

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Food Security, HC 622

Tuesday 24 January 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 24 January 2023.

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Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Steven Bonnar; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Derek Thomas.

Questions 300-401

Witnesses

I: The right hon. Mark Spencer MP, Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; and David Kennedy CB, Director General for Food, Biosecurity and Trade, DEFRA.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Defra](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mark Spencer and David Kennedy.

Q300 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the EFRA Select Committee, which continues our report on food security. We are very pleased to welcome Mark Spencer, the Minister at DEFRA, and David Kennedy. Will you briefly introduce yourselves for the record and explain what your role is?

Mark Spencer: I am Mark Spencer, the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, with some responsibility for trade as well within DEFRA.

David Kennedy: Hi. I am David Kennedy, director general of food, biosecurity and trade.

Q301 **Chair:** I will start off with the exam question, Minister: what is the Government's definition of an adequate level of food security for the UK, and how far away are we from that level now?

Mark Spencer: It is not a simple question to answer—not as simple as it is presented. It depends on who you ask. Consumers would have a different definition. They would define it as: is there food on the shelves of my shop when I go to collect it? It is quite difficult to have an arbitrary target. You measure that in tonnage or in calorific value. All these things are very blunt instruments. The direct answer to the question is: is there an adequate food supply for our consumers to purchase at a time that they want to?

Q302 **Chair:** We could be like Singapore, which produces hardly any food and imports it all. Would you be relaxed if we moved in that direction?

Mark Spencer: What matters is whether there is food on the shelves. You need a mixed balance between what is produced domestically and what is imported from reliable sources and established trading markets. Of course, there is a huge percentage of food that we consume that we cannot produce. We are 100% reliant on the import of bananas. That is recognised. For economic and landscape reasons, we need to make sure we produce enough food in the UK to satisfy as much of the marketplace as we can, but without putting at risk our food security in the same process.

Q303 **Chair:** The ballpark figure I have seen is that we are about 60% self-sufficient in all food and 70% in food we can produce in our climate. Where would you like to see that figure?

Mark Spencer: I think it is 61% and 74%; those are the figures that I have in my head. Those figures have been pretty stable for quite a long time. We can always add to that and tweak it one way or the other, but it is a balance that has worked very well for the UK; it has kept us very well fed since the second world war.



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There is always an opportunity for UK food producers to produce a little bit more. We should not dismiss the opportunity for exports as well, of course. We have some of the finest food producers in the world, and we should not be surprised that other nations want to purchase some of that food produced in the UK.

David Kennedy: It is important to say that our food security has been put to the test over the last few years—through covid, through EU exit, through Russia-Ukraine—and we have come through that. We have not had food supply interruptions; those have been well managed, as the Minister said, between a balance of imports and domestic production, which is there or thereabouts.

Mark Spencer: And of course avian flu and all the challenges that that brought. We have had lots of predictions of Armageddon and food shortages, but the robust systems we have in place have so far delivered for UK consumers.

Q304 **Chair:** Not only were turkeys available for Christmas, but I managed to buy one in January for the freezer for next Christmas, with a big discount.

Mark Spencer: Well, Chairman—I know which county you are from.

Q305 **Chair:** Thank you. Now, you have just mentioned that people have always found food on the shelves, but obviously the affordability of that food and food price inflation has been a real issue, particularly for people who spend a large proportion of their disposable income on food. What do you think will happen to food price inflation during 2023, given the continuing situation in Ukraine and the input prices that farmers are still facing with fertiliser, labour and feedstuffs as well?

Mark Spencer: If I knew the answer to that and what was going to happen to future food markets, I could probably make a lot more money than I can as a DEFRA Minister. It is fair to say that there is still some pressure in the system, and some of that needs to shake its way through. It feels like we are at the peak of that inflationary rise; certainly, world gas prices are starting to ease a little, which obviously affects fertiliser prices directly. Some of the input costs to those farmers are starting to reduce.

We need to see a little more fairness in the system, so that the risk and reward in the food production systems is shared adequately and primary producers, farmers, the processing sector and the retail sector share that risk, responsibility and reward fairly.

Q306 **Chair:** Supermarkets have been making record profits of late, which would indicate that they are not necessarily managing to respond to the market in a way that we would expect. We have a lot of competition in the sector, but they do not necessarily seem to be having massive price wars, which would help consumers.

Mark Spencer: There is always room to try to become more efficient. Again, that efficiency needs to be shared right the way through the

system. Farmers and primary producers have become much more efficient over decades; the processing sector is also becoming more efficient, and so are retailers. That is hopefully passed on to consumers, but of course all sections in that food supply chain need to maintain a profitability to survive in the future.

What I would like to see—and what we try to facilitate—are discussions between those various layers of the food supply chain to ensure that they are interacting in a way that is fair and sustainable.

Q307 Chair: You probably spotted the quote from Baroness Eliza Manningham-Buller—who, it must be said, knows a little about security—which says that food security should be a matter of national security. Do you agree with that statement?

Mark Spencer: Food security is certainly very important to the Government, yes. That is why we invest a lot of time in trying to ensure that those systems work and are in place.

Q308 Chair: Will you commit to publishing the UK food security report annually?

Mark Spencer: I think we do it every three years—that is my understanding. There is no reason why we could not do that more often, but we are legally obliged—I am looking at David—to do it every three years. I see no reason why we could not do that more often.

David Kennedy: Under the Agriculture Act 2020, there is a statutory obligation to report every three years. The sense was that in normal times things are not changing that much, so three years will do. Obviously, things have been changing quite a lot recently, so we are considering doing an annual update, for example—not to commit to that now, but it is something we are considering doing.

Mark Spencer: If that was the conclusion of the Committee, having looked at all this, we would certainly be open to a conversation.

Dr Hudson: As you have just said, David, we are not in normal times. When the Agriculture Act was passed, that report was every three years, but we have come through the pandemic and we have the war in Ukraine, so I think producing a status report on the country's food security each year would be a good thing to do. I do not know whether Committee members agree, but I have certainly said that in the Chamber, and I think it will be something that we should look at.

Q309 Chair: I am reliably informed that the Act says “at least” every three years, so that would allow for more regular reports. But I note the point you make that under normal circumstances, things happen at fairly glacial speed, particularly things like milk production, where it takes a long time from a calf being born to producing milk.

Mark Spencer: Yes, but I hope you would recognise that certainly during avian influenza, DEFRA updated the House and kept colleagues informed on a regular basis as to what was happening and the impacts that that



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was having within the sector. In moments of very acute challenge, I would hope our record of keeping people in the loop and informed is a good one.

Q310 Chair: During the summer, a lot of promises were made by candidates to be our Prime Minister during that election battle. One was that the current Prime Minister said that he would personally chair a food security summit at No. 10 Downing Street. Have you any idea when that might happen? David is nodding.

David Kennedy: There is lots of focus on it. We are just working through exactly what the content will be and who is going to come to that. We will have a date shortly; we have not finalised a date.

Chair: That is encouraging.

Mark Spencer: But let's not think that this is the golden moment. We have a responsibility within the Department, which we take seriously, to constantly engage with those players within the food sector to keep those conversations ongoing on a regular basis. You cannot solve the challenges within the food market with one conference; it is something the Department are focused on day and night.

Q311 Chair: Any idea when that might be? Soon? In the fullness of time? Before the spring?

Mark Spencer: I think those are questions for the successful candidate to answer, but it is something that I know is very important to him.

Chair: Maybe someone will catch the Speaker's eye tomorrow at PMQs. Thank you.

Mark Spencer: He has clearly asked a lot of questions of DEFRA—what's happening and where we're at. He certainly meets our stakeholders directly; he has done that on a number of occasions, so he is very engaged.

Chair: Yes, and he has mentioned at least once that he has more farmers in his constituency than any other MP. I am sure that must be true if he has said it.

Q312 Barry Gardiner: Minister, I want to follow up on one of the questions the Chair was asking, when you talked about supermarkets, because your answer was very reasonable: "Well, it would be good if they did pass these things on fairly." But you will know that the three largest supermarkets in this country are showing a differential between their pre-pandemic, pre-Ukraine profits and their post-pandemic profits—we are not post-Ukraine yet: an increase in profitability of 97%. If they were simply passing on their input costs, their profitability should be the same pre-pandemic and post-pandemic, but it is not.

In the food processing sector, you have not just a 97% increase in profitability post to pre, but an increase of over 200%. When you get to the international transportation, the bulk carriers and so on, it is over 20,000%. That means that somebody is gouging these prices. They are



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not just passing on their increased input costs, as you were talking about; they are actually making money off the backs of some of the poorest people in this country.

The interesting thing to me is that when I raised this with the Secretary of State when she was before us, she said that she would reflect on it. She didn't actually get back to us and write to us about it; in fact, she said that she had not promised to write to us about it.

Yesterday, you will have noticed on the morning programmes that John Allan, the chairman of Tesco, said he also believed that this was happening. What is your Department going to do about it?

Mark Spencer: We meet with the retailers and the processors on a regular basis. We also meet with the hospitality sector and with primary producers on a regular basis and we try to get them in the same room to thrash out some of those concerns and discussions. Ultimately, the market will find a solution to this. There are those disruptors within the retail sector that are very focused on value for money for consumers. We are seeing pressure on retailers to compete with each other.

My concern is more about the sharing of risk and reward throughout that whole structure. You are right to identify that, at this moment in time, the retailer certainly does not have the same amount of risk as the primary producer or the processor, and they take a huge chunk of the reward—that is not necessarily shared.

Q313 **Barry Gardiner:** Sorry, you and I would agree that we are perfectly happy for the producers, the food manufacturers, the processors and the retailers to make a reasonable profit. They were doing that before the pandemic, but now that profit has increased by 97%—it has almost doubled. That is not a case of getting the reward for the risk you have taken; that is exploiting the public.

That is where the Government do come in, and where they should not just leave it to the market. It is where the Government come in and say, "You are making excess profits off the back of people, many of whom are being forced to use food banks because of the cost of living crisis". Because the actual cost of food has gone up so much—17.4%, we are looking at now—they are making those profits off the back of some of the poorest people in this country. That is why the Government surely have a role here.

Mark Spencer: Which we take seriously. We engage with them directly on a regular basis. It is not quite as simplistic as you paint it to be. I would say that not all of those retailers are making profits of that size. Some of them are under pressure.

Q314 **Barry Gardiner:** The three largest are.

Mark Spencer: Clearly, the three largest have seen a boost in their profitability. I think the UK consumer is savvy enough to continue to shop around and ensure the marketplace drives those costs down. We are starting to see some of that. Some of those big three are now responding



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to the discounters, matching on price and having to compete in that marketplace. I think that will drive those prices back down and squeeze those margins.

Q315 **Barry Gardiner:** What happens in the meantime to the people who cannot afford it?

Mark Spencer: That is why I would encourage consumers to shop around—to take prices seriously and look at where they can get best value for money. We have started to see much more of that in the marketplace. That was not necessarily the case during covid.

Q316 **Barry Gardiner:** Sorry, but it seems to me that you are putting the responsibility—the blame, in effect—on the consumer instead of on the retailer here.

Mark Spencer: No, I am merely recognising that the true power here does lie with the consumer. Actually, over the last 40 years we have seen consumer power have an enormous effect on retailers and the shape of the marketplace. You should not underestimate the power consumers have when they act with a herd mentality and start to shop around and make retailers compete with each other.

Q317 **Barry Gardiner:** I drove down Ealing Road in my constituency on Saturday morning. The queue for the food bank was over a quarter of a mile long. Those people do not feel that they have power. They feel that they are the victims of a system that does not take their right to eat seriously.

Mark Spencer: That is a statement, not a question.

Q318 **Barry Gardiner:** It is a statement that the Department should respond to because it has a responsibility for food security in this country.

Mark Spencer: We have food security; what we are discussing is the price of that food and its affordability for some people in society, so that they are able to access that food. That is a different discussion to food security, but I do not dismiss the challenge that some of the consumers that you are talking about are facing at this moment in time. I do not dismiss that for a second. It is a huge challenge for some people in society to be able to afford food and to be able to access that at this time. I do not dismiss that. That is why the Government have put—

Barry Gardiner: Let me move on.

Chair: Barry, let me bring in Derek on that point.

Mark Spencer: Can I just make the point that the Government recognise that challenge and have put in literally billions of pounds of support through the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury to help support families with that cost of living challenge?

Q319 **Derek Thomas:** I share the concern about the profit margins that these three, in particular, are making. I hear what you say, Minister, about the last 40 years and how there has been a consumer-led market, but you



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will know from your own background that the people who get squeezed are the producers and the farmers at the farm gateway—they are the ones who really take the hit. As supermarkets begin again to do the right thing for consumers and the people who Barry rightly flags a concern for, what can the Government do to make sure that supermarkets deliver what people want for the prices they want it for, rather than just maintain their profits, which is putting enormous pressure on the supply chain?

Mark Spencer: There are a couple of ongoing reviews, one into the dairy sector and one into the pig sector. Primary producers in both of those sectors have felt a real squeeze. I expect those two consultations to produce a report very soon. There is an argument to start to be a little more interventionist in some of those sectors, if it does not appear that there is fairness there.

In the past, the Government have also taken a regulatory role through the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which we created about six or seven years ago. It can intervene where there is abuse of contracts, so there is a role for Government to cajole people in the right direction and a carrot of encouragement to do that, but also a regulatory stick behind that to force people, if they do not act responsibly.

Q320 **Chair:** I hope we will look at what happened with the egg market last year, because when the price of feed went up so much, the egg producers said to the supermarkets, "You are going to have to pay more for the eggs otherwise people will not restock." Then, in the autumn, we had a situation where we had to have Italian eggs on our shelves because the hen flock had gone down so much, and then we tried to blame it all on bird flu. So I hope as part of those reviews you will look at what happened in the egg market.

Mark Spencer: At that moment, we convened a roundtable on eggs. That is a good example of where the marketplace reacted quite robustly. I think there has been a small culture where the retailers have squeezed and squeezed some of those primary producers. I see and talk to a more militant group of farmers on a regular basis.

What we have seen with global grain prices rising quite dramatically, farmers and primary producers have suddenly got alternatives to doing what they have always done. That is driving real pressure in the system where farmers are suddenly willing to fold their arms and say, "Do you know what? I'm not doing this any more. I am not going to produce eggs at a loss any more. I am not going to produce cauliflowers or cabbages at a loss. I can plant wheat instead of cauliflowers, which is a lot less stressful and financially more rewarding."

The danger of that is that we are going to put a bit of pressure on our food supply chains within the United Kingdom if we get that wrong, so we are trying to facilitate and organise those meetings between the various players in the marketplace, to encourage dialogue and co-operation.

Q321 **Chair:** In hindsight, could the Government have done more, when pig



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producers were losing £45 a pig or when eggs were being produced at a loss, to try to intercede in some way to ensure that we had continuity of supply?

Mark Spencer: It is very difficult. In my experience, to have that interventionist approach from Government makes things worse not better. A Government tend to come with blunt tools that get a blunt response. You need people within that supply chain to act responsibly and to take seriously the challenges that we face. There are a number of positive examples. Avian flu is a good example of that, where there was huge pressure in the poultry meat supply chain and within the turkey supply chain when, actually, co-operation—primary producers working very hard to keep their flocks safe, processors acting quickly to make sure we could kill birds early and freeze them and retailers making sure they got good supplies from other places—helped the marketplace deliver for everyone at Christmas.

David Kennedy: We are very close to all these situations in the supply chain. We have strong relationships with the relevant suppliers. Where action is due, we take it. If you go back just over a year, we brought butchers in for the pork sector because there was a shortage of butchers. That cleared the backlog of pigs. Similarly, for turkeys for Christmas—not last Christmas, the Christmas before—we brought in turkey workers and that allowed the supply of turkeys.

On the eggs example—this just illustrates the complexity of it—there are 40 million laying hens in this country. Thirty-eight million are free range and 2 million were caged. There is a commitment to phasing out caged hens, which the industry has made; that was not a Government thing, but it is a good thing, I think. The 2 million caged hens have not been replenished because of that commitment and there has not been investment to offset it in free range, which requires different production facilities, because of uncertainty over prices, among other things. The shortage of eggs was because of panic buying, which, in turn, was because of limits placed in certain supermarkets. So there was not really a shortage in the market; it was manageable. A bit like with covid, there wasn't any food shortage; it was panic buying of certain products.

Chair: Toilet rolls.

David Kennedy: Yes.

Q322 **Barry Gardiner:** We have gone a little way away from the consumer. It is interesting that we focus back on the supplier and the problems the primary producer was having, which I acknowledge. However, I think the Department needs to keep its eye on the impact on the consumer: the ordinary person who is in a city, going to a supermarket and getting fleeced. I would welcome, Minister, if you could write to the Committee and do an investigation as a Department into what sort of increase in profits there has been, whether they simply reflect the increase in input costs and whether there is gouging going on in the market, as John Allan from Tesco has suggested. It is of real concern to the public and should



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be to the Government.

I wanted to ask you about the food strategy. Henry Dimbleby remarked that, strictly speaking, “it was not a strategy”, Dr Kelly Parsons described it as “weak” and Professor Tim Lang said it didn’t “add any heft”. What is your response to those criticisms from three eminently eminent persons who know what they are talking about in this area?

Mark Spencer: I happen to have a copy here. I recognise the huge contribution of those people who contributed to the national food strategy. It is not the only document that we refer to within DEFRA. It is a multi-Department response to solving the challenges that we face. Are we able to deliver everything that everybody wants? Of course not. That is one of the joys of being in Government; people will criticise and scrutinise what you do. We have taken very seriously the vast majority of the suggestions in this document. We have looked at, reflected upon and are adopting quite a lot of what is in there.

Q323 **Barry Gardiner:** The strategy had three elements to it: “a prosperous agri-food and seafood sector”, “a sustainable, nature positive, affordable food system”, and “trade that provides export opportunities and consumer choice through imports”. Which of those three are you prioritising?

Mark Spencer: All three.

Q324 **Barry Gardiner:** Not one of them is prioritised; they are all just as important. In that case, what are the specific levers—the carrots and sticks—that the Department is going to apply to bring about the necessary changes to deliver those things?

Mark Spencer: If we take the environmental impact of food production, what we are doing with ELM schemes is huge. That is a massive change in the way in which Government funds farmers and land managers. That will have a really positive impact on our environmental output, our carbon footprint and our ability to clean up our water and have a positive impact on biodiversity. They are huge levers. That is not necessarily a response to the food strategy. It happens to be in there, but it is also something we take very seriously, so there are lots of levers that we can pull to have an impact on the food strategy—not necessarily in a direct response to the food strategy, but in a happy coincidence we have taken these comments on board and we are moving forward with that agenda.

Q325 **Barry Gardiner:** You will recall that Henry Dimbleby recommended minimum trade standards. Given the Government’s aim of not compromising on high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards, why did you not adopt that recommendation?

Mark Spencer: We do take that seriously in our trade negotiations. Again, if you bind your hands on these things, you limit your ability to do trade deals that sometimes would be very positive for UK food producers as well. We certainly take animal welfare very seriously, and the trade deals that we have done so far—



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Q326 **Barry Gardiner:** But the strategy did not adopt that recommendation.

Mark Spencer: That is quite a blunt tool, but I think there is within the Department for International Trade and certainly within DEFRA a recognition that animal welfare is a very important consideration when doing trade deals.

Q327 **Barry Gardiner:** The recommendation was only to set minimum standards. It did not say you had to level everything up. It was simply that you had to set in your trade negotiations minimum standards.

David Kennedy: The recommendation was more specific than that. It said we should have tariffs that were dependent on meeting standards for animal welfare.

Q328 **Barry Gardiner:** It gave that as an example.

David Kennedy: It was not an example. That was a concrete recommendation, which it pushed very hard. We want to protect our animal welfare standards. That is front and centre of every negotiation that I am part of—Australia, New Zealand, CPTPP, India. It will always be absolutely key in the negotiations, but on whether you use that particular instrument—a welfare-related tariff preference—we have chosen to keep the flexibility in that respect.

Q329 **Barry Gardiner:** Do you accept the analysis that was presented in the national food strategy?

Mark Spencer: Yes, broadly.

David Kennedy: On the two hypotheses—the junk food cycle, broadly yes, and the invisibility of nature, broadly yes. We are seeking to address both of those.

Q330 **Barry Gardiner:** Would you say that that is the same analysis that the Government's food strategy is based on?

Mark Spencer: In principle, yes.

Q331 **Barry Gardiner:** Why did you reject so many of the national food strategy's key recommendations, then, based on its analysis such as the need for a sugar and salt reformulation tax? It is the same analysis in both strategies.

Mark Spencer: What matters is whether we are able to deliver lower sugar and salt content in our food systems. The good news is: yes, we can, and yes, we are. Only last week I had the privilege of visiting Walkers crisps. They have done a huge amount of work to reduce sugar content in those crisps and maintain great quality. I hasten to add other crisps are available. I am not on a retainer for Walkers crisps, but they have done a huge amount of work to reduce sugar content in those crisps and to maintain the same standard of taste. Coca-Cola is another example. If you go back 15 years, we were all drinking full-sugar Coke. They have done a lot of research and work to find alternatives in Diet Coke and Coke Zero. Pepsi have done the same. There is a huge amount of tech out there that



is being embraced by our food production systems to reduce sugar, fat and harmful things.

Q332 Barry Gardiner: There will always be good examples of good practice out there—of companies that want to be the trailblazers in healthy eating, or just in taking care of their consumer. We can all applaud them, but it does not mean that there are not then cowboys in the market who are going in the opposite direction and using the fact that they oversugar or oversalt their stuff to make profits on the back of that, undercutting the guys who are trying to do the right thing. Are you saying we should just leave it to the market and that the Government have nothing to do here?

Mark Spencer: There is a role for Government in making sure that consumers are informed so that they can make logical, informed decisions about the food they consume. I do not want to deprive people of a cream cake on a Sunday afternoon if that is what they want, as long as they are aware that that has a fairly high calorific content and that it is a treat that should be taken as part of a balanced diet. You have to make sure that consumers are informed and they can make those decisions for themselves.

Q333 Barry Gardiner: There is a suspicion that the reason the Government food strategy did not respond systematically to each of the national food strategy's recommendations is that by not responding to each of the recommendations specifically, it could blur the fact that it was not actually following what the national food strategy had said. Given that Dimpleby's report and the national food strategy had been commissioned by DEFRA, a lot of people find that rather strange.

Mark Spencer: I do not think that is strange. I think that if you look back through history, it would be pretty difficult to find a report with a series of recommendations conducted by someone independent where the Government said wholeheartedly, "We will take every single recommendation as it stands"—

Q334 Barry Gardiner: No, you have missed my point. My point is not that you should accept all the recommendations but that each of the recommendations should systematically have been acknowledged. So, "This is the recommendation made here; this is our response to it." Minister, you do that. Every time you sit there, we then go away and produce our inquiry report and you, the Government, come back and systematically say, "You have recommended this; this is our response. You have recommended that; this is our response." With the Dimpleby report and the national food strategy, you did not, and that has led people to think that you are just trying to blur the picture.

Mark Spencer: That is not right. It is a very important document that we refer to on a regular basis, and which we have taken seriously and are responding to in actions, forming policy and moving forward.

David Kennedy: We went through the recommendations one by one in great detail, not just with DEFRA but with all the relevant Government Departments. We accepted most of them. There are a few totemic ones—



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you have picked up on the salt and sugar tax, which the Government decided was not the appropriate way forward at the moment. We took an editorial decision that this was a Government strategy, not a response to advice from Henry, so we set it out that way. We could have gone a different way; we could have put in an annexe to say, "Here's the recommendations, here's the position." We chose not to do that, but it was not to obfuscate.

Q335 Derek Thomas: Minister, we are talking about food security and I have a particular interest in supporting my landowners and farmers to produce as much food as we could possibly eat or need. I think I am right to say that the Government said that they would seek to broadly maintain the current level of food we produce domestically. What does this target mean and why are we not making it a statutory target?

Mark Spencer: We have been pretty stable in terms of the percentage of food we produce domestically to supply that marketplace. It is the right approach to try to maintain that, but if you try to nail it down specifically and ask what that means—that the Government will ensure x litres of milk are produced each year in the UK, for example—then what is the penalty if that is not delivered? Trying to get into those specifics would just create a ridiculous, bureaucratic system with no reward or penalty. What actually matters is this: are we setting the market conditions and the support mechanisms to maintain, broadly, that level of domestic food production and ensure that those producers are profitable?

Q336 Derek Thomas: You were quite right to talk earlier about the quality of our food and the opportunities to export. I think that, at the moment, we produce around 50% to 60% of the food that we can produce, and, as you say, that has been the same for a long time. Given all the benefits of producing more of our own food, why have the Government not been much more ambitious about increasing the percentage of food that we can produce in the UK?

Mark Spencer: That could be a false ambition. In some sectors, of course, we do better than that. With lamb, for example, we produce way more than we consume. We are also pretty much 100% efficient at producing our own fresh milk. But we should not limit our ambition to that; we might want to produce more than that so we can export it.

However, we must not confuse domestic production with food security. I think that is a risk. If we are in a circumstance where we lift the drawbridge and do not maintain those markets where we import food, and should we then suffer some sort of catastrophic event—whether that is a weather or disease event—we would actually put at risk national food security by going down that route. So, actually, we have a very balanced marketplace, where we have established trade relationships and a very strong ability to produce quite a lot of that food ourselves. That puts us in a very strong position.

Q337 Derek Thomas: We might argue that there is an ethical reason for producing more. We have a growing global population, and parts of the



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world, for various climate reasons, are finding it more difficult to produce, and we are saying that we will produce roughly the same as we do now, despite those challenges. The reality of the global situation, which I take seriously, is that the western world will almost inevitably, every time, get the food that it needs, possibly at the expense of developing countries. Is there an ethical responsibility for the UK to produce more of our own food, simply to reduce the risk of that?

Mark Spencer: To a certain extent, yes. Of course, that is not the only reason to do it. We also have to try to produce that food and have less of an environmental imprint while we do it. The good news is that we have got roughly 1% more efficient every year over the past 30 years, in terms of our food production. You could therefore make an argument, in 10 years' time, that 10% of the land that we are using for food production today could be used for environmental benefits or to produce more food. You have to get the balance right between ensuring that our environmental footprint is reducing, and we are heading to net zero as rapidly as possible, and that we are improving biodiversity and our environmental output.

Q338 **Chair:** Henry Dimbleby said that 20% of our land produces 2% of the calories—talking about the uplands. A lot of the farmers in the uplands were very concerned about the suggestion that we should basically devote all of that land—big areas of land—to trees or other environmental objectives, and, in effect, depopulate the uplands of England.

Mark Spencer: Well, if you go to Exmoor, Dartmoor or Snowdonia, they also bring in huge tourist revenues. They are a great reservoir for helping people with their mental health, as they can go and enjoy the great British countryside. I think that our constituents quite like the landscapes that they view. In North Yorkshire, there are those stone walls and beautiful footpaths, and obviously, the Member for Penrith also represents a beautiful part of the country in the Lake district.

People like to visit those parts of the country because of the landscapes, which are there because of agricultural production. The stone walls are there to keep sheep in; they are not there for any other reason. We have to make that link between the food that we consume and the landscape that we view.

Farmers have shaped our landscapes for decades and they have taken very little credit for that. They have done it just because they like to do it, they want to have a positive impact on the land that it is their privilege to occupy at that time, and they want to produce great food. The Government have a role to try to support them in achieving all those things and to assist them in improving biodiversity and the environmental impact they are having.

Chair: Sorry, I interrupted you, Derek.

Q339 **Derek Thomas:** No, no, you are absolutely right. In west Cornwall—if I can get you down to visit, Minister—you will see that grazing on rough ground opens up the countryside to both the public and all sorts of



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biodiversity, which would be lost if we abandoned it and would probably be taken over by brambles and other invasive species.

Mark Spencer: You have to get the balance right between allowing the public access to those landscapes and the wildlife that also wants to live there. There is nothing worse for ground-nesting birds than having thousands of feet tromp across that ground and squash their nests.

Q340 **Derek Thomas:** Can I come back to maintaining the current level of food, which we just discussed? Is this a scientific “no change”, or is it just the amount of food that we need for the country compared with what is produced at the moment? For example, are we particularly interested in the calories, the types of food group or even the value of the food? How do we measure that?

Mark Spencer: Again, it is very difficult because people’s tastes and fashions change. If we look back at the diet we were eating, I doubt that there would have been MPs in the 1970s sat in the Tea Room eating avocado. Fashions and food tastes change, and we need to be able to have a diet and the ability to purchase and consume food that reflects current trends and desires. As long as we are doing that in a way that is environmentally friendly and responsible, and we are secure in our ability to procure that food, that is a good thing.

Q341 **Derek Thomas:** I hope you haven’t given the papers the headline that all we do is sit and eat avocado in the Tea Room.

Mark Spencer: For the record, I certainly don’t.

Chair: I remember that people used to buy olive oil at the chemist in a little bottle; that is how things have changed. Let us go to Neil on fertiliser, or “management”, as they call it in our part of Yorkshire—I don’t know if that term is used around the country.

Q342 **Dr Hudson:** Before I come on to fertiliser, can I quickly come back to the UK food security report? As a Committee, can we take it that you will take away and strongly consider the idea of producing annual reports? We note that the first report was published in December 2021. As we have come through an incredibly abnormal year—with our coming out of the back of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, avian influenza and so on—when will the next report be produced? If we are moving to an annual report, we should get one fairly soon. David, do you have any thoughts about when the next report is coming?

Mark Spencer: I think we will want to wait for your report and then reflect on your recommendations. If one of your recommendations is an annual report, of course we will respond in due course.

Q343 **Chair:** Maybe it could coincide with the Prime Minister’s summit at No. 10, which would be about halfway through the three-year period.

Mark Spencer: As we have indicated, we are open to a more regular update, when that is necessary.

Q344 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you; I will get on to fertiliser now. Currently, there is



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only one plant in the UK producing fertiliser. The Ince plant was mothballed and it has now been fully closed, and the remaining Billingham plant ceased to produce ammonia. Would you be concerned if the UK became reliant on imported fertiliser? Would that be consistent with food being a critical national infrastructure sector?

Mark Spencer: It is not that helpful that there is only one plant producing fertiliser at this time. That gives us some concern. We have an open dialogue with CF Fertilisers, who are the owners of the Billingham plant. To date, we have seen dramatic price increases, which is down to the world price of gas, but we have been able to procure enough ammonia, ammonium nitrate and carbon dioxide by relying on our friends in Holland to supply the ammonia and carbon dioxide. We remain in conversation with BEIS and those who have interests in that marketplace.

Q345 **Dr Hudson:** To clarify, you have some concerns; it's not helpful having just one plant and then having to import ammonia—what is the difference between importing ammonia and relying on an imported final product? So it's something that you are actively looking at across Government and you're worried that we—

Mark Spencer: We need to make sure that we have robust supply chains for fertiliser products within the UK, of course. At the moment, we are able to procure them from elsewhere if we cannot produce them ourselves, but it is something that we are very much aware of.

Q346 **Dr Hudson:** As we know, CO₂ is very important for the food and beverage sector, but also in the slaughter process for pigs and poultry, so it is a critical component of our food security and how we process that food. Minister, you have been quoted as saying—I think this was when you wrote to our Committee—that it is for the CO₂ industry, not Government, to ensure supplies to UK businesses. But if we are concerned that we are one-deep with the Billingham complex, what are the Government doing to support the resumption at Billingham of ammonia production? We know that the CO₂ by-product is so important, for many reasons.

Mark Spencer: With CO₂, it is not quite as simple as that. There are other players in the marketplace, and new technologies are coming forward that will be able to help with the supply of carbon dioxide. It is possible to get high-grade CO₂ from anaerobic digestion and other sources, and I know that there are people in that marketplace who are looking at supplying CO₂ in the future.

Q347 **Dr Hudson:** Are you confident that those alternative CO₂ supplies are there and consistent so that we would not end up with, say, an animal welfare crisis if we couldn't process the pigs and the poultry?

David Kennedy: I think so. There is one big plant that produces; it's called Ensus. The production there is enough to cover the priority needs, which are nuclear, hospitals and then animal slaughter. We have done that analysis and, if you were in a situation where you had no imports and you just had Ensus, you would have enough to cover those basics—the top priorities.



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When is Billingham going to start producing again? It is a commercial decision. They have found it more profitable to import ammonia from Canada and turn it into fertiliser, rather than producing ammonia here. I think that when the gas price goes down, which we expect it will, and they are part of the energy support scheme as they go forward, that will tilt the balance. That is not to guarantee they will start CO₂ production in the spring, but I am sure that is something they are actively considering.

Q348 **Dr Hudson:** David, you have anticipated my final question: when will ammonia production resume? So that is actively being looked at, and yes, there is a commercial aspect to it, but are DEFRA and BEIS keeping a close watching brief on this? We want to make sure that we are resilient in this area.

David Kennedy: Yes, absolutely. We actually had this morning a cross-Whitehall meeting, just making sure that we are on top of the situation and that we understand the different scenarios and different risks. I think, for the time being, we will get through.

Mark Spencer: It is difficult to talk about these things in public too much, because they are commercially sensitive and, of course, I do not want to prejudice moving forward, but it is something we take very seriously and we recognise how important it is.

Q349 **Dr Hudson:** Fair enough. If you can assure the Committee that the Government are keeping a close eye on this and watching and monitoring it, that would be very helpful and something that I am sure we would clarify in our report. When the dialogue about the fertiliser supply came to a head, there was a lot of discussion about alternative sources of fertiliser: organic material, and so on. What is the Government's current thinking on alternative sources and types of fertiliser?

Mark Spencer: There are lots of opportunities, moving forward—there are multiple opportunities. There is technology. The gene editing Bill, which is going through the House of Lords at the moment, may well bring opportunities to improve plant breeding, so that we can find plants that require less fertiliser input in the medium to long term. Some of the farming practices that were seen in the 1930s and 1940s—working with nature around soil health and cover crops, and the use of legumes as well to fix nitrogen into soils—also bring alternative sources of fertiliser. That does not replace the necessity for artificial fertiliser at this time, but it certainly reduces the amount of fertiliser from an artificial source that needs to be applied. Farming practices and technologies that embrace manures, plants and new tech will reduce our reliance on artificial fertilisers in the short to medium term.

Dr Hudson: Thank you; that is helpful. This is an area that we might well come back to in our soil health inquiry; there is a bit of overlap.

Q350 **Chair:** Would you include human manure? At the moment, sewage sludge is seen as a problem, when it could be a big resource.

Mark Spencer: Yes. It would require some work around heavy metals, to make sure that any product of that nature was safe, but we have the most robust system in the world for keeping our consumers safe. That is our first priority. With farmyard manure and human sewage sludge, there are opportunities to add organically to our food production systems. That would have a double whammy effect. It would not only reduce the need for artificial fertiliser, but improve water quality. If we can stop urea from our livestock farms reaching our watercourses, and can hold that nutrient in the farmyard and apply it to fields at the right time of year, it will reduce our need for fertiliser and improve our water quality.

Chair: The Committee went to see a project sponsored by Arla called N2 Applied; it is fixing more of the ammonia in slurry, so that it can be used as fertiliser, rather than lost to production potential.

Q351 **Steven Bonnar:** Thank you, Minister and Mr Kennedy, for your answers so far. Turning to labour shortages and their impact on food security, the NFU president, Minette Batters, said recently that labour shortages were the single biggest issue faced by farmers. Do you agree? Could labour shortages pose a food security risk?

Mark Spencer: Yes, there is a challenge; that is why we have increased the number of seasonal agricultural workers quite dramatically. I think it is now at 45,000 visas, and there is potential for a further 10,000 if the industry demonstrates that it needs them. In the medium to long term, new technology will help. Certainly, if you compare how many people worked in UK agriculture in the '60s and '70s with how many people work in it today, you see that technology has reduced the need for farm labour. It has become a much more technical industry to work in. That does not mean that we do not need help, support, and labour to harvest many crops—particularly soft fruit and vegetables.

Q352 **Steven Bonnar:** The Home Office said that the number of available seasonal visas in 2022 would be 30,000, and there would be the same again in '23. We know that, as you have suggested, that has been extended to about 45,000. We will probably need 55,000 seasonal visas. Would you therefore accept that we are dependent on overseas workers in this sector?

Mark Spencer: Clearly, at this moment in time, it works very well for the agricultural sector. There is opportunity to train and encourage people into agriculture and the food industry. It is a great career. I would encourage young people who are looking at careers to consider it. There is huge opportunity in agriculture and the food sector, and it is not what you might think it is. It is a high-tech industry that will be strategically important to the globe. We need the brightest and the best to come in and help us on the journey.

Q353 **Steven Bonnar:** In the Government's food strategy, DEFRA said it would work with industry to "articulate key food industry shortages", in order to inform the review of the shortage occupation list. What submissions have you made to the Migration Advisory Committee?



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Mark Spencer: I am not sure that I have made any to that committee. I have had direct communication with the Home Office, who are the ones issuing the visas. We have also made fairly robust representations on behalf of not only agriculture, but the fishing sector, where this is also very important. That includes the catching sector and the processing sector. We have been able to increase visas within the poultry sector as well, with an extra 2,000. So we have been making robust representations behind the scenes to make sure the industry is heard within the Home Office. They have been very co-operative and have worked with us.

Q354 **Steven Bonnar:** Before I open up to colleagues, we accept that there is pressure on the agriculture and farming sector because, in this labour shortage, we need labour from overseas. In your opinion, Minister, is that the fault of the covid-19 pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine, or Brexit?

Mark Spencer: We have always needed labour to come from abroad to help us in that industry. Now we are in control of our borders, so we can choose who comes and helps us, and make sure that they are the right people; I think that is the right place to be. Control of our borders is not about stopping people coming to the UK; it is about making sure that we have the right people with the right skills at the right moment.

Q355 **Steven Bonnar:** We are failing in that. As the Chair of the Committee said, we cannot get fishermen in the north of Ireland, for example, because they cannot pass the UK speaking test. We are having real problems in fishing and agriculture because we cannot get the right workers in. We did not have these pressures before our withdrawal from the EU.

Mark Spencer: I would argue, though, that the right workers are surely workers that can communicate in the language of the country in which they want to work. If you are saying to me that you think we should take anybody who cannot speak—I mean, there is a health and safety risk there.

Steven Bonnar: I am not saying that.

Mark Spencer: If the skipper on a boat communicates in English, you need people on that boat who can understand those direct instructions; otherwise, there is a huge health and safety risk.

Q356 **Steven Bonnar:** That would be the same in any sector. That would be the same on a retail floor: you would want your security officers to—

Mark Spencer: But your argument was that people are being rejected because they cannot pass the English language test, and I am saying to you that that is a very important bar.

Q357 **Steven Bonnar:** These are highly skilled operatives, but the question I asked was more about the reason. Is it the covid-19 pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine or Brexit that is causing labour shortages in these sectors, in your esteemed opinion?



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Mark Spencer: In my opinion, it is making sure that we are getting the right people. I suppose you could argue that in the past we have taken the wrong people just to solve that challenge, and I think we are in a better place now, because we are getting the right people who can speak the language. That puts us in a better place in terms of health and safety, and it is also clamping down on abuse. Some of those people were in terrible situations where they were brought to this country. Credit to Theresa May, who, when she was Prime Minister, did a lot of work on modern slavery to stop people suffering that abuse.

Q358 **Chair:** I was in Kilkeel last week, in Northern Ireland, and the crew on the trawler I was on were Filipinos. They were very experienced and effective fishermen; they had been working in the Philippines with similar sorts of tackle. There were certainly one or two of them who could speak good English, so the captain could communicate with the crew down on the fish deck, but they were working as a very effective fishing crew outside the 12-mile limit. The problem was that they could not operate within the 12-mile limit, and the barrier to that was the English language test.

The skipper said to me, "I can find people who can speak very good English, but I may not find people who are so effective in terms of working in the fishing industry." That was their plea. They are working here in the UK anyway, but they are outside the 12-mile limit when they are working, and are then coming back into port. That was the issue that was raised with me in Kilkeel, so I hope you will make some recommendations or try to understand the problem a little bit more, because these people are already working as a very effective team with a good health and safety record.

Mark Spencer: They are making use of the transit visa system, which means that they cannot land in the UK.

Q359 **Chair:** They cannot work in UK waters, but they can come into port with the vessel.

Mark Spencer: We just need to make sure that those people are not put in a position where they might be exploited by unscrupulous people.

Chair: I think Neil wanted to come in before I come back to you, Steven.

Q360 **Dr Hudson:** When the Government look at food security reports, why are there no food security targets for critical factors such as labour and fertiliser? Is that something that you can keep a watching brief on, and say, "Broadly, we need x and y"?

Mark Spencer: It is a moving feast; the target is constantly moving, adapting and changing. It depends on technology, practices and how the industry operates. If you set an arbitrary target, that will not necessarily be what the industry will require, moving forward. For me, it is much more about maintaining conversations, making sure that Ministers understand what the industry requires at that moment in time, and trying to facilitate that and to assist.



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David Kennedy: I don't think you would have a target for labour, but we do continuous assessment. You have probably heard of the independent labour review, which is being led by John Shropshire. That will give us the best, up-to-date picture of the challenges in the labour supply chains and what we can do about them, whether that is skills training, making the industry more attractive as a career choice, automation or whatever. That will report in the next couple of months.

Q361 **Dr Hudson:** That is very helpful. David, in a previous answer, you referred to the situation that we face in the pig sector, and the Government's response to it. It was a situation that I, as a veterinary surgeon and an MP, was very concerned about. Our Committee was very concerned about the fact that we had many thousands of pigs that were dammed back on premises, and many of them, sadly, had to be slaughtered on premises and not go into the food chain. That is very upsetting for many reasons.

You say you are happy now, or confident, that the situation is resolved. Can you give us a snapshot status report of where we are with labour supply? You mentioned butchers, but there are also meat inspectors and veterinary surgeons in the abattoir sector. Are you confident that we are resilient in that sector, and that we will not end up with things damming back, and having animal health and welfare crises?

Mark Spencer: At this moment in time, we are fairly confident, but you are only a crisis away from the next need to intervene. We try to scan the horizon as much as possible. The way you do that is by talking to the stakeholders regularly, and trying to predict together what their challenges might be and how Government can respond and help.

Q362 **Dr Hudson:** So across the board, in terms of butchers, meat inspectors and veterinary surgeons, you are confident that you are monitoring the situation closely and can respond?

David Kennedy: Of course. We acted before, because there was a backlog of pigs—150,000 pigs that could not go into the system for processing. That backlog has been reduced right back down to normal levels. We are okay for now, but we watch that very closely, because we could end up with a shortage of labour again.

Mark Spencer: There are no current tremors that are concerning us.

Q363 **Dr Hudson:** I think I can put on record our Committee's thanks. Your predecessor, Minister Prentis, played a key role in working with the sector, and had regular meetings to see what could be done to navigate through that. We just want reassurance that you are on it, in case the unpredictable happens.

David Kennedy: We are as close to the industry now as we were then. We are like that with all sectors, not just the pig sector—poultry, meat production or whatever.

Q364 **Steven Bonnar:** Why did the Government's food strategy not include a right to food, and why did the Government not even propose consulting



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on that?

Mark Spencer: It is about making sure that consumers have access to food, and that our food supply chains are robust enough to keep delivering, so that consumers can go and buy it. As Mr Gardiner said earlier, where it becomes much more of a challenge is in financial circumstances where that gets beyond their means. That is where the Government have stepped in, with huge amounts of support packages, to help people with those challenges.

Q365 **Steven Bonnar:** In Scotland, the Good Food Nation Act is now on the statute book, and there are similar moves being made in Wales. Do you agree with Dr Kelly Parsons, who said that England risks becoming the “poor relation as progress happens elsewhere” in the United Kingdom?

Mark Spencer: No, I don’t think that is the case. I think we have very robust food supply chains. We have fantastic support mechanisms to help people who are struggling with that challenge. We have unprecedented levels of Government intervention to help people with energy and food prices and their struggles with that. I think we have systems in place to try to help people.

Q366 **Steven Bonnar:** Will you join me in commending the Scottish Government for their Good Food Nation Act?

Mark Spencer: I have commended the Scottish Government on a number of occasions, and my admiration for them is a matter of record.

Derek Thomas: Well side-stepped—quite right, too.

Q367 **Chair:** Just one further point on that. The UN special rapporteur on the right to food, Professor Michael Fakhri, submitted a request to the Government several months ago to undertake a country visit to the UK. Will you invite him to undertake a visit this year, perhaps to put him right on one or two things?

Mark Spencer: I am sure that if he wants to visit, we will accommodate his visit, but I am not aware of that. Has he written to me to ask me?

Chair: There were quite a lot of headlines when he was critical of the UK, and many people thought he was likening us to some third-world country.

Mark Spencer: Yes. Well, maybe we can take him to Tesco and show him the shelves. Other supermarkets are available.

Q368 **Derek Thomas:** Or use the money to help some of the families who can’t afford food.

Going back to the food strategy, household food security is a really complex issue. The Government are doing some work on reducing energy use and setting up a taskforce. I wonder whether we need a similar thing with household food security—or insecurity. In the 40 years you referred to, so much has changed in how we feed ourselves and our households, how affordable that is, and how prepared we are as politicians, parliamentarians but also Government, to help households get—I am



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even stumbling to say it in public—just to understand how we can feed our children and our families in a way that is both nutritious and affordable. How bold can the Government be in addressing household food security? It is not just the responsibility of the householder, but we all know there are things we can do differently that help.

Mark Spencer: Education is the answer, isn't it? People need to be informed, so that they can make decisions for themselves. Helping and supporting people to think about reducing the amount of food waste in their household could certainly help, as could making sure that they are informed enough to prepare food themselves and use basic ingredients to prepare meals. Not everybody has those skills, and there is an argument for trying to help people when it comes to that knowledge and ability. I understand those arguments, and I think maybe there is a role there for Government in making sure that consumers are informed and can assist themselves with some of those challenges.

Q369 **Derek Thomas:** We heard from Barry that there are enormous numbers of families who, despite their best efforts, are relying on food banks. We have seen the growth of that in all our constituencies. What work is DEFRA doing with food banks to support their work, to ensure that families have good food and can get the food they need?

Mark Spencer: We work across the whole sector to try to make sure that there are adequate food supplies for everybody, and that food is readily available to everybody. Of course, the primary way of delivering that is through our retailers, direct to consumers. The best way to solve this challenge is to make sure that people facing that economic challenge no longer face it, and the way you do that is through the interventions we have provided with the Department for Work and Pensions, but also by making sure that work pays, and that people can work their way out of poverty.

Q370 **Derek Thomas:** We have picked on the supermarkets a bit, in terms of how they are pricing food. There is also a massive problem with food waste, sometimes in the field, sometimes through the supermarkets procuring food but then not selling it, and obviously in our homes. During the covid pandemic, the Government supported farmers in donating to FareShare, but DEFRA has chosen not to continue that. Why was that decision made, and is there more than can be done to make sure that food is never left rotting either in the ground or in skips outside supermarkets?

Mark Spencer: FareShare is a very good charity. They have done a lot of work to help people get access to food, and I pay tribute to that. They are in communication with retailers directly, and they get a lot of support to help them pass on food that is reaching its best before date so that it can be consumed before then. There is also a role for education, because the best before date does not mean that something is not fit to consume after the date on the label. I think I am right in saying that we found honey in Tutankhamun's tomb that it was more than possible to consume, despite having been there for thousands of years, but if you go to your



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supermarket today, I guarantee that the date on the jar of honey will not be in 4,000 years' time.

Q371 **Derek Thomas:** A lot of the best before dates have been dropped and replaced by use by dates, and that is a good thing.

Mark Spencer: I think it is the other way around: the use by has been dropped for best before, which says you can still use something after that date, but the retailer will not guarantee that it is in the best condition. That does not mean that something cannot be consumed. The sniff test works quite well, doesn't it? I don't know about you, but I always sniff the milk when I pick the bottle up in the morning. I don't look at the date; if it is in date and it smells funny, I won't drink it, and if it doesn't, I will.

Q372 **Derek Thomas:** Finally, do you accept that there is probably a national conversation to be had about the food we produce, and how much of it actually gets into the home and feeds the families we are concerned for? I have visited food banks, and it is quite staggering to see supermarkets deliver enormous containers of food that they cannot sell. They have obviously purchased far too much, or baked far too much bread, and even the food bank is struggling to pass that on in a timely way. Given the pressure in terms of the food available, might the Government need to lead a national discussion about the journey that food takes from the field right through to people's homes, in order to address these issues?

Mark Spencer: Again, I think the market is quite good at delivering. Nobody wants that inefficiency, do they? The primary producer does not want that inefficiency; they want to sell as much as they have produced—they do not want to waste it. There are alternative routes; if you take the fresh veg sector, there are alternative routes for misshapen or broken vegetables, which can go to animal feed or into anaerobic digestion.

The retailer does not want that waste either; they want to purchase as much of that food as possible and sell it, because otherwise it is lost margin. There is a lot of drive in those sectors to drive efficiency and stop food waste.

David Kennedy: To put some figures on it, 70% of food waste is in the home, and 30% is in the supply chain. We do campaigns through WRAP to reduce food waste in the home. I think things are improving in the supply chain, and £300 million-plus of food that would have been wasted in the supply chain was diverted last year.

Mark Spencer: My kids are probably better than me—I think of the number of times they buy a pizza, eat half of it, put the other half in the fridge and eat it the next day. We have to be smarter about how we consume food, and recognise that we can recycle quite a lot of it into another meal if we don't eat it all at the first sitting.

Derek Thomas: That's how I grew up—I was often eating the Sunday roast on a Thursday.

Chair: My family set itself a challenge over Christmas not to waste any



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food, and we were successful. We managed to put things into stews, casseroles, curries and soups. We deliberately set out to do that. We looked in the fridge to see what was there and said, "Those sprouts can go in that soup." It is possible, but you sometimes have to think, "We'll eat what's there, rather than what we'd like to eat."

Barry Gardiner: I have that every night, Chair, when I get home.

Derek Thomas: Sprouts?

Q373 **Barry Gardiner:** No; whatever is in the fridge.

David, I think you said that the salt and sugar tax was a very specific, high-profile recommendation in the national food strategy. Another, of course, was the proposal for free school meals. Again, the Government failed to accept that recommendation. Why?

David Kennedy: It was given serious consideration. Free school meals have been extended a number of times. As you probably know, we currently cover 1.9 million of the most disadvantaged pupils. There are also universal infant free school meals, covering another 1.25 million kids. You have to draw the line somewhere and this is where it was drawn by the Government—that it was not the best use of the money available.

Mark Spencer: There are more kids in receipt of free school meals today than at any other point in our history. The Government are feeding a lot of kids through free school meals. It is about ensuring that that is targeted at the pupils who require that support while they are in school.

Q374 **Barry Gardiner:** Yes, but it is reflective of the poverty that some children are living in. Of course, a third of children living in poverty—800,000 children—are not receiving free school meals. I do not doubt that there are more children in receipt of free school meals, but that is a function of the poverty they are in, and 800,000 children are not receiving free school meals.

Mark Spencer: The number of households in food poverty reduced this year from last year. We are in a better place. That does not mean to say that there is not more to do, but it shows that the tide is turning in the right direction.

Q375 **Barry Gardiner:** Will the Department undertake a cost-benefit analysis of providing universal free school meals and of providing free school meals to all children in a household claiming universal credit, so we can see an exact cost-benefit analysis of both those options?

Mark Spencer: Obviously, I have to be cautious here, because you are asking me to step into an area covered by other Departments. These questions are probably better put to the Department for Education or the Department for Work and Pensions. Clearly, our role is to facilitate the adequate supply of food into the UK marketplace and to make sure consumers have access to that food. These specific questions are probably best addressed by a Minister for the Department for Education or DWP.



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Q376 **Barry Gardiner:** I would like to see the Government, as I am sure you would, joined up on this. As I understand it, DEFRA's role is to be the advocate for good nutrition.

Mark Spencer: Yes.

Q377 **Barry Gardiner:** Therefore, although I perfectly accept that you might want to discuss this with colleagues in other Departments, I would have thought it appropriate for DEFRA to initiate such an analysis. The Government would then be able to say not just to this Committee but to the public, "We've looked at this and we have found that the cost-benefits of it are as we have said," or, "The cost-benefits are different, and therefore we will do something differently." That would make it clear, explicit and transparent. I am sure you will accept there is a virtue in being absolutely clear with the public, because at the moment there are 800,000 children in poverty who do not get those same free school meals.

David Kennedy: That is the process we went through. We initiated the discussion and were party to it, but it was led by the Department for Education with the Treasury in the context of the spending review. It was given careful consideration alongside the many proposals for education spending. The decision was that it would not offer the same value for money as elsewhere in the education budget.

Q378 **Barry Gardiner:** That wasn't my point. My focus was on the transparency of the process, so that you could explain it to people. Look, I will leave it there. Minister, just so we are clear about our earlier conversation, I trust that you will get back to me on the issue of supermarket profits, which we discussed then.

Mark Spencer: Very good.

Barry Gardiner: Thank you very much.

Q379 **Chair:** At the same time as we—particularly poorer people—are facing challenges in putting food on the table, there is increasing obesity in our country, and we see high rates at the lower socioeconomic levels. That has to be a challenge that the Government should address. We talked about sugar and salt, but how does the Government food strategy address England's dietary health challenges and contribute to reducing obesity levels?

Mark Spencer: Obviously, the Department of Health and Social Care leads on the obesity strategy. I wholly support its approach, which is about making sure that consumers are informed and can make their own decisions without going the full nanny state. It is about making sure that people get the right amount of exercise, can access the right sort of foods and make the right decisions themselves. That is done through labelling and education.

Q380 **Chair:** Henry Dimbleby suggested that the Government should bring forward a good food Bill, which I suspect, given that it has "food" in it, would be within your Department's purview. Why did you reject that?



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Mark Spencer: What would be the content of a good food Bill? What would its ambition be? Let us look at the challenge we are trying to solve, which is about making sure that consumers can make the right decisions to purchase the right foods, have a balanced and healthy diet, and live a long and healthy life without putting too much burden on the health service. The best approach and the best way to achieve that is through education and informing consumers, so that they can make the right choices themselves and make those decisions for themselves.

David Kennedy: We went through each of the commitments that we made in the food strategy and asked, "Does this need primary legislation?" The answer for each was no. What would we put into primary legislation? There are some areas—giving better information through reporting requirements on healthy food sold by the food industry, for example—that could be addressed through secondary legislation.

Mark Spencer: There are lots of levers that the Government can pull without legislation. Sometimes, legislation can be just for show rather than analysing what we are trying to achieve and seeing whether there are other means of achieving it.

Chair: This morning, I chaired a meeting sponsored by Kellogg's—a breakfast meeting, as you might guess. The focus was on trying to increase fibre levels in our diets; lots of health issues are affected by low fibre intake, and of course fibre fills the stomach, so you are less likely to eat foods that might increase your weight. Have you looked at fibre in the diet and what can be done? The point was made that even five-a-day fruit and vegetables are not sufficient to meet your fibre requirement. Can we increase fibre in foods in the same way as we are reducing sugar?

Mark Spencer: Clearly, one of the ambitions would be to do that as part of a good balanced diet. I start my day with Weetabix—to give a plug to a great British company buying UK wheat. There are lots of ways of doing it. Fruit and vegetables are part of that balanced diet and also happen to have the benefit of being produced in the UK of course—again, supporting the landscape that we like to look at.

Chair: Thank you.

Q381 **Derek Thomas:** Let us turn to junk food. Henry Dimbleby described the junk food cycle as being caused by a market failure and called on the Government to intervene. We have touched on this in relation to sugar and salt. It is amazing—I sat on the Work and Pensions Committee and was absolutely astonished to learn that in parts of the country junk food was the first and cheapest option for lots of families. I would not necessarily say that that was the case in every part of the country, and it certainly seemed to vary depending on the area that people represented. Do you think that Henry is right that that cycle is being caused by a market failure and that the Government should intervene?

Mark Spencer: I am not sure I am comfortable with the term "junk food", or what you define as junk food. Again, at the risk of sounding like a broken record, what matters here is that consumers are informed about



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the calorific value of the food that they are consuming and about portion size. I openly sit here as someone who is overweight. I probably eat way more food than I should, so I am not preaching to anybody. What matters is that consumers can make decisions from an informed place. I think that lots of those people you would define as junk food suppliers have done a lot of work to improve the information available to consumers—particularly the big chains. They have done a lot of work to reduce the number of calories and maintain the same taste for their consumers, and also to inform their consumers about what the alternatives are. If consumers do not want to have one product, they can eat another one that has a slightly lower calorific value.

Q382 Derek Thomas: I appreciate what you say about junk food—I probably should not have used that term, but I agree with you that the Government have never shied away from saying that we should eat healthy food. But it is fair to say that if you buy a prepared meal, which is unfortunately the only option for some households—particularly if they did not have the advantage of home economics, as I did when I was a child—it is very difficult, despite labelling, to purchase food that is as healthy as it could be. You do not always have the choice. Food producers are still, arguably, adding higher rates of salt and sugar than is absolutely necessary.

Mark Spencer: It depends on the food you are purchasing. You are speaking in very broad terms. There is nothing wrong with having a curry on a Friday night if that is your choice, as long as you recognise that you cannot do that every night. If you did that every night, you would end up gaining weight pretty quickly, but there is nothing wrong with having a treat every now and again. It is about that being part of a balanced diet, and the way you get to a balanced diet is by being informed as to what you are consuming.

Q383 Derek Thomas: Is it right for the Government to ban buy one, get one free, as Henry Dimbleby suggests we should?

Mark Spencer: I don't think we should be doing that at all. There are many consumers that will benefit from buy one, get one free. They can make that decision for themselves. I think intervening in the marketplace in that way is over-zealous, frankly. At a time when people are under pressure, some of those bargains and discounts that retailers offer are of great advantage to consumers, but they need to do things from an informed position. If it is buy one, get one free on chocolate bars, they should not eat both chocolate bars that evening. They should eat one tonight and save one for next week.

Q384 Derek Thomas: I like your vision. I agree that we should give people the power to buy what they want but to know what impact that has on them. You hinted earlier that this does not just sit with you; it sits with the Department for Education and other Government Departments.

Going back to my point about the energy reduction taskforce, is there a need for a cross-Government food security taskforce or a good healthy diet taskforce? I am not losing sight of the fact that we have enormous



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pressure on the NHS. I will be really honest: some of that is self-inflicted by those of us who do not treat our bodies in the way we should.

Mark Spencer: Yes. The Department of Health lead on that. They have a number of strategies in place to try to help and inform people. You will have seen many adverts on TV helping people with that information and encouraging them to eat five a day and to take exercise. The Government's role is to help and inform people so that they can make the right choices.

David Kennedy: We do have a joint initiative with Health following the food strategy. We announced the food data transparency partnership, which is about better information for consumers on health, sustainability and animal welfare, and that is moving forward.

Derek Thomas: I really love the idea that we can empower households to do that. I went to see Amsterdam and the examples that they use there, and it is quite amazing. It is quite life-giving if people have the power and confidence to do that. Good effort, and keep going.

Q385 **Chair:** Just to be clear, I think the Government announced that they were delaying the introduction of the ban on buy one, get one free. Is that now permanently off the agenda?

Mark Spencer: I do not think that falls within my responsibilities; you would have to ask the Government Minister whose Department that is. That does not fall within the gift of DEFRA. I am giving you a personal view, as someone who happens to be a Government Minister, that I think the best way is to inform consumers and make sure that they are armed with the facts so that they can make their own choice.

Q386 **Chair:** Okay. We will write to that Minister—when we find out which one it is—to get some clarification on that. The decision has been deferred until October 2023, I think.

Mark Spencer: I think that was in recognition of the fact that people were feeling the pressure of increased food prices and that was not the moment to increase those food prices. That allowed consumers to make the most of the opportunities and offers that retailers were putting forward.

Q387 **Dr Hudson:** I just wanted to get on to the prospective land use framework. The Government food strategy said that "In 2023, we will publish a land use framework that will reflect all our objectives for English Agriculture, the environment and net zero. It will also reflect and respond to the work of the House of Lords special inquiry committee into land use in England".

I am aware that that Lords Committee has only just come in December 2022. You are going to have a look at that report, but when would we be likely to expect the land use framework coming out?

David Kennedy: First, we welcome the House of Lords report. We work closely with them on that, and we are considering it very seriously. We



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were waiting for that before we developed our land use framework, and we are now thinking through, “What is our approach to land use?” in response. We have not got a date for publishing anything at the moment, but that is something that we will set as we go forward.

Q388 Dr Hudson: Do you think it will be the first half of the year or the second half of the year?

David Kennedy: I think that is premature, actually, and I would not want to commit now.

Mark Spencer: We just have to get that right in our own heads, haven't we? That is, what exactly we are looking for from a land use framework. We do not want something that is too prescriptive that will make very broad decisions and be used and weaponised against people in the future. We need flexibility in the land use system, and if you start prescribing certain areas for certain zones you remove the flexibility of people to be able to live their lives and do the right thing.

Dr Hudson: I take that point, Minister—that is a point well made.

Q389 Chair: In the Government food strategy, they said, “In 2023, we will publish a land use framework that will reflect all our objectives for English Agriculture”. It is going to be this year, isn't it—2023?

Mark Spencer: That would be our ambition, but I would rather get it right than get it quick.

Chair: Understood.

Q390 Dr Hudson: So when it does come—and I take your point about being overly prescriptive—if there are some suggestions, objectives etc, does the public sector have the sufficient tools and levers to be able to motivate private landowners to try to follow, adopt or respond to this land use framework?

Mark Spencer: Of course we do. We have a number of levers. If you look at the ELMS that have been announced already, there are huge levers in there to drive people to different environmental outcomes and try to assist people in improving biodiversity in that way. The planning system is also a huge lever that is available to the Government to make sure that we get the right use of land in the right place.

Of course those levers exist; we just need to make sure that they have the flexibility within them for local authorities to consider that when they are considering planning applications, and for local food producers and land managers to be able to respond on what is right for their landscape.

Q391 Dr Hudson: You mentioned the environmental land management schemes. Potentially, when you publish the land use framework, will the ELM system be able to be modified or tweaked to enable you to work together on those objectives? Is that something that you see? “This is a potential lever that we have, and we can adapt it.”



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Mark Spencer: Absolutely; that is how they have been designed. There is the sustainable farming incentive, the SFI—there are several measures coming forward whereby we can start and tweak and look at how people respond to them. We can drive different behaviours through those schemes and those support mechanisms, to encourage people to do the right thing and to follow the right practice.

Q392 **Dr Hudson:** I think I know the answer to this question from your original answers, Minister. Do you feel, then, that this land use framework will not be too prescriptive? Do you think it is going to be broad-brush?

Mark Spencer: I do not want to prejudge it, but what I would say to you is this. It is very easy to say—to pick a random example—“Let’s not put any solar panels on agricultural land. That seems like a sensible thing. We should be using that land for food production.” But actually what then happens is that you get a small diversification project where someone is doing something on a farm and they want to put a small solar array next to that diversification project, and you have just ruled that out as not possible. What we need to do is set broad-brush ambitions and guidance for local authorities to review during the planning process, and be able to drive change and land management through the ELMS.

David Kennedy: And that is consistent with the House of Lords recommendations, which said, “Don’t be too prescriptive.” So we will not be producing a blueprint that says, “Here’s the map of the country and here’s how we’ll use every bit of land.” You can grow trees on the uplands and you get a certain set of benefits. You can grow them in the lowlands and you get different benefits. It is a question of finding the right balance, and leaving flexibility.

Mark Spencer: Otherwise, you end up in a situation where Cumbria is the place to grow trees and Yorkshire is the place to grow sheep, and it doesn’t work, does it? You want to have that flexibility within different communities to be all things.

Q393 **Dr Hudson:** Horses for courses, Minister. David, you mentioned just then the Lords report. It came out in December 2022, but in your response to me there, you said, “The Lords report has said this.” I know it is early days, but can you give us any preliminary response as to how you felt about that report? Were there any things where you thought, “Oh, that’s going to be helpful as we take this forward”? Are there any headlines that you can give the Committee now, or is it too early?

David Kennedy: I think it is too early. It was broadly sensible. We welcome it. We are seriously considering it. I do not think it would be right to say, “Here is a response,” on the spot.

Q394 **Dr Hudson:** But there were areas of the report that you just said to us you noted. Are there any other areas that you noted?

David Kennedy: What resonated with me was that it would be wrong to go for a blueprint as a land use strategy and that you need to leave yourself flexibility because there are so many factors at play here.



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Q395 **Dr Hudson:** Okay, thank you. As you develop this land use framework, what will be the involvement of the devolved Administrations in that? This is going to be land use in England, but these are issues that are very relevant to how we in the UK farm and manage the land.

Mark Spencer: It is about dialogue, isn't it? It is about making sure that we communicate with them. Clearly, they have the right to go in a different direction if they choose, but we hope that they will look at what we are doing, we will continue those dialogues and we can encourage co-operation so that we get similar frameworks across the whole UK.

Q396 **Dr Hudson:** How far into the process are you in terms of developing the framework and then, potentially, starting these dialogues and drafting things? We hope it is going to come this year, but is the work advanced?

Mark Spencer: Those conversations are always ongoing. We are always talking to devolved Administrations, on a number of levels, about a number of DEFRA issues. I meet on a regular basis my counterparts in the devolved Administrations and have done that this week.

Q397 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you, but how far advanced is the LUF—the land use framework—in terms of the work?

David Kennedy: We have the building blocks in place. We have a sense of what land you might need for what environmental objective. We have a sense of the productivity opportunity in the food system, which we have referred to already—1% growth in productivity a year. It is a question of putting all these things together and developing scenarios that show how we can meet our goals. We made the statement in the food strategy that we will maintain food production and meet environmental objectives. We did some early analysis to get a degree of confidence before we said that, so it is a question of pulling it all together to show how we meet those two really important objectives.

Mark Spencer: We are starting on that journey already. We have already made a conscious decision that we want to increase the amount of biodiversity in the country, which is what the ELMS are designed to do.

Dr Hudson: Thank you. We look forward to working with you and seeing that in due course.

Q398 **Chair:** Where will food security be on that hierarchy of objectives for land-use strategy? Will it be up front and centre, or will it have to take second place in some cases to environmental considerations or carbon sequestration?

Mark Spencer: Food security is overarching over all of that. That is the Government's responsibility, to make sure that we are food secure. We are confident we can deliver that food security at the same time as improving our environmental footprint and biodiversity.

Q399 **Chair:** A common theme in Henry Dimbleby's report was the inefficiency, as he described it, of using animals to produce food, whether that be on the uplands, as we have already discussed, where very extensive grazing



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takes place on land that could, for example, be planted with trees, or in more intensive agricultural operations such as dairying, where producing grass to feed cows to feed a person is less efficient than producing peas or beans to feed directly to people. To put it bluntly, do you think we should eat fewer animals and animal products, and eat more vegetables?

Mark Spencer: No. 1, you need to recognise that meat consumption is going down in the UK. You also need to recognise that many of the landscapes you are talking about, where sheep and beef are produced, are not suitable for growing peas and beans.

Whatever you decide to do with some of the uplands of Cumbria or Yorkshire, you are not going to stick a plough in them. That would be catastrophic for carbon sequestration if you were to do that. We need to recognise that there are certain parts of the country that are best placed to produce that meat.

What we need to do is make sure that the efficiency by which it is produced is improved. There is quite a lot of low-hanging fruit, where we can drive change in agricultural production systems to make them more efficient and reduce their environmental impact, and to make them more sustainable in the way that they produce the food that we like to eat.

Q400 **Chair:** Thank you. We have touched on a number of other Government Departments: the Department for Education and free school meals; the Department for Work and Pensions and benefits; and the Department of Health and Social Care and obesity. Which Department has lead responsibility for hunger in our country?

Mark Spencer: I think that is a shared responsibility. It is not a metric that is easy to measure. Clearly, we have a shared responsibility across the whole of Government, to make sure that food supply chains are robust and can deliver consumers the food they require at a price they can afford. We consistently and constantly have conversations with other Departments to try to make sure that those mechanisms are in place.

Clearly, DEFRA has a role in ensuring that the food is there on the shelf. The Department for Work and Pensions has a role in ensuring that people are supplied with incomes that can procure that food. The Treasury has stepped in in a huge way to help and support households with the cost challenges that they face. It is a cross-Government response.

Q401 **Chair:** Do you feel you have a responsibility of some leadership role in that? Having been in Government, I know there is a little bit of buck passing when it is not clear which Department is in charge of something.

Mark Spencer: I don't think you could accuse DEFRA of buck passing. We are keen to ensure that other Departments step up and deliver what they have to deliver, but we take our responsibility seriously, and encourage dialogue, conversations and responses.

Chair: Thank you, Minister, and Mr Kennedy for your time. It has been a very interesting and informative session. We look forward to seeing some of the developments you flagged up in your evidence. We hope to see



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people better fed and have better skills to feed themselves, reducing food waste and obesity, and to see all the objectives we hold in common. Thank you; I hope you will look forward to reading our report when we publish it.