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for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

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My Lords,

Food Supply and Security debate 14 May 2020

Thank you for all your contributions to the debate on Food Supply and Food Security on 14 May. Many questions were asked and I thought it would be helpful for all noble Lords to see my responses to all the questions where I agreed to write and provide further information.

I would first like to provide an update on seasonal agricultural workers to all the noble Lords that spoke.

Restrictions on travel from other countries, as a result of COVID-19, have limited the number of seasonal workers coming to work in the UK. As soon as this risk was evident we promptly put in place a number of measures to help our world-leading farmers and growers access the labour they need over the busy harvest months. Current indications are that these measures have been very effective and for most growers, their labour needs are largely being met through a combination of migrant labour and a significant increase in domestic workers on our fruit and vegetable farms. There is, however, a continued need to mobilise the British workforce to make sure our excellent fruit and vegetables are on people's plates over the summer months.

In April government and industry launched a digital hub called "Pick for Britain" to support industry's recruitment efforts. Working across Government and industry, saw a further set of activities. On 19 May the Secretary of State spoke on-air to a number of regional radio stations promoting the Pick for Britain campaign and promoting the hub website. This was accompanied by Defra sponsored articles in The Sun and regional papers linked to fruit and vegetable farming regions. We were also very grateful to The Prince of Wales who kindly supported the call for more domestic workers. He produced a video supporting the Pick for Britain Campaign. Also, Waitrose partnered with ITV to release a new advertising campaign supporting the 'Pick for Britain' initiative.

We have had more than a million hits to date and are now in a position where some businesses have met their labour needs and are being asked to come off the site.

Not every grower is yet in that position, and we will continue to work with industry to promote the "Pick for Britain" website across the summer – in particular we are hoping to

signpost the opportunities presented by seasonal agricultural work to students as their terms come to an end.

Baroness Parminter asked how many of the workers in the pilot scheme would arrive and what steps the Government are taking to address blockages stopping workers in Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia from obtaining biometrics.

The Seasonal Workers Pilot continues to operate in 2020. Demand for seasonal workers under the pilot is still high and some workers have already arrived in the UK.

The visa offices in Ukraine and Belarus reopened on 1 June. We are working with the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to address any barriers to potential workers in countries where visa centres are currently closed.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch asked what proportion of pickers this year are expected to be eastern European; what arrangements are being made to ensure that they can travel here safely; and whether there is any danger of crops being left to rot because of a lack of workers.

We are not able to give a defined proportion but evidence to date suggests a significant increase in the use of domestic workers with all the growers we regularly talk to telling us they are hiring domestic workers.

Migrant workers will remain an important part of the overall workforce. Many migrant workers return year after year to the same UK farms for the harvest season and are familiar with the work, having valued experience and skills they can pass on to others.

Workers are able to continue to come to the UK under the key worker category “Food and other necessary goods”. The same social distancing rules currently apply to new arrivals into the UK as apply to the population as a whole, as per the clear advice Public Health England have set out.

From 8 June, we will introduce a new self-isolation requirement for passengers arriving in the United Kingdom. As the infection rate from coronavirus reduces within the UK it allows us to relax social distancing measures gradually, and the risk of infection from arrivals from other countries potentially increases and the self-isolation measures will help reduce the spread from imported cases. Seasonal agricultural workers coming to the UK will be required to self-isolate on the property where they are working.

We are actively reviewing the most appropriate response at the UK border to the changing situation in relation to CV-19, both in the UK and across the international community.

To help our farmers and to protect public health, industry have developed Best Practice Guidance for employers of seasonal agricultural workers to avoid the spread of coronavirus. This has been endorsed by Public Health England:

<https://ahdb.org.uk/coronavirus/social-distancing-farm-businesses>.

We are seeing a reduction in the number of migrant workers this year and we have been working with industry to mobilise the British workforce to fill that gap and make sure our excellent fruit and vegetables are on people’s plates over the summer months We have launched the government-industry digital hub for seasonal work information and job opportunities ‘Pick for Britain’ and seen over one million people visit the site.

Lord Caithness asked what plans Government has to reduce consumption of processed foods in the UK.

Obesity and poor diet represents a huge cost to the health and wellbeing of the individual, the NHS and the wider economy. This Government is passionate and committed to an NHS fit for the future and to supporting everyone to eat better and move more.

The Government encourages everyone to have a healthy balanced diet in line with the United Kingdom's healthy eating model the Eatwell Guide. The principles of the guide also underpin Government guidance and tools including the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services and Public Health England's (PHE's) catering guidance.

PHE also oversees the reduction and reformulation programme on behalf of Government, as set out in all chapters of the childhood obesity plan. The programme applies across the food and drink industry (retailers, manufacturers and the eating out of home sector) and aims to reduce levels of sugar, calories and salt in a wide variety of every day food and drink most likely to be consumed by children up to the age of 18, such as chocolate confectionery, breakfast cereals, pizza, ready meals, crisps etc.; and work to improve the nutritional quality of commercial baby foods and drinks.

PHE published the first detailed assessment of progress for the salt reduction programme in December 2018. PHE is working on the next phase of salt targets as set out in the Government's Prevention Green Paper:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/salt-targets-2017-progress-report> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/advancing-our-health-prevention-in-the-2020s>.

In 2019, PHE published its second report on industry progress towards achieving the Government's ambition on sugar reduction (a 20% reduction by 2020).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sugar-reduction-progress-between-2015-and-2018>.

The Government is also committed to ensuring that the food system supports healthy diets. Defra has commissioned its lead Non-Executive Director to lead an independent review to develop a series of recommendations that will help shape a National Food Strategy. The National Food Strategy will build on work already underway in the Agriculture Bill, the Environment Bill, the Fisheries Bill and the childhood obesity plan to address the challenges of supporting people to eat healthy diets, producing food sustainably and protecting national food security.

Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe asked whether the Government will review their attitude to sugar and recognise that it is a major factor causing significant problems.

The United Kingdom population, particularly children, are consuming too much sugar. This increases the risk of excess calorie consumption and weight gain, which is associated with obesity, and also leads to tooth decay. Both of these are linked to a range of social and health problems and consequent economic impacts, including major costs to the National Health Service.

We know people do not want to be hectored about what to eat. We feel people should be able to choose freely for themselves and their families as they know best. But those choices need to be fair and people need the right information to make those choices. We know many supermarkets and businesses get this and are taking the lead. They know their customers and know it makes business sense. We want the healthy option to be an easier option for everyone, so we can help all our children grow up healthier.

Many of the key measures in all 3 chapters of the Government's childhood obesity plan will have an impact on reducing obesity and improving diet across all age groups. These include the soft drinks industry levy, sugar reduction and wider calorie reformulation programme, restricting promotions and calorie labelling in restaurants which will improve our eating habits and reduce the amount of sugar we consume.

PHE oversees the sugar reduction programme which is a Government commitment included in all chapters of the childhood obesity plan. It challenges all sectors of the food industry¹ to reduce the level of sugar in foods, such as chocolate confectionery, cakes and breakfast cereals, that contribute the most to children's intakes (up to the age of 18 years) by 20% by 2020, with a 5% reduction to be achieved in the first year (August 2017). Voluntary reduction ambitions have been set for juice and milk-based drinks which are excluded from the soft drinks industry levy (SDIL). In April 2018, the SDIL came into effect which was aimed at encouraging producers to lower the sugar content of their drinks.

Last year PHE published its second report on progress made towards achieving the sugar reduction programme's ambitions. The report looked at progress made by retailers and manufacturers (in home sector), the out of home sector (for example quick service restaurants, cafés, pubs etc.) and through the SDIL. Further information can be viewed here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sugar-reduction-progress-between-2015-and-2018>.

In summary, this showed mixed progress across food categories with some achieving greater sugar reductions, for example breakfast cereals and yogurts, whilst others achieved little or no progress. Continued reductions were seen in drinks that are subject to the levy. The next report, due to be published later this year, will provide a further assessment of progress by all industry sectors. The first year of progress on sugar reduction in juice and milk-based drinks will also be reported.

Lord McConnell asked what progress has been made on setting up decision-making systems in agriculture and the environment, now that powers are being returned from Brussels to the United Kingdom.

Several mechanisms are being developed to ensure Defra and the devolved administrations can make effective decisions together. Defra and the devolved administrations have convened the Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. This a decision-making forum which discusses UK-wide agricultural and environmental issues. These meetings are also supplemented with bi-lateral discussions.

¹ This is retailers, manufacturers, and the eating out of home sector (quick service restaurants, casual dining restaurants, contract caterers (foodservice), cafés and coffee shops, sandwich and bakery led shops, pubs, vending, retail food on the go, takeaway and delivery services)

Defra is also working closely with the devolved administrations to agree the common frameworks that we will need for those returning EU powers that intersect with Devolved competence. The set of principles agreed at the Joint Ministerial Committee for EU negotiations (JMC (EN)) in October 2017 guide Defra in the development of these frameworks. This includes:

enabling the function of the UK internal market;

management of common resources; and

protecting the UK's ability to implement new trade agreements and international treaties.

We have also developed the UK Agricultural Market Monitoring Group (UKAMMG) with devolved colleagues. Its aim is to monitor UK agricultural markets and provide forewarning of any atypical market movements. This will help prepare the evidence base for the cause and possible range of interventions in specific markets (or specific geographical regions). It has already proved useful during the COVID crisis.

Lord McConnell also asked what progress has been made on the sustainable development goals, and making sure that we have a more resilient and economically productive food system in operation in this country in the future.

The UK remains committed to the achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) both domestically and globally. The SDGs will play a key role in post-COVID-19 recovery, recognising the connection between healthy lives, healthy societies and a healthy environment. It is more important than ever that we work to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and Defra has an important role to play. Defra is particularly well-placed to drive progress on SDG 12 around sustainable consumption and production. The UK's progress towards this and the other SDGs is laid out in the [Voluntary National Review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals](#), published in June 2019.

We are fortunate in the UK that we have the climate, the landscape, and the entrepreneurial farmers and food producers that equip us to produce world-class high quality food. Agriculture continues to play an important role in the UK's economy, contributing £9.5 billion in 2018. Food and drink exports are a success story: in 2019 UK food and drink exports were worth £23.56bn. This was an increase of 2.5% in 2018 in real terms.

Food supply into and across the UK is already resilient. Half of the food that the UK population consumes is home-grown and we will always champion our farmers and producers to provide a reliable and sustainable food supply to the British public. This includes through using powers under our landmark Agriculture Bill, and through our work with the Food and Drink Sector Council, a formal industry partnership with Government, helping create a more productive and sustainable food and drink sector. We are ambitious in our vision for our food and farming sector, and we will support our farmers to grow more, sell more and export more great British food. We want to see an innovative, productive and competitive food supply chain from farm and sea to fork, that invests in its people and skills.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch asked how the adequacy of the dairy support scheme will be monitored and adjusted as necessary.

The Government has continued to engage closely with representatives from all parts of the dairy supply chain throughout this difficult period to assess the challenges facing the industry and to ensure that appropriate financial support is provided. The vast majority of Britain's dairy farmers continue to supply their contracts at or around the usual price. Approximately 5% of total milk production, however, goes to the service trade. A small proportion of suppliers have therefore seen a reduction in demand. We have provided a range of support to help these affected farmers, including the dairy hardship fund.

On 6 May the Government announced a new scheme specifically to provide support to eligible dairy farmers in England who have lost more than 25% of their income over April and May because of coronavirus disruptions. This will provide farmers with funding of up to £10,000 each, to cover 70% of their lost income during the qualifying period, enabling them to continue to operate and to sustain production capacity without impacts on animal welfare.

The Government will continue to engage with the dairy industry throughout this period of disruption to monitor the impact of this scheme and the wider package of financial support, regulatory easements and promotional campaigns implemented by the Government.

Lord Bishop of St Albans asked whether we should dedicate one of our Thursday evenings to outdoor applause for British farmers and food producers.

Our farmers and growers are doing an essential job of feeding the nation during this challenging time. I warmly welcome every opportunity to show our appreciation for their hard work.

Lord Shrewsbury took issue with the fact that Lidl has chosen to stock Dutch eggs and asked that my officials contact both Lidl and Aldi to express producers' concerns that they have driven down the price of free-range eggs.

Consumer demand for eggs increased rapidly and significantly as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. We welcome efforts from all parts of the food chain to promote and source British products – and I personally am keen to do everything possible to promote the consumption of British eggs - but it is within the law for retailers to stock eggs from caged hens from European Member States. Consumers are, however, able to make an informed choice as to the provenance of their eggs. In accordance with Commission Regulation (EC) No 589/2008 and Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013, it is a requirement for class A eggs produced in the European Union to be marked with a producer code, which contains information on both the country of origin and the farming method. Packs of eggs are also required to state the farming method of the eggs. Ultimately therefore, consumers have sufficient information to make an informed decision as to whether they wish to purchase eggs from the UK or elsewhere, and whether they wish to purchase eggs from hens kept in enriched cages, free range, barn or organic systems of production. It is not ordinarily the Government's place to intervene in retailer sourcing decisions. The Government does not set prices for consumers. Our understanding is, however, that the retailers' move to source eggs from the European Union is temporary and that there is a continued desire to buy

British. It is also worth noting that all major supermarkets have committed to stop selling eggs from hens kept in enriched cages by 2025.

Over half of the food that we consume overall in the UK is home-grown and renowned for its quality, and high standards of food safety, traceability, animal welfare and sustainability. For this reason, I personally seek and encourage others to buy British food and drink.

Lord Holmes of Richmond asked if I agree that new technologies can provide greater resilience in our food chain, with respect to distributed ledger technologies, the internet of things and other elements of the fourth industrial revolution.

We are facing a new technological revolution which presents huge opportunities for food production. Advances in AI, big data and robotics will help increase productivity and enable the sector to meet the challenges of achieving the net-zero target, as well improving food security, animal welfare, nutrition, and resilience to pests and disease.

The Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund 'Transforming Food Production' programme is investing £90 million in research and development, bringing together new technologies in AI, robotics and earth observation to transform food production to boost productivity sustainably. This includes development and demonstration of novel technologies and solutions, and decision making tools, improving the resilience of the Food and Drink Sector and making it better able to respond to shocks such as Covid-19.

Defra's Food Authenticity research programme develops 'fit for purpose' methods to verify food labelling. These tools help food law enforcers and industry to protect consumers from food fraud, improving consumer trust in food and supporting a competitive, secure and resilient food supply. The programme invests in developing cutting edge research and has a focus on knowledge transfer to ensure that detection tools are taken-up and used.

Lord Krebs asked what the Government is doing about people potentially going hungry or suffering malnutrition as a result of the ongoing COVID19 crisis.

The Government is ensuring that over 2 million people in England identified by the NHS as being at higher risk of severe illness if they contract Coronavirus have access to the food they need.

Our Local Support System is making sure those individuals self-isolating at home and who are without a support network of friends and family receive basic food and essential supplies. The Government is working with a partnership of the food industry, local government, local resilience forums and emergency partners, and voluntary groups, to ensure that essential items are delivered as soon as possible to those who need it.

We are offering this extremely vulnerable contingent free food parcels, delivered to their door. The free food parcels offer is an emergency response to a very fast-moving situation to support those in greatest need of supplies. Over 2.25 million boxes of essential food have now been delivered by wholesalers to those at highest risk across England, with more than 300,000 boxes being distributed every week.

The parcels contain a basic selection of food and other essential items. They are a standardised package designed to be suitable for the majority of people and deliver the nutritional requirements for one person for one week, as reviewed by nutritionists and key industry groups.

Regarding those who are not classed as vulnerable but may still struggle to afford food at this time - Defra is working closely with charities to estimate the supply of food to charities and demand for food from users of those charities. We have also received £16 million from a DCMS funding pot for the charity sector to ensure that critical front-line services supporting the economically vulnerable can still access the food they need. We are distributing this funding across a network of charities that provide food for the vulnerable, covering England. We will work with FareShare, the Waste Resource Action Programme (WRAP) and other charitable organisations that distribute food to vulnerable people. They will use surplus food and purchase food from the supply chain to help at least 5,000 front-line charities, covering England and rural areas. This will provide millions of meals to the economically vulnerable through purchased and surplus food.

To ensure that we are considering all possible impacts in terms of hunger, Defra is also working very closely with other departments such as Department for Work and Pensions and Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to try and identify who may not be getting the support they need right now. We will work around the clock to ensure that nobody goes hungry as a result of this crisis.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch asked what is being done to solve issues with delivering school meal vouchers through Edenred to ensure families receive their promised vouchers efficiently.

I promised during the debate to raise this issue with the Department for Education, and have received the following response:

The Department for Education has introduced a number of important measures to ensure children who usually receive free school meals still have access to this provision while they are not attending school. During this period, we are asking schools to support children who are eligible for and claiming benefits-related free school meals, by providing meals or food parcels through their existing food providers wherever possible.

Schools are best placed to make decisions for their children, families and communities relating to this provision. In the first instance, we encouraged schools to speak to their catering team or provider to see if they can prepare meals or food parcels for families, ensuring they are distributed in line with social distancing guidelines. We know that many schools are successfully delivering food parcels or arranging food collections for eligible children, and we encourage this approach where it is possible.

Where this is not possible, schools have been able to offer alternatives, which has included use of our national voucher scheme. This scheme is delivering at a significant scale for thousands of schools. Our supplier, Edenred, has reported that over £110 million worth of voucher codes has been redeemed into supermarket eGift cards by schools and families through the scheme as of Wednesday 27 May and that over 17,000 schools had placed orders for the scheme as of Tuesday 12 May.

We have been working tirelessly with our scheme supplier, Edenred, to improve the scheme since its launch. Significant improvements have been made, including in relation to the waiting times that parents and carers have experienced when accessing the website to redeem their voucher codes, as well as the waiting times that schools have experienced in accessing the site to place orders.

We thank schools, parents and carers for their patience while we have expanded the system to meet the high demand.

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock asked about flexibility in terms of where families can use their £15 free school meal vouchers.

A large number of schools have signed up for the national Free School Meals (FSM) voucher scheme. Through this scheme, schools can ensure that families with FSM-eligible children receive a weekly shopping voucher to the value of £15 per eligible child. Maintaining consumer choice is part of our offer.

Through Edenred, you can currently access eGift cards for the following supermarkets: Aldi, McColl's, Morrison's, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, Waitrose and M&S.

We recognise that it may not be convenient or possible for some families to visit one of these supermarkets and DfE are working to see if additional supermarkets can be added to this list.

If families are unable to visit one of these supermarkets, DfE are encouraging schools to continue with a local solution to supporting pupils eligible for free school meals. This can include making their own arrangement with local retailers.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick asked about unfettered access for our food suppliers and food supplies in Northern Ireland.

The Government has always been clear that checks on live animals and agri-food will be needed for goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, building on what already happens at ports like Larne and Belfast. We want to ensure new administrative procedures are streamlined and do not affect the flow of trade. The engagement forum announced in our Command Paper, *The UK's Approach to the Northern Ireland Protocol (CP226)*, published on 20 May, will enable business to put forward proposals in this regard.

We have also been clear that there will be no new regulatory checks or export declarations as goods leave Northern Ireland for Great Britain. *The UK's Approach to the Northern Ireland Protocol* reaffirms our commitment, set out in *New Decade, New Approach*, to legislate to guarantee unfettered access for Northern Ireland's businesses to the whole of the UK internal market and will ensure that this legislation is in force for 1 January 2021.

Lord Purvis of Tweed asked when we will see the legislative proposals for checks and procedures at the new customs and regulatory border within the UK so that they can be scrutinised fully.

The government has committed to ensuring that the Northern Ireland Protocol will be in operation from 1st January 2021. The legislation to give effect to the Northern Ireland Protocol will be brought forward in due course, in the usual way.

Baroness Sheehan asked how the food safety inspections regime has been coping with reduced personnel, the difficulty of maintaining social distancing measures in food production settings, and a shortage of PPE.

Food safety inspections are delivered in some meat establishments by government Meat Hygiene Inspectors and Official Veterinarians, and in other food and feed establishments by Local Authorities.

The Food Standards Agency has worked with Food Standards Scotland and industry to develop contingency plans for the meat sector under COVID-19. This is a tiered and proportionate plan, to enable the FSA to take appropriate actions as required, reflecting that the impact of COVID-19 has differed from plant to plant. Additional measures are temporarily available to increase the FSA's ability to continue to deliver official controls in meat establishments should staff resources be reduced. Prioritisation of existing activity and recruitment/redeployment of resources have been effective, with limited need to use the temporary measures. FSA continues to meet demand and no meat plants have had to close due to unavailability of Official Veterinarians and Meat Hygiene Inspectors.

Government guidance recognises the difficulties of maintaining social distancing at certain points in specific food business settings but states that social distancing must be achieved as far as reasonably possible. The FSA has underlined its expectation that social distancing guidance would be followed in establishments and has engaged directly with businesses to support their implementation of social distancing, where necessary.

PPE for FSA frontline staff continues to be selected and issued following a risk assessment as is in line with BEIS and PHE recommendations. Wearing this PPE and adhering to hygiene requirements is well-established practice amongst these staff. It is for Local Authorities to undertake a risk assessment as to what PPE is required in each circumstance.

The Food Standards Agency has directed local authorities to defer planned food hygiene, food standards and feed inspections and other interventions until 17 July 2020 in order to focus on urgent reactive work to address public health risks and minimise footfall in food/feed establishments. Urgent reactive work includes responding to food or feed incidents, investigating any foodborne disease outbreaks, following up on intelligence in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and proactively checking food businesses with compliance issues to identify any potential risks to consumers. Local authority staff are also assessing high risk establishments to inform the need for on-site visits and have been encouraged to use remote assessment where such an approach is appropriate. We plan to issue updated direction to local authorities on resumption of official control activities in food and feed businesses in early July 2020.

We are hugely grateful for the co-operation from industry and businesses in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring food safety inspections can be progressed.

Baroness Sheehan also asked what advice scientists have given about the risk of SARS-CoV-2 jumping the species barrier from humans back to the animal kingdom.

Defra has a team of risk assessors who have been assessing the risk caused by SARS-CoV-2 to various animals since the start of the pandemic. They have specifically considered the potential risk to companion animals, exotic animals and livestock. They have concluded that while there are a few susceptible species, such as felines, mustelids and non-human primates, the available evidence shows that livestock are not as susceptible. There is also nothing to suggest exposure to the virus in livestock (whether mammals, poultry or aquatic farmed animals) would lead to widespread infection in other animals or transmission back to humans. The current COVID-19 pandemic is sustained by human-to-human transmission.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch asked what engagement Defra has had with the food sector unions.

Minister Paul Scully, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets at the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, has weekly calls with the unions, including the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), as well as him holding weekly calls with retailers and trade associations. We also engage at official level regularly with USDAW and with retailers/trade associations.

I hope you find this information helpful. I am very pleased that Lady Boycott's debate provided us with an opportunity to raise these important matters and more which I sought to address during the debate. I look forward to working with your Lordships on these matters, and I have no doubt that the forthcoming Agriculture Bill will enable us to continue our deliberations. I have placed a copy of this letter in the library of both Houses.

*Yours ever,
John*