

## COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE

### INVESTING IN LOCAL FOOD INFRASTRUCTURE

Westminster Hall Debate (Mr Peter Aldous MP)

Wednesday 8 September 2022

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#### Background

- This debate is being held to provide an opportunity to *“discuss the UK’s food supply chain and explore how we boost self-sufficiency, build long-term resilience, and localise our food system so that food producers have more direct routes to the market.”*
- It will seek to explore long-term Government infrastructure investment requirements to support food producers and how the issue intersects with the wider levelling-up agenda.
- The debate also acknowledges the context of the Government Food Strategy having recently been published alongside a consultation on public sector food procurement, which included a target of 50% of government food expenditure going on local food.

#### Key Issues

- **The levelling up agenda is too often seen as purely about supporting and improving urban areas outside of the south east of England. Rural Britain needs levelling up too, including its infrastructure, so that rural businesses including the local food sector can thrive.**
- **Primary food production is largely a rural business and with food being the UK’s largest manufacturing sector, it is of vital importance both to the national and local economies. Investing in opportunities for local food production, and robust local markets, must surely be a key objective for government.**
- **Food production, and those engaged in it, are essential to the delivery of the environmental benefits that the Government wants to see at the heart of its new agricultural support system, such as Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMs). 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 Government is proposing to prohibit live export for slaughter but perhaps more important is that it takes place as close as possible to where an animal is reared. This is a key consideration in any local food infrastructure. The Alliance has welcomed the Government’s apparent recognition of the value of local slaughter but is disappointed by the omission of issue of local abattoirs from the Government Food Strategy. Local slaughter allows for added product value to be retained within local economies and also has important benefits for animal welfare.**

- **The Government also needs to take steps to improve access to public procurement contracts for smaller businesses and at a local level. The current consultation on public food procurement also provides an excellent opportunity to celebrate nutritionally superior game meat and push for it to be on the menu.**
- **We 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.**
- **While this debate helpfully focuses on infrastructure for use by local food producers specifically, the continued need for investment in the wider infrastructure required for the success of any local business, in particular digital connectivity, cannot be ignored.**
- **Improved mechanisation within agriculture will be welcome and has the potential to bring additional benefits including increased productivity, so this should be an important target for local food infrastructure investment. Clearly, however, this cannot be achieved overnight. Nearer-term solutions to labour shortages are needed, especially in sectors where seasonal work is vital in bringing in the harvest.**
- **The Countryside Alliance will shortly launch the 2022 Countryside Alliance Awards, which are our contribution to the recognition and promotion of rural businesses, many operating in the food and drink sectors.**

## **Food security**

- *The 2022 Government Food Strategy states that the “continued production of healthier, high quality, tasty food and drink domestically remains of vital importance for our economy and food security.” It pledges to “support farmers to broadly maintain levels of domestic production through productivity gain and our new farming schemes” and to “enable growth in key sectors, including horticulture and seafood, making the most of post-Brexit opportunities.”<sup>1</sup>*
- *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”.*

## **Countryside Alliance position**

- **The UK produces some of the best food in the world, with the highest standards of safety and animal welfare.**

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<sup>1</sup> Defra, [Government food strategy](#), 13.06.22 (referenced throughout)

- Food production is essential to the delivery of the environmental benefits that the Government plans to put at the heart of 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 to the enhancement of the natural environment.
- The interests of food security require that food production must continue to be the primary use for productive farmland.
- The Alliance is 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, but the recent purchase by the Welsh Government of prime agricultural land for a Covid memorial woodland has been strongly opposed.

### Local abattoirs

- The Strategy makes no reference to abattoirs or slaughter, which is an issue on which the Opposition has raised concerns. In a House of Lords debate on pig farming in June, Baroness Hayman of Ullock, as Shadow Defra Spokesperson, said, *“We believe the abattoir network is just as much in need of support as farmers. It needs short-term capital investment to get itself match fit for a new, more market-facing world, in which consumers expect high welfare and environmental standards.”*<sup>2</sup>
- She continued, *“The Government maintain that there is sufficient capacity in the system but it is not just about capacity. It is also about transport costs, animal welfare issues and how small producers can access the services they need.”*
- Responding on behalf of the Government, Defra Minister Lord Benyon highlighted mobile abattoirs as a possible part of the solution: *“Yesterday, I was at Fir Farm in Gloucestershire, looking at a mobile slaughterhouse. This is an innovation that I hope the Food Standards Agency will authorise in the near future. This will be of enormous benefit to stock farmers, and it will alleviate the movements that some stock has to make.”*<sup>3</sup>
- He had previously, in December, made a similar point in response to a direct question about local slaughter. He also highlighted that Defra chairs a small abattoirs working group and said, *“We continue to find other ways of trying to support this vital sector to shorten food miles and improve farm animals’ access to properly run abattoirs.”*<sup>4</sup>
- The Government also remains committed to banning the export of live animals for fattening or slaughter, a measure that is included in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill which was carried over from the previous session but has yet to return for its Report Stage.

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<sup>2</sup> HL Deb, 16.06.22, [c1767](#)

<sup>3</sup> HL Deb, 16.06.22, [c1772](#)

<sup>4</sup> HL Deb, 09.12.21, [c2008-2009](#)

## Countryside Alliance position

- Given the Government's apparent recognition of the value of local slaughter, we are disappointed by the omission of abattoirs from the Government Food Strategy.
- The Countryside Alliance supports calls for the development of a network of local abattoirs, or alternative solutions such as mobile abattoirs. Local slaughter allows for added product value to be retained within local economies and also has important benefits for animal welfare, allowing livestock to be slaughtered closer to home and not forced to endure longer journeys.
- Local slaughter would also assist in the promotion of local food consumption, since it would situate more of the production journey within an identifiable area and avoid unnecessary transportation elsewhere.
- A proper network of abattoirs would be a major improvement in the existing local food infrastructure.

## Public sector procurement

- The Government Food Strategy sets an objective of making food provided by the public sector *“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 has published a consultation on public sector food and catering policy, which will run 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 April 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.<sup>5</sup> The Government responded that it was committed to doing so.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> EFRA Committee, [Sixth Report - Public Sector Procurement of Food](#), 21.04.21

<sup>6</sup> EFRA Committee, [Public Sector Procurement of Food: Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2019–21](#), 24.06.21

- Early versions of the Strategy are reported to have recommended an “*increase [to] the use of responsibly sourced wild venison*”.<sup>7</sup> 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 food businesses would be most welcome. In implementing these new arrangements the Government must take care to ensure that businesses have access to appropriate advice and guidance, so they can be well positioned to take full advantage.
- A new procurement framework should 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 Food Strategy is right to recognise that promoting local food and drink can also improve 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.
- Replacing intensively-farmed meat with local venison in the 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.

### **Food labelling**

- In the Strategy the Government commits to “*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.

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<sup>7</sup> Metro, [13.06.21](#)

- 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 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 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 would also suggest that supermarkets could do more to stock more locally sourced products when available and especially on a seasonal basis supporting local producers and making local foods more accessible to local people, rather than being largely the preserve of more specialist shops.

### **Digital infrastructure**

- A Countryside Alliance survey conducted with Gigaclear in 2021 found 80% of rural businesses agree that ultrafast fibre connectivity would have the single biggest positive impact on their business recovery post-Covid; 32% estimate it would help them recover twice as fast.<sup>8</sup>
- At the Budget in October the Government confirmed the investment of £1.2 billion from 2021-2022 to 2024-25 of the £5 billion Project Gigabit which aims to support the rollout of gigabit capable broadband in hard-to-reach areas across the whole of the UK.

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<sup>8</sup> Gigaclear / Countryside Alliance, [Rural Business Report](#), 07.21

- A further £180 million was announced over the next three years as part of the £500 million investment in the Shared Rural Network, which seeks to deliver high-quality 4G mobile coverage to 95% of the UK. This is estimated to offer extra coverage to 280,000 premises especially in rural areas, particularly for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### **Countryside Alliance position**

- While this debate helpfully focuses on infrastructure for use by local food producers specifically, the continued need for investment in the wider infrastructure required for the success of any local business, in particular digital connectivity, cannot be ignored.
- Covid-19 once again highlighted the disparity in broadband connectivity across the country as the networks have struggled to keep up with unprecedented demand which saw millions of Britons suffering from poor connectivity and outages. Our research also revealed 85% of rural businesses reported their current internet as being either poor but manageable (47%), or unmanageably poor (38%).
- Connectivity allows people to access information about local food, businesses to find new and local markets, and customers to access local produce online.

### **Mechanisation and labour**

- The Food Strategy recognises that *“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.<sup>9</sup>
- The Migration Advisory Committee is due 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.”*

### **Countryside Alliance position**

- Improved mechanisation within agriculture will be welcome and has the potential to bring additional benefits, including increased productivity, so this should be an important target for local food infrastructure investment.

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<sup>9</sup> Defra, [United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021: Theme 3: Food Supply Chain Resilience](#), 22.12.21

- Clearly, however, this cannot be achieved overnight. 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.
- 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 policy recommendations for seasonal workers.
- It is vitally important that seasonal agricultural workers are excluded from headline net migration figures since these people are in the UK for a time-limited period. 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.

### **The Countryside Alliance Awards**

- The Countryside Alliance will shortly launch the 2022 Countryside Alliance Awards, which are our contribution to the recognition and promotion of rural businesses, many operating in the food and drink sectors.
- The 2021 Awards saw a record 18,000 nominations, eventually leading to awards of National Champion and Highly Commended across a range of categories: Butcher, Local Food and Drink, Pub, Rural Enterprise, Village Shop / Post Office and Game. There was also a special Clarissa Dixon Wright Award. The awards ceremony was presented online and all winners have been celebrated on our website.<sup>10</sup>
- The 2022 Awards will open for nominations in the autumn and we are looking forward to continuing this celebration of the rural businesses and enterprise that the Countryside Alliance Awards stands for.

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<sup>10</sup> Countryside Alliance, [2020/21 National Champions and Highly Commended Winners](#)