AI sandboxes: the UK case

When the law can be switched off to test new technology, who keeps the animals in the room?

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The policy: sandboxing powers in the Regulating for Growth Bill

Legal powers to let existing rules be **temporarily relaxed**, “under strict controls”, so new products can be tested in real-world settings.
Changes that work are then **embedded permanently in law**.

Named technologies: medicines, autonomous maritime and defence technology, and AI.

Where it stands

Announced in the King’s Speech, 13 May 2026

Lead: Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (formerly DBT)

Precursor: DSIT’s AI Growth Lab call for evidence

Source: King’s Speech 2026 background briefing notes; DSIT, AI Growth Lab call for evidence (Oct 2025) · 2

The gap: the Government has listed its safeguards twice

King's Speech briefing notes, May 2026

Trials "would operate under strict safeguards, including protections for **consumers, workers and human rights**"

DSIT, AI Growth Lab call for evidence, p. 9

"Red lines" will include "**consumer protections, safety provisions, fundamental rights, workers' protections, intellectual property rights**"

Animals appear in neither list, nor anywhere in either document.

Both lists are illustrative, and the red lines are still out for views · 3

The AI Growth Lab's reason for sandboxing:

"Some regulations needlessly assume activity will be undertaken by a person not AI."

Animal protection law is built on exactly that assumption. A person inspects, watches, notices, and reports.

DSIT, AI Growth Lab: A Call for Evidence, p. 6 · 4

Two places where protection rests on a person

Automated delivery devices

Road Traffic Act 1988, s.170: stop and report injury to listed animals

DSIT's own example: small automated devices on pavements and roads, such as for urgent medical deliveries. With no one on board, there is no driver to stop and report.

Farm inspection

Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regs 2007, Sch. 1

Daily checks of animals and of automated equipment assume automation can fail. One ventilation failure killed **27,249 chickens**.

Sources: DSIT, AI Growth Lab call for evidence, p. 12; chicken case, Leicester Magistrates' Court, April 2022, £44,000 fine · 5

The lever: the Animal Sentience Committee

Statutory. Set up by the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 to ask whether government has paid “all due regard” to the welfare of sentient animals.

Any department. It has already reported on a DSIT digital statute, the Online Safety Act (October 2024).

A duty to answer. After a report, the minister must respond to Parliament within three months.

Built for this moment. Its terms of reference allow “smaller ad hoc reports at short notice in relation to a policy currently under formulation”.

Why not the Animal Welfare Committee?

Not statutory, acts only when Defra commissions it, and no duty to respond.

The bar is lower than it looks

The ASC will find *partial* due regard: paid when setting the goal, not when choosing the method.

Sources: Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, ss.2–3; ASC Terms of Reference (2023); ASC, Online Safety Act report (2024) · 6

The Government's own question:

"What types of regulation should not be eligible for temporary modification or disapplication within the Lab?"

Our answer: animal welfare law. No response has been published, so the list is still open.

The ask

Instrument

A smaller ad hoc report now, while the policy is being formed

The choice is the Committee's. Early talks with the policy team would also help.

Point 1

Put animal welfare law on the list a sandbox cannot touch

Failing that: a welfare assessment for any authorisation touching systems that manage or monitor animals, reported to Defra.

Point 2

Defra commissions the Animal Welfare Committee on AI in farming

The ASC can recommend this, so one submission can open a second route.

Where it stands, and three asks of this room

Submitted 7 October. “All submissions will be considered by the Committee”, with no obligation to report.

What success looks like now: the Bill on the Committee’s work plan, or the Committee talking to the policy team before the Bill is final.

EU colleagues

Do AI Act regulatory sandboxes have the same gap?

UK organisations

Know of a UK policy still being drafted that could affect animals? Ask the secretariat for its form and suggest it for review.

Everyone

Documented cases where automation harmed animals strengthen any follow-up.