Stakeholder Information Gathering: Items for Consideration

Background

The Animal Sentience Committee was established under the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022. The Committee will consider how well individual central government policy decisions pay all due regard to their impact on the welfare needs of sentient animals, defined as: any vertebrate other than *homo sapiens,* any cephalopod mollusc (such as octopus or squid), and any decapod crustacean (such as crab or lobster).

Scope of the Animal Sentience Committee

The Animal Sentience Committee may choose to review policies which are currently under development as well as recent policies and subsequent policy implementation decisions. They cannot review policies which relate to legislative provisions falling within devolved competence. They do not intend to duplicate the work of other Committees, for example ASPA which covers animals in science, or the Trade and Agriculture Commission which specifically scrutinises trade deals. Please note that any review or recommendations made by the Animal Sentience Committee should respect the legislative or administrative provisions and customs relating in particular to religious rites or customs, cultural traditions and regional heritage.

A policy is defined in the Animal Sentience Committees Terms of Reference as '*a decision made or implemented by a Minister which affects the activities of government, business, charities or members of the public. This includes, but is not limited to, the processes of making regulations, legislating, allocating resources or promoting a course of action'*.

Stakeholder Information Gathering

The Animal Sentience Committee is keen to reach out to external experts and stakeholders when deciding which policies to review and when drawing together evidence on the effects on animal welfare of those policies.

If there is a specific policy you would like to put forward for consideration by the Animal Sentience Committee, please fill in the form below. If there are multiple policies you

would like to put forward for consideration, please fill in the corresponding number of forms.

When completing the form, please do not alter the size of the text boxes, or the font of the text. All answers must remain in size 12, font Arial. Bullet points are welcomed. Once completed, please return this form to sentiencesecretariat@defra.gov.uk

Please note, you will not receive any confirmation of receipt upon submitting your form, nor does submitting your form impose any obligation on the Animal Sentience Committee to produce a report regarding your suggested policy.

Contact Details

Providing your contact details is optional. Please note, by providing contact details, you consent to the Animal Sentience Committee contacting you for further information regarding your form, if necessary.

Title of policy:	Regulatory sandboxing powers in the Regulating for Growth Bill
Your contact details:	Dr Laura Thomas-Walters; Dr Henrike Gätjens (e-mail addresses removed for publication)
Are you responding as an individual or an organisation:	Organisation
Your organisation (if applicable):	AI Governance for Animals Hub (AIGAH)
Date:	02/10/26

1. **Briefly describe the policy. Please include details of the stage of policy development (e.g consulting) and the relevant government department if known.**

   Announced in the King's Speech on 13 May 2026 and listed in the Leader of the House's written statement of 14 May; not introduced at the date of sending, so there is no bill text and this description follows the Government's background briefing notes. Regulatory reform is led by the Department for Business and Trade (renamed the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade on 21 July 2026). The AI Growth Lab call for evidence was published by the then Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

   Stage: under formulation, pre-introduction, with the DSIT AI Growth Lab call for evidence as the completed precursor consultation (closed 7 January 2026; no government response published).

What the power does: according to the briefing notes, cross-economy "sandboxing powers" – legal powers to allow existing rules to be temporarily relaxed, under strict controls, to test new products and technologies in real-world settings, with successful changes then embedded permanently in law. The technologies named are medicines, autonomous maritime and defence technology, and AI. The safeguards mentioned include "protections for consumers, workers and human rights". (No bill text, so this describes stated intent).

2. Why do you think this policy should be reviewed?

The timing: a review now can inform the design rather than assess it afterwards. The Committee's terms of reference provide for "smaller ad hoc reports at short notice in relation to a policy currently under formulation". DSIT's call for evidence said the Government was still "seeking views on which regulations should be 'red lines'", and no response has been published, so the list appears to be open.

The gap: the Government has twice indicated the safeguards it has in mind – trials "would operate under strict safeguards, including protections for consumers, workers and human rights" (King's Speech briefing notes), and "We intend that 'red lines' will include consumer protections, safety provisions, fundamental rights, workers' protections, intellectual property rights" (DSIT, AI Growth Lab call for evidence, p. 9). Both lists are illustrative and the second is still out for views. Animal welfare is absent in both cases and animals are not mentioned anywhere in the documents. Thus we have found no indication that their welfare has been considered in formulating the policy.

The scale: the powers are cross-economy and can relax any existing rule, so the animals potentially affected are all those whose protection rests on rules a sandbox might touch – farmed animals, animals at slaughter, farmed fish and decapods, and cetaceans in UK waters.

The novelty: as far as we are aware, the ASC’s due regard power has never been applied to AI and there is no precedent for how animal welfare is treated inside a regulatory sandbox. The Committee has, however, already examined a DSIT digital statute, in its Online Safety Act report of October 2024.

Neither ASPA nor the Trade and Agriculture Commission has a remit reaching this policy.

3. Are there any negative welfare impacts to this policy?

The primary adverse effect is structural: the powers allow the rules that protect animals to be relaxed or suspended, and nothing in the policy as

published provides for the welfare of animals to be considered when that happens.

The AI Growth Lab gives as a reason for sandboxing that “some regulations needlessly assume activity will be undertaken by a person not AI”. Animal welfare law is substantially built on that kind of provision. E.g., inspection duties under the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007, and ante-mortem inspection by an official veterinarian at slaughter.

The powers of the bill are cross-sector, and so is the gap. In the examples below, protection for animals rests at least partly on a duty that assumes a person is present.

Example 1, autonomous shipping

Maritime Autonomous Surface Shipping is one of the three worked examples in the briefing notes. Ship strikes and underwater noise are recognised causes of death, injury and disturbance to whales, dolphins and porpoises, all sentient animals under section 5 of the 2022 Act. Avoiding them depends largely on a watch kept by a person. The collision regulations require every vessel to "maintain a proper look-out by sight and hearing" (COLREGs Rule 5, applied in the UK by the Merchant Shipping (Distress Signals and Prevention of Collisions) Regulations 1996). That duty exists to prevent collisions generally rather than to protect cetaceans, but it is a crew member's lookout that lets a vessel see a whale and slow down or change course. For remotely operated unmanned workboats under 24 metres, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency keeps a person as look-out, watching camera and sensor feeds from a remote operation centre (Workboat Code Edition 3, section 10.1.2 and Annex 2, section 5.3.2). More autonomous vessels are approved case by case against "alternative or equivalent safety standards" (MGN 664 (M+F) Amendment 1, 2023). Neither document mentions marine mammals, so a system that replaces the person on watch does not have to show that it would see a whale.

Example 2, automated road vehicles

Section 170 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 requires a driver to stop if an accident causes injury to a horse, cattle, ass, mule, sheep, pig, goat or dog. If the driver does not give their name and address at the scene, they must report the accident to the police as soon as reasonably practicable and within 24 hours. That duty is drafted around a person noticing and choosing to act, and it is how the animal's owner or the police learn that an animal has been injured. The Automated Vehicles Act 2024 keeps a person attached to it where there is one, since section 49(1) treats the user-in-charge as the driver "for the purposes of any enactment", but two gaps remain. First, a driver who genuinely did not know an accident had occurred has a defence, and a user-in-charge is not required to monitor the road

while the self-driving feature is engaged, so a collision with an animal could go unnoticed and unreported without any offence being committed. Second, for vehicles authorised to operate with no user-in-charge there is no driver at all, and the Act leaves operators' duties to future licensing regulations under section 12. Section 49 is also not yet in force.

Coghlan and Parker (2023) also give self-driving cars not programmed to avoid collisions with small animals as an example of AI harm to animals.

Example 3, farmed animal inspection and automated equipment

Farmed animal welfare in England rests substantially on duties requiring a person to check both the animals and the equipment that keeps them alive. Under the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007, animals whose welfare depends on frequent human attention must be inspected at least once a day (Schedule 1, paragraph 2), and "all automated or mechanical equipment essential for the health and well-being of the animals" must also be inspected daily, with a back-up system and a failure alarm required where animals depend on artificial ventilation (Schedule 1, paragraphs 18 to 21). These provisions exist because automated systems fail. At a Leicestershire broiler unit, a malfunction closed the side inlets while the tunnel ventilation failed to open, sealing a shed of about 50,000 birds. The temperature alarm had been set at 37°C instead of 27°C, the relief manager was off site, and 27,249 chickens died. The company was fined £44,000 under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (Leicester Magistrates' Court, April 2022).

Automated monitoring detects what it was trained to measure and is blind to the rest, so early lameness, an individual off feed, and injuries a stockperson notices walking the shed go unflagged. The welfare harm is delay, with conditions found later, treated later, and endured for longer. Further, tools that relieve the constraints currently limiting production tend to raise stocking density and shorten cycles, both of which are welfare variables for each animal. Coghlan and Parker (2023) identify replacement of human observation by AI leading to neglect, as a distinct route to harm.

Note, in all these examples protection for animals is attached to the presence of a person, and removing the need for people to be present is the stated purpose of the power. Protection for animals needs to be explicitly written in.

The research evidence points the same way. A peer-reviewed scoping review of 52 papers (Jarvis-Campbell et al., Computers and Electronics in Agriculture, 2026) identifies thirteen welfare risks from technology in animal farming. It finds that the risks arising from narrow or vague welfare definitions and from poor validation are likely to be amplified by AI, and it identifies further intensification as a risk in its own right. Rethink Priorities (2026) finds that around 64 per cent of 91 companies building AI tools for

farmed aquatic animals make at least one product rated medium or high concern for driving expansion or intensification, and that around 30 per cent make tools that act on at least one welfare-relevant intervention, most commonly feeding, without human approval. Farmed fish and farmed decapod crustaceans are both within the definition of animal in section 5 of the 2022 Act.

Further, this omission appears to be a pattern rather than a one-off oversight. Coghlan, Parker and Lederman (Science and Engineering Ethics, 2026) report that most AI ethics guidelines, including those issued by governments and intergovernmental bodies, omit animals and their interests.

4. **Please quantify how many animals and type(s) of animals would be negatively affected by this policy.**

The total cannot be estimated without the bill text, because the powers are cross-economy. Orders of magnitude for the examples above:

Inspection duties, Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007. Cattle, pig, sheep and poultry populations in England, from Defra's June Agricultural Survey at 1 June 2026: 4.8 million cattle, 3.8 million pigs, 13.0 million sheep and lambs and 133.0 million poultry, of which 95.3 million broilers (Defra, Livestock populations in England, published 27 August 2026).

Official inspection at slaughter. Around 1.036 billion animals were slaughtered in slaughterhouses in England and Wales in 2025/26 (FSA, Annual Animal Welfare Report 2025/26, June 2026). We could not find an England-only figure covering all species.

Farmed aquatic animals. Finfish farming in England is small and mostly rainbow trout. UK rainbow trout production was 13,034 tonnes in 2023 (Cefas, via Seafish); we could not find an England-only figure.

Section 170, Road Traffic Act 1988. Annual collisions involving horses, cattle, asses, mules, sheep, pigs, goats and dogs. No national figure exists, because police collision records cover only collisions that injure people. As a partial indication, 2,810 road incidents involving horses were reported to the British Horse Society in 2025, in which 59 horses were killed and 82 injured (UK; self-reported, so an undercount).

Watchkeeping and lookout at sea. Around 330,000 cetaceans of the seven most abundant species are estimated in UK waters, including around 200,000 harbour porpoises, 57,000 common dolphins and 10,000 minke whales (JNCC Report 734, 2023).

5. **Are there any positive welfare impacts of this policy? How many animals and type(s) of animals would benefit?**

A sandbox could in principle speed welfare-improving tools to market, leading to, e.g., earlier disease detection, lameness alerts, automated heat-stress mitigation, less invasive monitoring.

Slaughterhouse CCTV is a case in point: the 2018 Regulations require recording and inspector access but do not themselves require the footage to be reviewed. FSA protocol is for inspection staff to monitor footage every operational day, viewing "at least 15 minutes of footage". Automated screening could in principle review all of it.

The animals that could benefit are the same populations listed above.

6. **Please list any supporting data or evidence relevant to the welfare impacts on sentient animals of this policy, summarising the results. Please do not attach documents. The Committee will ask for additional information if required.**

Jarvis-Campbell and colleagues 2026 in Computers and Electronics in Agriculture, a scoping review of 52 papers mapping thirteen welfare risks in four categories.

Rethink Priorities 2026 on AI in aquaculture, around 64 per cent of 91 companies make at least one product rated medium or high concern for expansion or intensification, and around 30 per cent make tools that act on at least one welfare-relevant intervention without human approval.

Coghlan, Parker and Lederman 2026 in Science and Engineering Ethics, on the omission of animals from AI ethics guidelines.

DSIT, AI Growth Lab: A Call for Evidence (October 2025; closed 7 January 2026): the "red lines" the Government intends (p. 9) and its question on what should never be modified or disapplied (question 15, p. 16); the rationale that "some regulations needlessly assume activity will be undertaken by a person not AI" (p. 6); no mention of animals.

Department for Business and Trade, Regulatory sandboxes: what businesses can expect (8 July 2026): describes sandboxes under the Regulating for Growth Bill as "a supervised, time-limited environment where businesses can test new products or services with certain legal or regulatory requirements temporarily modified or disapplied". It names medicines and innovative healthcare products, autonomous shipping, and cross-economy AI. It lists general safeguards, including "maintaining

standards and protections", but does not say which rules cannot be modified, and it does not mention animals.

7. Is there any other information you would like to share regarding this policy.

As the policy is under formulation, we would ask the Committee to consider a smaller ad hoc report at short notice, as its terms of reference provide, rather than a fuller report once the Bill is introduced. We recognise that the choice of instrument is the Committee's; early engagement with the policy teams, before the Bill is introduced, would also be valuable.

Two points might, in our view, be worth the Committee's consideration: first, that animal welfare legislation be included among the protections that a sandbox authorisation cannot modify or disapply, or, failing that, that a welfare assessment be a condition of any authorisation touching systems that manage or monitor animals, with the results reported to Defra; second, that Defra commission the Animal Welfare Committee to advise on artificial intelligence in animal farming. We would be glad to provide further evidence on request.