

Detailed Recommendations

Strategic Recommendation 1: On-farm audits must be reduced, simplified and delivered more consistently

Recommendation Title	Detail	Who	AHDB Comment
1.1. Clarity about purpose	The purpose and scope of farm assurance must be clarified and reset, based on the good practice statement set out in this report. Agreement should be sought from bodies across the food supply chain on this restatement so that there is a clear understanding of the need for, and objectives of, a high-quality UK farm assurance system.	NFUs and AHDB to lead	<p>We plan (with NFUs) to draft a discussion paper - based on the FAR findings and the submission we made to the independent commissioners - articulating the different models for purpose and scope.</p> <p>We expect to contribute to the debate through the Ownership Body (OB) as one of the owners of Red Tractor (RT).</p>
1.2. Revising standards – focusing only on what is necessary	There is an urgent need to remove or reduce the complexity of standards. Each farm assurance scheme must undertake a deep dive of existing standards to provide a publicly available plan setting out which, in due course, will be removed, replaced or improved. Each scheme must, thereafter, report publicly on the rationale for keeping or removing a standard, be that, for example, added value or due diligence delivered. Each new standard introduced to a scheme must have a publicly identified sponsor/sponsors to provide greater transparency on the catalyst for its inclusion. This work will provide the basis for applicable UKAS scheme reviews, which we recognise take place on a longer cycle, but will enable time to be provided for improved communication with the farming industry on the steps to standards simplification being pursued by farm assurance schemes.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.

1.3. A right of appeal	There must be recourse for farm businesses to refer an audit outcome to an independent arbitrator, outside the farm assurance scheme, who is capable of making binding decisions in instances where that outcome could restrict market access (for example in the dairy sector). Each farm assurance scheme must publicly restate its approach to having a transparent complaints and appeals procedure that takes account of the need for external arbitration. Unless non-compliance relates to an issue of food safety, or some other serious breach of standards, it should not result in immediate suspension of market access. Each farm assurance scheme must also publicly restate the timescales within which an appeal process will be completed.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.
1.4. Proportionate sanctions	Each farm assurance scheme must revisit the sanctions imposed for non-compliance to ensure that they are proportionate and do not unduly impact upon the viability of a farming business. To this end, standards should continue to be graded, but schemes must work together to ensure that there is greater consistency between their standards, grading and any sanctions imposed for non-compliance.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.

<p>1.5. Risk based, coordinated inspection</p>	<p>Each farm assurance scheme must adopt a risk-based approach to audit visits, based on previous audit outcomes, so that the timing of visits, and their content, can be adjusted to enable more focussed audits to be undertaken, possibly over a longer time period between visits where this is permissible under the accreditation arrangements pertaining to the scheme. The risk assessment must be clearly communicated to the farm business so that it is aware of the timescales and areas of focus that will form the basis of future audit visits. Prior to a farm audit, the certification body must continue, as currently expected, to contact the farmer to set out an audit plan on how the process will work and offer the opportunity for the farmer to ask questions or raise any concerns. However, this should, henceforth, be conducted as a supportive contact to reduce the stress associated with an audit. It should also be a mechanism by which advice about the audit process can be offered on a non-prejudicial basis. If an auditor is unable to conduct their audit in accordance with the timing in the agreed audit plan, they must set out their reasons for not complying with this requirement and provide a written statement to this effect to the farmer. If the farmer does not agree that the time taken for the audit was compliant with the audit plan, through no fault of their own, the farm assurance scheme must review the matter to ensure that the auditor's work is being conducted as effectively and efficiently as possible and inform the farmer of the outcome of its review.</p>	<p>Farm Assurance Schemes</p>	<p>We support this recommendation.</p>
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<p>1.6. Learning lessons: using experience to support members</p>	<p>Whilst recognising the nature of audit requirements, farm assurance schemes must establish processes to make the lessons learned from audit visits available to their membership in an anonymised form so that best practice, and the means to develop that practice, can be shared across the scheme. This should recognise the role that farm assurance plays in helping to maintain and improve standards across the farming industry and auditors should be tasked with the requirement to identify best practice to feed into these processes.</p>	<p>Farm Assurance Schemes</p>	<p>We support this recommendation.</p>
<p>1.7. Working in tandem: collaboration and cooperation between schemes</p>	<p>Additional work is required to secure collaboration and cooperation between farm assurance schemes to allow for multiple scheme audits to be conducted at the same time, reduce duplication and encourage ‘earned recognition’ between schemes, with the aim of reducing the time required from farm businesses in preparing for, and participating in, their audits. In due course there must be a common scale of standards (or at least a ‘read across’ between scheme standards) – with minimum standards and additional requirements related to customer requirements only where they are strictly necessary to obtain particular or specialist market access.</p>	<p>Farm Assurance Schemes, led by AHDB</p>	<p>We question whether we are the correct organisation to facilitate this process and we have limited resources.</p> <p>As an independent party with a role in all nations of the UK, we propose to offer to chair a task and finish group of assurance schemes to support them to discuss how they could further reduce duplicative audits and create ‘read across’ on standards. We will only proceed with this work if there is willingness from most schemes to participate actively and support for AHDB to chair such a group.</p> <p>The work will need to be done by the individual assurance schemes. We would write to them formally in advance of taking any action to ensure we had a commitment of support.</p>

1.8. Joint training for inspectors	<p>Farm assurance schemes must revisit their induction and training programmes for both new and existing auditors to create and publish a common ‘framework’ that is mandatory for all scheme auditors to follow to address the simplified assurance structure sought in this report. There must be a renewed focus on training to develop interpersonal skills amongst the audit community so as to better understand and improve communication and relationships between the audit process and the farm business. To this end, farm assurance schemes should engage with The Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (TIAH) as a means to capture and recognise the completion of continuing professional development of farm assurance auditors and for TIAH to help signpost farm assurance schemes, and their auditors, to appropriate training providers. Farm assurance schemes must publish data on auditor training and completion on an annual basis.</p>	Farm Assurance Schemes, working with TIAH	We support the point of this recommendation.
1.9. Transparency between schemes and regulators	<p>Farm assurance schemes must instigate a training programme/awareness raising exercise with farming industry regulators to better explain the purpose and scope of good practice farm assurance, and to help improve understanding of the respective roles of farm assurance versus regulatory requirements. Ideally, this process should be coordinated between the farm assurance schemes, though it is recognised that it will need to take account of the devolved nature of certain regulators and the schemes most relevant to their respective territories. This exercise must be repeated on a routine basis (we recommend once every two years) to ensure that the exchange of information is up to date. Account must also be taken of the regulatory review being undertaken by Defra to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of its regulatory landscape. Each year, under each farm assurance scheme, auditors should come together alongside key stakeholders to walk through mock inspections to improve two-way dialogue and learning. We are aware this happens under QMS/SQC</p>	Farm Assurance Schemes and industry regulators	We support this recommendation.

	schemes and strongly encourage all farm assurance schemes to adopt such an approach.		
1.10. Addressing the impact of audit on farmer wellbeing	We have been told about the pressure placed on some farmers by participation in farm assurance schemes, and of the impact on their level of stress and mental health. We are also aware of the wide variety of farms undergoing schemes audits, and the fact that farming is an industry where there are reported to be high levels of neurodiversity. There is a need for auditors to be aware of these factors and to be able to take them into account in their auditing approach, so farm assurance schemes must pay particular attention to audit style and approach in their auditor training programmes. Training and support is available on mental health awareness from, for example, FCN, RABI, RSABI and Rural Support and we encourage farm assurance schemes to engage proactively with these charities and support mechanisms.	Farm Assurance Schemes and relevant farming support organisations	We support this recommendation.
1.11. Promoting consistency in inspections	Where possible, there must be greater consistency in the appointment of an auditor to a particular farm business, to enable a better understanding of that business to be generated in the audit process. It is recognised that this will be subject to accreditation requirements and that a term of appointment may be necessary, but that term should be sufficient to enable an auditor to get to know the farm they are auditing.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.

1.12. Inspection as a career path	<p>Farm Assurance schemes must collaborate to secure and improve the pipeline of experienced and trained farm auditors. This may require greater engagement of farm assurance schemes with external bodies (such as colleges and universities), and publication of how this is done, to raise awareness of farm assurance as a potential role of interest (even if part time) to the next generation of farmers, and could involve work experience placements, student projects on farm assurance and discussions with course tutors on the latest developments in farm assurance and how they can be built into educational curricula.</p>	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support the point of this recommendation.
1.13. Risk-based inspection	<p>There must be a reduction in the frequency of farm assurance audits for those farm businesses that are consistently compliant, building upon the risk-based audit approach that we recommend should be adopted by farm assurance schemes. Farm assurance schemes must also consider having a focus on particular topics while auditors are on site, which, alongside the greater use of technology to deal with remaining audit requirements that can be reviewed before the farm visit, could release more time for the auditor to assess more aspects of farming practice rather than assembled paperwork.</p>	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.

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

Recommendation Title	Detail	Who	AHDB Comment
2.1. 'Tell Us Once': making good use of data	Farm assurance scheme auditors must be mandated to review their scheme's online portal prior to their audit visit and to conduct a 'tell us once' review of the documentation placed on the portal by the farm business. This is to enable the audit visit to focus more on any essential missing documentation and a review of farming practice during the course of the audit visit. Farm assurance scheme auditors must be required to provide written evidence that the pre-visit portal/repository review has been conducted.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.
2.2. Data ownership: the need for resolution	Any outstanding issues surrounding the ownership, holding and use/sharing of data required by farm assurance schemes, following the review and streamlining of current standards recommended earlier in this report, must be clarified in conjunction with farming industry bodies and the results communicated to the farming industry as soon as practicable. It is recognised that certain farming data may be seen as valuable by assurance scheme members, but it is essential that value creation by a farming business is not conflated with the use of anonymised data that can help direct improvements in farming assurance and farming systems. This distinction needs to be 'written in' to an industry compact about data ownership, custodianship and use that will be vital if the longer term benefits arising from the wider use of technology in farm assurance systems are to be realised.	Farm Assurance Schemes, NFUs and AHDB	<p>We support the point of this recommendation.</p> <p>There is much work in this space already, which can be applied to Farm Assurance - including the work being carried out on environmental data at the Food Data Transparency Programme - to make sure that farmers and other data owners retain control of their data.</p> <p>AHDB is currently developing a data sharing solution, which may provide some structure to ensure farmers have trust and control of their data.</p> <p>Ultimately, farmers must trust and support any use of data.</p>

2.3. Creating a data co-op	Farm assurance schemes, working together, should support the feasibility work into a data co-op, building on activities already started by SAOS in Scotland, whereby data could be shared across the private and public sector to reduce duplication and improve efficiency. However, through a co-operative mechanism farmers should retain control of the commercially sensitive data, managing consent and protecting any commercial value associated with it. Consideration must also be given to replicating the approach seen in Wales for the development of data hubs that can be used to pull data sources together to provide guidance and resources for the farming industry and inform the development of farming practices and policies.	Farm Assurance Schemes	<p>We support the point of this recommendation.</p> <p>There are several initiatives in the different nations of the UK. Alongside the work in Scotland on the proposed Scottish Data Co-operative and in Wales, AHDB is planning to work on a possible solution (focused on England but working with these other initiatives to ensure connections at a UK level).</p> <p>This is a development of the concept we published some information on in November 2024. This approach should make it easy for a collect once, use many times approach, controlled by the data owner, not undermine value and is applicable across several uses (where the data owner gives permission), one of which could be Farm Assurance.</p>
2.4. Supporting farmers in a digital world	Farm assurance schemes must publish information about the training programmes they have put in place to help improve farmer take-up of current technologies used within their scheme and must ensure that future system developments include relevant training for end users at cost to the scheme, not to the farm business.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.

<p>2.5. Future possibilities: harnessing collective expertise</p>	<p>The farming industry should seek to facilitate a regular ‘hackathon’ – inviting subject matter experts and institutions to help gather relevant businesses / academics to address the question of the longer-term use of technology in farm assurance. The literature review for this report shows that the topic of technology is often raised as a solution but there has been little collaboration and focus on building solutions that will help reduce the burden of assurance on farming businesses whilst satisfying the information needs of those who rely upon farm assurance for wider business or regulatory purposes.</p>	<p>NFUs, AHDB and the Defra Data Group, working with Agri-Tech E and/or the UK Agri-Tech Centre and participating Farm Assurance Schemes</p>	<p>We support the point of this recommendation and links to our comments against recommendation 2.3.</p>
<p>2.6. ‘Tell Us Once’: collecting and storing data</p>	<p>Farm assurance schemes must ensure that they have a portal or similar data repository which can be used by scheme members to host information required during their audit visit. The format of that data should be flexible (for example, data provided from farm management systems, relevant images, scanned copies of certificates etc) to better provide for data collection during the course of the audit cycle rather than during the period immediately before the audit visit. Information provided via a portal/repository should be a mandatory element of data collection and, to this end, farm businesses must be positively incentivised by farm assurance schemes to use these basic technologies as part of the audit process. Furthermore, farm assurance schemes must publish annually the take-up of their respective portal/repository by scheme members so that a record of progress towards universal use of such systems is publicly available.</p>	<p>Farm Assurance Schemes</p>	<p>We support the point of the recommendation.</p> <p>There is a need for systems that make it easier for farmers, assurance schemes and others to share data in a way with trust and control by the data owner/farmer.</p>

2.7. Alternative approaches	<p>The AIMS/Vetaverse scheme, along with other schemes under development using new technological approaches, should be explored further, with support from others, to provide a strong focus on their governance structures, data ownership and funding models. Whilst not an immediate replacement for accredited farm assurance schemes as they currently stand, technology-based approaches, such as that proposed by AIMS, may have the longer-term potential to disrupt current methods of farm assurance in the livestock sector, and could bring non-assured livestock products into farm assurance scope. Like similar initiatives, it will need to move from concept to coordinated application with the support of other actors in the food supply chain, the government and the wider farming industry.</p>	<p>New scheme developers to work with AHDB to support the development and delivery of novel approaches to farm assurance</p>	<p>We support the point of the recommendation.</p> <p>Conversations are ongoing with AIMS with regard to the development of their Vetasure scheme (2.7) for the meat sectors..</p>
2.8. Keep it live: reviewing standards	<p>As new approaches to farm inspections are created, either as a result of emerging legislation or other regulatory requirements, a dynamic approach to implementing related exemptions in current farm assurance systems must be taken. One example might be the impact of Vet Attestation and how this might be applied, or used as an equivalent method, to help reduce audit requirements in some farming sectors. We expect current farm assurance schemes to use data on a ‘tell us once’ principle to avoid duplication of effort by farm businesses and to deliver greater efficiency in farm assurance processes.</p>	<p>Farm Assurance Schemes</p>	<p>We support the point of this recommendation and links to our comments against recommendation 2.3.</p>

<p>2.9. Investing in technology</p>	<p>The intended outcome from the above recommendations is to deliver a technology and data environment, within the medium term, which is embedded within all farm assurance schemes and where farm business take-up is greatly improved. However, it is recognised that technological developments are moving at a fast pace and farm assurance schemes will need to maintain, at their cost, a comprehensive strategy for innovation and investment in this element of their work. The aim should be for farm assurance schemes to work together, using the results of the proposed Hackathons, to develop real time, mobile (i.e. farm friendly), data collection systems on which a rolling assurance system could be based. Research by Zhou et al on Intelligent Food Assurance Systems (IFAS) shows that food assurance/food transparency/food waste and sustainability and business value can benefit from collaboration and improved data use. The technology for some aspects of this approach, enabling real time data collection for example, is already employed on many farms, but greater coordination of effort, and engagement with the farming community, will be required to deliver a shift in farm assurance towards these methods and to enable aggregated data to be better used for best practice identification and feedback to farm businesses.</p>	<p>AHDB to coordinate with Farm Assurance Schemes</p>	<p>We support the point of this recommendation and links to our comments against recommendation 2.3.</p>
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Strategic Recommendation 3:

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

Recommendation Title	Detail	Who	AHDB Comment
3.1. Creating and amending standards	We recognise that farm assurance schemes have different ways in which they engage with the farming community, but it is essential that farmers are involved in the process of creating or amending farm assurance standards. Initially, each farm assurance scheme must publish the way in which it achieves this objective so that the routes for farmers to make their views known are clear. In the longer term, farm assurance schemes must collaborate to set out an agreed framework for the way in which consultation with the farming industry, beyond scheme board members, for example, is conducted.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.
3.2. Appointments to sector boards	It is also essential that the process for appointing farmers to sector boards (or similar) as representatives of their sector are transparent and that those acting in this capacity are clear that they must engage with the wider farming community to act as a representative voice for that community. The process for appointment should be independent of the scheme's senior executive team so that those selected are able to appropriately challenge that team on the operation and development of the farm assurance scheme. Furthermore, there must be a clear role description for farmer appointments which sets out their obligations to act as a representative for the relevant industry sector and in the wider interests of the farming industry.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.
3.3. Board structures in farm assurance schemes	All farm assurance schemes must review their structures and board composition to ensure that their skills mix is balanced and equitable across the food supply chain and should use the Campbell Tickell report as a guide to ensuring that their governance arrangements deliver best governance practice.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.

3.4. Balancing scheme demands	The statement of good practice for farm assurance set out in this report must be revisited periodically by farm assurance schemes to ensure that the demands placed on various parts of the food supply chain represented in the farm assurance scheme remain balanced, and that additional farm assurance costs arising from new or enhanced standards are shared across the food chain on an equitable basis. We suggest an annual review of this nature, with published outcomes, would provide the necessary assurance that such an assessment has been conducted and the results enacted.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation but suggest that it might be better if there was independent oversight of the annual review.
3.5. Using impact assessments	The publication of an impact assessment for either the creation or removal of a farm standard must become a matter of course for each farm assurance scheme. In this way the origin and rationale behind the standard/removal of the standard, and the way in which the farming industry has been consulted about this change can be publicly reported to help improve communication and levels of trust between the relevant scheme and its members.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.
3.6. A federation of farm assurance schemes	Farm assurance schemes should reflect on the need to establish a loose federation of farm assurance schemes which can act as a locus for knowledge transfer/thought leadership/best practice in the operation and development of the UK's farm assurance system. The federation would not be a new body, but a forum for agreeing common approaches to farm assurance across the UK. The secretariat for the federation should rotate between different schemes on an annual basis. Other governance arrangements for such a federation would need to ensure that no single farm assurance scheme would predominate and that the objective would be to support the farming industry, and wider food chain, in maintaining high standards in farm assurance to enable the UK to continue to compete in international food markets.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.

Strategic Recommendation 4:

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

Recommendation Title	Detail	Who	AHDB Comment
4.1. Developing acceptable environmental standards	<p>The RT scheme has made clear that it will not revisit the Greener Farms Commitment (or its successor) unless and until the farming industry asks it to do so. Other schemes will be progressing their own environmental standards in consultation with their respective members. In these circumstances there is no firm leadership around the issue of establishing a consistent framework for environmental standards that can act as a guide for farm businesses, nor is there clarity around how emerging legislation, with which the farming industry will be expected to comply, will be incorporated in farm assurance, other than in a very fragmented way. This issue must therefore be taken out of the hands of the farm assurance system and addressed by farming representatives, working with the relevant regulators, to provide a ‘foresight’ style approach to the conversion of environmental legal expectations into a code for use by farm assurance providers and farm businesses. This process will require the respective central and devolved government ministries and their agencies, to work with the industry to establish as common a framework as possible so that anomalies will not be ‘baked into’ farm assurance standards in different parts of the UK. To begin this process, the AHDB/NFUs must clearly articulate what is currently required by each of the 7 industry sectors to be legally compliant with current environmental legislation and conduct a gap analysis of methods for compliance and requirements of emerging/anticipated legislation for discussion with the ministries and their agencies.</p>	<p>AHDB, NFUs, Government Ministries and relevant agencies</p>	<p>We support the point of this recommendation but think the work needs to be wider than just the legislative level, and to also include what standards the market or Government is willing to pay for.</p> <p>There is considerable uncertainty about what the market will pay for. What should be included within farm assurance and what should be outside, might vary from scheme to scheme and depend on the purpose and role of that particular scheme.</p>

4.2. How can farmers implement environmental standards	In taking the above approach there must be clear and regular communication with farm businesses about the steps they can take to meet the necessary environmental legislative baseline and any agreed farm assurance standards related to that baseline. This should be on the basis of a menu of options for farming businesses to adopt, so that a ‘one size fits all’ approach for farm businesses is avoided.	AHDB and NFUs	We support the point of the recommendation but suggest there will be multiple partners to deliver on this work.
4.3. Rewarding the use of environmental standards	If businesses elsewhere in the food chain wish to see enhanced environmental or animal welfare standards (above the legal baseline) to help meet their public reporting requirements or to differentiate their position in the market this must be accompanied by a clearly identified premium paid to the farm business for the collection of the necessary data, the implementation of different farming practices or the adoption of new technologies to enhance animal welfare and/or environmental protection. This will recognise the benefit to the food chain business in delivering enhanced environmental and welfare standards whilst also compensating the farm business for any additional work required and for the use of farm data associated with these additional standards. Food chain businesses must report publicly on the steps they have taken to implement this recommendation to provide assurance to the farming industry, and to their customer base, that farm businesses are being, and will continue to be, adequately compensated for the additional work required to comply with enhanced farm assurance standards.	Food chain businesses beyond the farm gate	We agree that the supply chain should pay for additional environmental standards. Many stakeholders will be involved with this.

<p>4.4. Telling the wider world what farming delivers for the environment</p>	<p>Farm assurance schemes, in conjunction with the NFUs and AHDB, must collaborate to develop and implement a communications/PR plan for the wider public to highlight farming practices that are helping to deliver enhanced environmental standards. It is recognised that this approach may not be as straightforward when addressing animal welfare standards, because of the position towards UK farming taken by some animal welfare organisations, but consideration should nonetheless be given to highlighting good practice in farm animal welfare to better inform and allay potential concerns in the general public about UK farming standards.</p>	<p>Farm Assurance Schemes</p>	<p>We support this recommendation. AHDB already undertakes significant marketing and reputation work on behalf of its levy payers. We will work with partners to maximise the impact of our combined efforts.</p>
<p>4.5. A ‘foresight’ exercise on future environmental standards</p>	<p>Farm assurance schemes must work with the whole food supply chain to look at emerging trends to help the food sector be current and less defensive on environmental issues. We propose a further ‘foresight’ exercise to begin this process. It will be necessary to continue to monitor the UK’s farming performance on environmental standards and to benchmark this performance against competitor farming nations and international farm assurance standards. The review process must be driven from the perspective of farming businesses, taking longer term changes in environmental regulations as a baseline, whilst continuing to enable farms to determine how they will meet new standards from a menu of sector-appropriate farming measures.</p>	<p>Farm Assurance Schemes with farming and food chain industry representatives</p>	<p>We support the point of the recommendation and AHDB will play its part through our baselining and wider environmental work.</p>

Strategic Recommendation 5:

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

Recommendation Title	Detail	Who	AHDB Comment
5.1. Creating points of contact in government departments	There is no clear principal point of contact for farm assurance within government departments. They should address this as a matter of urgency, to ensure that governments across the UK are taking a more strategic view of how and when assurance schemes should feature as part of the regulatory landscape. We anticipate that responsibility for engagement with farm assurance schemes, the development of relevant policies (such as ‘earned recognition’) and coordination with regulatory agencies using farm assurance accreditation would form part of these roles. The assignment of these responsibilities would also enable greater coordination to take place between central and devolved governments, and with the farming industry, on the future landscape for farm assurance and the maintenance of standards to enable the UK to compete in international markets.	Government departments	We support this recommendation.
5.2. Consistency of regulatory use of farm assurance	There are a variety of ways in which government departments and agencies employ farm assurance, ranging from the concept of ‘earned recognition’ resulting in reduced inspections from an agency, or a laissez-faire approach where farm assurance has been outsourced to private providers and left to the market, to the engagement by a devolved government department in the co-development of farm support systems involving the industry and a farm assurance scheme. This patchwork approach to the use of farm assurance in the regulatory environment is no longer viable. A more strategic view is required, where the respective government departments, and their agencies, must determine how, and when, they expect to use farm assurance in their regulatory systems, and a consistent approach to its use is negotiated and agreed with farm assurance schemes and relevant industry bodies. An early part of these negotiations should be to	Government departments, regulatory agencies and NFUs	We support this recommendation.

	properly define the term ‘earned recognition’ so that the concept is employed consistently across the farm assurance landscape.		
5.3. Agreeing how regulatory sanctions and farm assurance work together	There is scope for farm assurance schemes to continue to be used as a proxy for regulatory inspections, but the terms of such engagements must be publicly available, and an approach must be agreed for the way in which sanctions resulting from noncompliance will be reported. This is intended to avoid the charge (sometimes reported, but for which we have found no evidence) that farm assurance schemes used by regulatory agencies are not serious about maintaining standards and applying appropriate sanctions.	Regulatory agencies working with farm assurance schemes	We support this recommendation.
5.4. Extending ‘earned recognition’	There is also scope for government bodies to extend the concept of ‘earned recognition’. Whilst we do not support the suggestion that farm assurance accreditation can be used as a gateway to government funding schemes (such as SFI or SFS), it is possible that participation in a government funding scheme could be used to fulfil the relevant aspects of a farm assurance audit. In this way duplication in the audit process can be avoided, or at least reduced, and with the focus on current farming support schemes being largely on environmental measures this approach may go some way to determining part of the requirements for	Farm assurance schemes in consultation with government departments	We support this recommendation.

	environmental standards discussed earlier in our recommendations.		
5.5. Using farm data to determine the impact of policy changes	A better coordinated and resourced UK Farm Assurance system could provide a considerable source of information about farming across the UK, together with evidence on the implementation of major policy changes on farm operations. One example would be the longer-term assessment of the impact and effectiveness of environmental management schemes, using suitably anonymised data from across the farming industry. To this end, central and devolved governments should work with farm assurance schemes to develop a commercial method of payment, in exchange for the release of relevant data from farming businesses, to support longitudinal studies on the outcomes of the UK's post-Brexit farming support schemes.	Government departments	We support the concept of this recommendation, but this is a sensitive topic and needs further discussion to ensure that farmer members of assurance schemes are comfortable with the approach and exactly what is done.
5.6. Improving government understanding of the role of farm assurance	It follows from our recommendation for the allocation of clear responsibilities for farm assurance that, within Defra, there must be close liaison with its Farming and Countryside Programme. The aspiration of FCP is to transform the way central government regulates and supports agriculture and the countryside environment – and without better engagement and a focus on farm assurance the opportunity will be lost to deliver recognition of the role of farm assurance schemes and how regulation and farming support mechanisms might be better aligned to the farm assurance system.	Defra	We support this recommendation.

Strategic Recommendation 6:

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

Recommendation Title	Detail	Who	AHDB Comment
6.1. Consider a new approach for combinable crops	<p>There are particular issues with the combinable crops sector, where evidence from the industry suggests that the RT model is not effective and where trust, in some cases, has broken down between the scheme and its members. We recognise that RT is working on a new entry level grain standard, but we still believe that the cereals sector must take stock of farmer feedback and decide if a new comprehensive model for the sector should be adopted. To this end, an exercise to compare and contrast the RT assurance scheme for this sector with the Scottish Quality Crops assurance scheme and the Food Fortress programme in Northern Ireland would provide a means to begin a thorough review, which should be time limited and which should engage widely with the combinable crops industry, and the AIC, to co-develop a new approach. The review must take account of the mixed nature of many farm businesses to ensure that a new approach, if adopted, does not increase farm assurance requirements or cost.</p>	<p>Crops supply chain organisations, coordinated by AHDB</p>	<p>We will quickly undertake the work proposed in the recommendation to compare and contrast the schemes and wider international standards. This work will help to inform the wider discussion the FAR recommends, which will logically follow that analysis.</p> <p>The AHDB seeks to add value to the Cereals and Oilseeds sector, especially where our independent role can bring parties together, or facilitate discussion that would be hard for other organisations to do.</p> <p>The Cereals and Oilseeds Sector Council sees it as vital that all parties within the Cereals and Oilseeds Sector are engaged and involved in the proposed discussions and are keen that AHDB act in an appropriate and helpful role in determining a way forward for the whole industry.</p>
6.2. Improving Red Tractor understanding of farming in Northern Ireland	<p>There are also particular issues pertaining to Northern Ireland and the complexities arising from its soft border with the European Union. These need to be taken into greater account by RT, which should establish a Northern Ireland governance board to focus on the particular farming circumstances found in this part of the UK. It is envisaged that the board would have strong farmer representation so that it can best understand the operating environment and trading arrangements that apply to Northern Ireland farm businesses.</p>	<p>Red Tractor</p>	<p>We support this recommendation.</p>

<p>6.3. Creating ‘one voice’ for UK farm assurance</p>	<p>We recognise that efforts have already been made to find ways in which assurance schemes can collaborate to achieve greater coordination of effort across the UK. However, we understand that whilst some schemes have continued with a positive approach to this endeavour, not all schemes have participated to the same level. New overarching structures to deliver greater coordination are unlikely to be required, not least because of the cost this would entail. Instead, farm assurance schemes must take part in our earlier recommended federation if it is to yield benefits for the schemes and their farming members. This network of farm assurance schemes must, in particular, seek to deliver economic benefits from collaboration in scheme developments, sharing of best practice and in representing farm assurance schemes to other elements of the food industry, as well as to their respective governments in seeking ‘earned recognition’ in their farming regulatory systems. A ‘one voice’ approach must be adopted when representing UK farm assurance to external bodies. To this end, as we note earlier, every scheme taking part in the federation must have an equal standing, there should be formal agreement as to how the network will operate, chairing of network meetings should be rotated between members and the arrangements for the network should be subject to periodic review.</p>	<p>All Farm Assurance Schemes</p>	<p>We support the point of this recommendation.</p>
<p>6.4. The role of whole life in farm assurance</p>	<p>Livestock farm assurance schemes that do not deliver whole life assurance should establish a plan to do so. We recognise that this will disrupt elements of the farming industry, but it is essential to the longer-term delivery of consumer confidence in product standards and to maintaining the assurance link between product origin and the consumer.</p>	<p>Relevant Farm Assurance Schemes</p>	<p>The Beef and Lamb Sector Council will be debating this point in more depth during 2025.</p>

Strategic Recommendation 7:

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

Recommendation Title	Detail	Who	AHDB Comment
7.1. Standards for imported food	There is a need for greater clarity on the food production standards of importing food nations and for these to be directly compared with the standards used by UK farm assurance schemes. To this end, the work begun by the AHDB to provide these assessments must continue and address other farming sectors and other nations. The UK farm assurance schemes must cooperate fully with these exercises to ensure that there is comprehensive information available to inform these assessments.	AHDB	<p>Where the recommendations refer to AHDB we will carry out and publish standards comparisons work where the sector councils decide to do so.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beef & Lamb did it during 2024/25 • Pork and Dairy will consider proposals in their June Council meetings • Cereals & Oilseeds Council has agreed to carry out work. <p>We will share those with Government and work with them and the farming unions, supported by AHDB's Exports team.</p>
7.2. Informing UK farming about food standards in other nations	The AHDB and NFUs must use the information obtained via the ongoing programme of comparative assessments of international food standards to provide the farming industry with an evidence base of how UK food production really compares with that of competitor nations. The information in these assessments should provide clear comparisons for ease of interpretation and should highlight major differences where international standards either exceed or fall below those employed in the UK.	AHDB and NFUs	<p>Where the recommendations refer to AHDB we will carry out and publish standards comparisons work where the sector councils decide to do so.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beef & Lamb did it during 2024/25 • Pork and Dairy will consider proposals in their June Council meetings • Cereals & Oilseeds Council has agreed to carry out work. <p>We will share those with Government and work with them and the farming unions, supported by AHDB's Exports team.</p>

7.3. Farm assurance for combinable crops	<p>The combinable crops sector has particular issues with the use of assurance standards when imported products can be mixed with those produced in the UK. There is a view that this can distort the presentation and consumer understanding of a product so that it is thought to solely meet UK farm assurance standards. Whilst it is recognised that only a limited number of consumer products based on such crops carry the RT logo there is no equivalent trade labelling for products mixed with imported combinable crops. This practice must be changed so that clear labelling is employed to identify the origin of component materials in a combinable crops product, in order to provide a complete picture for others in the food chain, and for consumers, about the nature of a product and, with the comparative studies we have previously recommended, the standards to which it has been produced.</p>	Farm Assurance Schemes working with Combinable Crops Sector representatives and their customer base	We support this recommendation.
7.4. Reviewing international standards by government	<p>All government departments with responsibility for the farming and food industries should ensure that they reconsider their approach to ensuring that standards for imported food are equivalent to those of UK farm assurance schemes, and that movements in international standards are kept under close review to assist in the export of UK food products. The work we propose must be conducted by the AHDB and NFUs, to maintain oversight of international food assurance standards, should be used as evidence to support this recommendation and it should be seen as a refocus by government departments on developing and supporting a new, comprehensive, UK food export strategy.</p>	Relevant government departments, together with AHDB and NFUs	<p>Where the recommendations refer to AHDB we will carry out and publish standards comparisons work where the sector councils decide to do so.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beef & Lamb did it during 2024/25 • Pork and Dairy will consider proposals in their June Council meetings • Cereals & Oilseeds Council has agreed to carry out work. <p>We will share those with Government and work with them and the farming unions, supported by AHDB's Exports team.</p>
7.5. The Trade and Agriculture Commission	<p>The UK Government should reconsider the way in which the Trade and Agriculture Commission operates so that it can provide advice during the negotiation process on free trade agreements where those agreements cover aspects of agriculture and food production, not just on the post-agreement impact of an FTA on the UK farming and food industry. The advice provided by the Trade and Agriculture Commission may be regarded as non-</p>	UK Government	We support this recommendation.

	binding, but it should at least be taken into account to help inform the UK Government's negotiating position.		
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Strategic Recommendation 8:

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

Recommendation Title	Detail	Who	AHDB Comment
8.1. A 'farmer first' approach to communications	Farm assurance schemes must continue to review the way in which they communicate with farming members to ensure that their institutional cultures deliver a 'farmer first' approach to the delivery and development of their farm assurance scheme. This process should be revisited on a regular basis to ensure that scheme staff understand the importance of farm member communications and that their means of communication remain effective.	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.
8.2. Implementing the Commission's Recommendations	All farm assurance schemes must publish an initial report on the implementation of recommendations contained in the Commission's report and ensure that this is made available to farming members and to the wider farming community. Where certain recommendations have not yet been implemented a clear timetable for their completion must be provided in the report, and updates made available to the farming industry on a quarterly basis until the implementation work is complete.	Farm Assurance Schemes	AHDB and the farming unions have also commissioned an independent review of actions to be published publicly as we are committed to seeing the Farm Assurance review deliver positive change.
8.3. Using features/advantages/benefits statements	The finance and insurance sectors produce a Features/Advantages/Benefits (FAB) statement for each of their products, setting out in plain English, and in a consistent way, the particular nature of the product and the way in which it will operate. Using the statement on good practice in farm assurance provided in this report as a starting point, farm assurance schemes must produce a similar FAB statement to make clear what is required from farmers by the scheme, the standards in the scheme's operation that farmers can expect, as well as aspects	Farm Assurance Schemes	We support this recommendation.

	that the scheme will not cover. This will establish a clearer understanding of what it is that farm assurance is expected to deliver, and, importantly, what the farm assurance scheme will not provide.		
8.4. Avoiding 'mission creep' to address third party requirements	We have already recommended changes to the way in which farm assurance standards are introduced to ensure that their origin is clearly stated. In cases where changes to farm audits that purport to relate to farm assurance requirements fall outside the accepted purpose and scope of farm assurance contained in this report, they must be subject to full industry consultation, an independent impact assessment and an agreed method to share the cost of implementation and operation. These actions must be undertaken collaboratively to achieve a collective decision on whether, and how, such changes are to be implemented, and how the costs will be shared across the wider food chain.	BRC with NFUs and AHDB	<p>We agree that the role and purpose of farm assurance schemes needs to be clear and where actions are requested outside of that, there needs to be clear and open debate and agreement re. costs, benefits and whether changes should be made.</p> <p>We agree with collective decisions and consultation with farmers.</p>
8.5. Implementing culture change	Where farm assurance scheme boards do not already do so, they must implement culture change programmes with their respective senior management teams to ensure that the 'farmer first' approach advocated in this review is followed through to all levels within their organisation. This could take one of a number of forms, including the use of leadership coaches and/or 360-degree appraisal. The outcome of this programme must be measured with farmer member feedback at routine intervals so that scheme boards are kept appraised of progress in developing greater levels of trust between farm assurance schemes and their farmer members.	Farm Assurance Scheme Boards	We support this recommendation.

<p>8.6. The ownership of Red Tractor</p>	<p>We considered the current ownership arrangements of RT, and the merits, or otherwise, of changing to a more independent structure, as suggested in the scheme's evidence submitted to the Commission. We recognise that this scheme can be caught between the requirements of its owners and need to implement change or address issues that might prove difficult with one of the industry sectors it serves. This means that the scheme is sometimes held to account for matters beyond its immediate control, or that change can take much longer than necessary. Coupled with some shortcomings in its approach to communications with farming members this has contributed to the largely negative feedback we have received from farmers about the scheme and its operation. However, because we have concluded that the scheme exists to serve its farming members, and that there would be the possibility of a farm assurance landscape driven by other industry sectors rather than with the full contribution of farmer members, a change to a more independent structure is not appropriate at this point. It follows that the current ownership arrangements should remain in place but these must be balanced by the RT Board being reaffirmed as the primary governing body for the organisation. The owners of the scheme must show greater and more active leadership, to help shape its future direction and organisational culture, but without straying into issues of setting strategic direction and overseeing operational delivery, which should remain with the RT board. The terms of this arrangement should be established by the Board and the scheme owners and published so that they are clear to members of the scheme.</p>	<p>Red Tractor Board and Ownership Organisations</p>	<p>We agree the owners of RT should show greater and more active leadership, to help shape its future direction and organisational culture.</p> <p>We are committed to working with our fellow owners to deliver this through the OB.</p>
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Strategic Recommendation 9:

The Red Tractor scheme must complete the implementation of recommendations in the Campbell Tickell report

Recommendation Title	Detail	Who	AHDB Comment
9.1. Reviewing progress with the Campbell Tickell report	RT must publish a report on the way in which it has implemented the recommendations of the Campbell Tickell report and ensure that this is made available to farming members and to the wider farming community. Where certain recommendations have not yet been implemented a clear timetable for their completion must be provided in the report, and updates made available to the farming industry when these elements have been addressed.	Red Tractor Board	We support this recommendation.
9.2. A formal assessment of changes to Red Tractor	Even though the Campbell Tickell report may address current issues concerning the governance of the RT scheme it remains to be seen if, in the longer term, the measures in that report, together with those in this review, have successfully repaired the levels of trust necessary to create a more positive relationship between the scheme and the farming community. To this end, the sponsoring bodies for this review must conduct a formal assessment of the outcome of both reports, to determine how farmer sentiment towards the scheme has changed as a result of this programme of work.	NFUs and AHDB	We will work with the farming unions to deliver this.