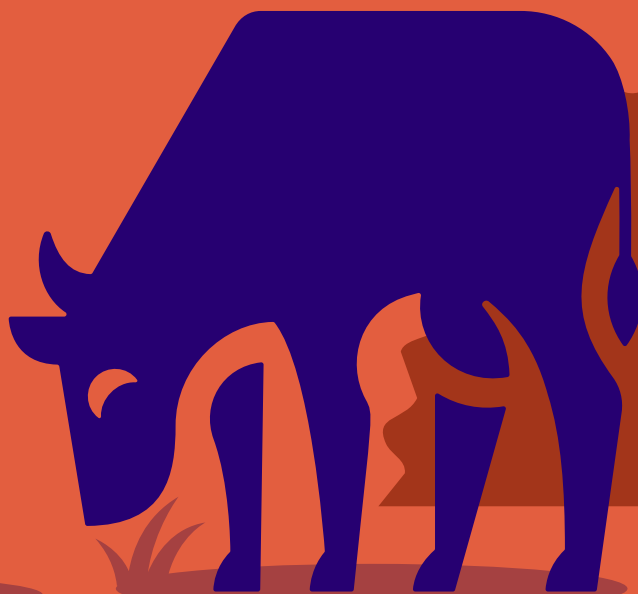
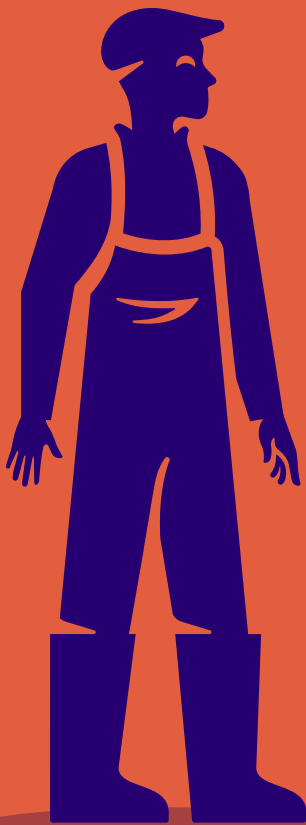


RSPCA 

Food and farming

Reducing the consumption of animal products



Introduction

The farming of billions of animals every year, the vast majority in low-welfare conditions, is the biggest animal welfare crisis of our time.

The global slaughter of farmed animals has risen dramatically over the last 45 years: from 12 billion in 1980 to an estimated 82 billion in 2025¹. With a global population of 8.2 billion people predicted to rise to 9.7 billion by 2050², demand for meat is expected to grow by 70 percent, increasing pressure on land and food production systems.

The demand for animal products³ has fuelled intensive farming practices that prioritise output and profit over animal welfare. In lower-welfare farms, animals are routinely confined to cramped cages or overcrowded sheds, with barely enough room to move or express their natural behaviours. Many are denied natural daylight, comfortable bedding and an enriched environment to combat boredom and stress. They're also bred to grow so fast or produce such high levels of animal products that they develop severe health issues. Many endure mutilations, inhumane conditions and miserable lives and deaths, highlighting the sheer scale of suffering embedded within the current food system.

In the UK, an estimated 94 percent of people currently choose to eat animal products, and this demand is expected to rise⁴. Over one billion land animals and around 77 million fish⁵ are farmed in the UK every year. An estimated 85 percent of these animals are produced to lower-welfare standards⁶.

A move away from lower-welfare farming would see supply chains reduce harm to animals and actively integrate farmed animals into healthy, functioning ecosystems that support both animal welfare and biodiversity. However, to end lower-welfare farming, poor management practices need to be eliminated, healthy breeds must be chosen, and the scale of production must be addressed. As long as demand remains high, systems designed for maximum output will continue to dominate.

“ In the UK, an estimated 94 percent of people currently choose to eat animal products, and this demand is expected to rise. ”

By shifting diets and market trends towards lower consumption of animal products, the number of farmed animals can be reduced, creating the physical space and economic conditions needed to transition to higher-welfare systems and provide animals with a good life.

Tackling suffering on this scale therefore needs a dual approach: phasing out inherently low-welfare practices and significantly reducing the number of animals farmed. This is a shared responsibility. Retailers, food businesses, governments, farmers and consumers all have a role to play in reshaping the market so that higher-welfare farming becomes the norm, not the exception.

1 ourworldindata.org/grapher/livestock-counts

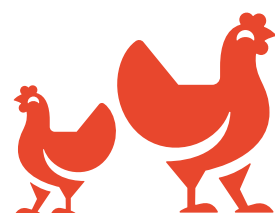
2 Chudasama, C., Current trends and technologies in the UK agricultural Technology industry, pricebailey.co.uk/reports/current-trends-technologies-uk-agricultural-technology-industry

3 Meat, fish, eggs and dairy

4 rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/strategy/food-and-farming

5 ciwf.org.uk/news/85-of-people-in-the-uk-want-better-future-for-farmed-fish

6 <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/our-campaigns/factory-farming-map>





Shifting the food system to improve animal welfare

It's unrealistic to think that we can tackle, and ultimately end, lower-welfare farming without reducing the number of animals we eat, both nationally and globally. That's why in our strategy we call for a significant decrease in the number of animals that are farmed.

Our refreshed organisational strategy⁷, launched in 2025, calls for a substantial reduction in the consumption of animal products across the UK by 2050. In practical terms, this means reducing consumption from current levels by three percent each year through to 2050. This reflects the need to deliver a significant reduction in animal suffering, while also contributing towards global climate and environmental targets, and aligning with human health recommendations. As a long-term commitment, the target supports lasting behaviour change to make higher-welfare and more sustainable choices the norm, helping to drive the shift towards a more compassionate food system that benefits animals, people and the planet.

As an organisation, the RSPCA has been working with others to improve farmed animals' lives for more than 200 years. But the challenges we face now are bigger than ever – tackling the huge and unsustainable numbers of animals suffering is the single, most important action we can take to improve animal welfare.

For a number of years, we've been calling on the public to Eat Less, Eat Better – to reduce the amount of animal products they eat, and when they do eat them to choose higher-welfare products. Alongside this, we've called for a reduction in the number of animals farmed and an end to lower-welfare farming. By setting an ambitious public target now, we're creating a clear framework for accountability and action.

Evidence shows that measurable goals help focus policy, bring stakeholders together, and speed up progress. Achieving this level of change will require coordinated action from government, industry and the public, particularly to strengthen standards and incentives for higher-welfare farming and protect higher-welfare British products from lower-welfare imports and alternative protein production.

There's already a plethora of literature on dietary health calling for diets to become richer in plant-based foods, with less reliance on animal-sourced foods, in order to improve health and environmental benefits. However, while it's assumed that eating fewer animals will lead to less suffering, the impact of reducing animal product consumption on animal welfare hadn't been explored in depth. This is why we commissioned the University of Lincoln to fill this evidence gap.

⁷ rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/strategy/our-strategy-2030

Animal welfare within a shared targets framework

We are one of many organisations across animal welfare, health, and environmental and climate sectors advocating for reduced consumption of animal products. We also join a number of other key organisations in setting a bold and ambitious target for reducing animal product consumption. These include the EAT-Lancet Commission, Eurogroup for Animals, the National Food Strategy, the Eating Better Alliance, and Compassion in World Farming. Together, these organisations demonstrate a clear and growing consensus across the animal welfare, environmental and food policy sectors that a significant shift in animal product consumption is both necessary and urgent.

A strong evidence base, including from the EAT-Lancet Commission, the National Food Strategy, and the Eating Better Alliance, highlights the need to decrease reliance on animal products, particularly those from intensive systems, for the benefit of human health, the climate and the environment⁸. Our target to reduce animal product consumption by three percent per year to 2050 aligns with these wider frameworks, while uniquely driving up animal welfare standards on farms through our RSPCA Assured scheme.

EAT-Lancet identifies substantial dietary shifts as essential to feeding a projected 9.6 billion people by 2050, including decreasing ruminant meat product consumption (such as beef and lamb) by 33 percent and significantly increasing the intake of whole plant-based foods (fruits, vegetables and nuts) by 63 percent⁹. Alongside environmental benefits, there's extensive evidence that reducing consumption of red and processed meat lowers the risk of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and certain cancers^{10,11}, while plant-rich and flexitarian diets are associated with improved metabolic health and weight management¹². By aligning with these health and environmental targets, our reduction pathway ensures that farmed animal welfare is explicitly included in food system change, delivering benefits for animals, people, and the planet.

Evidence produced by Friends of the Earth shows that 'intensive farming' has been linked to not only the loss of wildlife and poor animal welfare, but also soil and water pollution¹³. This has highlighted the far-reaching consequences of such practices that extend beyond farmed animals to also negatively impact wildlife and wider ecosystems.

Animals on farms are sentient beings, capable of experiencing pain and pleasure. Current low-welfare farming practices, including selective breeding for fast growth and high yields¹⁴, often compromise their welfare, leading to suffering from confinement, lack of enrichment, and poor health. Better animal welfare is an integral part of sustainable practice and scientists and governments have recognised it as such. It's not only a moral imperative: animals that are treated well are healthier and more productive, which supports animal welfare and reduces waste and environmental impact. Higher-welfare practices also reduce the zoonotic disease risks to human health.

8 compassioninfoodbusiness.com/media/7453787/2023_04_ciwf_meat_reduction_report_final.pdf

9 [thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736\(20\)29012-1](https://thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736(20)29012-1)

10 [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9159469/#:~:text=Regarding%20animal%20welfare%2C%20research%20suggests,et%20al.%2C%202016](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9159469/#:~:text=Regarding%20animal%20welfare%2C%20research%20suggests,et%20al.%2C%202016)

11 systematicreviewsjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13643-019-1264-5#:~:text=Reducing%20meat%20consumption%20may%20improve,animals%20raised%20in%20factory%20farms

12 healthline.com/nutrition/benefits-of-not-eating-meat#1-Supports-good-overall-health-and-weight-management

13 Friends of the Earth, How does farming affect our environment?, friendsoftheearth.uk/sustainable-living/food-production-and-sustainable-farming

14 D'Silva, J., 2006, Adverse impact of industrial animal agriculture on the health and welfare of farmed animals, *Integrative Zoology*, 1, pp.53-58

University of Lincoln research: main findings

To better understand how reducing the consumption and production of animal products affects animal welfare in the UK, the RSPCA commissioned the University of Lincoln to carry out detailed research quantifying the welfare impacts of a reduction.

The study investigated how reducing animal product consumption would affect the number of animals farmed, explored plausible scenarios that could lead to this reduction, and included scenario modelling that considered substitution effects as well as motivations driven by animal welfare concerns and cost-of-living factors. It also examined the impact on the number of animals affected by infectious diseases, the number of animals used in research, and the impact on land use and greenhouse gas emissions.

The results highlighted that equivalent to a three percent reduction in the consumption of animal products per year, based on current levels of consumption, **would lead to almost one billion fewer land animals and over one million fewer fish per year being farmed in the UK by the year 2050.**

After reviewing the existing literature, a plausible scenario is that if people eat less beef for reasons unrelated to animal welfare, such as cost-of-living concerns or health perceptions, they may switch to or increase their chicken consumption. This is known as a substitution effect. In this scenario, it could have detrimental impacts on chicken welfare. To avoid this effect, animal welfare would likely need to be a key driver to influence consumer behaviour. Ultimately, the extent to which reduced consumption leads to meaningful welfare improvements will depend on consumer motivation, purchasing patterns, and the market incentives that shape them. This gradual, continuous reduction leading up to the year 2050 would also result in up to **three billion fewer wild-caught fish**, and other aquatic animals such as decapod crustaceans, being taken from and fished in the wild in 2050. These wild-caught aquatic species are most commonly used to create fishmeal used in animal feed.

Impact on the number of farmed animals

The research used scenario modelling to understand the impact of a reduction on species types specifically. It found that substitution effects (e.g. shifting from red meat to chicken as a result of financial concerns) have the potential to temporarily increase chicken meat production and related welfare risks in the short term because consumers often switch to what they perceive as the closest, cheapest, or most convenient alternative when reducing other meats, increasing the number of animals farmed in lower-welfare conditions. In one scenario, where higher cost of living resulted in reduced red meat (beef, lamb and pork) consumption, this is substituted or reallocated towards an increase in cheaper white meat, notably meat chicken products. The results highlight the projected annual requirements for beef cattle, sheep, pigs, and broiler chickens under this model. As red meat consumption declines over time, the annual requirements for beef cattle, sheep, and pigs also decrease (Figure 1), equating to approximately 610,230 beef cattle, 3,434,530 sheep, and 3,392,470 pigs spared in 2050.

“The extent to which reduced consumption leads to meaningful welfare improvements will depend on consumer motivation...”

Population increase Scenario 1 (reduced red meat consumption) K head = per thousand animals

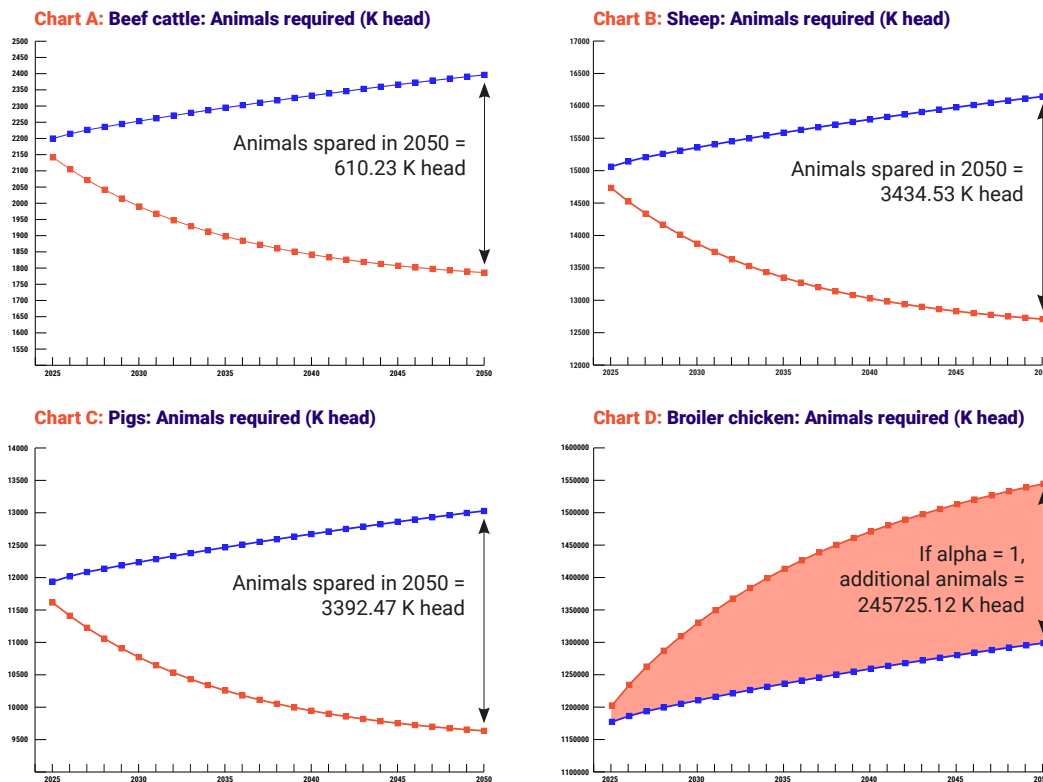


Figure 1: Farm animal requirements 2025–2050

For broiler chickens, Chart D (Figure 1) shows that in the absence of a substitution effect, requirements increase only in line with population growth. However, as the substitution effect increases, the number of broilers required also rises. The model indicates that if red meat consumption fell by 20 percent by 2050 and was fully replaced by chicken meat, an additional 245,725,124 broiler chickens would be required in 2050 compared with population growth alone.

Figure 2 presents model projections for the number of animals required across different animal categories under two scenarios. Scenario 1 (blue line) reflects current consumption trends and shows a small increase in the number of animals farmed over time. Scenario 2 (red line) models a gradual reduction in consumption, leading to a steady decline in the number of animals required. The difference between the two lines represents the number of animals spared each year. This difference is small in the early years but increases over time as consumption falls, resulting in a substantial reduction in the number of animals required by 2050. The largest reductions are seen for broiler chickens and salmon (877,938,016 and 110,558,264 respectively in 2050), largely because these animals produce smaller yields per individual compared to larger species.

Decline in disease

The research also found that there would be a range of other positive impacts for UK agriculture if a three percent reduction in animal products were achieved each year up to 2050. This level of reduction in animals on farms, as well as reduced stocking densities, would improve disease control and pathogen management, and help to slow antimicrobial resistance. This reduction would occur as the risk of exposure to, and severity of, diseases declines. Alongside this, the likelihood of new pathogen strains developing would lower, leading to pathogen transmission rates decreasing. This would result from the average distance between farms increasing, a reduction in the sources of potential transmission, and making disease control strategies easier to implement. Lower production, reduced stocking densities, and decreased livestock movements would further reduce the risk of disease outbreaks. In fish farming, lower production would reduce sea lice and infection rates by limiting opportunities for transmission between farms.

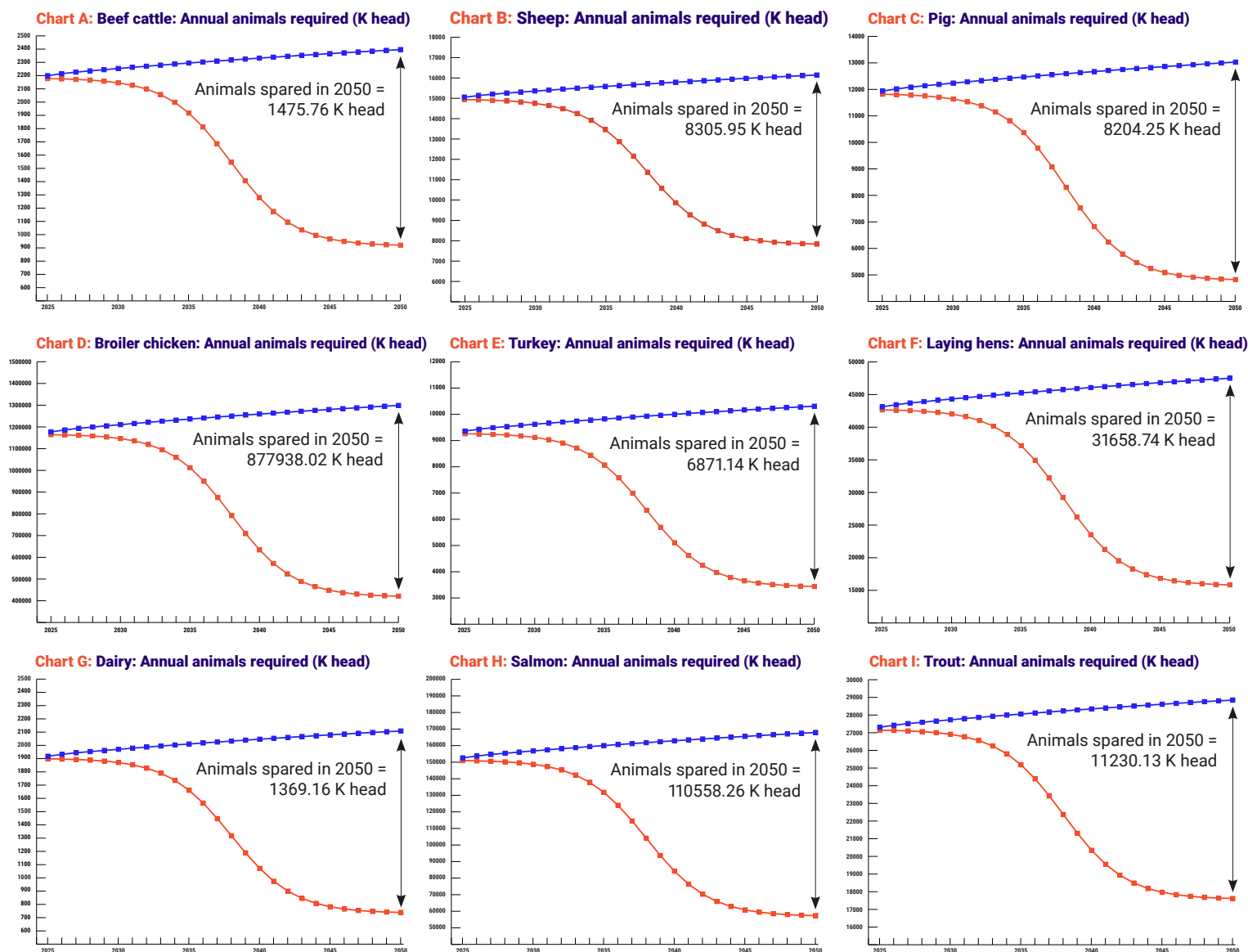


Figure 2: Animals spared 2025–2050

Environmental impact

From an environmental and land use perspective, if animal product consumption is reduced by three percent each year up to 2050, in 2050, compared to current levels, approximately **six million hectares of farm land could be freed up. This is equivalent to three times the area of Wales**, or nine million football pitches. Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions would also be reduced, including a **40 percent reduction in UK agricultural emissions and a four percent reduction in total UK GHG emissions**. This is the equivalent of a 0.03–0.04 percent reduction in global emissions. Some studies have identified that animal agriculture is responsible for 11–20 percent of global GHG emissions and more than 30 percent of global methane emissions¹⁵.

Producing feed crops such as soy and maize also places significant demands on land, water, and energy¹⁵. Reflecting this, the UK Climate Change Committee recommends reducing meat and dairy consumption by 20 percent by 2030 to meet national climate targets¹⁶. Reducing consumption in high-income countries is therefore critical for meeting global climate goals and improving food security¹⁷. Without this transition, climate impacts, including heat stress, flooding, and extreme weather, will continue to harm not just farmed animals, but companion animals and wildlife too.

15 [wri.org/insights/better-meat-sourcing-climate-environmental-impacts](https://www.wri.org/insights/better-meat-sourcing-climate-environmental-impacts)

16 lshrm.ac.uk/newsevents/expert-opinion/meat-and-dairy-reduction-policies-would-help-meet-net-zero-targets-and

17 earth.org/meat-consumption-and-climate-change



Motivations behind consumer behaviour

Additionally, the research highlighted that the extent and nature of welfare benefits will depend on the specific drivers behind changes in consumer behaviour, as well as the significant import and export of animal products in the UK. For instance, if reductions are motivated by concerns about animal welfare or environmental issues, such as a shift to plant-based diets, there could be greater welfare improvements as consumption moves towards lower-intensity systems that consider both animal welfare and environmental impact. Alternatively, if change is driven mainly by cost-of-living concerns or health perceptions, we may see a shift from more expensive meats, including extensively reared red meats such as beef and lamb, to cheaper more intensively reared poultry, which could reduce overall welfare gains. In practice, changes are likely to be influenced by a mix of factors. Therefore, campaigns or policies aiming to improve animal welfare through reduced animal product consumption should focus on promoting those drivers most likely to yield positive welfare outcomes, while being mindful of factors that may limit or delay such benefits.

Taking action to reduce meat consumption

For animal welfare, a three percent reduction in the consumption of animal products per year by 2050 would not only result in one billion fewer animals farmed, but would also have other significant impacts on animal welfare in the UK. In practical terms, this represents small and manageable changes for the average UK consumer, equating to around:

- Three fewer burgers or two fewer steaks per year to 2050
- Seven fewer sausages or three fewer pork chops per year to 2050
- Half a whole chicken less or four fewer chicken breasts per year to 2050
- Forty-five fewer bowls of cereal with milk per year to 2050
- Five fewer eggs per year to 2050

Framed this way, reducing animal product consumption appears far less daunting, with the changes more easily achieved through simple swaps or occasional omissions throughout the year, rather than an immediate, major dietary change.

While animal welfare concerns are key to driving lasting consumption change, if reductions are motivated mainly by cost, it's likely that animals may continue to be farmed under low-welfare conditions. The University of Lincoln's research found that while past welfare-driven campaigns and educational interventions can reduce meat consumption, their impact has generally been limited, short-term, and rarely sustained. **Achieving meaningful, long-term**

change requires a change in industry practices and public policy, as well as extensive campaigns, coordinated strategies, and ongoing public engagement. Targeting receptive audiences, such as young people in particular, could help shape early preferences and encourage lasting reductions in animal product consumption.

Standardised, mandatory welfare labelling

The University of Lincoln's research also found that the variety of product certification schemes may create a 'choice overload', confusing consumers and limiting their impact on behaviour. When faced with too many options, consumers often default to standard, cheaper products rather than choosing higher-welfare alternatives.

The UK egg sector demonstrates how effective this can be. Following the introduction of mandatory production labelling in 2004, consumer demand shifted significantly towards free-range eggs, with major retailers now committing to phase out cage-produced eggs. Over the past decade, demand for free-range eggs has increased by almost 75 percent, with spending rising from £419 million in 2010 to £1.1 billion in 2020. As a result, all major UK retailers committed to moving away from cage-produced eggs by 2025¹⁸. This demonstrates that clear, standardised labelling can empower consumers to make choices aligned with higher animal welfare values. This shows that when welfare information is clear and mandatory, it can drive meaningful market change.

Plant-based alternatives

Eating is a social activity, and people's choices are shaped by those around them¹⁹. Evidence shows that increasing the public appeal of plant-based alternatives and establishing sustainable diets as the norm through institutional or public procurement can support lasting change. For example, the introduction of 'Thursday Veggie Day' in Ghent's public organisations increased awareness of food's environmental impact among pupils, parents and staff, while contributing to reduced food waste, improved access to fresh meals for lower-income groups, a seven percent increase in vegetarians, and healthier, more sustainable meals for thousands of students²⁰.

Accessibility and how choices are presented to consumers also play a critical role. A University of Cambridge study found that doubling the number of vegetarian options in college cafeterias increased plant-based meal sales by 40–80 percent without reducing overall food sales, demonstrating that simply increasing availability can influence decisions²¹. Complementing access with appealing language and marketing further enhances uptake, with studies by the Better Buying Lab and the Behavioural Insights Team showing that menu and product descriptions that highlight flavour and texture (e.g. 'Rich, Buttery Roasted Sweet Corn' or 'Mild and Sweet Chickpea and Potato Curry') significantly increase the selection of plant-based options²².

- 18 thescottishfarmer.co.uk/news/19892720.demand-free-range-eggs-soars-75-past-decade/#:~:text=Demand%20for%20free%20range%20eggs%20has%20soared,%C2%A3419m%20in%202010%20to%20%C2%A31.1bn%20in%202020
- 19 sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0195666314005017
- 20 eurocities.eu/stories/ghents-food-revolution/#:~:text=Communication%20and%20citizens'%20engagement%20have,available%20to%20thousands%20of%20students
- 21 cam.ac.uk/stories/veg-nudge#:~:text=Scientists%20from%20the%20University%20of,the%20National%20Academy%20of%20Sciences
- 22 greenqueen.com.hk/language-matters-mainstream-consumers-prefer-term-field-grown-to-meat-free-vegetarian/#:~:text=Aside%20from%20provenance%2C%20analysts%20say,sales%20by%20a%20whopping%20108%25



Retailers and food service providers also amplify these effects. For example, a UK supermarket's Veganuary campaign in January 2021 increased plant-based product sales by 57 percent during the promotion period, with sales remaining 15 percent above pre-intervention levels afterward, particularly in stores serving less affluent areas²³. Similarly, Tesco's 'Better Baskets' initiative has signposted plant-based alternatives while reformulating products to reduce calories, contributing to improved health and sustainable consumption²⁴. Restaurants taking proactive action also demonstrate measurable impact: Wagamama's commitment to a 50 percent plant-based menu increased diners' consumption of plant-based meals to 20 percent, illustrating that systemic interventions in retail and catering reinforce individual behavioural change²⁵.

Driving meaningful change

Taken together, these findings highlight that meaningful reductions in meat consumption, and the associated animal welfare benefits, require coordinated action across education, marketing, accessibility, and institutional leadership, creating an environment where plant-based and higher-welfare choices are both visible and appealing.

Across the UK, numerous organisations run campaigns to promote meat reduction for animal welfare. These campaigns target both consumer purchasing behaviour and engagement with corporate organisations. For instance, in April 2020, several public sector catering associations launched the #20percentlessmeat campaign. This initiative aims to reduce meat on menus by 20 percent in public sector institutions such as schools, hospitals, universities, and care homes²⁶. FOUR PAWS UK also campaign for reduced meat consumption, promoting their 3Rs principle: reducing the consumption of meat and other animal-based products; refining diets by choosing products with certified high animal welfare standards; and replacing animal-based products with plant-based alternatives²⁷. Over 18,000 supporters have already committed to their meat reduction pledge²⁸.

The RSPCA's strategy encourages people to Eat Less, Eat Better. As an organisation, we recognise that we can't tackle animal suffering unless there's a significant reduction in the number of animals farmed and the amount of animal products we consume. We want to help redesign our food system and drive a shift in consumer behaviour to achieve the three percent reduction in animal product consumption each year. We're committed to working with a broad range of stakeholders throughout the food and farming industries to create and drive positive change. **The aim is to ensure every farmed animal can live a good life and have a humane death.** We actively campaign for an end to lower-welfare farming practices, a reduction in the number of animals farmed, and the end of certain systems, such as cages. We also advocate for progressive, higher-welfare standards for farmed animals, including through our farm assurance and food labelling accreditation scheme RSPCA Assured.

23 cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/CB44968AAD1E86856D01CA47A7BC884D/S1368980022001914a.pdf

24 tescoplc.com/sustainability/health#:~:text=%E2%80%9CI%20am%20proud%20of%20the,encourage%20healthier%20choices%20has%20altered.%E2%80%9D

25 thecaterer.com/news/the-restaurant-group-reveals-fy21-results#:~:text=In%20the%20eight%20weeks%20to%20from%203,meals%20to%2020%25%20since%20introducing%20the%20range

26 20percentlessmeat.co.uk

27 four-paws.org.uk/campaigns-topics/topics/nutrition/animal-welfare-and-nutrition

28 action.four-paws.org.uk/page/81982/petition





Conclusion

The evidence is clear: reducing the consumption of animal products is one of the most powerful and immediate actions we can all take to improve farmed animal welfare, while also delivering substantial benefits for the climate, nature, and our health.

The University of Lincoln's research demonstrates that achieving a two to three percent annual reduction in animal product consumption could result in up to one billion fewer land animals and over one million fish being farmed in the UK in 2050, alongside significant reductions in environmental harm, disease risk, and greenhouse gas emissions. Reducing consumption also creates the conditions needed for the animals who remain in farming systems to be reared to far higher welfare standards.

However, the research also shows that how consumption is reduced matters. If reductions are driven primarily by cost pressures, then substitution towards cheaper, intensively farmed products risks undermining welfare gains. To maximise positive outcomes for animals, change must be guided by clear welfare-focused drivers, supported by effective campaigns, simplified information, and policy frameworks that prioritise high-welfare and lower-impact food choices. Long-term change will depend on shaping preferences early, reducing consumer confusion, and embedding animal welfare as a central consideration within food system reform.

“A future food system that farms fewer animals, farms them better, and supports farmers through a fair and well-managed transition is not only achievable, but essential.”

For the RSPCA, this reinforces the importance of an animal-first approach to food and farming. A future food system that farms fewer animals, farms them better, and supports farmers through a fair and well-managed transition is not only achievable, but essential. By working with consumers, businesses, farmers, and policymakers, and by aligning animal welfare with environmental and health objectives, we can help drive the systemic change needed to reduce suffering at scale and build a more compassionate, resilient food system for animals, people, and the planet.



RSPCA.

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We exist to inspire everyone to create a better world for every animal ■ Patron: HM King Charles III ■ Registered charity no. 219099

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