

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Department, HC 705

Tuesday 28 March 2023

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Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Steven Bonnar; Ian Byrne; Geraint Davies; Rosie Duffield; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Julian Sturdy; Derek Thomas.

Questions 102 – 220

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Dr Thérèse Coffey MP, Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs; Tamara Finkelstein CB, Permanent Secretary, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Thérèse Coffey and Tamara Finkelstein.

Q102 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's meeting of the EFRA Committee, where we are honoured and graced with the presence of the Secretary of State, Dr Thérèse Coffey, and her Permanent Secretary, Tamara Finkelstein. I do not think that you need to introduce yourselves, so maybe I could start straight off with the questions.

Farmers Weekly described your appearance, Thérèse, at the NFU conference as a car crash. On reflection, why do you think it said that? What could you maybe have done to get a better reception there?

Dr Coffey: I do not know whether it was the same journalist who wrote that who subsequently said that they had voted for the Liberal Democrats for the past decade and have now joined the Labour party. It might be a different journalist who did that.

Q103 **Chair:** This was the editor of *Farmers Weekly* in the editorial that I saw.

Dr Coffey: I do not pretend that I read the editorial of that. I am into information and facts in what I try to do. There is an element here of making sure, as we continue to do as a Department, that we speak to farmers. I do. We will continue to deliver the legacy of what has happened with the Agriculture Act, the Environment Act and the transition, as was set out in the 2019 manifesto, on which Boris Johnson won our majority of 80, including many rural seats. That is what I intend to keep doing.

Q104 **Chair:** You said that the Government understand the pressures farmers face and that they must continue to work with farmers. You also said, for example, that there was not a market failure in egg production. Are you confident that you have the confidence of the industry? As far as eggs are concerned, we received evidence of big declines in the flock—down to below 40 million—and we saw a shortage of eggs in the autumn.

Dr Coffey: The NFU and others have been asking to use a particular power in order to instigate kind of an inquiry, in effect, due to a market failure. The advice I have had from officials is that—I am not pretending otherwise—there were fewer eggs on sale.

I was led to believe that some of that was because something had gone wrong in the wholesaler supply chain. As a consequence, many in hospitality were going and buying lots of eggs in the supermarkets at a particular moment, so they did not run out of eggs. In terms of the technical terms of the powers under the Act, that is the advice I have been given: that there is not a market failure to do that, because it would imply that there is not a market. There is a market in that regard.

In terms of ongoing supply, we have seen a few things happen. We have seen a change in terms of more and more requirements for things to be more free range. We are seeing less production of certain kinds of hens in the market. My understanding is that that has had an impact in terms of



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egg production. Particularly on that aspect of market failure, it was relating to a technical element of interpretation of a piece of statute.

- Q105 **Chair:** There have been reports of low morale and high staff turnover rates at Defra. Can you guarantee that Defra can deliver the key farming and environment programmes, such as ELMS, on time and on budget?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware particularly of the thing you say at the start. I do not know where that report has come from.

- Q106 **Chair:** There are quite a lot of vacancies unfilled at Defra. Is that true?

Tamara Finkelstein: There are some vacancies, not at a particularly higher rate than there is as a result of turnover and so on. The Department is very energised by the agenda that we have and is very much focused on, particularly, the environmental improvement plan coming out. That has created a really good framework for the Department and the wider group and family of arm's length bodies to gather behind and deliver. That is the work we are doing. The Department is very energised in order to do that.

- Q107 **Chair:** In terms of your monitoring the situation of recruitment and staff retention, as to whether it is red, amber or green, are you in a green zone, flashing amber, or maybe even red?

Tamara Finkelstein: It is always a bit more about pockets and particular skills. It is challenging, for example, to get all the digital skills that we are keen to have. There is quite a high turnover there, so getting and retaining people is always challenging in a market that is much broader than Government. We are similar to other Government Departments. We have a whole range of mechanisms in place to try to improve that.

There are particular pockets and our arm's length bodies will have said similarly. The Environment Agency has particular skills that are a bit challenging to recruit to and to retain. I would not be at all complacent about attracting and retaining. As I say, we are trying to approach that piece by piece.

- Q108 **Chair:** Has that been picked up in staff surveys, where particular Departments are under pressure with unfilled vacancies and people who feel that they are being asked to maybe do more than is fair?

Tamara Finkelstein: Across the piece in Departments, staff engagement scores were a bit down. We are tackling some of the elements that drive that. One of those was a real clarity about what we are trying to deliver. The environmental improvement plan really helped with that. That is one of the measures that we are already taking action on.

There are concerns around pay, and we have taken some action on improving the employee offer around the edges where we can do that. That has had quite a positive reaction. There is no doubt that there are issues in pockets and other issues more broadly from the staff survey that we are trying to tackle.



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Chair: One big challenge facing you will be transposing all this EU law. Geraint wants to ask a quick question about your capacity to do that within the timescale allocated.

Q109 **Geraint Davies:** That is essentially the question. Given you have to look at thousands of EU laws by the sunset at the end of this year, how much resource is that taking? What is the impact on these very critical areas you are working on, whether it is farming, food security or air quality? The list goes on. You have a lot on your plate, so how are you coping with looking at every law the EU has passed in the last 45 years?

Tamara Finkelstein: We have been doing a full project on that to identify all the relevant laws. You have seen that that number has increased as we have been doing that work. Then obviously we are doing work scoping on what the plan for that is with Ministers, in terms of retaining, reforming and repealing, the programme of statutory instruments that would go with that and how we match that with the other obligations we have.

One thing we have done cross-Government is that we have a contract for some external legal advice, which is really supporting us now and will go on supporting us with the programme. We are aware of the programme, we are scoping it out and we will balance that with the other obligations we have.

Q110 **Geraint Davies:** What proportion of your staff are working on that? How many people have taken action to do this?

Tamara Finkelstein: It is a really difficult thing to say.

Dr Coffey: It does not get measured. There is only a handful of people completely dedicated to it. It is a broader element of work.

Tamara Finkelstein: Yes, exactly.

Dr Coffey: Ministers have gone through. We are pretty clear what we can repeal. We are in that next stage of what it is that we want to potentially change, so reform, or review. Then there are other elements that it is very clear that we absolutely will keep.

Q111 **Geraint Davies:** Are you consulting the devolved Assemblies on that?

Dr Coffey: The decisions are for the devolved Assemblies where it is devolved, but there is ongoing work happening with the officials and it has been discussed at some of the interministerial meetings.

Q112 **Barry Gardiner:** You informed us, Secretary of State, in February, that the shortage of certain salads in the supermarkets was caused "predominantly by seasonal weather". You said that, "We know that Ireland and other parts of Europe are facing very similar supply issues". When Henry Dimbleby came before the Committee, he said, "It wasn't happening in the rest of Europe". He said, "We have this fixed-price system in the UK which is bad in a volatile market", as deliveries of food in short supply were sent to the highest bidder elsewhere. Can you



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reconcile your evidence to the Committee with his evidence to the Committee, other than saying that one of you is right and the other is wrong?

Dr Coffey: I am going on the briefing I had at the time, which I have no reason still now to doubt. Absolutely, Henry is correct, depending on different countries and how they do their commercial arrangements. We know that, for example, there will still tomatoes produced. They went to other supermarkets in some other countries that were prepared to pay more, so we saw some significant price comparisons increasing elsewhere. We obviously did not see that.

Our supermarkets, by and large, still had a supply and they chose different ways of interacting with their customers on whether to restrict the number of their purchases. I think that Sainsbury's took the decision not to. If that meant they were all consumed, they were all consumed. Some other supermarkets chose a different route and put limits on how many. That varied by supermarket.

That is my understanding of the situation. I know that I cannot talk about some of the commercial discussions I have had with supermarkets. There is, undoubtedly, a commercial relationship that exists there. Some operators do it differently. My understanding is also that some of the pricing changed in wholesalers and different elements like that. It will vary.

That is, in effect, a decision to some extent driven by how the supermarket wants to interact with its customers. The supermarkets know their customers and that relationship better than I do. I asked them, "If you had increased prices by whatever percentage, would you have sold anything?" Their expectation was that, no, they would not.

It is a commercial arrangement in two ways. It is about understanding how much consumers are prepared to pay for food and then what the relationship is in terms of contracts on variable pricing.

Q113 **Barry Gardiner:** I understand that and I see the point that you are making. Would you see the point that I would make in response to the supermarkets and the fixed-price system, when I say that, in an economy that is supposed to provide choice and freedom of choice in a free market system, it seems odd that the choice is being made for the consumer by the supermarket, rather than the consumer being allowed to make that choice? Is that not one of the problems of the way in which the finances between the supermarket and its suppliers, and the supermarket and the public, are going wrong?

Dr Coffey: This was a temporary situation for a short amount of time.

Q114 **Barry Gardiner:** No, it is a structural part of the economy between the supermarkets and their suppliers, and the supermarkets and their customers. It is a structure that actually takes away the choice from the consumer and leaves the power of choice to the supermarkets, is it not?



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Dr Coffey: It is up to a retailer to decide what products it is going to sell and at what price. If you were, like me, not just shopping at supermarkets but shopping elsewhere, there was access to some of those highly sought after vegetables at the time at a higher price.

Q115 **Barry Gardiner:** That was not accessible to most consumers in the market. I do not see this as a point that is necessarily one of conflict between us, because you are not responsible for the way in which the supermarkets decide to use their power, but you are responsible for the power that they have and the good and effective working of the market. It seems to me that that may be the role that you can play in this to change things.

Dr Coffey: Again, I am not sure that I can get into naming individual supermarkets. One CEO I spoke to explained about how they had increased the prices they were paying, reflecting the input costs they recognised from the growers. You will be aware that there is often an intermediary along the way. That is where the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator comes in, with that relationship there, rather than the growers.

The Department, through our Agriculture Market Monitoring Group, continues to monitor markets and supplies. We can stand things up, as we did, in order to keep a grip of what was going on. We had our daily sit reps. We had our interactions. Our Food Minister was also in regular meetings.

It is about recognising that we are not in that situation of trying to define specific contracts, but I am conscious that we are still doing some supply chain reviews. I am hoping that some of those will come to a conclusion fairly soon. We are still getting through dairy; we are still getting through the pig one. I have lined up one or two potentially for the future, just to see and understand the supply chain in that regard.

Q116 **Barry Gardiner:** It would be very interesting to see what your information throws up there. I am not trying to push you into a position where you are defending the supermarkets, but it is important that you should explain to the Committee how you see your role in balancing what you described as cherishing our specialisms in this country—in other words eating things in season—and consumers wanting that year-round choice that they were not able to get in this instance.

Dr Coffey: Some supermarkets, as I say, had taken a policy of allowing a free-for-all, frankly, versus other supermarkets that had a restriction of how much could be purchased per customer. There was still availability; it just was not quite as readily available.

Q117 **Barry Gardiner:** Now you seem to be just backing up what the supermarkets are doing. I am asking you how you see your role in providing the adjudication between the customer, who says, “If I want to purchase tomatoes, I want to be able to purchase tomatoes”, or bananas or whatever it happens to be, and the supermarkets, which are saying, “Actually, we have a fixed-price system”.



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Dr Coffey: It varies by supermarket.

Q118 **Barry Gardiner:** Yes, but you have a role as the mediator between the public and the supermarket. I am trying to pin you down on what you conceive that role to be.

Dr Coffey: We have had a very strong, resilient supply of food. We got through Covid. There was a transformation within the supermarkets, at a speed that is unimaginable, on how they reached people who never left their homes. We have a competitive supermarket, which has led to pricing being largely in the favour of the consumer, certainly as a proportion of people's income that they spend.

Undoubtedly, with some of the things that have happened and the particular inputs, we have seen food price inflation. I am also very conscious that a lot of our growers in this country have been seeing that inflation too. That is why, over the last year, farmers have been eligible to get the energy support that has been extended to other businesses as well. We had already, I think at the last time I spoke, discussed about some of the other things that we had done. We had removed tariffs on imports.

Q119 **Barry Gardiner:** I do not wish to appear rude, but we are straying off the point, so let me move on. Talking about your role again, Secretary of State, under the Agriculture Act 2020, you have powers that could be used in relation to what are called excess supermarket profits. On your last appearance before the Committee you and I had a discussion about the reporting of 97% increase in profits from pre-pandemic levels that the supermarkets were making to post-pandemic levels.

If the supermarkets were simply passing on the increased supply chain costs, you would anticipate that their profit levels would be approximately the same. The fact that they were 97% above pre-pandemic levels gave rise to concern. I asked you about that at the time. I had understood you to have agreed to write to the Committee on that point. When we wrote to ask you for your written response, the reply was that you had not agreed to write to the Committee on that response. Mark Spencer, when he came before the Committee, agreed. He actually then wrote back on a very different statistical basis. I do not want to rehearse the idea of lies, damn lies and statistics.

The point is this. You have powers that you are able to exercise, and you also have powers under that Act that allow you to require data from the food supply chain businesses to make regulations to promote fair contractual relationships. How is it that you seek to apply those powers? What statistics have you demanded from the supermarkets in order to see whether you need to do that?

What monitoring are you doing of the supermarkets and the triggers that you would apply in order to use those powers to stop the excess profits that I believe they are making, from the research? Also John Allan, as chair of Tesco, told Laura Kuenssberg only three weekends ago that supermarkets were making excess profits. This is the chair of one of our



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leading supermarkets saying that this is happening. It is important that the public know what you are doing to prevent it.

Dr Coffey: I have already set out to the Committee that we monitor markets through the UK Agriculture Market Monitoring Group and other forums. I have already pointed out to the Committee that we are doing some supply chain reviews. There is an element here where we have seen very competitive ways of how certain products from leading manufacturers have been delisted in an attempt by some of the supermarkets to try to keep prices down.

There are different ways that supermarkets will make profits. They often do not just do it through their food outlets. They have extended their brands into a number of different elements that consumers wish to purchase, with the power of the brands that they often have.

Q120 **Barry Gardiner:** Let me ask you bluntly. Are you content that post-pandemic profit levels are 97% higher than they were pre-pandemic and that that has arisen solely legitimately, or do you agree with John Allan that excess profiteering is actually going on?

Dr Coffey: I have not observed John Allan. I am conscious of the question you have asked. I do not know whether you have written to Tesco. I am very happy. I will write to Tesco.

Q121 **Barry Gardiner:** John Allan said specifically that Tesco was not doing it, but that he believed other supermarkets in the market were doing it.

Dr Coffey: Did he give any evidence on that? I am just a bit surprised.

Q122 **Barry Gardiner:** I have given you the evidence. Laura Kuenssberg gave the evidence to John Allan. I am a bit surprised that your officials and your spads have not given that evidence to you. If you would like more evidence, I can certainly provide the statistics and the information for that.

Dr Coffey: John Allan should provide the evidence of his assertions.

Q123 **Barry Gardiner:** It is your responsibility, Secretary of State, not John Allan's. It is your responsibility to regulate the market. That is what the Agriculture Act 2020 does. It says that it is your responsibility.

Dr Coffey: It is not my job under the Act to set prices.

Q124 **Barry Gardiner:** Nobody said that. It is about profits, not prices.

Dr Coffey: As I have said to you and the Committee, we have instigated supply chain reviews. I think that the dairy one is quite close to conclusion. The pig one is underway and we are looking at some further sectors. That is what we are doing. I am surprised that you, Mr Gardiner, are taking what John Allan, the chair of a FTSE 100 plc, says about other companies without any evidence, making that assertion, and then expecting me to investigate his assertion, made on the basis of I have no idea what.



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Q125 **Barry Gardiner:** I did not ask you that. Last time when you appeared before the Committee I gave you the statistics from the independent investigations that had already been conducted. That was the evidence that I gave to you. It was subsequently confirmed by John Allan on the Laura Kuenssberg programme. Please do not make this an issue about John Allan. The statistics are there if you care to look at them.

Dr Coffey: I said to you, and I have said it again today, that they make it in different ways using their brands. Have I looked into the individual accounts of Tesco plc? No, I have not.

Q126 **Barry Gardiner:** My question was very simple. I asked whether you are satisfied that the profit levels that are being made post-pandemic, as compared with pre-pandemic, are being incurred without excess profiteering?

Dr Coffey: As I have said to you, we have instigated supply chain reviews, because we are looking at aspects of that.

Q127 **Barry Gardiner:** It is a yes or no question.

Dr Coffey: I have not investigated Tesco plc's individual accounts.

Q128 **Barry Gardiner:** It is not about Tesco. You are just throwing distraction into the Committee. Please try to focus on the question that I ask you.

Dr Coffey: Which supermarkets do you believe are making excessive profits?

Q129 **Barry Gardiner:** It is the top three.

Dr Coffey: That includes Tesco.

Q130 **Barry Gardiner:** No, they were not the top.

Dr Coffey: Are they not in the top three?

Barry Gardiner: No. They were not actually, no.

Q131 **Chair:** We probably need to move on. We posed this question to Mark Spencer. He said that we have a competitive supermarket sector in this country and they all claim to have cheaper prices than each other. If the market is not actually functioning, because they are not competing for customers, that is maybe something that you should be looking at. Is it a cosy club where they are happy to keep their profits at levels higher than before the pandemic? That is basically what Barry was asking. Do we really have competition in the supermarket sector, or are they content to make profits and not really park their tanks on each other's lawns?

Dr Coffey: Going back to it, as I said earlier, the proportion of income spent on food is considerably lower than in most other countries. I think the US is the only one that comes into comparison. A lot of that is driven by the competition between the supermarkets. I am very conscious of the supply chain aspects and what that means for our growers and producers. That is why I have instigated those reviews.



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How can I put it? There are the price matches that happen in competition between different supermarkets. I do not think that it is a surprise to people that, quite often in retail, people will make very low margin on certain products to get people in through the door. Where they place their products around the supermarket is all designed in order to draw people in and to sell up around that.

Q132 Barry Gardiner: Moving away from profits and profiteering, given the high rate of food inflation continuing, what steps will the Government take to support households when the current support packages expire?

Dr Coffey: As you know, the Government have added an extra household support programme in order to help people, particularly on universal credit. That is going ahead and that is an important element of it.

At the same time, we are investing to try to make sure we have energy security, so that we can start to bring down, structurally, the cost of supply of energy, which will help our economy. As you know, the support for energy expires commercially, principally, in comparison to what has been enjoyed by businesses in the last six months.

We continue to work on all those elements and see where there are other opportunities that we can take, as we have in the past, such as removing the tariffs on certain feedstock. That is all going to be part of ongoing direct financial support. Around about 25 April, people on universal credit will be receiving that support directly into their bank accounts. That is real cash help to people on the lowest incomes in society.

Q133 Julian Sturdy: This is just a quick point, but it came up in some of the answers you gave to Mr Gardiner, Secretary of State. Given the high level of food inflation, but also the high costs that have been incurred by producers, over the past 18 months to two years have we seen any increase in, or a higher level of, referrals to the Groceries Code Adjudicator?

Dr Coffey: No, not to my knowledge.

Q134 Julian Sturdy: Do you monitor those on a regular basis?

Dr Coffey: Tamara, I think that, if we saw a significant increase, we would be made aware of it. I am not aware specifically of an increase.

Tamara Finkelstein: We can write in terms of levels of referrals. I am not aware of there being additional or higher referrals.

Q135 Julian Sturdy: There is nothing that would trigger any alarms within the Department over that at the moment.

Tamara Finkelstein: I am not aware, but I think that we should check.

Dr Coffey: The reason why we have done the supply chain is that I am very clear that the Groceries Code Adjudicator is between the supermarket and that first tier, not the lower tiers. We know that there were problems, which I am sure many of us experienced in our



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constituencies around the country. There were issues about abattoirs, contracts not being honoured and different elements such as that.

That is why we have started these supply chain reviews to understand and, where necessary, take action. We need to do that on the basis of understanding and the analysis that we do on whether action is needed further down the supply chain.

Q136 **Julian Sturdy:** For my reference, and the Committee's as well, do we have set dates when those supply chain reviews are going to report?

Dr Coffey: I am afraid that I do not. I am hoping that the dairy one will be very soon. I think that the pig one is going to take a little longer. As I have indicated, I am looking at some other potentials for the future on getting supply chains, but we can manage only so many at one time.

Q137 **Julian Sturdy:** Dairy will be within the next few months and then pigs at least this year.

Dr Coffey: I think so, yes.

Tamara Finkelstein: We have responded to the consultation on dairy and are drafting the legislation, the SIs, to put that in place. We are expecting to publish a response on pigs shortly and have implementation after that.

Q138 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you both for being before us today. The Agriculture Act requires the Government to publish a food security report every three years. As you know, we have asked on this Committee, orally and by writing to Defra, to make that at least annually. We were very disappointed to have the reply that Defra does not plan to increase the frequency. Bearing in mind that the first report was December 2021 and that was prior to the war in Ukraine, and the world has changed drastically since then, why not give us an annual report? Is that something that the Department would consider moving forwards?

Dr Coffey: No.

Q139 **Dr Hudson:** Why not?

Dr Coffey: We produced a report in 2021. It takes a considerable amount of time. There is a particular issue at the moment dealing with food price inflation. I have already set out to the Committee some of the work that we are doing generally, as Government, in order to help with that, as well as some of the other financial support. I do not think that it will particularly add any information right now, especially as we are doing a whole series of other work about understanding that, rather than generating more reports.

Q140 **Dr Hudson:** Bearing in mind that December 2021 was prior to the war in Ukraine and everything has drastically changed since then, would it not be beneficial to at least have a status report subsequent to that? If you wait another two years until 2024, things will have changed drastically.



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Dr Coffey: The market is still in a particular place when it comes to inflation. We are seeing different aspects of wholesale gas prices start to come. We will start to see things. There is a forecast, I think from the OBR, of inflation broadly falling by the end of the year to a low level. The fall in food inflation tends to lag, so I am not sure that it will help in any way to just do another report. The legislation was that element. That is what we are pressing on with. We are trying to fix some of the other issues as we get there and to tackle, as has already been referenced, the supply chain problems, once we have done these reviews.

Q141 **Dr Hudson:** In one of our last sessions with Defra officials and the Farming Minister we asked about this. We also referred to the Prime Minister's commitment made during the leadership election in the summer to host and chair a food security summit at No. 10. We have asked Defra about that and it says that that is in discussion. What is Defra's approach to that? When will that No. 10 food security summit be coming?

Dr Coffey: That will be happening in the first half of this year, in quarter 2. That is my understanding. I do not think that we have a finalised date.

Q142 **Dr Hudson:** Will it be chaired by the Prime Minister?

Dr Coffey: Yes, that is my understanding.

Q143 **Dr Hudson:** To reiterate, you are not going to produce annual reports. That is what you are saying.

Dr Coffey: I am not intending to start introducing annual reports.

Dr Hudson: I think that, as a Committee, we are disappointed with that.

Mrs Murray: I disagree. You are not speaking for us.

Dr Hudson: We wrote to the Secretary of State on behalf of the Committee calling for that, but at least we are going to get a summit this year. Then we will be able to get a status report on where we are at with food security.

Q144 **Derek Thomas:** Secretary of State, thank you. Thank you for starting off by mentioning the Environment Act and the Agriculture Act, but also for the work that is going on around land use planning and the environmental land management scheme. That actually provides real opportunities to target money where it is needed.

In the background of that, Natural England is using the Wildlife and Countryside Act to determine what landowners and farmers can and cannot do on their land. This is a live issue in my constituency and will make several farmers unviable. There is no question about that. Given that we have the Agriculture Act and work is being done around land use planning, is legislation that was passed over 40 years ago, in a very different environment than all the things we are trying to achieve today, fit for purpose?



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Dr Coffey: The Government and Parliament took the Environment Bill and made it an Act, so I would hope that there was opportunity then to make necessary changes. I do not know about the specific issue in your constituency, Mr Thomas. I know that the Farming Minister and the Environment Minister are meeting Natural England to discuss how some of these things are being applied. I am sure that he will, as an active Minister, respond to any specific constituency issue that you have.

Q145 **Derek Thomas:** We are meeting him tomorrow to discuss that very problem. The point is that Defra and we are doing what we can to support farmers to have viable farms and protect the environment. Some legislation works against that. What plans does Defra have to ensure that landowners can continue to deliver public good and so continue to nurture our landscapes, as they have done for generations? The landscapes we appreciate today have been years and years in the making. Do you believe that ELMS payments achieve that harmony between land, public good, food production and managing the land? Are the payments adequate?

Dr Coffey: When I came into the Department, I wanted to make sure that there were more options open to a wider range of farmers, recognising that BPS was on its journey of being reduced, which liberated more money for the other schemes to be deployed, hopefully by as many farmers and landowners as possible. It is a move from that system where about half of the money spent through CAP went to about 10% of farmers and landowners. It was an opportunity to change that.

In order to open up that window more, that is why, instead of just putting forward three new initiatives under the SFI, I pressed for three more, so that we could bring more farmers into that and, critically, start the work to help us achieve our Environment Act targets, particularly on species abundance, by 2030. That is where the thinking went. It has taken some more time to make the IT come together to be able to open up that offer, but that is what officials are working on very specifically.

The other thing that happened was a significant review of the different rates being paid for countryside stewardship, recognising what the feedback had been and aspects of take-up. That has reached a pretty comprehensive amount that is open to farmers and landowners to access.

In terms of some of your wider points, I do not believe that you necessarily have to choose between still having food production and helping the environment, whether that is about unprofitable strips of farming or, indeed, what we have seen in the first phase of landscape recovery projects. We have not seen any fall in food production as a consequence of it. It is not like all of a sudden there is less food being produced in those projects. That is a thing that we want to continue to build on.

One should not come at the price of the other, but it may be a different way of becoming more productive or sustainable. Improving soil health, which is the reason why the first SFI element was available, will help food



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production. That is why we are trying to help farmers to improve the quality of their soil.

Q146 Derek Thomas: I would certainly agree with that and my farmers would also. Unfortunately, the legislation that is being applied in my constituency, which I will raise to you when the time is appropriate, will mean, as has already been confirmed, that these farmers will not be able to carry on farming, which is a shame. Then you lose farms to hobby farmers who do not necessarily use the land in the way it could be used. Are you confident that you can get the 70% of the farmers that cover 70% of farmland signed up to ELMS? Is the process unattractive due to its overly bureaucratic and complicated nature?

Dr Coffey: A lot of learning happened during the SFI pilot. Part of the element is to try to simplify the application process. I know that considerable work has been done on that by officials, in partnership with the RPA, to make that more straightforward.

Clearly, we still have to sell this product. That is why we are lining up a variety of communications that we are doing, particularly ahead of the agricultural shows and when SFI will be opened. I think that the countryside stewardship agreements opened up last week. We will monitor the take-up on that.

I have been asking and we are working through. I am very keen to use the RPA information that we have to understand what is working, where the take-up is, and where we perhaps need to go further. It not just about leaving everything on a website; it is about making sure we go to the auction marts, go through other ways, and speak to farmer influencers around different parts of the country.

Tamara Finkelstein: Let me pick up the point of over-bureaucratic process. We have tried very much to address that as part of this reform. We learned a lot from the piloting of the SFI and in opening SFI 2022. It is now a very short process and you can very quickly get the money out. Instead of a very complex system and then weeks before the money comes out, it is a 20-minute process and a couple of weeks before the money is paid.

We have just opened countryside stewardship with a much simpler process, using the information we have about land in a completely different way. I hope that we have tackled that, and that is what we will be looking at as we roll out the other SFI proposition, to have it on that basis. We have had good feedback on that.

To also pick up on the 70% take-up, we had a very significant almost doubling of take-up on countryside stewardship, which puts us in a really good place for 70% being in a programme. We also increased the rates on countryside stewardship, which allows a lot more options and opportunities for farmers to engage.

Dr Coffey: Building on that further, we listened to farmers. We set up the SFI management payment, which was £20 a hectare for up to 50



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hectares, to help with elements such as that. There is a wider discussion, perhaps, about upland farms. At the moment, it is said that about three quarters of upland farms are in schemes already. We want to make sure that we keep extending the offers available. We also just announced further funding for farming in protected landscapes, with particular focus there on national parks. Indeed, about 72% of national park land is in the uplands. We are proactively trying to make sure funding is available.

One challenge I have set to the Department is about how we make it as straightforward and interesting as possible for people to want to join. There are a variety of ways: advisory capacities, trying to remove all the barriers to entry that have been in place. We have made sure that we can also open up the access more to tenant farmers as well.

Q147 Derek Thomas: I recognise a lot of that. Having worked with my farmers for a number of years, it certainly has moved forward and improved. Thank you for that. Would it be your judgment then that, given all the things that are available to farmers, irrespective of whether they farm across lowland or upland farming, they actually could receive a similar amount of support from Government for the similar amount of environmental benefit?

Dr Coffey: Yes, and indeed potentially more. Up until now, it has all been based on how much land you have, rather than perhaps the services that you do. As I say, we are trying to make sure that a wider group of people can benefit from this, because we are going to need that help in order to deliver the environmental improvements.

This is transition time. I am very conscious that there are a lot of farmers who are used to having a certain income—a cheque once a year for cashflow reasons. We have moved that to twice a year. This is a change. That is why we need to work with farmers as we take this forward, which is what we do.

Q148 Chair: Derek has talked a lot about the marginal farming in the south-west or the North York Moors. There are of course some very intensive farms in East Anglia and Lincolnshire, where I suspect it might be difficult to make some of these stewardship schemes attractive. If they can consistently grow 10 tonnes of wheat a hectare, is there a concern that some of these big areas of land might opt out and not have to worry about cross-compliance?

Dr Coffey: That is why I want to monitor as we go, to see what the take-up is in different parts of the country and respond accordingly on where perhaps take-up is not as high as we would like. That is relying on, which we are still developing, an agile element of using the applications, using the information we have from the RPA and translating that into what we need to do locally.

Q149 Ian Byrne: Last month, the Committee visited Liverpool and saw first hand the work to provide food aid and the issues facing those who have to turn to such support. One in three in Liverpool at the moment are food insecure. Last week, we had the Mothers Manifesto on hunger strike



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outside Parliament to highlight the plight of mums unable to feed their children.

On Saturday, I took part in a hunger march with Right To Food London, calling for the legal right to food on behalf of the 12 million going hungry right now. Just a couple of weeks ago, we heard from the outgoing chief executive of the Environment Agency saying that there are people going to foodbanks who work within your own workforce. With all our communities in the grip of this hunger crisis, is food security your responsibility?

Dr Coffey: We have made our commitments to have that element of food security. It is why we put aspects of reports and the legislation for it. It is why we continue to work right across Government in what we do to try to help people during these challenging times.

Mr Byrne, you will know that I grew up in Liverpool. You may not know that the median salary in Liverpool is higher than in my constituency in Suffolk. We continue to try to help people in different ways right across Government in these challenging times. I know that they are very challenging. That is why we have extended support particularly to people on low incomes.

Q150 **Ian Byrne:** Can you outline what actions you are leading on across Whitehall to end this systemic hunger that we are talking about?

Dr Coffey: We have already discussed that the proportion of income spent on food is one of the lowest in the developed world. We have a competitive supermarket system, and that has implications elsewhere, in different aspects of the food supply chain.

As I have indicated before, we continue to have some direct support in terms of cash payments, particularly at this time. Also, as you will be aware, there are different things that the Government are doing to try to boost the prosperity of people in this country. That is what we will continue to work on.

Q151 **Ian Byrne:** With regards to the potential or upcoming food security meeting chaired by the Prime Minister, what ideas is Defra actually going to put before the Prime Minister to solve what we are talking about, when we have 12 million people who are unable to have a regular meal on the table?

Dr Coffey: The food security summit is particularly focused on food production and supply. There will continue to always be a role, as the Government do through welfare support, to help people struggling with low incomes. That will continue.

Q152 **Ian Byrne:** By 2035, the NHS is expected to spend more on treating type 2 diabetes—one of a multitude of illnesses caused by obesity and bad diet—than it does on all cancers today. Last week, Henry Dimbleby quit as food tsar, saying that Government have given up on public health. On Saturday, in an article in *The Times*, he wrote, “I recently left my role as lead non-executive director of the Department for Food and Rural



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Affairs because I can no longer swallow my frustration. There are so many things the government could do to shift the food system on to a better track...Far from endangering the economy, acting now would prevent us sliding further and further into ill health, low productivity, dwindling tax receipts and a health service so overwhelmed by diet-related disease that it sucks the national coffers dry... Instead, we are paralysed by political indecision. No, worse—we are going backwards”. With the health disparities White Paper effectively scrapped and key policies on junk food deferred, does Henry have a point?

Dr Coffey: Henry has been a non-executive director in Defra for six years. He was recruited by Michael Gove and George Eustice reappointed him. That reflected the fact that Henry had been a successful owner and founder of a food chain, which he subsequently sold. When Michael asked him to do the independent review to contribute towards the creation of a national food strategy by the Government, Henry went into a number of matters on food, including access to food and different elements like that.

When I arrived in the Department, I think he had another year to go, potentially, but he was very clear that he wanted to do more on some of the topics, building on from his independent review. I think it is sensible that it was agreed that he would no longer be the lead NED. He has subsequently resigned, so he does not feel restricted in his views and what he wanted to say about food in this country.

In terms of some of the legislation that has been deferred, it was a reasonable decision to defer the banning of “buy one, get one free” offers, recognising the challenges of food pricing. There are different elements where, instead of introducing legislation in the midst of all that was going on, it was deferred until potentially, I would suggest, the market situation was more stable.

Q153 **Ian Byrne:** It has been deferred, not cancelled.

Dr Coffey: It has been deferred, yes.

Q154 **Ian Byrne:** To touch on what Henry is talking about, in 1950 under 1% of the UK were clinically obese. Now the figure is a staggering 28%. Would you say that this is a collective collapse of the nation’s willpower, or a broken food system?

Dr Coffey: I am certainly obese and I am not going to pretend otherwise. A long time ago I lost a lot of weight and then I put it back on, so I will not pretend I had the willpower to keep the weight off. There are different aspects of nutrition. A lot of work has gone into improving the quality of food at school. Henry may well have been involved in that many years ago.

We continue, as a nation, to see what we can do about aspects of calorie control. It is this Government that introduced calories on the menus as a way of informing customers when they are out having a nice meal, to help people make informed choices. That got a lot of resistance from



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industry at the time. It was the right thing to press on with and is still in place.

- Q155 **Ian Byrne:** Henry talks about political indecision and we are seeing numbers that are absolutely staggering. Potentially, more people die from poor diet than any other element within the country. It is staggering; it truly is staggering. You have the ability to intervene. Henry also stated about the lack of political will.

Do you think that the Government should intervene on obesity by restricting advertising and raising the taxes on food production that were called for in the national food strategy? Should it all be left, in your opinion, to the responsibility of individuals? That is what you talked about before with your weight loss. Do the Government have a role to play, or is it individual?

Dr Coffey: Ultimately, people decide what they eat or drink. There is good information there that is regularly put out. There is also a proactive public health programme that happens. A lot of that is done through local authorities. I have already talked about the changes that were made to school meals.

The Government themselves published a national food strategy last year and that was driven by some of the evidence or recommendations made by Henry Dimbleby in his review that he put forward. There is still action underway in deploying aspects of that.

- Q156 **Ian Byrne:** I am trying tease out here some of the key elements of the national food strategy that potentially could tackle what we are talking about, the horrific numbers on obesity. You talking about deferring. Has it been deferred? Are there still talks within the Department to implement what we are talking about, which was raising tax on food producers, certainly the sugar element of it, restricting advertising and banning advertising on junk food pre-9 pm? These are things that Henry put before you to potentially tackle some of these issues that we are talking about.

Dr Coffey: The Government legislated for that. In terms of the secondary legislation to bring it into place, that is the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Care. The decision had been made to defer some of that, initially potentially for one year. Off the top of my head, I think it might have been deferred for two years. That is in the Department of Health and Social Care in terms of regulations. It went through an Act of Parliament, under the auspices of the Department of Health and Social Care.

As I have tried to indicate, there are a variety of ways that the Government have acted through health and education. We have had the labelling that has been done in the last decade, looking at the proportion of fat. There have already been regulations about how food is created. That led to a lot of changes by food manufacturers. There are a number of ways, for example about aspects of the sugar tax that was imposed.



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Some companies chose to change the formulation of their products. Some others did not and there was a surplus to be paid on that.

There are a number of ways that the Government have acted in trying to improve, if you like, the aspects of that. Ultimately, it comes down to an individual and what they decide to eat or drink.

Q157 Ian Byrne: If there was too much intervention in the role you played, are you concerned that you would be accused of nanny state? Henry gets to that. He talks about the political interference, people who are worried about a nanny state and how potentially the Government could be doing a whole lot more. Would you not take that on board?

Dr Coffey: The Government have already done a lot. I have listed to the Committee a number of actions the Government have taken.

Q158 Ian Byrne: We still have 28% of people obese. It is not working, is it?

Dr Coffey: They have taken a number of actions. On the one you referred to about "buy one, get one free", a deliberate choice was made, recognising the challenges of food price inflation, that that was not the appropriate time to reduce the opportunity for people to have, potentially, cheaper food. As I say, that is deferred, not cancelled. It would actually take primary legislation to cancel that.

Q159 Geraint Davies: I was going to ask about foodbanks. You probably know that, in 2010, there were 26,000 people on foodbanks. By 2020, there were 2.6 million. That is a hundredfold increase. Do you think that foodbanks are here to stay, or should the Government have an ambition that we get rid of food banks and move to a situation where people can afford to buy their own food?

Dr Coffey: I do not want people to be in a situation where they are so short of money that they feel they have to turn to foodbanks. Often they will pay other bills first, recognising that there may be an opportunity. Where I was living in Hampshire, in 2006, we set up a foodbank there, recognising that there will often be people who struggle in different ways. I am very conscious about how it has increased significantly.

It is one reason also, a few years ago, under this Government, that, when we started talking about surplus food not being used, we changed the dial and made sure it was in a place to be redistributed, rather than dug back into the fields, simply disposed of or put into things such as anaerobic digestion. We have shifted that way, which has also, to some extent, made the market in one aspect more efficient in trying not to have quite such surplus food.

I want to thank the people who undertake these. When I was at DWP, we were looking to see whether we could work with those organisations in terms of food redistribution, what more we could do to help their customers take elements forward and how we could potentially boost their income or other support that they might need. I want to give credit to the people who do that. I also want to see a situation where people are



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more prosperous and do not need to go and get their food from food banks on a regular basis.

Q160 Dr Hudson: Secretary of State and Tamara, I wanted to change the topic a bit on to APHA and animal health, welfare and disease. Thank you to the officials and vets from your Department who are in the frontline, working on the UK's biosecurity and in the avian influenza outbreak. Can you give us just a very brief status of the situation with regard to avian influenza in the UK?

Dr Coffey: Since 1 October 2022, I have been informed by my officials, there have been 148 confirmed outbreaks in England of the H5N1 HPAI in poultry and captive birds. Most of the impact has been in East Anglia. Nearly 5 million birds have either died or been culled for disease control. The year before we had a significant impact as well of about 152 cases across the UK and then the year before that there were just 26.

We had to deploy significant APHA resource to make sure that impacts could be mitigated. You will be aware that we changed the compensation process, but, undoubtedly, improving strict biosecurity measures will help reduce and prevent transmission.

Dr Hudson: You mentioned the compensation process. Our Committee took evidence and then asked for Defra to look at this in terms of the compensation schemes moving forward. How do you respond to farmers who are still concerned that that compensation scheme, although you have changed it, is not what they had hoped for?

Dr Coffey: The whole purpose and what is set out in legislation is that compensation gets paid for animals that do not have the disease, that are healthy and that need to be culled to restrict the transmission of the disease. It is not designed to pay for animals that, frankly, are already dead.

One thing that we have tried to do is about flexibility on the point at which the assessment of healthy birds is being done, and that certainly helps some of the farms. We have paid out about £34 million since 1 October in compensation, but I am not anticipating any further changes to the scheme, because it is designed to, as I say, cull healthy birds.

We will of course continue to try to improve the biosecurity. I know that there is certainly a pretty strong correlation between biosecurity measures of varying severity and the impact. Unfortunately, it has not been true in every case, but there are certainly significant cases, which I have been assured by officials are reported to the local authorities, as it is their responsibility in terms of licensing and other elements like that.

Q161 Dr Hudson: If I can just follow up in terms of control measures, when we had our emergency session on avian influenza, we heard evidence that the vaccine available to us is not particularly suitable to this H5N1 highly pathogenic strain. There is a certain derogation to use it in zoos and that side of things.



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It is really just to ask you where the Government are in working with our international partners, in terms of the vaccine taskforce and developing a suitable vaccine, also bearing in mind that the European Commission has moved a little on this, making vaccination possible, albeit we do not have the right vaccine at the moment. The French are planning to release vaccines to farms later on this year and the Dutch are trialling potential vaccinations. In terms of developing the right vaccine and then when it becomes available, what assurances can you give us that the UK is working collaboratively to try to tackle this moving forward?

Dr Coffey: The taskforce, I believe, met for the first time last month and is already on to its fifth meeting, trying to see what can be done as a preventive measure. The challenge is whether the vaccines will either keep that animal alive or mask the fact that avian flu has been contracted, so more or less whether it is a preventive measure in reality as opposed to controlling the impact of the virus.

We are due to get recommendations this summer to Ministers. I was giving an example. We export quite a lot of our brown meat to the European Union countries, and it is not yet clear that they would still allow elements to come in, where you might still need to check about whether that flock or whatever has actually had avian flu. It is trying to understand whether we can develop a vaccine that is preventive rather than controlling.

Tamara Finkelstein: On that international point, Christine Middlemiss, our Chief Veterinary Officer, has very active conversations internationally to ensure we have that knowledge transfer, understand where everyone is up to and feed that into the work we are doing on the taskforce. That is in addition to the taskforce work. It is very active work.

Q162 **Dr Hudson:** It is active collaboration and working on developing the right vaccine, but also, as you say, Secretary of State, developing the tests to differentiate between naturally infected animals and vaccinated animals. Can I come back to APHA? We have asked you both about the redevelopment of the Weybridge site. We know, according to the NAO, it needs £2.8 billion and the Government have committed £1.2 billion. I know from when we asked you before that Defra is very strongly supportive of refurbishing and redeveloping Weybridge. Can we just ask you again whether that is Defra's position? Are you making a strong case to the Treasury to redevelop the site so that we can protect the UK's biosecurity moving forward?

Dr Coffey: Yes, we are. Work is already underway on the first phase of that project to prepare the site for the main construction stage, once the final scope and funding has been agreed. I know Tamara in particular is active in the assessment, because, understandably, this is a huge amount of money and the business case back and forth is a key next stage of the process. I am having a meeting again later this week.

Dr Hudson: Defra is strongly making the case.

Dr Coffey: Yes, absolutely.



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Tamara Finkelstein: We are putting together the business case very actively. The Treasury is totally alongside us in terms of the conversations we have been having with it. The money that is committed for this spending review is £200 million, but the work we have done on the business case is not just the refurbishment but also the capability that goes with that, which would be the estimate that was in the NAO report of £2.8 billion. We are in conversation as to what money will be available for the programme and the final business case is for 2024, so that is the work that we are doing. We are using the £200 million both to do some of the work we need to do on the site now, to be ready for the programme, and to do the work on seeing how we can get that cost down.

Q163 **Dr Hudson:** You are probably aware that our Committee is going to be visiting the Weybridge site in due course.

Can I now change a little bit? It is still on biosecurity and moving into the idea of border checks and what the status report is. Will full border checks for imports of sanitary and phytosanitary products from the EU into GB be fully implemented before the end of this year? Where are we at with that?

Dr Coffey: We are in the very final stages of agreeing our approach to borders across Government in that regard. I am confident that we are very alert to the risk of biosecurity and, in particular, thinking of the import of food. I am confident that you and the Committee will be satisfied with where we reach in that regard any moment.

I know that there is still a little bit of discussion going on with one of the devolved Administrations, but we have already been in discussions on this with the Food Standards Agency and I am absolutely convinced that we will be ready with the timeline that the Committee was made aware of before in terms of completion of these controls.

Q164 **Dr Hudson:** You are confident in the UK's biosecurity moving forward and that the checks will be in place.

Dr Coffey: Yes, I am.

Q165 **Dr Hudson:** Can I continue on animal health and welfare, talking about movement of animals? Currently we still have puppies being smuggled into the country. We still have heavily pregnant dogs being smuggled into the country to fuel the pet trade. We still have mutilated dogs being imported, having had their ears cropped. We still have pets being stolen. We still have horses being transported illegally to the continent for slaughter. Many of these things can be stopped, mitigated or prevented by the passage of the Kept Animals Bill. Can you please tell us when we will be getting that Bill back?

Dr Coffey: As you know, it is the business managers who control the scheduling of Government Bills in the House and they will make their announcement in the usual way.

Q166 **Dr Hudson:** For your Department, though, this still is a priority Bill that



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you would like to see come forward.

Dr Coffey: Yes, I am very keen that we deliver our manifesto commitments and I am pleased that we have supported other Bills on animal welfare in the manifesto to hopefully get their way through the Lords in the next few weeks and then become law.

Chair: We were very pleased at the way that Defra responded to our call for an independent scientific review of the mass shellfish mortality, which ruled out the two existing theories, but, as Geraint will ask, there is still quite a lot of consternation on the Yorkshire coast as to where we go from here.

Q167 **Geraint Davies:** On that, the conclusion on the balance of probabilities of that committee, many of whose members were working for Defra and, indeed, for the ports, was that, in fact, some sort of unique pathogen that affected crabs and other crustaceans had been responsible for this mass killing. Have you identified this pathogen?

Dr Coffey: No.

Q168 **Geraint Davies:** My understanding is that you rejected calls for further investigation to identify it. Is that correct?

Dr Coffey: I replied to EFRA questions on 7 February. One thing that the panel did conclude significantly and rule out was any issue to do with the pyridine, but it was a novel pathogen. By that stage, it felt like trying to find the holy grail of what it could be. I made the judgment that we would not try to pursue any further research. However, we did say that we would respond to reports of similar mortality events, and Cefas has not received any reports of similar mortality events since the original 2021 incident.

Q169 **Geraint Davies:** The verdict was a probabilistic one, was it not? On the balance of probabilities, they did not think it was pyridine.

Dr Coffey: They highly concluded it and, in effect, when interviewed the panel ruled it out.

Chair: With 99% degree of certainty they ruled out capital dredging. I read the report.

Q170 **Geraint Davies:** We do know that many other sites around the country, the something like 10 freeports, have a history of major industrial work with chemicals like pyridine, which are known to be toxic to crabs there. My understanding is that there is no attempt now to test for pyridine and other toxic chemicals for dredging materials that are being dumped back into the sea in Tyne-Tees, and no plan to test for them in other freeports. Is that correct?

Dr Coffey: The testing regime will be, I assume, undertaken by MMO, but to give you an example, where Ms Duffield may be interested, mortality in landed whelks was reported to Cefas at some point in 2022. The samples received by Cefas arrived frozen, which limited any



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investigation possible, and after the decline in late 2022 my understanding is that landings have started to return to typical levels.

I know in other parts of the north-east there have been drops in catches of prawns, but overall in that area the review has indicated that there has not been a particular change in that regard. There are no obvious particular things to get into, but, as I said at the time, if there are reports of similar crab and crustacean mortality events as was experienced in that 2021 incident, Cefas will be involved pretty much straightaway in trying to determine it.

- Q171 **Geraint Davies:** Do you not think, given the level of crab and other crustacean mortality, there is a precautionary principle case that we should be doing testing of the seabed where we are going to do major dredging next to prospective new freeports? Should we not test in advance whether crabs might be affected, rather than after the event saying, "Oh no, there are another few million crabs dead; we must have another look and it might not be this phantom pathogen we refuse to look for"?

Dr Coffey: Due to some of the changes that have happened in parts of the north-east, Cefas has undertaken sampling and testing for diseases or pathogens. I am particularly thinking of the nephrops area, so the Norway lobster and the Dublin Bay prawns. That work is underway.

- Q172 **Geraint Davies:** We had very saddening testimony from fishermen and women who had multiple generations of fishing in their family and now, because of the devastation of the crab stocks—as you know, crabs and lobsters take five or six years to mature—they are going to have sell up their boats and that is the end of their living forever. Why is it that you have not called for the Government to provide them some level of compensation, even if this is an act of God, as it were, akin to what happened with the foot and mouth disease episode, where farmers were compensated? Are you treating fishermen differently to other people who have had their lives ruined?

Dr Coffey: In terms of foot and mouth, the Government required, as it does on aspects of avian influenza, to kill the animals that were healthy and compensation was paid for that. In this regard, I understand the concerns of the local fishermen, but in that wider area what has been fed back is that we are not seeing a particular change in aspects of revenues. We also have certain funds available, including the seafood fund. I met two of the local MPs just recently and talked about how there might be access to some of that funding to help in terms of reinvestment in kit or other facilities that may be possible, in order to help the fishermen in that area.

- Q173 **Geraint Davies:** In the event that you were correct, namely that this was a novel pathogen, as it is called—a sudden virus of crabs and the like that has basically killed the crab population—what confidence can the local community have that they can over time rebuild that? What confidence have you that that pathogen might not suddenly spread from



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the Tyne-Tees, where it seems to be uniquely infecting things, to go around the whole coast destroying our entire crab and lobster stock? If that is a possibility, why are you not testing for it? It seems completely irresponsible.

Dr Coffey: It is not irresponsible. I have already reported to the Committee that Cefas has not received any reports of similar crab or crustacean mortality events since that original incident. I have already said to the Committee one of the sudden changes in terms of dropping catch of Dublin Bay prawns and Norway lobster means Cefas has undertaken some sampling and is testing for diseases and pathogens, so we are being proactive.

Q174 **Geraint Davies:** I am not quite with this, in the sense that this pathogen allegedly suddenly emerged, killed all these crabs, then disappeared and we have not found it, so it could just happen again anywhere, could it not? It seems a farcical explanation to me, I have to say, but assuming that is the explanation, that implies it could just spontaneously happen again. We do not know what we are looking for and we are not even looking for what we are looking for.

Dr Coffey: We do know what we are looking for.

Q175 **Geraint Davies:** We are not looking, are we?

Dr Coffey: We do know what we are looking for in terms of the similar crab and crustacean mortality events. None has been reported.

Q176 **Geraint Davies:** Finally, shifting the subject very slightly, you used to be the Health Secretary and you probably know that treating somebody who is poorly nourished costs about three times the amount. It costs about £7,500 instead of £2,500 for someone who is nourished, and half the people coming in from care homes are malnourished. Do you think you have a responsibility to ensure a greater level of nourishment, if you like, for the population to save the public purse in the round?

Dr Coffey: We have already covered a lot of what activity the Government have already done.

Geraint Davies: I know that.

Dr Coffey: Health is a devolved matter, so you might want to take up your local things with the Health Minister in Wales.

Q177 **Geraint Davies:** No, I am talking about the one in four people who are in food poverty and the on cost to the health service.

Dr Coffey: I have already given an answer to Mr Byrne.

Q178 **Geraint Davies:** Namely, you are going to do nothing to stop the malnourishment.

Dr Coffey: That is pathetic, Geraint. Grow up.

Geraint Davies: That is the truth, is it not?



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Chair: We are digressing a bit from shellfish.

Geraint Davies: Just wash your hands of it.

Dr Coffey: You are being pathetic about it, Geraint. I have already given comprehensive answers to Mr Byrne about the wide range of activities the Government have undertaken.

Geraint Davies: You have not.

Dr Coffey: It is pathetic.

Geraint Davies: No, it is not pathetic.

Dr Coffey: You are pathetic.

Geraint Davies: One in four people are in food poverty. You are pathetic.

Chair: Order. We shall move on. We have mentioned whelks already, which is an issue in Kent, so Rosie would like to come in.

Q179 **Rosie Duffield:** Thank you very much for mentioning the whelks, because it is really heartening to know that the Department is aware of that. I met with my fishers in Whitstable fisheries about two weeks and they are losing boats on an almost weekly basis because they are landing such drastically smaller catches and, when they do, the huge proportion of the whelks that they are landing are dead. Nothing has improved and they are not getting any answers. They really feel as though no one is listening to them. They have similar dredging going and it just seems like an almighty coincidence. Is there any way that someone from the Department could come out, meet us and just talk about it somewhere in Whitstable?

Dr Coffey: IFCA is the local body. The information I have been given is that landings have started to return to typical levels after what happened.

Q180 **Rosie Duffield:** That is not what they tell me at all. That is not what they told me two weeks ago.

Dr Coffey: I am just saying that is the information that has been provided. It is IFCA that tends to look at aspects of this, but we can see what there is. As I say, the mortality was reported to Cefas and, unfortunately, the samples arrived frozen, which limited any disease investigations. We have not had any further reports from fishermen in that area, but it would be very useful, Ms Duffield, if you wish to send that in and we can follow up.

Rosie Duffield: Yes, I will. Thank you.

Q181 **Chair:** Just in terms of landings on the east coast, there are some good landings in Hartlepool, but they are generally vessels that have gone out further. The area that was affected by the mortality event is still pretty much devoid of crab and lobster, so you need to see that data with a little bit of knowledge about where those fish are coming from.



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Dr Coffey: They are going out about nine miles, whereas before it was about two or three miles.

Chair: The smaller vessels that would normally be closer inshore cannot go that far out. That is the problem they face.

Q182 **Mrs Murray:** Just to clarify something, Secretary of State, if you have dredging, the MMO issues a licence for dredging a certain area and dictates where you can dispose of that dredged material. It also does a lot of testing to ensure that you are not disposing polluted material into a dispersal site. Am I correct?

Dr Coffey: Yes, the MMO does the licensing and, from what I am being informed, there is no evidence to suspend the licences.

Mrs Murray: Thank you. I just wanted to get that on record, because it seems some people are of the opinion that you can dredge a harbour and throw it anywhere in the sea. I just wanted to seek your clarification, having a dispersal site off my own constituency, which was moved. Thank you to Defra for doing that. There are stringent checks.

Dr Coffey: That is right.

Chair: The evidence the Committee got was very clear that there is a difference between capital dredging, which is material that may have been there a long time, and maintenance dredging, which washes in and out of the channel mainly from out at sea. Certainly in the case of the Tees, some of that material was tested and had to be disposed of on land because it was not deemed fit to dispose of at sea. In fact, when I was Shipping Minister part of the Tyne could not be dredged because of the level of heavy metals. It was just not possible to do that.

Q183 **Julian Sturdy:** I just want to touch on species decline, if I can, Secretary of State. What actions and resources are you committing to limit species decline between now and 2023?

Dr Coffey: There are a number of ways we want to improve species. The key thing is how you keep, improve and extend habitats in that regard. We undertake that in different ways. The abundance of breeding wild birds had fallen substantially. Different elements of Natural England, working with the MMO and others, will undertake certain licensing conditions to make sure things like wader birds are protected.

In terms of what we want to do, there are some positive trends. A lot of effort went into trying to have greater protection for bats. That has happened. We have seen a widespread abundance of bats.

In terms of the different aspects we are working on, we have the changes to funding for landowners and farmers that are happening with the environmental land management schemes. There is activity underway on local nature recovery strategies, which will be put in place by councils and local authorities around the country.

We have already put in place the strengthened biodiversity duty, and biodiversity net gain is coming later in the year. We are undertaking a



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number of different activities principally to try to drive the extent of habitat. I am very keen to make sure we get on the front foot in improving the state of our SSSIs as well.

Q184 Julian Sturdy: That all sounds very good, and I completely agree that there is some good stuff there. How do you monitor progress against these targets? How are they being tracked by Government? That is going to be crucial to make sure they are achieving what they set out to do.

As a slight supplementary, are you monitoring whether there are unintended consequences, as I would class them, on other species? You can do a lot for one species and then have unintended consequences on others.

Dr Coffey: The Government have the 25-year environment plan board, which is run at official level. We are still putting in place the environmental improvement plan dashboards. They will be getting underway and building on the work that was already in place for the 25-year environment plan.

We will continue to do the monitoring in different ways. I am keen that we work more substantially with the data we have on how we can track the impacts of the things we are putting in place on the monitoring and evaluation of the success of different payments in order to persuade farmers to do certain farming activities in a slightly different way.

Q185 Julian Sturdy: There is also the COP target, which commits us to a 10-fold reduction in extinction risk by 2050. How is all that going to fit into that?

Dr Coffey: The targets agreed at the Convention on Biological Diversity are global targets. A lot of work is happening not only in the UK but around the world, as we make progress towards the next meeting of CBD, where we will have that assessment or stock-take.

We are already mobilising a number of elements of how we get investment in projects around the world. It cannot and should not all come from state aid, in effect. That is why we are working with other countries to mobilise the 10-point plan for financing biodiversity. We have had a follow-up meeting within two months of the Montreal conclusions. That work is ongoing. There has been work on this at World Bank meetings.

We are using different levers around the world to try to mobilise this, recognising the global goal we are trying to achieve. We are already undertaking the work in this country to achieve the targets we have set on biodiversity, particularly on species. We have to keep monitoring that and make changes where necessary.

Q186 Chair: I am species champion for the sand eel, the small fish most commonly photographed in a puffin's bill. There have been calls to stop fishing for sand eels from organisations like the RSPB. The Scottish salmon farmers are probably not as keen, as it is generally feedstock for that. Can you give us an update on progress in banning that?



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Dr Coffey: We have just launched a consultation on sand eels. We await the responses to that consultation and we hope to make progress later this year.

Q187 **Rosie Duffield:** East Kent has some brilliant species reintroduction programmes. You probably know about the bison and the choughs, but at the NFU conference last month you stated that lynx and wolves would not be reintroduced into England. The Species Reintroductions Taskforce and Natural England told us a few weeks ago that you did not consult them prior to this announcement. Why not? What evidence did you base your decision on? Does that mean that you are undermining the purpose of the Species Reintroductions Taskforce before it even gets going?

Dr Coffey: My predecessor but one established this taskforce. It met for the first time last month. Some of this is about getting evidence and views, and providing advice. Plenty of successful reintroductions are already underway. In particular, there seems to be a lot more focus on animals, on fauna rather than flora, but I know we are trying to make sure, building on what I said to Mr Sturdy, we are focusing on improving the habitats we have.

Too often we have seen a situation where groups of people are keen to reintroduce lynx, wolves and others—I know there have been applications for lynx in the past—although the past evidence has shown that is not going to be helpful. We need to give some confidence to farmers that we are not going to be reintroducing certain kinds of animals in the near future.

There is plenty for the Species Reintroductions Taskforce to do. As Andy Clements will talk about, it is not always about the reintroduction of a species to the country. It can often be about moving location. That has been done successfully with quite a lot of raptor birds, so it is about trying to translocate them as well.

Q188 **Rosie Duffield:** Does that mean you are going to consult closely with the taskforce in future? They seem to think they have not been consulted.

Dr Coffey: I did not need to feel the need to get advice from them on that particular issue.

Q189 **Chair:** The Committee is doing a report on species reintroduction, which I am sure you will find interesting.

Dr Coffey: Minister Harrison is coming to give evidence on that.

Q190 **Chair:** Yes. Indeed, we recently returned from Bavaria, where they now have 25,000 beavers. What surprised me was the budget they needed for compensation to farmers and engineering works to protect vital waterways and drainage channels, etc. I hope that will be fed in.

Dr Coffey: We have been very careful with the beavers that have been allowed to come into the country. In the case of the Bavarian beaver, there is a risk around a certain disease it can carry, which, if transmitted to humans, can have a serious impact. That is why the introductions so



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far are supposed to have been principally beavers from Scotland or Norway. That is an important element of consideration in relation to the types of species being brought into the country.

Q191 **Barry Gardiner:** Secretary of State, you will be aware that last year we had before us from the Global Environment Facility Carlos Manuel Rodriguez, the CEO, and Gustavo Fonseca. Just to put it on the record, Gustavo has sadly passed away since then. We should acknowledge his enormous contribution over many years to the GEF and the global biodiversity fund.

Could you outline for us the Government's delivery plan to make sure the UK's domestic and international policies on biodiversity and the funding for it are aligned with those of the GEF?

Dr Coffey: The GEF is the financial mechanism for CBD, as you will be aware, as well as some other conventions. In our replenishment last year, which we significantly increased, we made sure—because it is also responsible for UNFCCC—there was a substantial increase in biodiversity funding.

Barry Gardiner: Indeed you did, and that was very welcome.

Dr Coffey: Within Government, the Foreign Office takes the lead on the GEF relationship, but it takes advice from Defra on that. One of the things I have been working through, which was agreed in Montreal, is an extra financial mechanism.

There is a strong belief, which was agreed, that that is best done through the auspices of GEF. That is why Carlos Manuel was at our summit in Lancaster House.

Q192 **Barry Gardiner:** I want to come on to that, but my question at this stage was about the way in which the Government are ensuring that our domestic and international policies are aligned and that the funding is aligned with those policies when it comes to the GEF.

Dr Coffey: When it comes to the global targets, you will see how some countries will do more to achieve some of those targets and others will do less. It may be that there are certain parts of the world where achieving the species challenge will be more straightforward for them to do.

We have put into domestic law what we are doing to halt the decline of species here. The emphasis that is given to each will vary in different parts of the world. Coming together in Turkey at the next CBD COP, having that stock-take and doing the preparation for that will get that aligned vision across the world.

In terms of our domestic approach, we have already put in place elements in the Environment Act, and we will continue to use our auspices and work with overseas territories through Darwin Plus and the other initiatives we undertake and do through international aid, the



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collaboration we naturally extend in a variety of coalitions as we work towards other treaties, and what we do with our Commonwealth family.

- Q193 **Barry Gardiner:** You will be aware that, following on from COP 15 and the establishment of the global biodiversity fund, there are certain issues that have not sat easily with all member countries of the GEF. There has been a particular concern that there has not been enough funding from the GEF going through to African nations. The bulk of the funding has been to China, Brazil, Indonesia, India and Mexico.

Could you tell us about the representations we make on the GEF council as to how we regard what seems to be an imbalance in the funding, given the nature of the environmental challenge that exists on the African continent?

Dr Coffey: This is one of the reasons why it was agreed to establish a fund at Montreal as part of the arrangements, in order to get the agreement of countries from around the world to seal the deal. We are still in the process of establishing that framework fund. My understanding is that in June the GEF council will consider that element and then the assembly later in the summer will follow up on that.

The work is still ongoing. That is why we have continued to have that meeting in Lancaster House, which a number of Ministers from African nations attend. We will continue to try to convene and develop solutions, in particular with the people who have supported the 10-point plan on biodiversity financing.

Another element of making sure money will be secured, particularly through the private sector, is the digital sequencing information. Given that the officials led those negotiations, I am very keen that we continue that work, and we will continue to do so.

- Q194 **Barry Gardiner:** I am hugely supportive of the work our officials carried out in Montreal. They did a superb job in ensuring that in Montreal we got the deal we wanted globally. I hope I can take from what you have said that, prior to the GEF council in the summer, the UK position will be to look very seriously at addressing what appears to have been an imbalance in GEF funding previously, not only so that African nations feel completely included in part of the ongoing work, but so that the challenges that so dramatically face African nations are met.

Dr Coffey: That is a fair reflection of the outcomes the UK wants to make sure happen through GEF. GEF is probably one of the better UN organisations for getting money out to where it is needed.

Barry Gardiner: I would heartily endorse that.

Dr Coffey: It could still do a lot better.

- Q195 **Barry Gardiner:** I hope the Committee will also endorse that in its report. I am glad you said that, Secretary of State. Thank you.

What is the grade of the civil servant who represents the UK on the GEF



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council?

Dr Coffey: I do not know the answer to that.

Tamara Finkelstein: The Foreign Office represents us on the GEF council. I do not know the level.

Q196 **Barry Gardiner:** Perhaps you could write to the Committee. Given what the Secretary of State has just said about the importance of the GEF as an international funding mechanism for not only the CBD, but in fact all the environmental conventions, it is appropriate that we are represented on that council by an appropriate grade of civil servant.

Tamara Finkelstein: I do not know whether grade is as important as knowledge and experience.

Barry Gardiner: As long as we continue to get the results—

Tamara Finkelstein: Yes, the right outcomes. I should say we put a lot of effort into our work with the Foreign Office to ensure that biodiversity issues, marine plastic and so on are really well represented. We commit significant resource and expertise.

Q197 **Barry Gardiner:** Please do not take the question I have asked as in any way indicating any disrespect for the civil servant who is currently in post. I am trying to suggest that sometimes the grade of the civil servant we put forward to an international organisation indicates to that organisation whether we are treating it with the appropriate seriousness.

Dr Coffey: It is funny that you say that. Quite often I have been at things with officials, particularly in my previous time in Defra, who call themselves a deputy director because that is their grade in the civil service. It used to be a grade 5. I always encourage them to remove the phrase “deputy director”. If they are in charge of that area, they are in charge. I proactively encourage that. Otherwise it looks like we are only sending the deputy, even though the deputy director level is in charge of that area.

Q198 **Barry Gardiner:** Perhaps you could elaborate on what was agreed at the London meeting, looking at the high ambition of the alliance around financing. You hosted that in February. Just say to the Committee what you see as being the next steps and what milestones you have set in place to achieve them.

Dr Coffey: That was a gathering two months after, which brought together people, thinking through how we could take forward a variety of ideas. It is fair to say that the conveners of each group achieved different outcomes. The clear outcome from the finance aspect, which is an action that is being delivered, to my knowledge, was to have those meetings alongside—I do not want to call it a fringe agenda, but not as part of a formal meeting of the World Bank—and to use those forums to generate the actions there. I have not had a report back, because the World Bank meetings have only just happened, so I do not know the latest from there.



Q199 **Barry Gardiner:** I understand that there were, essentially, four strands, so perhaps the Permanent Secretary could outline the steps in terms of the nature of finance packages, payment for ecosystem services, use of genetic information from plants and animals, and the sustainable food systems.

Tamara Finkelstein: Those were the groups and there are follow-up meetings. It formed some relationships and clarity about who would like to take some of that forward at that event, and agreements to meetings that are happening in only a few weeks or shortly on those areas. That was the progress and there is further progress planned.

Dr Coffey: It was not a re-creation of CBD. It was bringing together actors, whether Governments or different sorts of financial institutions, that could help us drive forward how we bring in more financial businesses, for example, and the pharmaceutical or other science bodies that could do that. It was trying to bring out the best people who can then take forward that relationship, and there will then be a more formal aspect of the process that we are doing, working alongside GEF in establishing these biodiversity framework funds. Carlos Manuel was in London and we will continue to try to make sure that, where there are different elements and a coalition of not just the willing but the “can do”, we can make this happen.

Chair: You will have worked out that Barry is our resident GEF expert and enthusiast on the Committee.

Q200 **Mrs Murray:** I will now turn—and no surprise here, Secretary of State—to fisheries and refer to the document that was drawn up for the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations and the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation in 2022, called *Spatial Squeeze in Fisheries*.

I know that it is not just your Department, but, if you could answer in terms of your Department’s views, are you concerned that the fishing industry is being affected by spatial squeeze? We see so many people now competing for our seabed and our sea areas. Do you believe that this could affect the fishing industry?

Dr Coffey: I hear and understand the concern. I have this in my own constituency, where the interaction with the development of wind farms has led to uncertainty in that regard, so I am conscious of how this can worry people in terms of their traditional fishing grounds.

With the things that we have done through the highly protected marine areas, we have gone ahead for consultation on only three, but I fully expect them to be deployed. We took into account some of the socioeconomic factors, including the impact on local fishing that there could be, when considering where there could be, in effect, no-take zones.

One thing that we have tried to do consistently is to develop—and we now have it in place—a full set of marine plans in England, which should help guide the decision making in terms of the use of that marine area. I know that this is over a decade ago now, but, in terms of my



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expectations around the renewables policy statement, it did require offshore wind developers to take account of the species and similar. Indeed, the Planning Inspectorate is expected to place significant weight where there would be impacts on sustainable fisheries or activity at those grounds.

There is a cross-Government board, which includes my Department and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, in terms of this prioritisation programme, which, in certain processes, is looking at models and scenarios, mapping future demands, working with the Crown Estate and the North Sea Transition Authority—there are a number of organisations involved—and engaging with the fishing industry itself, to see what we can do. It is fair to say that the Government are alert to that and will continue to try to develop that, especially recognising the extent of offshore wind that we anticipate in the next decade or so.

Q201 Mrs Murray: Where should the balance lie between the various British interests in the sea, particularly as we saw, when we left the European Union, a strong intention and emphasis on rebuilding our fishing industry? There is pressure on being more widely focused on home produced food, and yet we are also hearing from other Government Departments that we are perhaps looking more at offshore floating wind. We are seeing the seabed being used for cables. What I am asking you is whether you are prepared to fight the fishermen's corner from Defra.

Dr Coffey: Absolutely, yes, and that is why, in terms of this cross-Government board, we are fully represented in looking at the spatial prioritisation. We shared some analysis publicly last week, which indicated that, having left the European Union, due to what has happened in terms of quotas and similar, there is an opportunity open to our fishermen for an estimated £100 million more fishing value than if we had stayed in the European Union.

The fisheries and seafood scheme has grants of up to £6 million annually overall in a variety of ways, alongside the seafood fund, which looks at a combination of skills and training or infrastructure that could be helpful to the domestic fishing industry. Defra will continue to press the case domestically, but also in our negotiations, making sure that there is plenty of fish for consumption by UK residents and to be fished by UK fishers.

Mrs Murray: They also have to have somewhere to go to use their boats to fish. That is what I was trying to emphasise there.

Dr Coffey: Indeed, yes.

Q202 Mrs Murray: Has this cross-Government marine spatial prioritisation programme work set a plan and a map for the future?

Dr Coffey: I have been informed that, in the next few months, focusing on a variety of data and looking at current and future demands, this is where bringing organisations together, whether it is the North Sea Transition Authority, the Crown Estate, fishermen or similar, is an



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important part of trying to work that through. It is not a board that Ministers usually attend, but decisions that come out of it will require collective agreement. It is fair to say that we are still in reasonably early stages on aspects of that.

Q203 Mrs Murray: Will fishing industry representatives be consulted for their knowledge of where they would normally use their boats, tow their nets or lay their pots?

Dr Coffey: I do not know whether Tamara wants to add anything here, but my expectation is that officials would be informed, thinking through our IFCAs but also the wider organisations that we have in that regard.

Mrs Murray: IFCAs have a responsibility only out to six miles, and then between six and 12 miles.

Dr Coffey: I am just saying that, going beyond that, there are other organisations that are involved. You will also be aware of the international conventions and arrangements that we get into in trying to negotiate access in different ways.

Tamara Finkelstein: Those involved in the board are our teams, which are very actively engaged with organisations that can provide that information. It will be very data and evidence-based, so they will ensure that they have the data and the evidence. You can feel confident that it is people who have that knowledge, those connections and those relationships, and who will use the right data and evidence.

Q204 Mrs Murray: If I give you an example, I mentioned earlier the dispersal site in my constituency that was moved, because it was next to an MPA. The fishermen were then consulted, because they towed their nets in the area where it had been moved to. When there was a dialogue between the two sectors, it was decided that the dispersal would take place in a certain area of the dispersal site, so as to enable the fishermen not to be as inconvenienced as they could well have been. Is it intended for that sort of collaboration to happen, so that they can have real input into any areas that are restricted for other use?

Dr Coffey: The fisheries team is proactive in that regard. I am conscious that, for example, looking at the highly protected marine areas, we want to perhaps revisit some of the criteria, recognising the social and economic elements that came out of our consideration of the first five sites. That is where I hope the engagement between our Department's officials and the industry is very active. Mrs Murray, you are, of course, very active in lobbying Ministers on behalf of the fishing industry, and long may that continue.

Q205 Chair: This is our last scheduled question. I would like to ask about plastic waste. We generate large amounts of plastic waste, and a lot of people were surprised, when they read our recent report, that 70% of the plastic waste we generate in this country is exported, the majority of which goes to OECD countries. That includes places like Turkey, where we were concerned that the high environmental standards that we would



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expect in terms of it being recycled, reused or disposed of were not being met.

We called for a ban on the export of plastic waste by 2027. Defra chose to reject that ban completely and not even to come up with a less ambitious timescale. Have you had to look at that again? Should we look again at whether we should be exporting our plastic waste out of sight, out of mind, almost?

Dr Coffey: There is a legitimate role for exports in terms of the management of UK waste plastics, because it is an internationally traded commodity. There is an element here of circular economy. Quite a lot of products are made from it, so it is about reusing aspects of plastic. We did say that we would commit to banning the export to non-OECD countries, and we will consult this year on the timelines in which we are going to undertake that. That will, hopefully, provide industry the confidence to invest in domestic infrastructure, but there are still investigations that are possible where things are not being handled appropriately, even within OECD countries. That is for the Environment Agency to investigate, which it often has.

Q206 **Chair:** Are we not missing an opportunity here for the UK to become a world leader in the way that we deal with waste, to ensure that we have the benefits of this raw material, which, in fact, it is, and not just to export it to other countries and let them deal with that problem because their environmental standards are not as good or their labour is cheaper?

Dr Coffey: There is a market for plastic waste to be used in a number of products. We are already taking action through different environmental approaches, including extended producer responsibility and the tax on plastic in products. There is already a lot that we are doing to be leaders in this regard, and I am comfortable with the approach that we have taken.

Q207 **Chair:** Turning to the deposit return scheme—DRS—the Scottish Government are proposing to introduce a DRS for beverage containers. Do you support that and can you see that there might be problems if England is not moving at the same pace?

Dr Coffey: The Scottish Government have a different policy. I will wait to see whether the new First Minister wishes to continue with the same policy and proposal of that scheme in Scotland. I am pleased that England, Northern Ireland and Wales are certainly moving in step. Wales wants to do extra on glass, and it thinks there is a way that it can achieve that.

I still think that there is an opportunity for a GB/UK-wide scheme. We are going through the request that was made, but there is also a balance here in terms of understanding from the new First Minister whether that is still the policy that they wish to do and whether they want to continue with that request for exemption from the UK internal market.

Q208 **Chair:** Can you see complexities where, for example, Glasgow runs short of Coca-Cola but cannot ship stuff up from England because it does not



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have the right barcode, or even for people living on the border, who may well pay the deposit and then find that they cannot recover it at their local authority or reverse vending machine—whatever way they are going to return them?

Dr Coffey: Consumers and industry would love a UK-wide scheme, or at least a GB-wide scheme, and that is still open to the Scottish Government to join, if they wish to. Ultimately, they have been elected with a particular kind of DRS in their manifesto, but I am conscious that the Scottish Government will have to continue to consider very carefully the concerns people have raised on the price of goods and, indeed, the supply of goods in Scotland. For what it is worth, the best outcome would be if we could have the one scheme, but, so far, the Scottish Government have not chosen to do that.

Q209 **Chair:** Turning to extended producer responsibility, which is a couple years behind schedule, representations that I received from the Food and Drink Federation indicate that the way that local authorities collect and process waste may not be at the scale or at the high level of technology needed to do that. What are your thoughts in terms of how we will deliver that? Local authorities may well be involved in collecting waste, but should we be looking at more capital-intensive and larger sites, rather than the current situation with local authorities?

Dr Coffey: I met the Food and Drink Federation and some of its members last week to talk through what we could do to progress with the management organisation that is going to be put in place and to bring in their thinking. Indeed, in terms of governance, I am open to them being on the board, so that we can drive the best outcomes. We are restricted in that it needs to be a public body on the basis of designation of status by the Office for National Statistics and agreement with the Treasury, but I want to make it as successful as possible. I am aware and conscious of the concerns that industry has, and I hope that we can move forward and work together to make it a good outcome.

Q210 **Chair:** In terms of the packaging tax, the way to avoid paying it is to incorporate high levels of recycled plastic. Are we not going to have to bring it all the way back from Turkey, after it has been recycled there, and would it not be better doing it on our own doorstep, at least from a carbon footprint point of view?

Dr Coffey: As I indicated earlier, there is a market for these products and, as we start to see a change in the formulation, given that the tax has only just started to come into effect, you will see that producers are adjusting their products accordingly.

Chair: We have reached the end of our scheduled questions. If you would be so kind as to indulge us, I have a couple of short questions from colleagues. I hope that it will be quickfire questions and answers.

Q211 **Robbie Moore:** Secretary of State, you made a point about the ban that the Committee called for on transferring plastic. I just wanted to clarify the point that you were making, which is that there is a difference



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between exporting unprocessed plastic and exporting processed plastic, because of processed plastic having a commodity value that is attached to it.

Dr Coffey: There is still a market in stuff that has not been processed, because other countries may believe that they are going to provide a more cost-effective way of delivering that.

Q212 **Robbie Moore:** Are the Government looking at potentially bringing in a ban on unprocessed plastic as opposed to processed plastic being exported?

Dr Coffey: I do not think that we are intending to bring in a ban for non-OECD countries, but not within the OECD.

Chair: Barry has a quick one on access.

Dr Coffey: What kind of access?

Chair: He just wrote "access" on the piece of paper that he passed to me.

Q213 **Barry Gardiner:** I welcome the fact that, in the 25-year environment plan, you committed that you wanted the natural environment to be enjoyed, used by and cared for by everybody. In the EIP, there was a pledge that people should be within 15 minutes' access to the countryside and so on.

Last week, as I understand it, you said that the Government would no longer honour the commitment that had been made, and that the claims for historic paths should not now be limited to 2026 but put back to 2031. The pledge was that there would be that extra period in which people could say, "There was a historic right here and we want to keep that". Walkers and ramblers across the country are deeply concerned that there has not been the ability, the time and certainly the publicity that has enabled people to get in all those historic paths before the deadline in 2026.

Dr Coffey: The 2000 Act brought in that 2026 deadline.

Barry Gardiner: Then you said you were going to revoke it and put it to 2031. That was the commitment that was made.

Dr Coffey: Hold on. My successor before one had agreed potentially to revoke it entirely, so there would not be a closing date. I do not think that that was necessarily the right way to tackle this issue. I am the person who said that we will not go ahead with 2026, but that we will put an end date and take advantage of the power to make it 2031. We need to introduce a regulation to do that, but my intention is, instead of getting rid of it entirely, to make it 2031.

Q214 **Barry Gardiner:** So people will still be able to claim for historic rights up until 2031.

Dr Coffey: That is my intention when we introduce the regulation.



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Q215 **Barry Gardiner:** The Government are proposing amendments to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill to set back the review of access maps to that 2031 timeframe and to make that optional. That is not going to help in the meantime, is it?

Dr Coffey: It is being done in partnership for the alignment of the 2031 date, but the opportunity is still there for people to submit. My understanding of the legislation is that the authority does not need to have decreed. It is the submission that needs to happen by a certain timeline. Councils and authorities then still have the opportunity to go through and review. We are conscious about what happened with Covid and the pressures on local authorities, but it is about bringing this into one particular holistic approach. Let us just add five more years. That is what the powers from the 2000 Act allow me to do, so I am taking advantage of that.

Q216 **Barry Gardiner:** In terms of the access provision in ELMS, the promise was that the environmental land management scheme would provide funding for new and improved access, but the prospectus proposes only to explore how we could pay for permissive access. That seems to be a potentially material change.

Dr Coffey: The key thing that we are focused on is achieving what we are going to do about aspects of species or of carbon. Access is an important part of that, but there are higher priorities in how we need to make sure that taxpayers' money is used.

Q217 **Barry Gardiner:** I totally accept that there will need to be a prioritisation, whatever that may be, but I just wanted to be clear that the original promise that funding would be provided is a defeasible statement, in effect, and will depend on what your other priorities are and, presumably, the funding that is available.

Dr Coffey: I know that there is still some work to consider that. I have just had to prioritise what we are developing within the Department in terms of the different standards and the opening up, and I have had to focus that on what we are trying to achieve for nature. We have a very specific commitment about extending access, and there is already some work underway, a lot of it led by Natural England in particular, about access. I am very conscious of what I want to happen in terms of people with disabilities being able to access. There is also a huge role for things like canals. It is not just about the countryside.

At the same time, we are also intending to publish again or update the countryside access code, because we need to make sure that, as people are enjoying nature, unintended consequences are not happening in that regard.

Q218 **Barry Gardiner:** You and I are totally at one on that. My focus is simply to establish that the commitment for new and improved funding for access through ELMS has now been downgraded to a wish rather than necessarily a commitment.



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Dr Coffey: There is still commitment involved. I just have to prioritise what we are developing.

Q219 **Chair:** In terms of rights of way, landowners would like some degree of certainty. Certainly in my village, a right of way has been established across somebody's garden, which has been quite contentious. A degree of certainty at some point in the future would help people if they are selling a property where there is a question mark over a right of way. If there is no certainty attached to that right of way, it can be a real problem, not just for farmers and estate owners, but for people with homes and gardens where the right of way might be attempted to be re-established.

Dr Coffey: That is why I made the decision not to change the 2000 Act, but to recognise the timing and the different pressures people have had. This weekend, I was doing a walk along the Orwell in Suffolk, and I was quite disappointed with some of the lack of signage or ineffective signage.

We need to continue to see what we can do to help with that. There is an opportunity with the local nature recovery strategies coming up and the whole active travel element of what we are trying to do through DfT as well. We have thousands of miles of public footpaths. Once we complete the coastal footpath, I am led to believe that that will be the longest coastal footpath in the world that is open to the public. I am very keen to do that, but certainty will help.

Even then, dare I say it, I have been criticised off record, as it were, by people for extending it to 2031, but it is a sensible approach, recognising where we are and what other things have been prioritised in the last few years in dealing with Covid and other matters.

Chair: Rosie wants to ask about water quality, but can we do that in three minutes? Let us see if we can.

Q220 **Rosie Duffield:** Yes, less than three minutes. This is my favourite subject. Is the current maximum penalty that the Environment Agency issues to water and sewage companies of £250,000 appropriate, especially given that, in October 2022, your predecessor called for the maximum to increase a thousandfold to £250 million? Given the recent performances of water and sewage companies, what do you think the maximum should be?

Dr Coffey: You will see my thoughts—indeed, not just mine, but those of the Government—fairly soon when I hope we can publish a consultation on what it will be.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Secretary of State, you have been very generous with your time and very expansive in your answers. You have said you will write to us only once, where it is a Foreign Office thing.

Dr Coffey: I know that, early on in the session, Tamara conceded at least one more writing to people.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed and best wishes in your endeavours



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at Defra.