

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: NATIONAL FOOD STRATEGY

Backbench Business Debate, House of Commons

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Key points

- **The Countryside Alliance welcomes the Government’s food strategy and its proposals to back British farmers and producers, reconnect consumers with their food, and ensure food security in these uncertain times.**
- **Food production is essential to the environmental benefits from agriculture. Unless we recognise the dual role of farmers as food producers and conservationists, we risk turning farmers into environmental contractors with little incentive to continue farming. The strategy could be clearer in linking the food production to action against climate change and to enhance the natural environment.**
- **Migrant labour has typically played an important role in harvesting, production, and processing across the food supply chain, in both skilled and unskilled jobs. Seasonal agricultural workers are particularly important in filling temporary and labour-intensive roles. This type of employment is not only important for farming, but also for other sectors of the rural economy such as forestry and game farming.**
- **The first consultation associated with the strategy was on public sector food and catering policy, which provides an excellent opportunity to celebrate game meat and push for it to be on the menu. There is already a trial of six NHS Trusts who are piloting pheasant, partridge and venison on their menus as part of a project driven by British Game Assurance.**
- **Improving the labelling of food can empower the consumer. We would support efforts to develop a comprehensive food labelling policy and extend mandatory country of origin labelling. Meat and products containing meat should only be labelled British if the animals were born, bred and slaughtered in the UK.**

- **We also believe a proper network of local abattoirs is essential, to promote local sourcing of meat, reduce the environmental impact of food miles and promote animal welfare.**

Food security

“The continued production of healthier, high quality, tasty food and drink domestically remains of vital importance for our economy and food security. We will support farmers to broadly maintain levels of domestic production through productivity gain and our new farming schemes. We will enable growth in key sectors, including horticulture and seafood, making the most of post-Brexit opportunities.”

- The strategy aims at *“ensuring security and sustainability of food supply in an unpredictable world”*. It cites the UK Food Security report from December 2021, which indicated that domestically we produce 60% by value of all the food we need, rising to 74% of food which we can grow or rear in the UK, with surpluses in lamb and milk and recent growth in sectors including poultry and soft fruit.
- It distinguishes between food security and self-sufficiency, given the diversity of import routes, but warns that *“exposure to international markets, in combination with global supply chain pressures and shocks, can also create price and supply impacts, such as those arising from the conflict in Ukraine”*.
- The Government has committed *“to continue to monitor and strengthen the resilience of our supply chains and support our domestic production”*, including by managing increased input costs such as of fertilisers, and to work internationally to address food security issues worldwide.
- In its report on the UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement issued on Friday 17 June 2022, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee concluded, *“In practice it appears unlikely that food produced to lower animal welfare standards will enter the UK as a result of this deal. Given this, it is disappointing the deal did not go further on animal welfare and include more far-reaching provisions that would have shown greater global leadership in this area.”*

Countryside Alliance position

- The UK produces some of the best food in the world, with the highest standards of safety and animal welfare.
- Food production is essential for the delivery of the environmental benefits on which the Government plans to centre in its agricultural support policy. Unless we recognise the dual role of farmers as food producers and conservationists, we risk turning farmers into environmental contractors with little incentive to continue farming. This would do enormous damage to the jobs and communities that depend on farming, as well as weakening our food security. The strategy could be clearer in linking the food production to action against climate change and enhancing the natural environment.
- In negotiating and implementing free trade agreements the Government must avoid undermining the domestic agricultural sector and production standards by declining to accept the import and sale of goods, in particular foods, that it would be unlawful to produce in the same manner in the UK.

- The Alliance is robustly challenging Natural Resources Wales and Welsh Government on their plans to plant trees on productive farmland. We have made our position clear that we are not opposed to tree planting to address climate change, however the recent purchase by the Welsh Government of prime agricultural land for a Covid memorial woodland has been strongly opposed.
- The interests of food security require that food production must continue to be the primary use for productive farmland.

Labour

“It is essential that there is a sufficient, qualified, and well-paid workforce to support every food and drink business, dispersed around the whole country. To address near term need, the Government will release the additional provision of 10,000 visas under the Seasonal Worker Visa Route, including 2,000 for the poultry sector. This means that in total 40,000 visas will be made available for seasonal workers in 2022, providing labour for food businesses across the UK.”

- The Food Security Report 2021 estimated that, up until the last two years ago when labour patterns were severely skewed by the coronavirus pandemic, 99% of seasonal workers in the horticultural sector came from outside the UK each season.
- The T5 (Temporary Worker) Seasonal Worker visa route was introduced in 2019 with a pilot scheme limited to limited to 2,500 visas. The scheme has since expanded to a quota of 30,000 visas which will remain in place to 2024, but with the intention of tapering down from 2023.
- For 2022, the Government had made *“provision for an extra 10,000 if there was evidence of need”*. The strategy confirmed that these extra 10,000 would be made available in 2022, bringing the total to 40,000. Of those, 2,000 were to be extended to include poultry to address acute shortage in the turkey processing sector.
- The Migration Advisory Committee has been commissioned to review the Shortage Occupation List and the strategy commits the Government to *“work with industry to articulate key food industry shortages”*.
- The Government takes the view that industry reliance on seasonal migrant labour is unsustainable, and therefore plans an independent review of labour shortages in the food supply chain. The strategy states, *“This will consider the roles of automation, domestic labour, and migration in the labour market, the last of these with reference to the wider work by the MAC, to ensure UK businesses can access the labour they require.”*
- Prior to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU, around 80,000 seasonal agricultural workers were employed in the UK every year and according to the Office for National Statistics, 99% of these people were from countries within the EU.
- In 2018 the Migration Advisory Committee reported, *“it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which this workforce can come from the resident labour market.”* It stated that if no new seasonal agricultural workers scheme is introduced *“it is likely that there would be a contraction and even closure of many businesses in parts of agriculture in the short-run”* and *“may lead to modestly higher prices for consumers.”*

Countryside Alliance position

- Migrant labour has typically played an important role in harvesting, production, and processing across the food supply chain, in both skilled and unskilled jobs. Seasonal agricultural workers are particularly important in filling temporary and labour-intensive roles. This type of employment is not only important for farming, but also for other sectors of the rural economy such as forestry and game farming.
- The seasonality of many rural businesses means that access to labour is vital at important times of the year and attempts to reduce this form of temporary migration would be damaging to the rural economy. A clear distinction needs to be made between permanent migration and temporary migration.
- While improved mechanisation within agriculture will be welcome and has the potential to bring additional benefits including increased productivity, clearly this cannot be achieved over night. The Government must not fix future policy based on assumptions about technological developments and the viability of their adoption by the sector. At minimum it must be ready to delay plans to taper down visa availability should the vital interests of food production be threatened.
- Ultimately, we need to retain an immigration policy that reflects the importance of migrant workers to the food and farming industry and the broader rural economy. This must include distinct recognition of the importance of seasonal workers. There are simply not enough seasonal workers available from within the UK population.

Public procurement

“Public sector food should be healthier, more sustainable and provided by a diverse range of local suppliers. Locally produced food with reduced distance between farm and fork can provide societal benefits, such as creating personal connection between producers and consumers, supporting local food cultures and local economic growth, and improving traceability of food through shorter supply chains.”

- Alongside the strategy, the Government published a consultation on public sector food and catering policy, which ran until 4 September. The consultation covers plans to:
 - Promote procurement of local, sustainable, healthier food and catering;
 - Open up public sector supply chains to a wider range of companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to better support local economies, increase resilience, and encourage food producers to innovate;
 - Increase transparency of food supply chains to drive continuous improvement and build our understanding of what is bought, served, sold and wasted in the public sector; and
 - Provide guidance and standards that are simple and engaging, reflect latest scientific evidence and national sustainability priorities and align with other policies such as on waste and diet.
- In March 2021 the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee published a report following an inquiry into public sector food procurement. Among other things the Committee recommended that access to procurement contracts be widened for smaller, local suppliers without delay. The Government responded that it was committed to doing so.

- Early versions of the strategy are reported to have recommended an “*increase [to] the use of responsibly sourced wild venison*”. It is unfortunate that this did not survive into the published edition. The proposed new policy does, however, include a requirement for menus to be varied throughout the year to include foods in season, and cites venison during the winter as one example.

Countryside Alliance position

- Any steps to improve access to public procurement contracts for smaller businesses would be most welcome. In implementing these new arrangements the Government must take care to ensure that rural businesses have access to appropriate advice and guidance, so they can be well positioned to take full advantage.
- A new procurement framework will ideally recognise the value of promoting local food and drink, given its economic and environmental benefits. These include supporting diversification of farms and producer businesses, creating additional demands for skills and training, and reducing food miles and carbon emissions.
- The strategy is right to recognise that promoting local food and drink can also increase cultural identity and community pride. This in turn makes an area a more attractive tourist offer, while also ensuring the resilience of the local food supply and supporting farmers and small producers.
- With the first consultation associated with the strategy being on public sector food and catering policy, this provides an excellent opportunity to celebrate game meat and push for it to be on the menu. There is already a trial of six NHS Trusts who are piloting pheasant, partridge and venison on their menus as part of a project driven by British Game Assurance. Game meat is perfect for many hospital patients as it is nutritionally superior and higher in selenium than other meats. In tests it was also easy to consume for patients with swallowing problems.
- There are more deer in the UK than at any time since the Norman conquest and, in many places, densities are far too high and having a serious impact on fragile habitats. Over-grazing by deer can have knock-on effects for other species and the muntjac, which has spread across Southern England and the Midlands, is a particular issue. They are notorious browsers, eating the shoots from shrubs, as well as woodland herbs and brambles. This clearing of woodland understory and undergrowth, combined with the browsing of larger species, has been linked to declines in several species including the nightingale, willow tit and woodcock.
- Meanwhile, replacing intensively-farmed meat with local venison in your diet benefits both the environment by reducing carbon emissions and public health as venison is low in saturated fat and high in vitamins and minerals.
- Promoting venison and encouraging an increase in the UK deer cull should, therefore, be a straightforward and wholly positive policy. However, the primary driver for deer culling is the value of the deer carcass. The muntjac is tiny and the carcass value is therefore low. A game dealer might pay £10-15 for a muntjac carcass which is clearly not a good economic driver. Meanwhile, the market for venison is weak for reasons including the impact of increased red deer culls in Scotland and imports of farmed venison from New Zealand. This means the motivation for reducing deer numbers is lower than it could be.

Labelling

“In England, we will ensure that food information (such as labels, online information, QR codes) is optimised and based upon a set of established overarching principles which will be defined by Government, working with industry and other key actors in partnership. These principles will include ensuring that information is consistent, accessible, easy to understand and does not mislead.”

- The Government’s pledge to review and optimise food labelling is of long standing. The 2021 Queen’s Speech, for instance, included a pledge to “[fulfil] our commitment to a wide-ranging review into food labelling.”
- The headline aim of the section in the strategy that deals with labelling is “*creating a more transparent food system*”, with plans announced for enhanced requirements on producers relating to food data, reporting and monitoring.
- Importantly the strategy does acknowledge that the food industry has already made significant strides in this direction in response to customer demand, for example in relation to the poultry sector and marine stewardship.
- New work includes setting up a mandatory method that suppliers must use when labelling products according to ecological factors, so that consumers can be confident in the truth of claims that are being made. There may be changes to nutrition labelling which will be outlined in a forthcoming White Paper on health disparities, and there is a consultation planned for 2023 on proposals to improve and expand current mandatory animal welfare labelling requirements.
- The strategy also notes a plan to “*explore whether existing country-of-origin rules can be strengthened by mandating how and where origin information is displayed, for example, on the front of packs.*”

Countryside Alliance position

- Improving the labelling of food can empower the consumer, so we are pleased to welcome these proposals.
- Meat and products containing meat should only be labelled British if the animals were born, bred and slaughtered in the UK. For example, it should no longer be lawful for bacon to be labelled British because the pork meat from outside the UK was processed in the UK.
- We would support efforts to develop a comprehensive food labelling policy and extend mandatory country of origin labelling to lightly processed meats and some dairy products. The Government should also continue and develop protections for regional and speciality food and drink products in order to support UK farmers and producers.
- Our preference is for improvements to animal welfare in farming to be driven by empowering consumers to make good animal welfare choices in the food they eat, rather than by resorting to banning things. We therefore also believe a proper network of local abattoirs is essential, to promote local sourcing of meat, reduce the environmental impact of food miles and promote animal welfare.

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