were to occur.⁵⁶ On 16 August 2024, the [Chief Vet said that the risk to British livestock remained medium](#),

⁵³ Defra, [Independent review of protected site management on Dartmoor](#), 12 December 2023

⁵⁴ Defra, [Independent review of protected site management on Dartmoor](#), 12 December 2023

⁵⁵ Defra, [Independent review of protected site management on Dartmoor](#), 12 December 2023

⁵⁶ AHDB, [Lamb market outlook](#), June 2024

but called for farmers to remain vigilant in the light of rising numbers of cases on the European mainland.

More generally, in November 2023, Ruminant Health & Welfare (an independent, industry-based network to support flock and herd health) published the [UK Sheep Welfare Strategy](#), supported by industry leaders and organisations across the farm to fork supply chain. This strategy aimed to help the UK sheep sector demonstrate progress in six key areas of sheep welfare.

The transport of live animals, including sheep, has been a welfare concern for the public for a number of years. The [Animal Welfare \(Livestock Exports\) Act 2024](#) included measures to ban the export of live sheep (and other livestock). From 22 July 2024, sheep may not be sent for fattening or slaughter from England, Scotland or Wales to a destination outside the British Islands. The [library briefing on the Act](#) contains further information.

Some farmers and animal welfare groups are concerned about abattoir capacity and have called for increased local provision following a period when consolidation and closure of some small-scale facilities has led to longer journeys from farm to slaughter.⁵⁷ The publication *Farmers Weekly* reported in February 2023 that ongoing closures of red meat abattoirs in England, Wales and Scotland, suggested that none would be operating by 2030.⁵⁸ In December 2023, Defra launched a fund so that smaller abattoirs in England can apply for capital grants through a £4 million fund designed to boost the sector.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Food Unfolded, [Small Abattoirs are Closing Fast | Why Does That Matter?](#), updated 25 March 2024

⁵⁸ *Farmers Weekly*, [Analysis: How can the small abattoir sector be saved?](#) 28 February 2023

⁵⁹ Defra blog, [Introducing the Smaller Abattoir Fund](#), 13 December 2023

2

PQs

Agriculture: Livestock

Asked by: Smith, Henry

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, what steps he is taking to help support the transition to (a) humane and (b) sustainable livestock farming.

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

We are committed to investing in targeted schemes that support sustainable farming whilst improving the viability of farming businesses, delivering environmental outcomes and supporting sustainable food production.

Through the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway we are providing support directly to farmers in England to deliver gradual, continual improvement against a series of livestock health and welfare priorities, including tackling key endemic diseases alongside a range of welfare issues whilst ensuring that farmers can produce good quality food for the nation.

The Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill is now awaiting Royal Assent; this will ban the export of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and horses for slaughter and fattening from Great Britain, stopping unnecessary stress, exhaustion and injury.

HC Deb 20 May 2024 | PQ 26115

Sheep Meat

Asked by: Lord Framlingham

To ask His Majesty's Government what estimate they have made of the fall in overall domestic lamb production resulting from the proposed changes in agricultural policies and payments.

Answering member: Lord Douglas-Miller | Department: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The UK has a high degree of food security, built on supply from diverse sources; strong domestic production as well as imports through stable trade routes. We produce 60% of all the food we need, and 73% of food which we can grow or rear in the UK for all or part of the year. These figures have changed little over the last 20 years: historical production

figures, including for the commodities you reference, can be found in “Agriculture in the United Kingdom”, a publication of annual statistics about agriculture in the United Kingdom at [GOV.UK](https://gov.uk). UK consumers have access through international trade to food products that cannot be produced here, or at least not on a year-round basis. This supplements domestic production, and also ensures that any disruption from risks such as adverse weather or disease does not affect the UK's overall security of supply.

Domestically, the Government has committed to broadly maintain the current level of food we produce. This includes sustainably boosting production in sectors where there are post-Brexit opportunities, including horticulture and seafood, and the Agriculture Act imposes a duty on the Secretary of State to have regard to the need to encourage environmentally sustainable food production. Our farming reforms aim to support a highly productive food producing sector by supporting farmers to manage land in a way that improves food production and is more environmentally sustainable, and by paying farmers to produce public goods such as water quality, biodiversity, animal health and welfare and climate change mitigation, alongside food production.

Speaking at the recent National Farmers Union Conference in Birmingham, the Prime Minister and the Environment Secretary announced a range of measures to boost productivity and resilience in the sector, including the largest ever grant offer for farmers in the coming financial year, expected to total £427 million. This includes doubling investment in productivity schemes, bolstering schemes such as the Improving Farming Productivity grant, which provides support for farmers to invest in automation and robotics, as well as solar installations to build on-farm energy security. The Prime Minister also announced a new annual UK-wide Food Security Index, which will capture and present the data needed to monitor levels of food security, and announced plans to hold the Farm to Fork Summit annually.

HL Deb 07 March 2024 | PQ HL2893

Hill Farming

Asked by: Farron, Tim

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, how many upland farms have closed in each year since 2015 by region.

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

Defra does not hold any data on the number of farms that have ceased farming in any particular year. We produce statistical estimates of national crop areas and livestock populations each year, but we do not

track changes in individual farms. Changes in national/regional activity can be seen in our annual publications and this includes the number of agricultural holdings with significant levels of farming activity* in England. Changes in the number of holdings could be for a number of reasons, in addition to ceasing trading.

* Data only covers holdings which are registered with the Rural Payments Agency for payments or livestock purposes and have significant levels of farming activity (as recorded in responses to the Defra June Survey of Agriculture or the Cattle Tracing System). Holdings are only included if they have more than five hectares of agricultural land, one hectare of orchards, 0.5 hectares of vegetables or 0.1 hectares of protected crops, or more than 10 cows, 50 pigs, 20 sheep, 20 goats or 1,000 poultry.

Number of holdings by region are available [here](#).

Number of holdings in the uplands (less favoured areas) are available [here](#).

Number of holdings by farm type are available [here](#).

HC Deb 23 February 2024 | PQ 13958

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News and further reading

National Sheep Association press release

[New NSA report highlights a sustainable future for the UK sheep industry](#)

30 July 2024

Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board

[Lamb Market Outlook](#)

June 2024

Agriland news portal

[EasyCare sheep farmer 'positive' about future lamb prices](#)

18 May 2024

British Wool press release

[New research project looks to improve future for UK wool industry](#)

22 January 2024

Farmers' Weekly

[Upland sheep farmers in Lake District fear for future](#)

22 September 2023

National Sheep Association

[Future of Farming](#) collection of news items from the Association

Future of sheep farming

Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board (ADHB)

Opportunities for the sheep sector research report

April 2021

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