



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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From the Chair of the Committee

Rt Hon George Eustice MP

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

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COVID-19 and Food Supply

I am writing to follow up the briefing the EFRA Committee received from DEFRA and MHCLG officials on 22 April, and the bilateral conversations I have had with you and your Permanent Secretary recently, on the actions the Government is taking to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our food supply chain and to ensure ongoing supplies of food.

These were very helpful discussions and the Committee welcomes the open and constructive way your officials have engaged with us. However, given these were private meetings there are some points that the Committee would like to put on the record and questions we would welcome a public answer to, either in the Department's written submission to our COVID-19 and Food Supply inquiry or separately. These are set out below.

Market disruption

The Committee welcomes the efforts from the Government thus far to support food producers coping with disruption to their markets. However, UK farmers, fishers, and producers continue to face significant pressures, and there is likely to be a need for bolder Government action, beyond that set out in your written statement of 21 April, to prevent lasting damage to the UK's domestic food production, and the businesses and livelihoods it represents. We therefore seek further detail on and what further actions the Government intends to take to support UK producers to weather this unprecedented challenge.

These market disruptions have resulted in some producers being left with surplus food at a time when there is also a substantial increase in the number of families and vulnerable people struggling to afford or access healthy food. The Committee therefore welcomes the steps you have already taken to support food charities to redistribute surplus food, but there is clearly a strong case for the Government to quickly provide significantly more support.

Many takeaways, and restaurants who could provide takeaway or delivery, have chosen to close when legally they could have stayed open because of understandable concerns about protecting staff and customers. Public safety is obviously of paramount importance, and the Committee would therefore ask what steps the Government is taking to support and encourage these businesses to safely re-open as far as they are able as quickly as possible.

We would also welcome an update on how the UK's ornamental horticulture sector is being supported, including what support Government can provide businesses such as garden centres to reopen as soon as it is safe for them to do so.

Labour shortages

We continue to hear serious concerns about the pandemic's impact on the seasonal agricultural workforce; despite the efforts of the industry, working with the Government, to recruit domestically. There have been conflicting reports about the number of jobs offered and their take up by UK workers. We would therefore ask for DEFRA's assessment of the number of UK nationals who have applied for seasonal jobs, how many have subsequently taken up work, and what barriers are being faced in recruiting and retaining UK nationals.

We would also welcome an assurance that all possible steps are being taken to ensure that the continued arrival of seasonal workers from abroad does not undermine the vital work being done to manage the spread of Covid-19, including whether testing of those arriving has been considered.

Vulnerable people

To supplement the published numbers of those people who have been advised by the NHS to "shield" and are eligible for food deliveries organised nationally, the Committee would like your estimate of how many people in England are at risk of experiencing difficulties in accessing healthy food because of their health, age, disability or other factors but not covered by the national programme. Furthermore, what steps is the Government taking, with partners, to ensure these people have access to healthy food, and what has been delivered so far?

We would also appreciate an explanation of how DEFRA is working with the devolved governments to share data, resources and best practice in supporting vulnerable people to access food during the Covid-19 pandemic.

DEFRA Structures

We would like to further understand how the department has liaised with the various parts of the food supply chain during the crisis. We would like a full list of the membership of the Food Chain Emergency Liaison Group and the Food Supply Chain Resilience Forum, when they have met in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and any minutes of their meetings or advice to the Government they have produced.

To assist with our wider remit of examining the expenditure and administration of the Department, we would also be grateful for answers to the following questions:

- What new teams or structures have been created or expanded within the DEFRA group in response to the coronavirus pandemic, how they have been staffed, and overall how many DEFRA staff have been working on the response to the crisis?
- What projects or other work has had to be stopped or delayed in order to release staff for higher priority work responding to the crisis?
- The source of the funding for the new support schemes that the department has announced, including, where appropriate, which existing departmental or DEFRA ALB's programmes it has been reprioritised from?

I would like to record in closing the Committee's ongoing thanks to all those in DEFRA who are working tirelessly in responding to this pandemic and to ensure that the country continues to have the food it needs.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in purple ink, consisting of the name 'Neil' followed by a stylized, elongated flourish.

Neil Parish
Chair of the Committee