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My Lords,

Committee (Day 3): Agriculture Bill

I am grateful to noble Lords for their contributions on the third day of Committee for the Agriculture Bill on 14 July. I said that I would write on several matters raised.

Regulatory interventions during the Covid-19 outbreak

Lord Bruce, Lord Adonis and Lord Cormack asked about the Government's plans for the end of the EU Transition Period, and how we can be certain that food security will not be disrupted. The Government's response to Covid-19 serves as a guide to the approach that we can draw on in our planning for the end of the EU Transition Period.

UK retailers have highly resilient supply chains and they continue to work around the clock to ensure people have the food and products they need across the four nations. The Government has well-established ways of working with the food industry during disruption to supply situations. Following a significant spike in consumer demand in early March of this year, the Government introduced several measures to help ease supply chain disruption and support an industry-led response.

The Government extended delivery hours to supermarkets and relaxed rules on drivers' hours, to allow a higher frequency of deliveries to stores to help replenish shelves more quickly. We also temporarily relaxed the single-use carrier bag charge for online deliveries. This change enabled contact between delivery drivers and customers to be kept to a minimum and made deliveries more time efficient. The Government made the Competition Act 1998 (Groceries) (Coronavirus) (Public Policy Exclusion) Order 2020 to help grocery suppliers and logistics companies mitigate the food supply disruption attributable to Covid-19 by collaborating in ways that would normally be prohibited by Competition Law.

Defra and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) produced advice for trading standards officers which allowed local authorities to provide food businesses with some temporary flexibilities

on information presented on food labels. This helped avoid the real risk of food being wasted and unnecessary additional disruption to the supply of food to shops and homes.

Defra also launched several interventions to support the dairy sector including the Dairy Response Fund to provide support to eligible dairy farmers in England who have been significantly impacted by Covid-19. The Government also provided a temporary relaxation of competition law that enabled the dairy industry to come together to maximise processing capacity and ensure as much product as possible could be processed into dairy products. Defra and the Devolved Administrations jointly contributed towards financing the £1 million campaign by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board and Dairy UK to drive an increase in the consumption of milk.

Defra also took action to support the vulnerable. The Government announced £16 million to provide food for charities and other organisations to support the economically vulnerable. The programme is providing an estimated 20 million meals and is being delivered through charities including FareShare and WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme). DEFRA also announced the £3.5 million Food Charities Grant Fund for front-line food aid charities, offering grants up to £100,000, to support charities to continue to provide food to vulnerable people. £63 million was committed to the Emergency Assistance Grant Scheme to enable Local Authorities to support those who are struggling to afford food and other essentials due to COVID-19. Finally, through a contract with Brakes and Bidfood, we delivered more than 4.5m boxes of food to people who were shielding. And we have worked with supermarkets to ensure that people who are isolating at home can access priority delivery slots.

The Covid-19 response has illustrated that Defra, through its close relationship with industry, has the capability to respond flexibly to significant increases in demand and associated food supply disruption. The recent period has demonstrated the underlying resilience of the UK food supply chain which has responded well during Covid-19, due to its diversity, size and the hard work and commitment of those on the front line.

Defra is working alongside other Government Departments, Devolved Administrations, and industry to ensure that we build on learning from recent experiences as we plan for future risks. Defra's thorough preparations for leaving the EU and work with industry during the recent Covid-19 response provide a robust foundation for end of Transition Period planning.

Obesity, Public Health and Healthy Food

Lady Jones of Whitchurch recommended in her contribution that producing healthy food, in an environmentally sustainable way, should be a key purpose for which financial assistance can be given. She argued that in the context of poor diets and food poverty this was especially important.

Agriculture and health are connected in many ways. Tackling public health and food issues properly requires a joined up and practical cross-Government approach, while beyond the scope of this Bill alone, Defra is working with the Department of Health and Social Care (amongst others), to put public health at the heart of everything that we do.

The new provisions within the Bill will support the sustainable production of healthy food, made to high environmental and animal welfare standards. The Government will do this by supporting investment in new technologies, so that producers can increase the quality and quantity of the fruit and vegetables they grow. An increase in domestic production could help increase the availability of different foods throughout the year, reduce imports and lead to a reduction in prices for the consumer.

There are currently interventions outside of the Agriculture Bill. The Government already supports the three Healthy Food Schemes (Healthy Start, Nursery Milk and School Fruit and Vegetables), which together support the national Childhood Obesity Plan. Healthy Start encourages healthy diets for around 290,000 pregnant women, families and children under four from low income households. It offers vouchers, which can be used to buy, or be put towards the cost of, fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables, plain cow's milk and infant formula. The Nursery Milk Scheme (NMS) provides a reimbursement to childcare providers for daily 1/3-pint portion of milk to children under the age of five, who attend childcare for more than two hours per day. Each year around 236m portions of milk are distributed through roughly 56,000 childcare settings. The School Fruit and Vegetables Scheme provides over 2.3m children in Key Stage 1 with a portion of fresh fruit or vegetables each day at school, with approx. 442m pieces of fruit and vegetables are distributed to children annually.

As a country we consume too many calories, as well as too much sugar, saturated fat and salt. Obesity is a leading cause of serious diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. Being obese or excessively overweight also increases the risk of severe illness and death from Covid-19. This represents a huge cost to the health and wellbeing of the individual, the NHS and the wider economy.

The Government launched its new Obesity Strategy on 27 July setting out measures to get the nation fit and healthy, to protect themselves against Covid-19 and, to protect the NHS. These measures add to the wide range of actions already in place and bring us a step closer to reaching our ambition to halve childhood obesity and significantly reduce the gap in obesity between children from the most and least deprived areas by 2030.

As part of the new Obesity Strategy, Public Health England launched the new national Better Health campaign on 27 July. The campaign will be targeted at groups most affected by obesity and will be supported by a coalition of partners, including those providing weight management services. It will encourage adults to introduce changes that will help them work towards a healthier weight, with a suite of free tools and apps supporting people to eat better, drink less alcohol and take more exercise.

The Government has already made good progress towards its goal; cutting sugar from half of drinks on sale, funding exercise programmes in schools and working with councils to tackle child obesity locally through ground-breaking schemes.

Finally, part one of the National Food Strategy independent review, led by Henry Dimbleby, was published on Wednesday 29th July. This sets out independent recommendations to Government, including proposals to help vulnerable children eat healthily, and recommendations on trade. We will carefully consider these recommendations with the relevant departments and coordinate a response in due course. The Government also maintains its commitment in responding with a White Paper within six months of the final report being completed. I look forward to discussing with their Lordships what should be in that document, as well as part two of the National Food Strategy independent review, at a later point.

I hope noble Lords find this information helpful. I am copying this letter to all noble Lords who took part in the debate and I shall be placing copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

Yours ever,
John