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COMMISSION**



REPORT

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The UK-EU SPS Agreement

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Foreword

By Andrew Lewin MP, Chair of the UK Trade and Business Commission



This is the second substantive report published by the cross-party UK Trade and Business Commission under my chairmanship. It sets out a realistic and detailed approach to an SPS deal. One that would deliver benefits for consumers and businesses in the UK and the EU.

Inescapably, some of the topics covered are technical in nature. New genomic techniques (NGTs), maximum residue levels (MRLs), and precision-bred organisms are not typically the top priorities for my constituents when I hold MP advice surgeries. But getting the details right matters, for several reasons.

It matters for trade. British-grown produce is among the best in the world. But the costs, red tape and delays which have appeared since 2021 have made it greatly more difficult for British farmers to export their produce to the European markets on our doorstep. We owe it to our farmers and food manufacturers to tear down the barriers created by leaving the EU Single Market, to help restore this trade.

It matters for the cost of living. Last year I established a parliamentary group to generate new policy proposals to make life more affordable. MPs from all parties understand that the rising cost of essentials is the dominant political issue of the day. The coming spike in energy costs following the Iran war makes it even more pressing to support all measures to apply downward pressure on prices. And, in time, an SPS deal should do just that.

Perhaps most important, as this report makes clear, a successful deal on SPS standards can stand as an exemplar for the broader UK-EU reset. It is not a straightforward issue. As I heard at a UKTBC business roundtable in February, any action the Government takes will need to be carefully considered, and require balancing competing stakeholder priorities.

But the prize for getting this right is considerable. A well-balanced, sustainable deal will show that the reset can move beyond improved rhetoric into the realm that really matters: delivering meaningful economic benefit for the country. That is something we can all get behind, even without knowing our MRLs from our NGTs.

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1. Overview

At the first UK-EU Summit, held in May 2025, the UK Government and EU Commission agreed to undertake detailed negotiations to reach a Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement.

1.1. Towards an SPS agreement

The Common Understanding, published in May 2025, states that the UK and EU “*should work towards establishing a Common Sanitary and Phytosanitary Area by way of [an SPS] Agreement*”¹. 11 of the 61 paragraphs which make up the Common Understanding are dedicated to the SPS agreement. Despite this relatively detailed framing (by contrast, just one paragraph is dedicated to the Youth Experience Scheme), negotiations on this topic have not been entirely straightforward.

At the time of writing, the 2026 UK-EU Summit is expected to take place in the summer, slightly later than its 2025 forerunner. In March 2026 the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) published guidance urging “every business in the agri-food sector [to] start to prepare now” for the new arrangements. DEFRA stated its intention for an agreement to be in place by mid-2027², suggesting that negotiations were nearing completion. Press reports ahead of the March 2026 UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly underscored this view³.

1.2. Impact of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement

Since 2021, the introduction of Export Health Certificates, plant health certificates and increased border checks have harmed GB-EU agrifood trade. In February 2026, the National Farmers’ Union (NFU) calculated that British farm product sales to the EU had declined by 37% between 2019 and 2024⁴.

The introduction of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) has contributed to food price inflation. A 2023 London School of Economics study put the per household cost of Britain diverging from EU agrifood standards after leaving the EU at £250. The study notes that while UK food prices rose by 25% between December 2019 and March 2023, this would have been limited to 17% had the UK remained in the EU.⁵

Great Britain leaving the EU’s common food area created particular problems for Northern Ireland that were illustrated by the introduction of ‘Not for EU’ labels displayed on food products. This significantly reduced consumer choice in Northern Ireland supermarkets, contributing to complexity and consumer costs. These impacts have been lessened only following significant time and effort including via the Windsor Framework, but any regulatory divergence would bring the issue back to the forefront.

¹ UK Government, [UK-EU Summit – Common Understanding](#), 19/05/2025

² UK Government, [SPS agreement: preparing your business – GOV.UK](#), 09/03/2026

³ The Guardian, [Row over tuition fees cut for European students threatens Starmer’s EU reset](#), 15/03/2026

⁴ The Guardian, [Post-Brexit sales of British farm products to EU fall by 37%](#), 07/02/2026

⁵ Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, [Brexit and consumer food prices: 2023 update](#), May 2023

1.3. Questions for the UK Government to consider

If the damage of divergence is widely understood, a common UK-EU food and drink area should be the basis on which to repair this damage. At the same time, several thorny issues related to the SPS Agreement need to be addressed. These are summarised below, and covered in more detail in sections 2-6 of this report.

Dynamic alignment

The Common Understanding determines that the UK will align with EU SPS rules on an ongoing basis. The Common Understanding also provides for “a short list of limited exceptions to dynamic alignment”⁶. Three areas where exceptions have been suggested are: animal welfare, plant protection products (pesticides), and precision breeding. Weighing the costs and benefits of securing ‘carve-outs’ on these issues has been a key issue for UK Ministers and civil servants since talks on an SPS Agreement began. A continued England-only exception on precision breeding would pose challenges for the UK Internal Market.

Implementation

Some stakeholders will embrace the SPS Agreement as a liberation from red tape and costly, time-consuming checks. Others will experience it as a complicated, burdensome process to ensure compliance where approaches have diverged. The UK Government should ensure proper engagement with this latter group, and prepare the necessary measures to ensure a smooth implementation in practice.

Legislation

Senior MPs want a greater role for Parliament in scrutinising UK trade deals, challenging the post-2021 emergence of “executive-led” treaty-making and implementation. Ministers will need to decide whether to grant this wish, or to prioritise speed of adoption, and then pursue further areas of UK-EU alignment. In any event, updating all relevant SPS standards so they align with the 76 EU regulations and directives in scope for the agreement will be a major legislative project, involving the UK, Scottish and Welsh Parliaments.

Broader aims for the UK-EU relationship

Senior MPs have urged the UK Government to provide more clarity on its strategic objectives for the UK-EU relationship. The way the UK Government approaches the SPS Agreement, and the trade-offs it will impose, could go some way to clarifying its longer-term intentions for UK-EU relations.

Maximising the benefits

Ultimately, the SPS Agreement can help the UK Government to get closer to delivering against two of its primary aims: improving economic growth, and mitigating cost of living pressures. Crucial to this is seeking a commitment from the EU to remove checks quickly, on which the UK should seek clear timescales.

⁶ UK Government, [UK-EU Summit - Common Understanding](#), 19/05/2025

2. Dynamic alignment

The basis of the SPS Agreement being negotiated between the UK and EU is UK dynamic alignment with relevant EU rules. Even though much attention has focused on the possible exceptions the UK may seek to pursue, the fact that the agreement will be rooted in dynamic alignment is a further demonstration of how the place of the EU in UK political debate has shifted in recent years.

2.1. Public support for aligning with EU SPS standards

Best for Britain polling conducted in September 2025 revealed that all policy areas in which the UK and EU agreed to enter negotiations following the May 2025 UK-EU summit were supported by a majority of Brits.

The UK Government and the EU have agreed to enter negotiations in a number of areas. Would you support or oppose the UK agreeing to...?

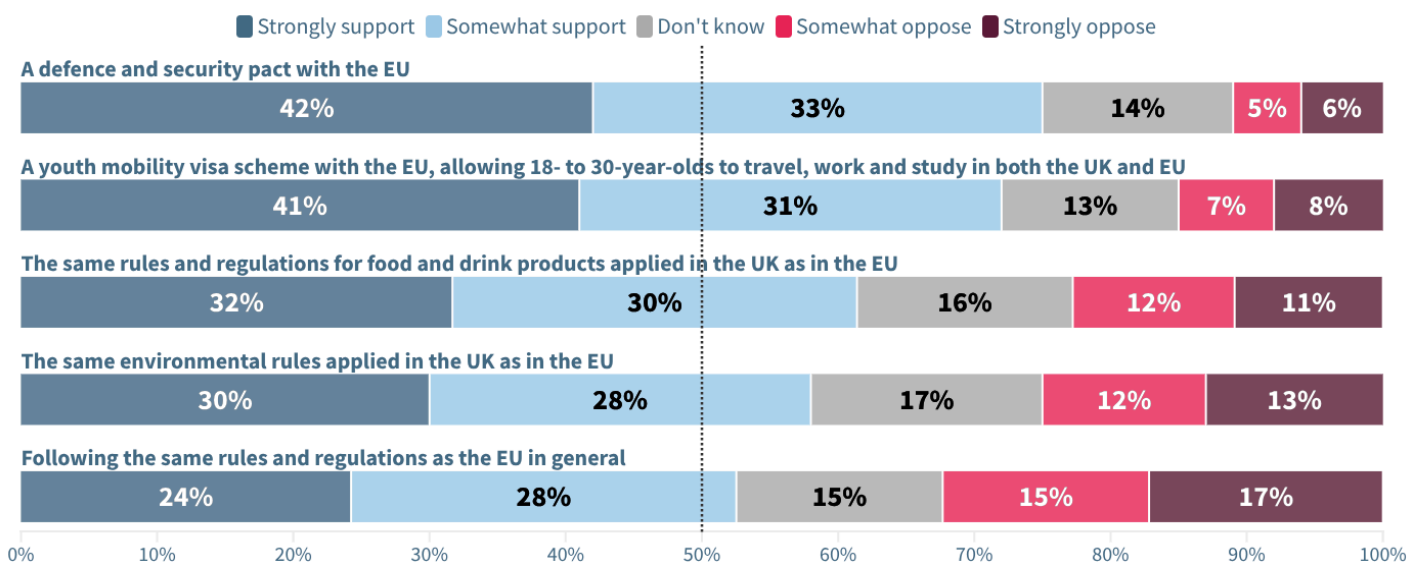


Figure 1: Support for policy areas to be agreed between the UK and EU among GB adults (September 2025).⁷

Figure 1 shows that around six in ten voters (62%) supported the UK agreeing to the same rules and regulations for food and drink being applied in the UK as in the EU. Around a quarter (23%) opposed alignment in this area, with the remainder - 16% - undecided.

The strength of feeling revealed by the polling is also significant. The number of Brits “strongly” supportive of the UK following EU food and drink rules (32%) was larger than the number in total who opposed it (23%, comprising roughly equal numbers who were “strongly” and “somewhat” opposed). This should give the UK Government confidence as it seeks to expedite an SPS agreement, the conclusion of which may be announced at the 2026 UK-EU Summit.

⁷ All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 4,368 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 5th-10th September 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+)

Support for an SPS agreement is extremely strong among Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green supporters. Figure 2 shows that, in September 2025, more than four in five voters intending to vote for these three parties at the next general election (86% of Labour voters, 85% of Lib Dems, 86% of Greens), supported the UK following EU food and drink rules. 55% of Conservative supporters said they would support alignment on food and drink standards. Support among Reform UK supporters was much weaker - fewer than two in five (37%) said they supported such alignment.

This is consistent with other polling conducted by Best for Britain on a range of issues relating to the UK-EU relationship, which has shown strong support for the UK cooperating more closely with the EU among supporters left-of-centre parties (Labour, Lib Dems and Greens), much cooler support among Reform UK supporters, and Conservatives falling somewhere in between these two poles. Figure 2 further demonstrates that pro-EU policies are a strong unifier for ‘progressive’ supporters, and that British Eurosceptics have largely consolidated their support behind Nigel Farage’s Reform UK⁸.

The UK Government and the EU have agreed to enter negotiations in a number of areas. Would you support or oppose the UK agreeing to...?

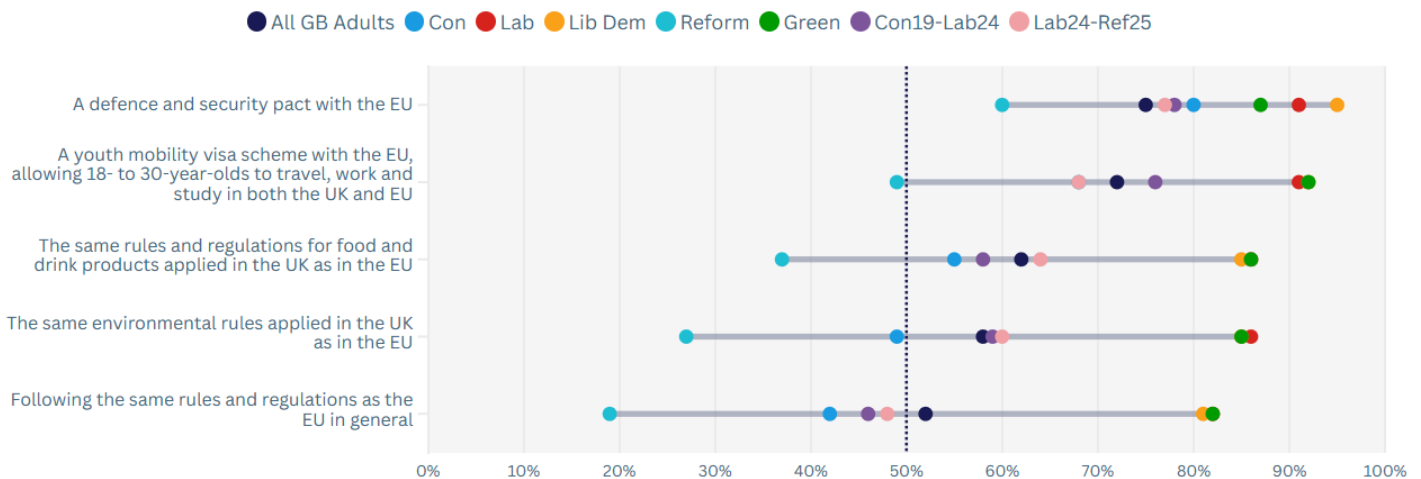


Figure 2: Support for policy areas to be agreed between the UK and EU among GB adults, by party voting intention (September 2025)⁹

Despite the differences in attitudes revealed by viewing the issue through a party political lens, the overall picture is clear: a strong majority of the British public, in September 2025, supported the UK aligning with EU SPS standards. The fundamental trade-off for the UK is widely understood: regulatory independence versus seamless trade. Polling data suggests that Brits increasingly prioritise the latter over the former.

2.2. Possible exceptions to dynamic alignment

The Common Understanding states that the SPS Agreement “should include a short list of limited exceptions to dynamic alignment”, provided the exceptions do not “lead to lower standards as compared to

⁸ See, for example, Best for Britain, [The Brexit Report: Public attitudes towards Brexit ahead of the 2025 Budget](#), October 2025

⁹ All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 4,368 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 5th–10th September 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+)

European Union rules”, do not “negatively affect European Union animals and goods being placed on the market in the United Kingdom in respect of Great Britain” and respect “the principle that only animals and goods compliant with European Union rules move into the European Union”¹⁰.

Three areas in particular are understood to be under consideration as possible exceptions to the dynamic alignment that will govern the SPS Agreement: animal welfare, pesticides, and precision breeding. (Other issues are likely to arise in the course of implementation, for example given particular local circumstances, and a process is needed for dealing with these).

Animal welfare

Several stakeholders have raised concerns that aligning with EU SPS rules could lead to lower animal welfare standards in the UK. In its evidence submission to the Environmental, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee inquiry into animal and plant health, the RSPCA stated the “one threat” it sees from the Common Understanding was “the lack of clarity as to whether animal welfare standards will be included within the scope of the Agreement”¹¹. In December 2025, the UK Government published its Animal welfare strategy for England¹². The published text makes two references to the future UK-EU SPS agreement, but has nonetheless raised questions among animal rights groups as to how the two documents will interact with each other.

Since 2021, the UK Government has diverged from EU rules in some areas in ways which have raised UK animal welfare standards. These include banning exports of live animals, and introducing protections for some seabirds¹³. Some animal rights groups have expressed disappointment at reports that the UK Government may not seek to ban imports of foie gras and fur, but such a decision (if the reports are correct) would represent a continuation of post-2021 policy.

Seeking a carve-out to protect post-2021 decisions taken to diverge on animal welfare grounds would appear to comply with the Common Understanding, which states that an exception to dynamic alignment can be permitted where it does not involve lower standards than existing EU rules. Discussion in the UK Parliament on the SPS Agreement may focus on the precedent set by Switzerland in this area. In its SPS agreement with the EU, Switzerland has an explicit carve-out on animal welfare, allowing it to exclude EU products on animal welfare grounds where it has higher standards¹⁴.

In March 2026, one newspaper reported that EU officials had “accepted” Britain could “keep its higher animal welfare standards” as part of the upcoming deal¹⁵, suggesting the Commission was relatively relaxed about a limited exception to dynamic alignment in this area. In practice, these higher standards are likely to apply to UK exports but not to UK imports, an issue which may prove controversial with some animal welfare groups. A possible trade-off stemming from the UK seeking to raise standards above prevailing EU levels would, of course, be the risk of some UK produce having to compete with cheaper imports from the EU. **Pesticides**

¹⁰ UK Government, [UK-EU Summit – Common Understanding](#), 19/05/2025

¹¹ RSPCA, [RSPCA Response to the EFRA Select Committee Inquiry: Priorities for a UK-EU SPS Agreement](#), submitted September 2025, published 5 February 2026

¹² UK Government, [Animal welfare strategy for England](#), December 2025

¹³ Politico, [UK fights to preserve animal welfare standards in Brexit reset deal](#), 31/07/2025

¹⁴ Wildlife and Countryside Link, [UK-EU SPS Agreement](#), February 2026

¹⁵ The Guardian, [Row over tuition fees cut for European students threatens Starmer’s EU reset](#), 15/03/2026

Pesticides is another area where Great Britain and the EU have diverged since 2021. The EU introduced stricter regulations, which Britain did not follow. This means some British farmers are continuing to use a range of pesticides that are now banned in the EU. There has also been divergence on Maximum Residue Levels - the maximum permitted level for pesticides within or on food or feed - after the EU strengthened its regulations in this area.

Recommendation 1

The UK Government should seek an exception from EU rules in the limited number of areas where it has brought in higher animal welfare standards since 2021, and work with the EU to deliver future improvements.

This type of divergence, whereby the UK's prevailing regime entails *lower* standards than EU rules, contravenes the terms set out in the Common Understanding and thus damages the prospect of swift implementation. Assuming this interpretation is correct, the task for the UK Government would be to help stakeholders to manage the transition to the new regime. As Pesticide Action Network UK (PAN UK) put it in its submission to the same EFRA Committee inquiry mentioned above, "It is vital that farmers, in particular, are supported properly to realign with EU standards"¹⁶.

PAN UK proposes "an increase in support to help farmers adopt Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and non-chemical alternatives (such as biopesticides) more broadly". It may also be prudent for the UK Government to seek to secure transition periods, through which the purchase and then the use of banned pesticides would be phased out, and MRLs brought into line with EU standards, though this may delay the point at which EU controls are lifted. Reasonable transition periods are likely to be acceptable to the European Commission: EU MRL decisions (which are all made separately and on a case by case basis) routinely include transitional periods of varying lengths according to the risk profile of the pesticide, to allow third country producers to adjust.

Recommendation 2

The UK Government should not seek to continue the divergence from EU pesticide standards that has occurred since 2021. Instead, it should seek to introduce appropriate transition periods, balancing the need to protect British farmers from being unfairly penalised with the need to arrive at full alignment in order to realise the benefits of increased agrifood trade.

Croplife UK has argued that a "well managed transition process" will be a "necessity" to protect farm incomes and UK food production¹⁷ as an SPS agreement comes into operation. From a different vantage point, the

¹⁶ Pesticide Action Network, [Written evidence submitted by Pesticide Action Network UK \(PAN UK\)\(APH0245\)](#), submitted September 2025, published 5 February 2026

¹⁷ CropLife UK, [Analysis of the impact on UK crop production of GB aligning with EU rules and decisions on Plant Protection Products](#), January 2026

Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFNN) agrees that transition periods are necessary. NFNN suggests a 12-month period for cereal farmers and two years for non-organic OSR growers¹⁸.

Precision breeding

Precision breeding is the third significant area in scope of the SPS Agreement where Britain, or more accurately in this case, England, and the EU have diverged since 2021. The Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 introduced a new regulatory framework for the treatment of precision-bred organisms in England. Secondary legislation required to implement the Act was passed in May 2025.

In its submission to the same EFRA Committee inquiry, Best for Britain argued for an independent cost-benefit analysis of precision breeding as an exception to dynamic alignment to be conducted¹⁹. A number of unresolved questions could be answered by such a study:-

Quantifying the benefits of precision breeding. To date, most public statements of support for the UK continuing to pursue a divergent path from the EU on precision breeding, such as those from the multinational pharmaceutical and biotechnology firm Bayer²⁰, and the NFU²¹, have not been accompanied by detailed economic analysis. Without an understanding of the degree by which precision breeding technologies can be expected to improve crop yields, bolster food security, or generate economic growth, it is difficult to see how the UK Government would justify the costs (political and/or financial) likely to be imposed by divergence on this issue.

EU progress. The 2023 Precision Breeding Act was interpreted by some observers as a sign of the UK's ability to innovate more quickly than the EU. However, since then the EU has made significant progress towards its own regulatory regime, applying to 'new genomic techniques' (NGTs). In this light, as law firm Osborne Clarke has suggested, and given that many businesses in the sector have operations in both the UK and EU, the UK may need to "slow down its plans" in the gene-editing space²². At the UK Trade and Business Commission's evidence session looking at the SPS Agreement, held in December 2025, expert witnesses spoke about the need to see the precision breeding debate in a wider, global context.

"It's a global issue, and it just so happens that the UK and the EU have probably got the first formal negotiation where both systems will be required to trade with each other. But the Canadians have legislated in this area. So too have the Argentinians, the Australians, China, they're all moving ahead on this. And what is a global trade issue mustn't be distilled in an EU-UK mini drama amongst a wider negotiation. And we mustn't, I think, fixate in the here and now too much on it to the extent that we risk making it such an issue that it gets burnt effectively forever. These are moving issues and by the time of implementation of the SPS agreement, we should have a legislative proposal in place in the EU."

– **Ed Barker, Head of Policy and External Affairs, Agricultural Industries Confederation**

¹⁸ Wildlife & Countryside Link, [Dynamic alignment on pesticide standards](#), April 2026

¹⁹ Best for Britain, [Written evidence submitted by Best for Britain \(APH0195\)](#), submitted September 2025, published 5 February 2026

²⁰ Bayer, [Time to act on precision breeding to drive innovation and growth](#), Politics Home, 11/09/2024

²¹ National Farmers' Union, [NFU welcomes secondary legislation to advance precision breeding technology - NFUonline](#), 17/03/2025

²² Osborne Clarke, [Can newly enacted UK rules simplifying approval for precision bred plants survive the EU reset?](#), 21/05/2025

New labelling requirements? After 2021, the 'Not for EU' labels required on food products demonstrated the particular problems for Northern Ireland of the rest of the UK leaving the EU common food area. These have only been reduced following significant efforts. Burdens on Northern Ireland business should diminish further, leading to consumer benefits, once the SPS deal is negotiated and implemented. There is at least a risk that, if a precision breeding exception is pursued, this could lead to the introduction of *new* labelling requirements for these new products, with attendant costs and logistical challenges for food producers and manufacturers.

Recommendation 3

The UK Government should pause plans for continued (English) regulatory divergence from EU precision breeding standards. The UK and EU, recognising the global nature of the issue, should instead work towards a harmonised framework for regulation of precision-bred plants and animals.

Possible exceptions to dynamic alignment: summary

The courses of action implied by the summaries of the three issues above are as follows. Animal welfare may be a comparatively straightforward exception to incorporate into the SPS Agreement. Retaining higher animal welfare standards, in the small number of areas where the UK chose to diverge from EU rules since 2021, would appear to meet the specified criteria for an exception within the Common Understanding.

Continued divergence on pesticides would involve lower standards, and therefore would not be in line with the Common Understanding; instead the UK Government should focus its energies on transition periods and other methods of support for farmers who would be at risk from a sudden shift to the new regime. The challenge will be to balance the need to allow farmers to use up stocks of fertilisers that do not meet EU standards, with the imperative to realise the export gains made possible by UK-EU alignment.

Likewise, continued divergence on precision breeding would appear to be difficult for the UK Government to justify without understanding the economic benefits divergence would bring, particularly as its 'first mover advantage' is not as obvious as it was previously. It is also unclear how an exception would work in practice, given the differing views on precision breeding expressed by the Scottish and Welsh Governments. Northern Ireland, under the provisions of the Windsor Framework, has continued to treat precision-bred organisms under EU regulations covering the broader category of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)²³, although forthcoming EU legislation is expected to remove NGTs from the scope of its GMO legislation.

All decisions the UK Government chooses to pursue will have wide-ranging impacts on a range of businesses. It should increase its engagement with affected stakeholders, in order to properly understand and mitigate these impacts. Whether the UK Government ultimately chooses to seek exceptions on all three topics, or abandons exceptions altogether, it is vital to grasp the full extent of the practical implications of the SPS Agreement for businesses across the country.

²³ NetRegs, [Gene-editing regulation: implications for businesses in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales](#), 04/03/2026

3. Implementation

For many agrifood exporters and major food retailers, the prospect of Great Britain fully aligning with EU SPS rules is an exciting one. Marks and Spencer welcomed DEFRA's March 2026 call for businesses to prepare for alignment by the middle of 2027 unequivocally: "The sooner this deal is done the better"²⁴.

But in its engagement with a wide range of parties with a direct interest in the SPS agreement, the UK Trade and Business Commission has found a more nuanced picture. Stakeholders have expressed concern at being given too little notice to prepare for the changes that alignment may impose. NFU Chairman Tom Bradshaw, responding to the same DEFRA announcement to encourage business preparedness, encapsulated this view: "Farming is a long-term business – many farmers are making production decisions now that will impact food sold beyond mid-2027"²⁵.

While some stakeholders will embrace the SPS Agreement as a liberation from red tape and costly, time-consuming checks, others will experience it as a complicated, burdensome process to ensure compliance with a new and far-reaching set of regulatory standards. The UK Government should ensure this latter group in particular are properly consulted and supported, including on issues such as exceptions to dynamic alignment and transition periods, both as negotiations with the EU reach a conclusion and on an ongoing basis once the SPS Agreement comes into force.

3.1. Stakeholder engagement

Throughout the UK Trade and Business Commission's research and evidence gathering in relation to this topic, the most common refrain has been the need for improved stakeholder engagement. Diverse stakeholders, including those representing agriculture, ports and food manufacturing interests, have pointed to a lack of transparency from the top of the UK Government about what would be involved in securing an SPS agreement. While acknowledging the necessity for a degree of confidentiality while negotiations were ongoing, stakeholders engaged by the UK Trade and Business Commission expressed frustration at being kept in the dark about the UK Government's broad approach. Engagement from relevant departments was felt to be good. What was thought to be missing was meaningful communication from the top of the UK Government to the relevant departments, which then limited interactions between departments and industry.

The importance of high-quality, meaningful stakeholder engagement was underscored at the December 2025 UK Trade and Business Commission evidence session on the SPS Agreement.

"So my recommendation would be to think really carefully and resource properly stakeholder management because the government is going to need to give the food industry the maximum visibility of what change is required and the maximum notice to make sure that we get that done as quickly as possible, and then we can get to the benefits.

But we know from experience, connecting with what is quite a diverse and complex supply chain with many SMEs as well as large businesses within it, is really difficult for the government. But they really

²⁴ UK Government, [Businesses urged to take simple steps for smoother trade with the EU - GOV.UK](#), 09/03/2026

²⁵ NFU, [NFU says farmers and growers need time to adjust on EU alignment](#), 09/03/2026

need to think carefully about those 200-300 pieces of legislation that need to be implemented because the EU will definitely expect us to be compliant with that. That requires a huge stakeholder management exercise about making sure people have full visibility about what they need to do and by when, and if we all get on the same page with that, then we can get to the benefits much, much quicker than we would be able to otherwise.”

- Andrew Opie, Food and Sustainability Director, British Retail Consortium

3.2. Transition periods

In its various conversations with stakeholders affected by the SPS Agreement, the UK Trade and Business Commission has found support for transition periods to be widespread. The specific example cited in section 2.2 of this report, relating to pesticides and MRLs, is just one of dozens of potential areas where transition periods may be appropriate. In December 2025, for example, during the public evidence session on the SPS deal, UK Trade and Business Commission members heard the case made for a phased approach to the implementation of a new regime.

“Are we expected to be starting on day one, everyone, green button, go, all systems change? Or is there a type of a transition or phasing in period for all those products that will have to be withdrawn, for example? Is there a way in which we can have a transition for businesses to adapt? Because expecting one big day one go button is going to be very difficult for a lot of very complex supply chains.”

– Ed Barker, Head of Policy and External Affairs, Agricultural Industries Confederation

In March 2026, the UK Government invited businesses and trade bodies to give their views on a transition period. DEFRA’s Call for Information from businesses and trade bodies affected by the SPS Agreement, published on 9 March 2026 and closing on 26 April 2026, includes a series of questions seeking to understand the time it will take for businesses to become compliant with the new regime²⁶.

Switzerland concluded an SPS deal with the EU in 1998, but it took until 2009 for all trade barriers to be removed. The approach followed in that case was for relatively little detail to be included in the formal text, and significant powers handed over to joint EU-Swiss working groups to steer practical implementation. While there is little reason to expect the process in Great Britain to be anything like as lengthy, the Swiss example stands as a reminder that implementation and transition periods should be considered carefully. (The UK is intending to align its Emissions Trading Scheme with the EU’s Emissions Trading System at the same time as pursuing SPS alignment, placing further burdens on UK civil servants and regulatory officials).

Provided the rationales for transition periods are evidence-based and explained clearly, there is reason to be optimistic that they will be accepted by the European Commission. Equally there should be a timetable laid out for the EU’s removal of checks on GB exports. The Common Understanding does not prevent the inclusion of transition periods in any final agreement, but insofar as transition periods would also delay the removal of the checks and red tape the SPS deal is designed to remove, they may also delay UK and EU consumers feeling the benefits of the SPS deal.

²⁶ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [UK-EU SPS Agreement – Call for Information](#), 09/03/2026

Recommendation 4

The UK Government should seek reasonable transition periods to full alignment. These transition periods should aim to realise the trade-related benefits to be gained from alignment, while giving affected stakeholders time to adjust to the new SPS standards regime

3.3. Maximising the UK's decision-shaping rights

The Common Understanding sets out that the UK “should contribute appropriately for a country that is not a member of the European Union to the decision-shaping process of European Union legal acts” pertaining to food and drink standards²⁷.

While the text makes it plain that the UK will not enjoy the same rights as EU members to amend existing standards or to introduce new ones, there is nonetheless a strong appetite among British stakeholders for the UK to make the most of its ability to shape EU rules. After all, once the SPS Agreement comes fully into force, the UK will be *affected* by EU SPS rules as much as it was when it was a member state. Being able to influence the evolution of the 76 EU regulations and directives pertaining to food and drink rules implies a significant increase in civil service capacity, to staff consultative bodies in the UK and, even more importantly, to ensure participation in relevant forums in Brussels. This work can start now, before a final agreement has been reached. If the UK is to take up the opportunities afforded to it via the Common Understanding to influence EU rules - not just in relation to SPS but also for Emissions Trading Systems and energy cooperation - in practice, that means having more UK officials and stakeholders working together to influence the decision makers in Brussels.

Recommendation 5

A significantly enhanced UK presence in Brussels, as well as new consultative bodies in the UK, will be necessary for the UK to maximise its ‘decision-shaping’ rights under dynamic alignment, and thus to deliver potential benefits from the agreement.

3.4. Border Control Posts

One specific practical issue worth highlighting relates to Border Control Posts (BCPs). These were constructed to manage the increased level of checks required on goods traded between Great Britain and the EU after 2021. The anticipated level of checks, and the resultant revenue that could have covered the cost of installing the new infrastructure, did not materialise.

²⁷ UK Government, [UK-EU Summit - Common Understanding](#), 19/05/2025

Currently, BCPs are servicing only a small fraction of the daily checks they were intended to perform. While ports have welcomed the SPS deal as presenting them with an opportunity to completely repurpose the facilities, the worst-case scenario would be for checks to reduce even further without being removed entirely. While other stakeholders - for entirely legitimate reasons - may argue against the introduction of a rapid removal of all checks, moving at too gradual a pace towards no checks could lead to further challenges for BCPs.

This is another example of the complexity inherent in the shift to a new SPS regime, and a case where proper stakeholder engagement and clearly-established lines of communication will be key if the shift is to be a success in practice.

4. Legislation

Updating GB agrifood standards so that they align with the 76 EU regulations and directives understood by the UK Government to be in scope²⁸ will be a significant legislative project. The UK Government will need to pass primary legislation to implement the SPS Agreement, but it is unclear which parliamentary mechanisms will be utilised to bring the relevant EU rules onto the Statute book. Devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales will also need to pass new legislation to ensure GB-wide alignment with EU rules.

As Prof Emily Lydgate has pointed out, the Common Understanding explicitly grants the UK some freedom to determine the level of democratic oversight it wishes to employ when pursuing re-alignment with EU standards²⁹. The UK Government will need to decide how much scope it wishes to grant to Parliament, devolved administrations and affected stakeholders to scrutinise and influence current and future regulations.

4.1. Parliamentary scrutiny

Previously, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee Dame Emily Thornberry MP argued for a greater role for Parliament in scrutinising and voting on the UK-EU reset³⁰. This followed a similar call Dame Emily made with Liam Byrne MP, Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, in advance of the UK and US signing the Economic Prosperity Deal, for MPs to be able to vote on trade deals which would “have a profound effect on Britain”³¹ – a threshold which would certainly be met by the UK-EU SPS Agreement.

On the other hand, the ambitious timeframe the UK Government is working towards, for a deal to be fully implemented by mid-2027, suggests that the “executive-led approach”³² to UK treaty-making that has emerged since the UK left the EU is likely to remain in place. A March 2026 UK In a Changing Europe blog, which credits the UK Government for its signalling to businesses on how to prepare, suggests that Ministers are prioritising “speedy adoption” over an enhanced role for parliamentary scrutiny³³.

“There is a huge amount of work which the UK supply chain and UK retailers and their manufacturers will need to go through in the next 18 months to two years to align with EU regulation. We understand there’ll be 200-plus pieces of legislation which will need to be implemented in the UK, which is a massive task for those businesses to take on at what is quite a difficult time anyway, in terms of a very tough market.”

- Andrew Opie, Food and Sustainability Director, British Retail Consortium

Whether the UK Government seeks to prioritise speed of implementation or to grant significant powers of scrutiny to Parliament, the scale of the legislative task should not be underestimated. This was brought

²⁸ UK Government, [UK-EU SPS Agreement - Legislation in scope](#), 09/03/2026

²⁹ Emily Lydgate, [How to deliver a UK-EU “re-set” that works](#), UK Trade Policy Observatory, 26/11/2025

³⁰ Dame Emily Thornberry MP, [The reset of the UK-EU relations is too important to be left to the leakers - Parliament must have its say](#), Politics Home, 19/05/2025

³¹ The Guardian, [Labour select committee chairs call for parliament to vote on trade deal with US](#), 16/04/2025

³² Lydgate, [How to deliver a UK-EU “re-set” that works](#), UKTPO, 26/11/2025

³³ Joël Reland, [Full speed ahead on SPS alignment](#), UK in a Changing Europe, 11/03/2026

home to UK Trade and Business Commission members during the December 2025 public evidence session on the SPS deal.

4.2. Devolved administrations

Since SPS is a devolved policy area, ongoing dialogue between the UK Government and devolved administrations in Edinburgh and Cardiff will be essential for the SPS Agreement to enter into force. As made clear in the Common Understanding, the “continued application of the Windsor Framework” would mean Northern Ireland is largely unaffected by the SPS Agreement, and would maintain “its privileged unique dual access to both the European Union Single Market and the United Kingdom internal market”³⁴.

The Scottish and Welsh Governments have expressed strong support for a deal on SPS standards. A March 2025 position paper from the Scottish Government pointed out that agrifood exports make up a larger share of GDP in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK, and expressed the belief that an SPS deal would benefit exports of key products including salmon and whisky³⁵. The Welsh Government, in its response to the May 2025 UK-EU Summit, welcomed the likely future benefits to Welsh food and drink exporters, and highlighted in particular its desire for Live Bivalve Molluscs to regain access to the EU market³⁶.

While the UK was an EU member state, all UK nations followed EU regulations. Since the UK left the EU, England has sought a more divergent path on SPS matters than Scotland and Wales - the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 being a prime example. These divergent approaches have introduced an element of tension to the UK Internal Market. Some observers have expressed hope that the UK-EU SPS Agreement may act to ‘reglue’ the Internal Market. However, since the power to make treaties rests with the UK Government, it remains to be seen how UK-EU alignment will play out in devolved areas such as this³⁷.

In September 2025, the Welsh Government commended the “significant ongoing engagement between the UK and Devolved Governments” and the “good joint working at both ministerial and official level to date”³⁸. It is to be hoped such an approach continues at a time of potential strain. The EFRA Committee, in its report linked to the inquiry into animal and plant health, said it “did not receive a clear or satisfactory explanation” from witnesses it interviewed regarding the Internal Market tensions created by the (England-only) Precision Breeding Act³⁹. Certainly, it is unclear, in practice, how Scottish and Welsh alignment with EU rules on precision breeding could exist alongside a continued English exception. As negotiations with the EU reach a conclusion, close cooperation between the UK Government and devolved administrations is likely to become even more critical.

³⁴ UK Government, [UK-EU Summit - Common Understanding](#), 19/05/2025

³⁵ Scottish Government, [Agrifood trading arrangements with the EU: position paper](#), 31/03/2025

³⁶ Welsh Government, [Written Statement: EU- UK Summit \(19 May 2025\)](#)

³⁷ Emily Lydgate and Alex Carson-Taylor, [An EU-UK SPS Agreement: The perils and possibilities of \(re\)alignment](#), Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy, 03/12/2024

³⁸ Welsh Government, [Written evidence submitted by The Welsh Government \(APH0221\)](#), submitted September 2025, published February 2026

³⁹ Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [UK-EU agritrade: making an SPS agreement work](#), 05/02/2026

5. Broader aims for the UK-EU relationship

In March 2026, the Foreign Affairs Committee published a report which pointed to the UK Government's "lack of transparency about UK objectives and priorities" regarding the relationship with the EU.

The Committee "urgently" called for "more clarity from the UK Government about its strategic objectives for the relationship with the EU, and how it will seek to achieve them", arguing that an "EU White Paper with a coherent vision for the future of the relationship" would be the best way to realise these aims⁴⁰. While the Committee's report sought to look at the UK Government's approach to the UK-EU relationship in the round, the supposed lack of clarity has been raised by many stakeholders in the context of the SPS Agreement.

This was clear during the February 2026 UK Trade and Business Commission roundtable, where several participants expressed uncertainty over the UK Government's aims for the SPS Agreement. They were unsure how far the UK Government wants to go through a painstaking, patient process to make sure it gets the detail right, as opposed to viewing the deal as 'enabling' legislation, to be agreed and implemented quickly in order to open up possibilities for accessing other parts of the EU Single Market in future.

Progressing to implement a deal quickly, as laid out by EU Relations Minister Nick-Thomas Symonds in his Spectator speech in August 2025⁴¹, would certainly be consistent with the main messages from the top of the UK Government. Addressing the Liaison Committee in July 2025, Prime Minister Keir Starmer stated his intention for annual UK-EU summits to be "iterative... not just to monitor what we have agreed; [but] to go further"⁴². More recently, in her 2026 Mais Lecture, Chancellor Rachel Reeves spoke of a "strategic imperative for deeper integration between the UK and EU"⁴³.

An alternative approach would be for the UK Government to move slowly and in a deliberative manner. It could, for example, seek lengthy transition periods for multiple stakeholder groups. This would be welcomed by those businesses and trade bodies which have sounded the alarm over the burdens the new SPS regime will impose on them to become compliant. But a trade off in this scenario may be to postpone the date at which the anticipated benefits of SPS alignment - such as higher agrifood exports, some downward pressure on food prices, and the prospect of UK-EU alignment in additional economic sectors - are realised.

Whatever approach it takes, the UK Government should seek to ensure the concrete outcomes it achieves from the SPS Agreement complement its broader objectives. That includes the way in which the SPS Agreement links to its longer-term intentions for the UK-EU relationship. It should also take care that the SPS Agreement does not contradict other published strategies or stated goals, particularly those related to food security and devolution.

⁴⁰ Foreign Affairs Committee, [From a Common Understanding to Common Ground: Building a UK-EU Strategic Partnership fit for the future](#), 04/03/2026

⁴¹ Nick Thomas-Symonds MP, [Speech on the UK's Future Relationship with the European Union - GOV.UK](#), 27/08/2025

⁴² Liaison Committee, [Oral evidence: Work of the Prime Minister, HC 1199](#), 21/07/2025

⁴³ Rachel Reeves MP, [Mais Lecture 2026 - GOV.UK](#), 17/03/2026

6. Maximising the benefits

Concluding and implementing an SPS agreement with the EU will deliver benefits. It should boost agrifood exports, smooth GB-NI trade, open up the possibility for trade-driven economic growth, and apply some downward pressure to food costs.

6.1. Agrifood exports

The UK Government estimates the combined impact of SPS and Emissions Trading Systems (ETS) deals with the EU would add 0.3%, or around £9 billion, to UK GDP by 2040⁴⁴. This would represent a welcome boost at a time of low economic growth and straitened public finances, even though it would only amount to a small fraction of the 4% hit to GDP caused by the UK leaving the EU in the first place, as estimated by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR)⁴⁵.

A 2024 study⁴⁶ by Prof Jun Du, Prof Gregory Messenger and Dr Oleksandr Shepotylo assessed the likely economic impact of a UK-EU SPS agreement. The research found that the benefits to the UK agrifood sector could be considerable: a 22.5% increase in exports, a 5.6% increase in imports, and an extra 0.2% to the agricultural sector's value added. These estimates accord with anecdotal evidence provided to the UK Trade and Business Commission's evidence session looking at the impact of an SPS deal, held in December 2025.

"This is potentially a really exciting opportunity for us to try and regain markets that we have lost or stepped away from in Europe. Specifically, we have not been able to export seed potatoes to the EU, that's been banned. We've not been able to export prepared meats like sausages, burgers, fresh preparations. We haven't been able to send any of our really high-quality breeding livestock across to the EU. So, creating this common SPS area will hopefully remove those prohibitions, which will be really positive and get us back into the market and those fantastic products."

- Gail Soutar, Head of Department, Trade and Business Strategy, National Farmers Union

6.2. Benefits for Northern Ireland

The SPS Agreement would mean Northern Ireland and Great Britain once again agreeing to the same set of rules on agrifood. By reducing checks, removing the need for certificates and getting rid of the 'Not for EU' labels, trade should increase and costs reduce. While these gains, in common with the anticipated rise in GB-EU trade following an implemented deal, will take time to be realised, Northern Irish consumers should also benefit from more choice in supermarkets as more British businesses restart exports to Northern Ireland (and the Republic of Ireland).

⁴⁴ UK Government, [PM secures new agreement with EU to benefit British people](#), 19/05/2025

⁴⁵ See Office for Budget Responsibility, [Brexit analysis](#), July 2025. Other economists estimate the impact to be even greater than 4%.

⁴⁶ Centre for Business Prosperity, Aston Business School, [Enhancing the Brexit Deal: Exploring the Impact of a UK-EU Veterinary Agreement on Agri-food Trade](#), April 2024

More generally, the fact that Northern Ireland will no longer need to be treated separately from the rest of Great Britain should avoid another scenario in which Northern Irish consumers suffer from the practical implications of divergent standards, as has been the case since the UK's departure from the EU. If the UK Government, as noted above, seeks to pause English divergence from EU (and Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish) precision breeding standards, the resultant harmonised UK-wide regime may also lead to an improvement in GB-NI agrifood trade.

6.3. Paving the way for future economic growth

Prof Du's 2024 study cited above considered an SPS agreement to be an important *intermediate* step on the way to a broader improvement in UK-EU relations. "An agreement can be viewed not just as an economic instrument but also as a strategic step towards rebuilding a more constructive and trusting relationship between the two regions. This agreement could set the stage for future negotiations on more complex issues, such as the mutual recognition of professional qualifications"⁴⁷.

If this proves correct, and if both the UK and EU are willing to view a successfully-concluded SPS Agreement as an 'exemplar' for future negotiations, the prospect of greater economic alignment and integration may draw nearer. Independent modelling by Frontier Economics, and commissioned by Best for Britain, showed that UK alignment with the EU on goods and services would increase exports in both directions by tens of billions of dollars annually, and would help both sides to lessen the impact of US tariffs⁴⁸.

It is unclear whether the EU would entertain this kind of deep alignment without considering other issues. What is clear is that the successful conclusion of the SPS agreement is an essential first step.

6.4. Helping with the cost of living

On mitigating the cost of living, the benefits of concluding an SPS Agreement seem clearer. The LSE study cited at the start of this report calculated that Britain leaving the EU had added £250 to the cost of food shopping for an annual household between December 2019 and March 2023 - and food costs have risen further in the three years since the study was published.

Joël Reland of UK in a Changing Europe has noted that, following the Iran war, any downward pressure on UK food prices stemming from the UK-EU SPS Agreement is likely to be "blown out of the water" as energy cost rises feed through into wider inflation. But this will not diminish the UK Government's willingness to act.

Best for Britain polling from September 2025 showed the cost of living to be the most important issue for British voters⁴⁹. Moreover, as Figure 3 shows, the cost of food was considered the most important issue affecting the cost of living, with nine in ten survey respondents (91%) choosing this option. The issue was

⁴⁷ Centre for Business Prosperity, Aston Business School, [Enhancing the Brexit Deal: Exploring the Impact of a UK-EU Veterinary Agreement on Agri-food Trade](#), April 2024

⁴⁸ Frontier Economics, [Modelling the effects of closer UK-EU cooperation and of US tariffs](#) | Frontier Economics, February 2025

⁴⁹ Best for Britain, [The UK's biggest challenges: Public attitudes towards the most important issues facing the UK and local communities](#), November 2025

equally important to voters across the political spectrum, suggesting there would be widespread public support if a successfully concluded SPS agreement were to lead to a noticeable improvement in food prices.

Thinking specifically about the cost of living, which of these are the most important issues? (Please select up to three options)

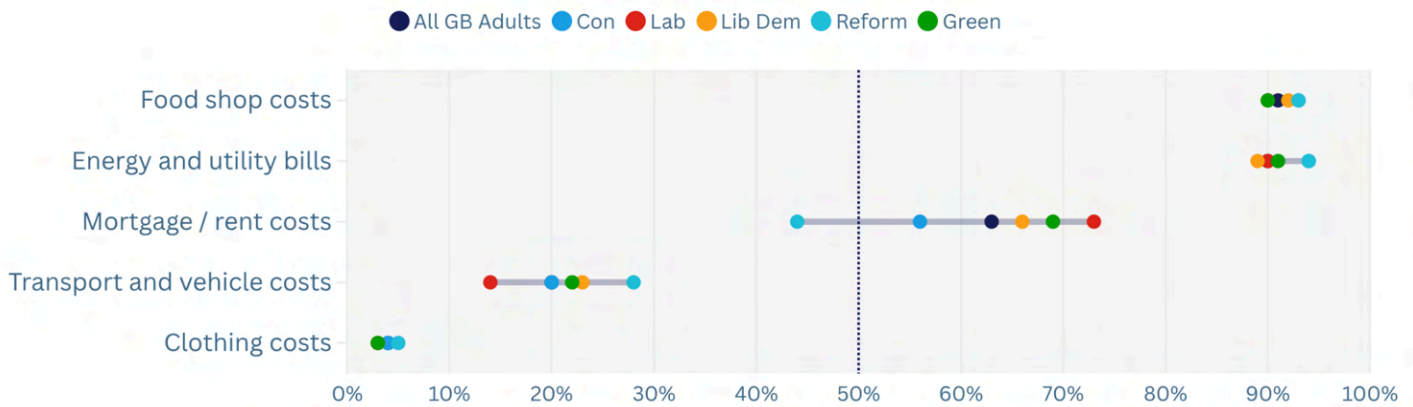


Figure 3: Public views on the most important issues facing people and their communities, by party voting intention (September 2025)⁵⁰

Given the salience of the cost of living among the British public, the UK Government’s continued prioritisation of the issue⁵¹, and the Prime Minister’s statement that an SPS deal with the EU “will mean lower food prices at the checkout”⁵², it will be important that the anticipated reductions in costs are passed on to end consumers.

⁵⁰ All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 4,368 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 5th-10th September 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+)

⁵¹ Politico, [Starmers new plan: Save our energy bills, stop the war](#), 11/03/2026

⁵² UK Government, [PM’s remarks at press conference with EU leaders : 19 May 2025](#)

7. Conclusion: finding the right balance

The word “balance” appears in the Common Understanding three times; in sections relating to the youth experience scheme, the UK’s association to the Erasmus+ programme, and UK-EU energy cooperation. It could just as easily have been included in relation to the SPS Agreement - because, from the UK’s perspective at least, finding the right balance will be essential for an agreement to enter into force successfully.

The anticipated benefits of concluding and implementing an SPS agreement are considerable, and widely understood. Improved exports for English, Scottish and Welsh food and drink producers; greater choice for Northern Irish consumers; enhanced food security for the whole of the UK; a proof point that the UK-EU ‘reset’ is progressing; and a stepping stone towards two of the UK Government’s primary aims: driving economic growth and action on the cost of living.

At the same time, and as with all negotiations, the SPS Agreement also implies some potentially consequential tradeoffs. In a range of areas, the UK Government will need to balance divergent interests. On possible **exceptions to dynamic alignment**, the UK Government should accept that any decisions it takes are likely to require some adaptation time and transitional periods. The UK Government should listen carefully to stakeholder concerns over implementation, and understand that the **practical impact** of the deal will last far beyond the conclusion of negotiations. Where necessary, the UK Government should consider what support it is prepared to offer the sectors that may benefit from these transition periods.

When **legislating**, it should consider ways to balance its understandable desire to realise the economic gains from alignment with action to assuage concerns about executive dominance. And it should put in place measures and extra resources to ensure the UK maximises its ability to shape EU rules as they change in future.

In all of these areas, regular, open communication and meaningful stakeholder engagement will be essential if the agreement is to be a success. As important, the UK Government should be clear about how the SPS Agreement interacts with its other strategic goals, not least as related to food security, devolution and its broader vision for the UK-EU relationship.

The UK Trade and Business Commission

The UK Trade and Business Commission brings together MPs from across Westminster and from all four nations of the UK, along with business leaders and expert economists to provide independent scrutiny of the UK's trade deals and provide recommendations to the Government. It is led by Andrew Lewin MP.



Andrew Lewin MP - Andrew is the Labour Member of Parliament for Welwyn Hatfield and Chair of the UK Trade and Business Commission.



Peter Norris - Peter has chaired Virgin Group since 2009, is Chair for Virgin Atlantic and Virgin Hotels and sits on the board of Best for Britain.



Jonathan Faulkner - Sir Jonathan is Chair of European Public Affairs at the Brunswick Group and was previously Director General in various departments at the European Commission.



Baroness Ros Altmann - Baroness Altmann is a non-affiliated peer in the House of Lords, former Minister of State for Pensions and now emeritus governor and Visiting Professor at London School of Economics.



Layla Moran MP - Layla is the Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for Oxford West & Abingdon and Chair of the Health and Social Care Select Committee.



Claire Hanna MP - Claire is the SDLP Member of Parliament for Belfast South and Mid Down and currently sits on the Commons' Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.



Lord Darroch - Kim Darroch has served as the British Ambassador to the United States and was previously National Security Adviser and the UK's Permanent Representative to the European Union.



Liz Saville Roberts MP - Liz is leader of the Plaid Cymru group of MPs in Westminster and Plaid's Spokesperson for Home Affairs, Justice, Business and Equality.



Stephen Kinsella - Stephen practised for 40 years as an EU competition lawyer, and is now deputy chair of the anti death penalty organisation Reprieve, founder of campaigns Clean Up The Internet and Law For Change, and chair of the Press Justice Project.



Sir Simon Hughes - Simon was a Liberal Democrat MP for Southwark and Bermondsey from 1983 to 2015 and is now Chancellor of London South Bank University.



Rachel Blake MP - Rachel is the Labour Member of Parliament for the Cities of London and Westminster constituency since 2024.



Tamara Cincik - Tamara is the founder of Fashion Roundtable, and holds over 20 years of experience working internationally in the fashion industry.



James MacCleary MP - James is the Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for Lewes and his party's spokesperson on Defence.



Eman Martin-Vignerte - Eman is the Director of External Affairs and Government Relations at Bosch UK.



Carma Elliot - Carma is a former senior British diplomat of over 30 years, with postings in China, the EU and the Middle East, focused on trade and investment; education and culture; and wider people to people relations.



Ellie Chowns MP - Ellie is Green MP for North Herefordshire and spokesperson on Foreign Affairs and Housing and Communities; and Parliamentary Lead on Education, Defence, Business and Trade, Social Care, and Constitutional Affairs.



Uma Kumaran MP - Uma is the Labour MP for Stratford and Bow and is a member of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee and the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly.



Deborah Annetts - Deborah leads The Independent Society of Musicians as Chief Executive and is currently Chair of the broadcast licensing body ERA and Honorary Research Fellow at Queen Mary University.



John Alistair Clarke - John is a former EU Diplomat and trade negotiator, and now sits as a Fellow of Maastricht University, Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, and Fellow of the British Institute of International and Comparative Law.



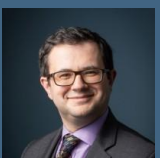
Dr Geoff Mackey - Geoff is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry and IEMA (the Institute of Environmental Management & Accounting); a Trustee of CAPE and SCI; and on the board of ReCoup and Rotary UK&I.



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