Abattoir Sector Group
Sustainable, Local, Collaborative

The Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP
10 Downing Street
London
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Dear Prime Minister,

RE: Local abattoirs: infrastructure for growth, food security and stronger regional economies

Your recent visit to Cornwall and your commitment to rebuilding trust with British farming were extremely welcome. In particular, your recognition that food and farming are part of our national resilience and infrastructure, and that the UK must be able to guarantee its own food production, goes to the heart of an issue requiring urgent Government attention.

Our message is simple: if we want UK farmers to produce our food, they need the infrastructure that enables them to get it to market.

That infrastructure does not end at the farm gate.

A viable network of local and regional abattoirs is fundamental to the livestock economy. Without it, farmers lose routes to market, local meat businesses become unviable, livestock travel further with implications for animal welfare, opportunities for local procurement diminish and economic activity becomes increasingly concentrated in large national supply chains.

While responsibility for agriculture, food, animal welfare and rural development is largely devolved, some matters, including the UK fiscal framework, regulation and international trade remain UK-wide or require cooperation between governments. Effective action must combine decisions taken within each nation with appropriate UK-wide coordination.

Local abattoirs should therefore be recognised as essential economic infrastructure for rural and regional growth. This matters particularly in the context of your commitment to growth in every postcode across the UK.

Local infrastructure for local growth

Local abattoirs underpin networks of farmers, butchers, farm shops, hospitality businesses, food manufacturers, markets and other small and medium-sized enterprises. By providing the essential services of private kill, cutting, packing and value adding that many large abattoirs do not provide, local abattoirs allow livestock produced in a region to be processed and sold locally, retaining more of its economic value.

For many smaller and mixed livestock farms, including those keeping native breeds and supporting biodiversity through nature-friendly and conservation grazing practices, this route to market is fundamental to their viability.

The 2025 Abattoir Users Survey, conducted by the Sustainable Food Trust with the Soil Association and Rare Breeds Survival Trust, received 850 responses from farmers and land managers across the UK. Two-thirds had experienced difficulties accessing appropriate abattoir services during the previous five years and one-third had seen an abattoir they used close. If their current abattoir closed, 43% said they would no longer be able to sell meat locally and 29% said they might have to close their meat business altogether. Critically, 58% said their business would not be profitable without direct or local selling.

These figures represent more than an abattoir problem. They represent rural businesses, jobs, investment and economic activity at risk when essential infrastructure disappears. The Farming Profitability Review led by Baroness Minette Batters has likewise recognised the importance of maintaining appropriate slaughtering infrastructure.

An opportunity for place-based action across the UK

We believe this issue presents an opportunity to demonstrate how coordinated national and local action can support rural economies across the UK.

Different parts of the UK have different livestock populations, geography, farming systems and markets. The infrastructure required in Cornwall will not necessarily be the same as that required in Cumbria, Wales, the Scottish Highlands or the Midlands.

In England, the Government's devolution and local growth agenda provides an opportunity for strategic and local authorities to work with farmers, processors and investors to identify the slaughter and processing infrastructure their regional food economies require. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the respective governments can already use their existing powers to undertake similar work, in partnership with relevant regional and local bodies. Solutions might involve private investment, co-operatives, mobile or modular facilities, public-private partnerships or other locally designed approaches.

Coordination between governments will nevertheless be important where UK-wide funding decisions, common regulatory challenges, cross-border supply chains or reserved matters are involved.

Removing barriers to investment and productivity

There is, however, a fundamental obstacle.

The regulatory and charging framework under which abattoirs operate does not sufficiently reflect scale and risk. While the impact is most immediately visible among lower-throughput premises, this should not be regarded simply as a "small abattoir problem".

Time-based Official Veterinarian Costs, inflexible operating arrangements and limited recognition of variations in throughput and risk can undermine the viability of abattoirs of every size, although the effects are most acute for smaller, remote and seasonal facilities.

The result is the opposite of what a pro-growth regulatory system should achieve, making otherwise viable businesses uneconomic and discouraging investment, productivity and expansion.

The sector is not seeking lower animal welfare or food safety standards. We are asking for smarter, proportionate, risk-based, consistent and economically sustainable regulation.

In England, the industry has worked constructively with Defra through the Abattoir Task and Finish Group, and the Smaller Abattoir Fund provided valuable capital investment. Industry and government have also undertaken relevant work in the devolved nations. However, capital grants alone cannot resolve an operating model that remains unsustainable.

Meanwhile, slaughter capacity continues to disappear.

A practical proposition for Government

We therefore ask you to convene Defra, HM Treasury and other relevant UK Government departments, together with the Welsh Government, Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive, the Food Standards Agency, Food Standards Scotland and representatives of the industry, around a shared objective:

to secure a sustainable network of local and regional abattoirs as part of the UK's essential food and economic infrastructure.

As an immediate first step, we propose:

1. Recognise local slaughter capacity within the devolution and growth agenda

In England, strategic and local authorities should be encouraged to consider local abattoirs and other regional food infrastructure within their economic planning, alongside transport, skills and energy. The Welsh Government, Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive should work through the appropriate national, regional and local arrangements in their respective nations to undertake equivalent assessments and support locally appropriate solutions.

2. Undertake a focused, outcome-driven review of regulation and charging

The responsible government and food-safety authority in each nation should urgently review the regulatory and charging framework affecting local abattoirs, including Official Veterinarian provision and costs, inspection arrangements, ante- and post-mortem requirements, regulatory thresholds and opportunities for digitalisation.

These reviews should be coordinated where the same problems arise across national boundaries, while recognising that responsibility for policy, delivery and charging is not held by a single UK body.

3. Establish national funding for local abattoir infrastructure and feasibility work

The UK Government should establish an appropriate infrastructure and feasibility fund for England. The Welsh Government, Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive should develop or strengthen equivalent support within their own areas of responsibility.

The Treasury should consider how the wider UK funding settlement can support comparable action across all four nations, without cutting across devolved competence.

Funding should enable the relevant national, regional and local bodies, working with industry, to assess slaughter provision and develop credible proposals where provision is inadequate or at risk. This could support feasibility studies, business planning and the identification of locally appropriate operating models.

Each government could invite expressions of interest from areas wishing to develop locally led solutions, creating a pipeline of projects capable of attracting private, community and, where appropriate, public investment.

Prime Minister, your recent comments offer an opportunity for a new conversation with farming. Supporting farmers through immediate pressures is important, but rebuilding trust also requires addressing the structural issues that determine whether farming businesses can remain profitable for the next generation. Local slaughter capacity is one of those issues.

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If the UK wants resilient domestic food production, thriving rural businesses and growth that reaches every part of the country, we cannot continue allowing the infrastructure connecting farmers to their markets to disappear.

We represent organisations from across farming, food production, animal welfare, conservation and the wider rural economy across the UK. We would welcome the opportunity to meet you, or the appropriate senior Ministers, to discuss how this proposal could become an early and practical demonstration of your Government's commitment to farming, devolution and growth in every postcode.

Yours sincerely,
Christopher Price, Chair, Abattoir Sector Group
CEO, Rare Breeds Survival Trust

ASG Steering Group
Patrick Holden, CEO, Sustainable Food Trust
Marisa Heath, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare
Eleanor O'Brien, Managing Director, National Craft Butchers
Jason Aldiss, Executive Director, Association of Independent Meat Suppliers
Clare Wise, NFU Livestock Board Chair
Gavin Lane, President, Country Land and Business Association
Jimmy Woodrow, Chief Executive, Pasture for Life
Helen Browning, Chief Executive, Soil Association
Scott Walker, Executive Manager, Scottish Association of Meat Wholesalers
Ben Loughrey, Chair, Farm Retail Association
John Mettrick, Managing Director, Mettrick's Butchers
Lady Jane Parker, Owner, Fir Farm
Tom Bowling, Edge and Son
Andy Gray, M C Kelly

Farming and agricultural organisations
Robert Lewis, NFU Cymru Livestock Board Chair
Richard Boden, Abattoir Liaison, British Farming Union
Christopher Dodds, Executive Secretary, Livestock Auctioneers Association
Phil Stocker, Chief Executive, National Sheep Association
George Dunn, Chief Executive, Tenant Farmers Association
Gwion Rowlands, Chair, Livestock & Hill Farming Committee, Farmers' Union of Wales
Sarah Palmer, AGRI Manager, National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs
Martin Lines, CEO, Nature Friendly Farming Network
Jyoti Fernandes, Campaigns Coordinator, Landworkers' Alliance
Robert Fraser, CEO, Real Farming Trust
Steve Clarkson, CEO, Organic Farmers & Growers CIC
John Cherry, Founder, Groundswell
Chris Short, Chair of Trustees, Foundation for Common Land
Beth Austermuhle, Chair, Agricultural Industries Confederation Feed Sector
Jane Cooper, Chair, Orkney Boreray Co-operative Limited
Guy MacNaughton, Local Abattoirs R Key

Food system, environment and animal welfare organisations
Vicki Hird, Strategic Lead - Agriculture, The Wildlife Trusts
Harry Bowell, Director of Land and Nature, National Trust
Jenny Hawley, Policy and Advocacy Manager, Plantlife

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming
Rosie Downs, Head of Campaigns, Friends of the Earth
Philip Lymbery, Global CEO, Compassion in World Farming
Shane Holland, Executive Chairman, Slow Food in the UK
Rebecca Sunter, Executive Director (Interim), Eating Better
Charlie Mason, Technical Director, Humane Slaughter Association
May Wheeler, Secretariat, CLEAR
Tom Goatman, CEO, British Grassland Society
Caroline Hanks, Director, Herefordshire Meadows

National Parks and National Landscapes
Debbie Stockwell, Executive Director, National Parks England
Tom Hind, CEO, North York Moors National Park Authority
James Blake, CEO, Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority
Sion McGeever, CEO, South Downs National Park Authority
Gavin Capstick, CEO, Lake District National Park Authority
Tom Surrey, CEO, Dartmoor National Park Authority
Phil Mulligan, CEO, Peak District National Park Authority
Sarah Bryan, CEO, Exmoor National Park Authority
Alison Barnes, CEO, New Forest National Park Authority
David Renwick, CEO, Northumberland National Park Authority
Sarah Cowley, CEO, Broads Authority National Park
Tom Munro, Lead Officer for Dorset National Landscape and Chair, National Landscape Association's Farming & Land Use Group
Jason Lavender, Director, High Weald National Landscape Partnership
Rob Fairbanks, Director, Surrey Hills National Landscape
Estelle Hook, Manager, Howardian Hills National Landscape Partnership
Linda Nunn, Director, Cranborne Chase National Landscape
Tim Youngs, Manager, Blackdown Hills National Landscape
Joe Newberry, Manager, North Devon Coast National Landscape
Richard Grogan, Isle of Wight National Landscape
David Shiel, Area Manager, Clwydian Range and Dee Valley National Landscape

Local food partnerships and public bodies
Helen Graham, Food Partnership Officer, Wealden Food Partnership
Sophie Robinson, Project Manager - Land Use Plus, Brighton and Hove Food Partnership
Iona Smith, Coordinator, Rother Food Partnership
Fiona Revell, Director, Eastbourne Food Partnership
Hilary Schan, Coordinator, Lewes District Food Partnership
Dr Patricia Patterson-Vanegas, Green Party Ward Councillor representing Forest Row, Wealden District Council
Rob Leet, Head of Enterprise, Horsham District Council

Public figures, academics and individual professionals
Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, Writer, Broadcaster, Founder of River Cottage
Sir Roger Daltrey
Charlie Ireland
Baroness Prentis of Banbury
Baroness Mallaieu
Dr Kieran Mullan MP, Member of Parliament for Bexhill and Battle
David Chadwick MP, Member of Parliament for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe
John Lamont MP, Member of Parliament for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk

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Sarah Champion MP, Member of Parliament for Rotherham
Lord Trees
Lord de Mauley
Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville MBE
Sarah Langford, Bestselling Author
Dr Dolly Van Tulleken, Director, Dolitics
Claire Whittle, Veterinary Surgeon, The Regenerative Vet Ltd.
Professor Michael Lee, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Harper Adams University
Professor Angelina Sanderson Bellamy, Co-founder and Director, Root and Reason
Phil Scott, Head of Purpose and Sustainability, Lake District Farmers and Honorary Teaching Fellow, Lancaster University

With support from more than 100 farmers, abattoirs and other independent businesses. View the full list of signatories here:

https://sustainablefoodtrust.org/press-releases/abattoir-sector-group-calls-on-andy-burnham-to-support-local-abattoirs/