

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Public sector procurement of food, HC 469

Tuesday 1 December 2020

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Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Ian Byrne; Dave Doogan; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Julian Sturdy; Derek Thomas.

Questions 45 - 96

Witnesses

[I](#): Andy Jeffery, Owner, Farrington's; and Greg Parsons, Co-Founder, South West Food Hub.

[II](#): Howard Stevenson, Supply Chain Manager, Yorkshire Purchasing Organisation; Jason Swettenham, Head of PSPI, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service; and Kirstin Morris, Category Development Lead, NHS Supply Chain.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Andy Jeffery and Greg Parsons.

Q45 **Chair:** Welcome to EFRA's inquiry on public procurement. We have two panels this afternoon. Our first panel is Andy Jeffery from Farrington's farm and Greg Parsons from South West Food Hub. Would you like to introduce yourselves for the record, please? We will then carry on and ask questions.

Andy Jeffery: I am Andy Jeffery from Farrington's farm shop near Bristol. We are growers of organic vegetables and we have other activities on the farm here.

Greg Parsons: Good afternoon. I am Greg Parsons from South West Food Hub. We are working with the Crown Commercial Service to deliver a pilot for the future food framework in the south-west.

Q46 **Chair:** Thank you very much. It is good to have both you gentlemen with us this afternoon. I shall start off with the first question. What is the most significant barrier facing small and medium-sized enterprises that want to supply food to the public sector? I will bring in Greg first, and then you can give us your ideas on the sharp end, Andy.

Greg Parsons: For starters, the pure paperwork that is required to get close to supplying into the public sector is quite a challenge for an SME. Andy will probably delve more into those levels but, at a higher level, the biggest challenge is that public sector supply has to be extremely resilient. It is understandable that the tier-1s assume massive responsibility for that. The trouble is that the tier-1s are the gatekeepers, almost, of that supply. It is extremely difficult for many SMEs to get access to that supply chain through the tier-1s. The public sector buys a significant amount of product for its institutions. Therefore, the SMEs are, in many cases, not able to supply that volume on their own, which is why we are working on an aggregated supply chain that helps to open up more channels for SMEs.

Other barriers can be meeting the required Government buying standards, but those are surmountable. In the food chain today, most producers of all sizes have to adhere to certain safety and accreditation standards. Those would be the key challenges. The main one from my perspective would be that it is fairly much wrapped up by the tier-1 suppliers.

Q47 **Chair:** What is your role in this as the hub?

Greg Parsons: We are a community interest company. We have been aware of the objective of Government since 2014 in *A Plan For Public Procurement* to open more opportunity for small and medium-sized enterprises. Of late, we have witnessed the small-scale pilot of a dynamic food procurement system. We could see a lot of good intention in *A Plan For Public Procurement* back in 2014, but there did not seem to be a clear method for delivery. As I said just now, in the public sector, where you are feeding, in many cases, vulnerable people, a resilient supply chain is key. You cannot afford to stop and start something new. Continuity is key. Up



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until the technology development through the dynamic food purchasing system, there has not been the technology to facilitate many small and medium-sized producers coming through a supply chain to public sector securely.

Q48 Chair: We will talk a little more about the pilot in a minute. Andy, what is your situation with running your business and your farm shop, and producing food? How do you find it? Can you get into the public sector contracts?

Andy Jeffery: It is almost impossible for someone like us, I am afraid. First, there is the form filling. Exhibit A is a 19-page application form for the one that we undertook, which was for Bath and North East Somerset. I am told that 19 pages is very, very light. It included questions that I did not have a clue how to answer. I can quote one if you want, but it was a horrendous piece of work for me as a farmer. I went to university; I have a degree. I had some knowledge of paperwork. Some farmers do not. For a lot of farmers, it would be a horrific thing to enter. Throughout that, on a number of occasions, I needed my hand holding on it by the agents who were doing it locally.

Secondly, we only grow organic vegetables. We grow about 30 varieties of vegetables. For us to try to submit a tender for public supply, they want more than 30 types of vegetables. They want year-round supply, which we could not do because we are seasonal. We had limited supplies of each of those vegetables so we could not undertake to supply the whole thing. For an individual farmer to try to supply a public contract is almost impossible in those circumstances.

Added to that, the contracts only come up once in a blue moon. Well, let us say once every three, four, five years or something. Farmers just are not aware of when they are coming up. Unless they get alerted to it, they have no hope of knowing when they are up for tender and are therefore unable to do it.

There is a little thing that we would have. We have just one little van to deliver our vegetables to various local customers. If we had to deliver lots and lots of pallets at one time with that van, we might have a problem with it but that is a relatively small issue.

Q49 Chair: I suppose, Andy, if you are to be able to take part in a contract, it is about how we bring several farmers together to deliver the amount of produce. Then, when you have to buy in various aspects at different times of the year, that has to be fitted into the contract. I imagine that is what the hub is about as well. Did you have contact with the South West Food Hub?

Andy Jeffery: My personal experience is the fact that we started before any of this—the dynamic food procurement, the food hub or anything like that—back in 2008 with a pilot project that the Soil Association was involved in, supplying schools with organic vegetables to try to get them



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eating healthily. We were part of that and supplied vegetables. We delivered vegetables to individual schools in the area. Not very many schools took part in it, but a few did and we took part.

We did that for about three or four years. There was then a period when we were not involved. That was 2008 to 2011. In 2013 or maybe 2014, the dynamic food procurement issue started taking off and we started getting involved then. Our involvement was from quite an early stage. We found that schools did want our produce but not in very great quantities.

The amazing thing that I found was in that interim period between the Soil Association involvement and the dynamic food procurement. There was a meeting where Equilibrium Markets, the agents who were helping this dynamic food procurement, invited wholesalers and farmers. We were able to supply our organic potatoes at £8 a bag. In discussions, I discovered that one of the wholesalers was supplying schools with organic potatoes, the same product, and charging £25 a bag. I thought, "Wow, there is a huge opportunity here for farmers to supply direct." I was astonished at the margin the wholesalers were making on it.

Chair: We will talk a bit more about it in a minute, but there is a way to put this together where those buying the food could save money and get a really good product. Hopefully, perhaps the farmers get a little more for it. Without starting a war between wholesalers and farmers, we can all gain from this if we can do it the right way. We will park that question there because we will drill down a bit more on this.

Q50 Mrs Murray: Andy, for local suppliers, what were the advantages and disadvantages of the procurement pilot run by Bath and North East Somerset Council?

Andy Jeffery: The only disadvantages were the paperwork and red tape involved. You had to do everything properly. All our customers just ring us up or text us with their order each week and we deliver it, whereas the pre-supply requirements for Bath and North East Somerset were quite stringent.

There were lots of advantages because we were supplying the public sector. We knew we were going to get paid. There was no question of them going bankrupt, not paying us on time or whatever, whereas that is a nightmare for us supplying small businesses. Any of them can go bankrupt at any moment.

The volumes we were experiencing were not outrageous. We just had about 60 schools to supply and the volumes were not that big. We could easily fit it in with the daily work that we had. The other advantage was that the agents, Fresh Range, collected the produce from us. We had no problem in getting it to the market.

I am trying to think of any more advantages or disadvantages. No, there were not really. On the quality aspects, what we produced was acceptable throughout. I do not think we were told once to take something back



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because it was not of an acceptable standard. There were no problems really.

Q51 Mrs Murray: Greg, how could the Government make a success of the future food framework pilot in the south-west?

Greg Parsons: First and foremost, we need to get it going. This has been talked about for a long time. Andy will be aware that there is a board, the Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board. We have been established since 2015. I sit on that board. We have been excited about bringing things to life.

We had hoped in 2020 that the actual platform would be live for the pilot in the south-west. Obviously the circumstances this year were unpredictable. Because of what has happened with Covid, the CCS team being redeployed and key members of that team moving departments, that is now lagging. We thought it was in danger of slipping into 2021 and it is looking in danger of slipping further than that, which would be, quite frankly, disastrous because, as Andy alluded to, we have a pilot that has been successful. We have a hell of a lot of challenge coming to the food and agri sectors over the ensuing months and years. There has never been a more perfect time for something like this to be put into place.

Remember that the south-west is only a pilot. We are doing all we can to prepare the region to embrace it, to get suppliers and buyers ready to engage as soon as it is live. As soon as the pilot is proven and modified, it can roll nationally. We hope that such a way of buying could be applied to the private sector, too. Back to answer your question, what we need is some acceleration. CCS needs to be correctly funded and resourced, and with a real spring in its step, to get this to life as soon as possible.

Q52 Chair: Greg, what has been your experience with the pilot of food being procured locally by small and medium-sized businesses? Has this cost extra money or has it saved money? What has it been financially?

Greg Parsons: In the pilot that was running in Bath and North East Somerset, there was a saving. The saving was largely driven by a reduction in food miles, which, of course, reduces the carbon footprint as well.

There is significant caution in the assumption that local food would always be more expensive. Andy referred earlier to the bag of spuds at £8 versus £25. The dynamic food procurement system and the future food framework would put into place a totally transparent supply chain whereby there is no one product weighted versus another one unweighted and below cost. Suppliers can choose at what price point they would like to pitch it versus the quality and the specification of the product they are supplying.

The short answer is that there was a cost saving in the BANES pilot. In what would be an extremely scaled-up pilot, part of the challenge to the pilot is to make sure that there is not an additional cost to the public sector for introducing this platform.



Q53 Chair: This is really interesting because, very often, Government and those procuring the food are inclined to think that procuring local food is going to cost more. This is what I am really interested in. Be it a school, a council or whatever you are supplying, is supplying through a wholesaler or a larger supplier a more viable option than supplying public bodies directly? Is this what the food hub could do in putting people together? What is the situation?

Greg Parsons: Very briefly, if I may, because this will probably answer your question, the way in which the platform will work is that there will be minimum criteria, which could be the Government buying standards combined with the balanced scorecard. That is under review with Defra at the moment. There will be a set of standards that need to be reached in order to enter the platform versus the specification of the product. We should remember that it is not that the specification is going to be impossibly difficult to achieve. There need to be specifications according to the different public sectors and what they need to buy.

Let us take, in my view, the worst-case scenario: if a buyer wants to buy according to cost, they can still do that. At the other end, if they want to add some value by buying at a higher standard or buying more empathetic to animal welfare, et cetera, they can choose to do that as well. On one end, you have the suppliers able to enter the platform after reaching the required standards. At the other end, you have the buyer and the anchor institutions that enter the platform to procure their products.

The key link-up is that, rather than it be going through a wholesale channel, logistics providers throughout the regions will facilitate the collection, as Andy pointed out, the consolidation and the distribution of the products. That supplier will be paid for logistics, but they will not be trading that product. The price will be agreed with the producer. It will be the price from the producer plus the logistics charge for delivery to the anchor institution.

Q54 Chair: I then go back to Andy. With this platform, do you think you will be able to access it and get your potatoes or whatever your 29 other vegetables might be into the system?

Andy Jeffery: Of course, we have done it already. That was what the trial was about. It has worked. Farmers always worry about the margin that the wholesaler is going to make. If the farmer knows that the money the school is paying is going directly to the farmer, goodness, he is going to have no complaints at all. He knows that what he is quoting is what he will get paid. That is half the battle, in my book.

Q55 Chair: It could help the farmer or the business directly supplying the food, and then save some money as well. Hopefully, the school gets good, healthy food directly from the farm and there is a bit of a saving to be had, and perhaps a bit of mark-up or help with the farmer's price. We might be able to tick all the boxes. It is quite exciting, really. We wish you well with that.



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If the Government buying standards were mandatory across the whole public sector with compliance monitored, what impact would this have on suppliers?

Andy Jeffery: I suppose it is to what standards the Government are expecting things to be grown. We have a whole host of farm assurance standards that are available to farmers at the moment. They can sign up for whichever they like or whichever their customers demand. The base level is red tractor but you have things like the RSPCA standards. You have the organic standards, to which we comply. There is something called SALSA, which is to do with local food suppliers. There is Freedom Food. There is LEAF. There are all sorts.

Each of them has a cost. For instance, when we were looking to supply locally into the public sector, there was an expectation that we would meet the SALSA requirements. I pay £400 a year to the Soil Association to meet its standards and to be inspected every year. SALSA was going to cost us another £635. I could not run to that sort of money just for a farm assurance scheme that I was already complying with. If the Government are asking for food standards, it has to be realistic and to a level that a lot of farmers will be able to reach. It is pointless doing it to the very highest base level; otherwise virtually all farmers will be excluded from it and they will not be able to supply.

Q56 **Barry Gardiner:** Greg, it has disturbed a number of us to find that we have mandatory standards that are not being applied. We found that, in the NHS, 52% of hospitals were compliant, but that means 48%, almost half of them, were not. How do you see the enforcement of these standards actually helping suppliers?

Greg Parsons: As Andy pointed out, there is a huge proliferation in standards. We have the Government buying standards for food. We have the balanced scorecard. The balanced scorecard, in principle, tried to cover those eventualities but, as was spoken about in the previous review, there is no policing of it. There is no way in which these standards are reviewed, and therefore it is impossible.

My view, and the view of the hub, would be that we are at a unique time in food and drink supply in the UK, and in production in particular. We have a new Agriculture Bill and a new environmental policy. We also have these not-insignificant changes that are led by Brexit and what we have learned from Covid, which is that food security is a big issue. We have an opportunity now, and Defra is already on to this, to review the Government buying standards and the balanced scorecard, and take guidance from a lot of really knowledgeable bodies that are out there.

Once and for all, we need to come up with a set of standards that reflect what this country wants to do in future for farming and food. We then need to put them into a set of standards, to set a baseline that is achievable for those suppliers that are looking ahead and that are prepared to look after the land and their animals, to plan for the future and to achieve those.



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There should be, as was intended in the balanced scorecard, the opportunity to continuously improve upon those standards and be rewarded for that.

- Q57 **Barry Gardiner:** It is one thing to have the standards but, if you are not bothering to monitor or enforce them, it does not seem to be doing a lot of good, because the standards are in place but people simply are not observing them. What element of monitoring and enforcement do you think is necessary to make sure that the people who Government say ought to be abiding by those standards—and, in fact, have mandated that they should—like the NHS, the armed forces and so on, are actually complying with them? In Scotland, they seem to do this a lot better than we do.

Greg Parsons: The accreditation bodies themselves will have a degree of monitoring, reviewing, visiting and checking that the standards they are putting their badge on, for want of a better word, are being put in place. It would be a civil servant responsibility to make sure that the Government compliance standards are being executed in the place. There simply is not a resource or review method in place to check that, as far as I am aware.

- Q58 **Barry Gardiner:** Is that something you would like to see this Committee put as part of its recommendations, that there should be somebody going around and asking, “How come half of our hospitals are not complying?” or “How come so many of our schools are not complying?”?

Greg Parsons: That should be part of the future planning. We have to be careful that we put the horse before the cart. First and foremost, these standards should be set, as I said previously, at a level that reflects our future ambition for food and farming. Set those standards up with the right framework and the right assurance bodies in place. Make it really clear and then, absolutely, we would love to see mandatory requirements put into the public sector food supply chain.

I am all for that, but it has to be timely and deliverable. What we saw with *A Plan For Public Procurement* was some really great ideas and some real excitement but no way of delivering it. We are six years on and we still do not have a way of delivering it. That needs to be in place first, and then you can start to police those standards.

- Q59 **Barry Gardiner:** We do have the Government buying standards. We have that framework in place. We know that the Government have said that a number of bodies need to comply with it, and they simply are not doing it. As a supplier, you can be doing everything in your power to meet the standards that are there but, if people are not buying in from you, the whole system is breaking down. It is breaking down because people are not checking that the schools and hospitals are complying with that standards framework.

Greg Parsons: We opened up earlier and said what the barriers are for some of the SMEs. So much control is with tier-1 supply and, to an extent, they are asked to mark their own homework. I cannot answer for a lack of



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integrity with that, Barry, but certainly your point is that it should be a priority going forward to make sure that what is promised is delivered.

Q60 Dr Hudson: Thank you, Andy and Greg, for being before us today. That leads nicely into this question. We are talking about Government buying standards and we have touched on compliance, but there are some exemptions within the Government buying standards. They state, "All food served must be produced in a way that meets UK legislative standards" for food production and animal welfare, or equivalent standards, but "if in any particular circumstances, this leads to a significant increase in costs which cannot reasonably be compensated for by savings elsewhere, the procuring authority shall agree with the catering contractor or supplier to depart from this requirement and the reasons for doing so shall be noted and recorded."

There are then differences. That is for animal welfare but, when we move on to fish, the Government buying standards require that "all fish are demonstrably sustainable" and "no 'red list' or endangered species of...fish shall be used". We are concerned about this potential exemption. If the Government buying standards allow exemptions to meeting food production and animal welfare standards, should this be allowed to happen, considering that fish are covered but animal welfare and food production in that sector are not? What do you think about this particular exemption? Does it need to be looked at closely?

Andy Jeffery: I cannot say a lot really, because I only discovered this recently. I was told this recently, and I could not believe it. I was outraged by it. I thought, "Well, how can that be? If you have a standard, you have a standard. You have to meet it." It means that suppliers can run a coach and horses through the whole system. I could not understand why it was allowed. That is all I have to say about it—over to Greg.

Dr Hudson: That is quite clear. You have articulated your outrage there. Thank you. Greg, what do you think?

Greg Parsons: It is fundamentally wrong. I have worked in the food sector for all of my career. From the days of having somebody crawl all over our factory at least once a month, we have subscribed to the very highest standards. We had to do what was written down. To me, that should be even more important in Government. The devil is in the detail. As you have pointed out, Neil, there are loopholes within the detail that allow things to happen that I do not think members of the public would be happy with, which should not be the case. It should be part of this review process. Things like that should be surfaced and eradicated.

Q61 Dr Hudson: Thank you. That is very, very clear from both of you. We have had a bruising political and parliamentary battle in looking at international trade deals moving forward. We have achieved a lot. The Government have moved and set up a Trade and Agriculture Commission so that we can uphold animal welfare standards in our trade deals and negotiations, but we have this domestic loophole in terms of Government procurement. That is something we really need to put a magnifying glass over to see if it can



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be clarified or, indeed, stopped.

Are you aware of how frequently this exemption, which you have expressed your opinion on, is used? If it is used, what impact do you think it is having on local British suppliers?

Andy Jeffery: No, I am not aware of how often it is used. I would not be able to predict how many times it should be used, because I am not fully au fait with the public sector supply chain as it operates at the moment. I am aware of the local pilot that was done here, but I do not think it was used in that case.

Let me quote you an example that happened to us a couple of years ago. It might have been three years ago, but there were floods in Spain and it meant that courgettes went through the roof in price. They went from something like £2 a kilo up to £25 a kilo. They were still being imported by the schools. The agents locally, Fresh Range, tried to persuade the local schools to change their menu from using imported courgettes to using locally grown kale. In fact, it was our kale that they used instead of the courgettes. The kale was at £2 or £3 a kilo, so they were saving money from it. They could use it in exactly the same way that they were using the courgettes in the same meals that they had programmed in the schools. That was an example where sometimes, if the price goes up, you can just switch to a different product if the chefs or those using it are clever enough. For what it is worth, that is my opinion.

Q62 **Dr Hudson:** Greg, do you have anything to add on that? Are you aware of how frequently this exemption is used and what impact that might have locally, if it is being used?

Greg Parsons: I am not aware of how frequently that happens. I am guessing that those who would be most aware are probably the ones who are responsible for it happening. I am not aware of that. We are part of wanting to change the culture and approach to public sector procurement. What has happened in the past has been very much driven by price. It has been very much driven by urgency and short-term focus. Food has never been so high on the agenda as it is right now, driven by food security and everything else that is going on.

Are there areas to be improved on dramatically? Yes, there are. With the review of the standards that has already been announced by Defra, I would invite the RSPCA and the accreditation bodies to be part of that review process and iron out anything like that that exists that does not need to be in place. If it is an issue that makes the difference between somebody eating and not, that makes it a different argument. If it is a choice that is made on something that may be related to cost, that should not be the case.

Q63 **Dr Hudson:** That is really helpful. As a Committee, we will be able to probe this further with procurement later on in the session this afternoon. It is something we can take on board, to see how commonly this exemption is being acted upon and shed a light on that. If we felt that animal welfare



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and food production standards were being compromised on that, we could comment on that as a Committee. You have touched on cost but, hypothetically, if this exemption is happening and cost is a real factor, surely the endpoint could be that local producers will be undercut by cheaper production methods elsewhere. They would be undercut, would they not?

Greg Parsons: It goes back to having a set of standards that are aligned with the objectives of the country. If you had those laid out and they were mandated, that would be brilliant. You would then have a sound base to start from.

Dr Hudson: You are right. Yes, it is about our values as a country. Hopefully, the Trade and Agriculture Commission, moving forward, will be able to articulate a lot of that about where we stand on these food production and animal welfare standards, and that we are not going to go below those.

Q64 **Chair:** Before we leave you both, the whole idea of having this inquiry was to make sure that we put our own house in order, that what we buy in the public sector and public sector procurement is meeting good standards and that we can get as much local food as possible. Naturally, we say that, if the standards are there for fish, they should be for animal welfare as well. Greg, you also talked about the food hub and putting the platform together. What would your final ask be before you leave this afternoon to make sure that this platform can go live, that Andy, if he wants to in the future, will be able to supply through the hub and that we can get good local food into our hospitals and schools?

Greg Parsons: As we have discussed in this debate, the country and the people running this country are far more aware of the complexities of the food and agricultural world than they ever have been in the past. We have discovered in public sector procurement that it is far more fragmented than any of us ever realised. Within that, as Neil rightly pointed out, there are things happening that we simply are not happy with and we should not be happy with. They are below the standards that we aspire to.

Therefore, I think it is recognised that change is necessary. However, there needs to be a means to change. How do we change? What we need to do is embrace technology, as Mr Bezos has done and has much of us shopping through. Embrace the technology that is out there to open up public sector procurement and make it so that we can use it as a tool to implement the standards that we want. Use it to open up supply to the food and agriculture suppliers who badly need a leg up in this country. This is my ask: "Let us get on with it. Can people please get behind this project and make it happen?" It will open up all the opportunities that we have discussed to come to light through the future food framework.

Chair: Thank you. That is quite clear.

Andy Jeffery: If this is going to go ahead, it would be very simple for me to increase our output of organic vegetables and supply the public sector.



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We have around 70 acres converted to organic and we only use about 25 of them for organic vegetable growing at the moment. I could easily increase the amount of veg we grow. If we know there are public sector contracts out there and that local schools and other establishments are going to be using it, we would grow with confidence. The biggest question I have this year is, "What on earth are we going to plant next year?" We have Brexit; we have Covid. I do not have a clue how much veg we are going to need next year. How many acres am I going to plant? Someone please tell me that. If we were supplying the public sector, I would know.

Chair: I am sorry I cannot give you an answer to your very direct question, but hopefully things will become clearer very soon because it is difficult for all businesses at the moment. We appreciate both of your evidence this afternoon. As we put the report together, we will try to be very positive about how we create the food hub and the platform, and how we get Government, Defra and others to invest in it. We will work to get that into the report.

You can hang on and listen to the evidence, but we will be coming to our other three witnesses. Thank you both very much for this afternoon. It is most appreciated. I think this has been your first time before the Select Committee, so I hope it was not too traumatic for you. Thank you very much.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Howard Stevenson, Jason Swettenham and Kirstin Morris.

Q65 **Chair:** Welcome, everybody. Would you like to introduce yourselves, please? Then we will get on with our second panel.

Kirstin Morris: My name is Kirstin Morris. I am category development lead for food, NHS Supply Chain. NHS Supply Chain covers 11 specialist buying functions, food being one of them. That contract was awarded to Foodbuy.

Howard Stevenson: I am Howard Stevenson. I work for YPO. We already have in place the dynamic procurement system that was discussed in your previous evidence. I have experience of getting local authorities and suppliers on to that.

Jason Swettenham: I am Jason Swettenham, head of prison industries catering, retail and PE in the Prison Service. That is quite a mouthful. I have two hats on today, one as the senior business owner for the food supply contract for prisons in England and Wales, and, among other things, I am also in charge of our horticulture and farming footprint.

Q66 **Chair:** Thank you very much, all three of you, for joining us this afternoon to carry on our discussions on public sector procurement. To what extent has the quality of food served been compromised by the need to stay within tight and sometimes decreasing budgets? What is it like in the NHS food



supply chain, Kirstin?

Kirstin Morris: Before I answer the question, I just wanted to set a bit of a scene about the model within NHS Supply Chain. We are not a mandated route to market. The trusts make the purchasing decisions and, therefore, can decide which procurement organisations they work with. We have approximately 40% market share at the moment, and therefore my answers to your questions will be based on the trusts we work with and our knowledge of that share of the market.

The budgets are set individually by the trusts and, therefore, there can be some variability. From the hospital food review that was sent out in October, the average budget is £4.56 per meal within hospitals. The boards within the trusts make the decision about the budget changes. We have not seen a tightening of these budgets across the board. We are targeted on delivering savings, but that is only one of our targets. We are working with the trusts on how to unlock efficiencies, which can deliver quality at the same time as saving costs.

Q67 **Chair:** The NHS very often buys in very big quantities and very often has quite large contracts. If you were, say, dealing with individual regional food hubs and the like, would it fit your system?

Kirstin Morris: We do not have any regional food hubs on our frameworks at the moment. We deal directly with suppliers and manufacturers. We have quite a few SMEs on our framework but we do not have any of the regional food hubs at the moment, although we would welcome them to participate in any of our upcoming tenders.

Q68 **Chair:** If we can get the food hubs to work from the pilot and they were rolled out across the country, you think it would be feasible for the NHS to access a lot of local food, without putting too many words into your mouth.

Kirstin Morris: We welcome all suppliers who would like to participate. We already have quite a few SMEs: 52% of our suppliers are SMEs already. Any access to future supply options would be welcome.

Howard Stevenson: Because we are running it through the DPS, as was discussed with the previous witnesses, we run further competitions all the time. That does a lot to drive and keep prices competitive. It is up to the various local authorities that we work with to decide on whether they want to weight the answers via quality and/or price. The maximum we would ever recommend to any one authority is 80% either way. You weight it towards either the price or the quality of the product. You are always striving to seek a balance between the two.

Because of the way the DPS is set up, we deal either directly with suppliers and wholesalers or with the SMEs. We have a large proportion of SMEs within the framework that we run, the DPS, but it is up to each individual council to decide how much it wishes to spend on a child's meal. The decision-making is within the authority as to how much it is willing to spend



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per child per meal, which is obviously dependent on a large number of factors.

Q69 **Chair:** Did you say 8% variance either way?

Howard Stevenson: It is up to 80%. The maximum you would go for on a benchmark is 80% weighted towards price. The most you would ever have when you run a further competition is 80% on price and 20% on quality. We can flex that either way down to between 40% and 80%.

Q70 **Chair:** At the moment, when you are procuring food, what percentage is local, regional British food compared to imported food? I do not suppose we grow too many bananas, but you know what I mean. On the foods that we produce here directly, where would you see that figure?

Howard Stevenson: It really depends on the food group, if I can give an answer in that regard. We are based in Yorkshire. All the eggs we provide to all our local authorities across the north of England are supplied from farms in Driffield. All the eggs are British, as are a number of other products we have in the range. There are products that we cannot supply, which are British in the main. All our cheese is from Lancashire. That is all from dairies within the area around Lancashire and Preston way, because the dairy we use is based over there.

Where we can, we are using SMEs that are local to the local authorities we have, which are all across the north of England. Unfortunately, there are food groups that we cannot get, or cannot get in the quantity required local to the north of England. I know it is a large area but, within that, we have some big suppliers who are supporting lots of the local economy, like the cheese and the eggs that I just mentioned.

Q71 **Chair:** I do not know whether you could supply some figures on the percentages of supplies for us in writing. I am delighted that a Yorkshireman is supplying Lancashire cheese. I believe there is hope for us all yet. Seriously, in this Committee, we are very interested in seeing where the food is coming from. Can we get more local food in at a reasonable price? We were hearing from our previous panel that, if we can get these food hubs and others right in the future, it may not actually increase the cost of food. It will just reduce the number of miles, perhaps, that the food has travelled. You are already working quite hard on that, are you?

Howard Stevenson: Yes, absolutely. Localism and SMEs are part of the agenda for YPO. Because we are owned by local authorities—13 member councils across Yorkshire and Lancashire—part of that is to support the local economy. We are very focused on trying to get SMEs into our supply chain and supporting the local economy. We can then say to the schools that we are, ultimately, supplying that they are getting their food from a local supplier. They can do the farm-to-fork journey in a local way. There are products that we cannot do that with, like tuna, which is sourced globally, but we try to get any of the local products that we can.



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Q72 Chair: Jason, with a budget of just over £2 a day per prisoner, how do prisons maintain quality? That one is a bit of a hardball.

Jason Swettenham: Do not worry; that is fine. The daily food allowance is £2.10. When I spoke to one of the Clerks earlier, they had it as £2.02. It is now £2.10 for three meals a day. You might ask, "Crikey, how do you manage to measure quality?" We do it on a number of levels. I am an ex-operational grade, so I started off as a prison officer and have come up through the ranks. When I was a governor, part of my duty every day was to go into the prison kitchen and taste the food. We taste it in the kitchen and at point of service. As you can imagine, with our population, if the food is not right you soon know about it, because it is such a huge part of prison life.

We have one national contract, for which I am the senior business owner. That is Bidfood. We keep a constant eye on quality. Each of our items, even down to a fish finger, is to a specific specification where we say what is crumb and what is crust. In response to the specific question around quality and localism, 65.3% of our supply chain today are SMEs and 52.1% are UK. We keep it really local, though, because there are 1,020 prisoners still employed in and around horticulture in 40 of the prisons in England and Wales. That is a tiny footprint compared to what we used to have, but they grow vegetables and other crops, which are then—pardon the pun—fed into the kitchen to be turned into meals.

Q73 Chair: We will talk about the farms in a minute. I suppose, within prisons, a lot of the cooking and things would also be done by prisoners. Is that how it works?

Jason Swettenham: Yes. That is why there is not necessarily an apples and apples comparison with a colleague in the NHS, because we provide staff to provide training to prisoners. It is a training kitchen. We give them level 1 and 2 NVQs in food preparation. By and large, the biggest part of the workforce in the kitchen is prisoner labour. Although they get paid, it is nothing like what we have to pay staff and it helps us keep the price down.

Q74 Dave Doogan: This is a supplementary for Howard on the eggs. It is a good thing that your shell eggs are sourced from the UK. Is that true also of egg product? Shell eggs are quite hard to import, but egg product is very easy to import. Is egg product British as well?

Howard Stevenson: Not necessarily. I would have to check exactly how many are not. In the main, the egg product we use is British but I would have to check precise quantities. Any of the shell eggs we use are UK.

Q75 Dave Doogan: That is fine. If you could follow up with the detail on that, that would be great. Thank you.

Howard Stevenson: I would have to look into that.

Chair: Dave Doogan raises a very good point, because processed food is



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where a lot of imported egg is used, either liquid or powder egg. Sometimes I do not think you would necessarily be aware of where the liquid or powder egg comes from. It might be good for all of you, if you did not mind, to have a look at that, because it would probably be quite interesting.

- Q76 Robbie Moore:** It is good to see you joining us on this EFRA Committee. My question is to do with prison farms. Jason, if you would like to pick this one up first, it would be very kind. Reading the Sustainable Food Trust, I was staggered by the fact that, 25 years ago, the UK prison system was entirely self-sufficient in food produced on farms. I wonder why the number of prison farms has been significantly reduced. What impact do you believe it will have on food procurement and on prisoners' skills?

Jason Swettenham: There was an internal review in the Prison Service in 1996. At that time, we had a population of 47,000. That is important because we have around 78,000 today. It has reduced due to Covid, because the courts have been closed. We had a much smaller population but you are right: we were near enough self-sufficient. We returned a profit in those times of £3.2 million. We were self-sufficient for milk, pork, bacon and eggs. It allowed us to have other spin-offs of training prisoners in butchery skills, food production and all the packing, processing and distribution that came with it. It was a huge business.

I was a prison officer in 1996; I joined in 1992. In my view, it was a huge mistake. That was very short-sighted in my mind. It was done for purely fiscal purposes. They thought we could buy the food more cheaply, not looking at the missed opportunities for training prisoners and giving them skills to work in the UK economy. We are trying to turn that back. We have huge backing from our Minister to make sure we are trying to maximise the opportunities for offenders. The majority of offenders come from urban areas and not necessarily rural communities, but there is lots of urban farming going on.

We have 40 prisons with at least some horticulture. We still have five prison farms. We still own some land. We put in a bid, through the SR bid, for money to bring some of that back under sustainability. We are going to try as much as we can to increase our footprint. We are looking at aquaponics and vertical farming in certain urban areas. In the Arches in Hackney, there are farms. There are underground farms. It is certainly an area of significant interest. If we can give offenders these types of skills, do you know what? They might be able to assist the horticultural and agricultural sector.

- Q77 Robbie Moore:** Can you specifically comment on the food procurement side of things as well, Jason? That is related to the fact that there has been a significant drop in prison farms.

Jason Swettenham: We put around £300,000-worth of product into prison kitchens each year. The annual contract value is between £52 million and £56 million. It just shows that we have a huge opportunity. The key issue for us is space, because some of the farms were sold off. We now



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have only five fully functioning farms. We have dairy, some rare-breed pigs and chickens, but it is nothing like the scale of what we used to have.

Chair: The aquaponics are interesting, because a lot of salads can be grown either underground or with artificial light. There is a real potential for that as well, so we will watch this space. We take on board exactly what you said about the farms and training prisoners to be able not only to cook food, but to grow and produce it as well. We take that on board, so thank you for that.

Q78 Derek Thomas: Can I bring us back to the Government buying standards and the balanced scorecard, which you will be familiar with? Can you tell us what impact the Government buying standards and the balanced scorecard had on procurement in your sector? How could it be improved? We have heard over the course of this inquiry that, while the intention is good, it leaves a lot to be desired. I do not know if you would agree with that about the Government buying standards.

Kirstin Morris: With the Government buying standards, as the final decisions rest with the trusts, the reporting is down to them. The Government buying standards are currently included in the hospital food standards. They are monitored through the place assessments that happen annually, in which the trusts need to report whether they are compliant with Government buying standards.

The Government buying standards and the Defra balanced scorecard are difficult for one organisation to manage. For example, within procurement, we cannot influence menus. We cannot influence, potentially, how the product is served on plates at the end. It makes it tricky for one team to monitor all of it. As you said, monitoring has not always been in much detail, or very stringent, so it is a "yes or no" tick-box exercise. There is not always the detail behind it to show what improvements have been driven and to share best practice.

Howard Stevenson: I would back up what Kirstin has just said. I agree entirely with what she said and reaffirm the evidence. It is down to the local authorities, in our instance, to choose what standards they go after and chase. When they do the further competition, they will weight for either quality or price. As I was saying before, there is always a balance between those two things. If they are more on the quality side, they will go after further enhanced standards. What makes it very difficult is the multitude of different standards. Like the previous witnesses were saying, within the industry and the food supply chain, there are multiple standards that people can use. It is difficult to know which one people are going to adhere to and use as their standard.

Q79 Derek Thomas: I assume that you agree it is heading in the right direction and we need these Government buying standards. Given that even where it is mandatory, such as in hospitals and schools, recent reports show that about half are compliant, what must be done to improve it so that people have confidence in the standard?



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Jason Swettenham: We mandate it. It is much easier for us because we have one national contract. My team supervises the cooking of the meals. The things that jump off the page to me when we look at the scorecard are about animal welfare. People would not believe it, but prisoners really care about animal welfare. It is something they would be really interested in.

There are recent examples around country of origin, which is really important when you think about the scandal two or three years ago, I want to say, of horsemeat in food production. We can trace all our food, and that is really important. My organisation believes that it should adhere to the standards, but that is because it has one contract. It is relatively easy for us. We are a national service and we have one contract, so it makes it easier than for other colleagues in the NHS or in the education world.

Derek Thomas: That is helpful, thanks.

Howard Stevenson: Ultimately, it is the customer who decides. In this case, the local authorities are our customer. They decide which of the various standards out there on the different food groups they are going to adhere to. The one thing we would all like is to be in the same situation as Jason, with one standard that we adhere to. I completely take your point, Derek, that we all want a standard that we have to adhere to, but it is that one overarching standard that we would like to work towards.

Q80 **Derek Thomas:** Kirstin, would it be your view that the Government buying standard should be mandated right across the public sector? Does that sound easier said than done?

Kirstin Morris: Yes, it should be mandated, although it needs to be clear about how it will be monitored and measured. Within PCR, it needs to be clear how it will be evaluated, with any subjective elements taken out. We need to measure it on an objective basis to make sure that we are being fair and transparent with our suppliers. Some of the elements within Government buying standards at the moment could be construed as subjective. If we could just clarify that, that would make it a lot easier for us to use.

Howard Stevenson: I would agree with what Kirstin has just said.

Jason Swettenham: It is relatively simple from my perspective. With one contract, we can basically say, "We expect you to adhere to it." I am very fortunate; I have a really good procurement team to support me. We have a tight contract and a good supplier.

Q81 **Derek Thomas:** Jason, I appreciate that the system is simpler for you. Is it as much political will, and the commitment of procurers to the standard and to what is trying to be achieved, as it is delivering it? If everyone signed up to it, would it make it so much easier to deliver? Ultimately, lots of people decide that they need to provide a meal and it needs to cost this much, and they might not think much more than that.



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Jason Swettenham: We have one core message: just because you are in prison, it does not mean that you are not entitled to decent things. That decency runs through. We do not get everything right all the time, as I am sure you and your colleagues on the Justice Select Committee know. Around food, the one thing I was taught when I came into this job is "Do not mess with food and do not mess with visits, because you will know about it."

The key thing for us is that, if the people who are managing the service care, you have a chance. That is not saying that other colleagues do not care. The key thing for me is that the people we serve meals to are among the most deprived and the unhealthiest in the country. We use food as an intervention. A square meal to the people in our care might be a Pot Noodle or a kebab. It is our one way of getting vitamins into these people. Therefore, we use food almost as an intervention, as I have already said, to try to improve their life chances through that. The best way of delivering that is having a contract and a clear line through my senior business owner meetings all the way down to the person who serves it on a plate that we need to get some nutrients into our population.

Q82 **Chair:** What parts of the Government buying standards could be considered subjective? Are they clear or are they not?

Kirstin Morris: One element that jumped out at me was about the attractiveness of the serving on a plate. That is not easily measurable. There could be different opinions of what looks attractive and what does not. That would be a clear example for me.

Q83 **Chair:** There are some improvements that can be made, in your opinion. Is that right?

Kirstin Morris: Yes.

Chair: I probably led the witness there, but this is what we are naturally looking to do in the inquiry.

Q84 **Dave Doogan:** Do our witnesses agree that there is inadequate monitoring of compliance within Government buying standards?

Jason Swettenham: I cannot speak across other Government Departments, but I can certainly speak for the Prison Service. It is interesting to hear about what things look like on a plate. We test that because we get a party of prisoners and staff to test each meal. The buying standards are reflective of the organisation. I am keen for the Prison Service to retain one contract because it makes it easier. We get the best value for the public, but in doing so we welcome SMEs.

I listened in to the previous witnesses in the session before us. For everything, where there is will, there is a way. Local does not necessarily mean things are expensive. Standards can be maintained if people have connectivity with the serving of that meal. There is a huge distance between running a procurement exercise and having a competition, and



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what that child, senior citizen, patient or prisoner eats. The input that you have into the day-to-day operational management of the contract helps to maintain that. It is very difficult to get it right all the time everywhere, but if there is a drive from the top, and if you retain that operational reality, you have a better chance of customer satisfaction.

Q85 Dave Doogan: If I could paraphrase from your earlier evidence, Jason, the Prison Service is something of an outlier in public procurement of food. You have your one contract and your one supplier. You have a fairly close eye on the standards of your materials coming in.

I will reframe the question for Kirstin and Howard. Is there any way in which we could have better monitoring of compliance? If we could, would that involve any innovation around inspections and penalties for failure to comply with standards that have been set down?

Kirstin Morris: This has been picked up in the hospital food review. Because the Government buying standards form part of the hospital food standards, the lack of detailed monitoring and compliance with the hospital food standards was raised. Overall, the compliance was rated about 90%, so it was a reasonable figure. It was recommended in the hospital food review that the Care Quality Commission start to include more monitoring of hospital food standards and the parts within it, as part of its assessments within hospitals. That would definitely help.

We have seen more compliance with other schemes in which there have been consequences and incentives. For example, in the CQUIN scheme, there were financial incentives for trusts to deliver healthier eating options for staff and visitors. We have also seen more emphasis put on the manufacturers. For example, the PHE targets for salt and sugar for the manufacturers to adhere to have meant that we have been able to drive it from the very start of the supply chain rather than relying on the end.

Howard Stevenson: Again, I would agree with Kirstin. It is difficult when you have all the different local authorities as the customer base. Each of them has a different interpretation of the Eatwell system and different menu options. How do you have that one standard across all of them that says, "This is what a balanced menu would look like for any particular schoolchildren"? That is probably easier to do if mandated at a national level. Potentially, the Department for Education could say, "These are the standards that we want to enforce and see in the menus." The menu options that the schools and local authorities provide to the children determine the food that is purchased. Central Government definitely have a role to play in that to mandate how it should look.

Q86 Mrs Murray: The Government buying standards provide an exemption from the requirements to meet UK legislative standards for food production and animal welfare if it would increase the cost significantly. How often is this exemption used, and how much is food sourced from abroad instead?

Howard Stevenson: The honest answer is that we have never, in the time we have been running the further competition, used the exemption. In the



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way that we are as an organisation, I do not believe we ever would use that exemption. It would be the wrong thing for us to do as an organisation and as a provider of the framework. Ultimately, with any dynamic procurement system that we are running, the customer, a local authority, can say, "We want to use the exemption anyway."

Our advice would be that, from a compliance point of view, it is not the best thing to do. We would countenance against doing that as the provider of the framework. Ultimately, it would be for local authorities to decide, but in most cases we would tell them not to do it. However, I do not believe we have ever been asked to do it. I am providing a hypothetical answer, because we have never been asked by a local authority to use an exemption.

Kirstin Morris: Along with Howard, we have not been asked. Within our product specifications, we set the minimum standard at the legislative requirements. We would not feel comfortable deviating from that. Again, we have not been required or requested to use that exemption.

Q87 Dr Hudson: To quickly follow up on that, I am relieved that you have not been asked to exert that exemption. In your experience, have you heard of this exemption being used at all anywhere? It might not have been within your frame of reference in terms of the local authorities or the contracts you are particularly dealing with, but have you heard it? Has it been used at all?

Kirstin Morris: I am not aware of anything.

Howard Stevenson: Casting my mind back to previous organisations I worked for prior to YPO, I have never been asked to do that.

Q88 Dr Hudson: That is very encouraging. As the Chair was saying, there is a degree of subjectivity in some of the standards. You have touched on different ways of classifying different standards. Is that something that could be improved in defining the standard so that everyone is crystal clear on the benchmark that we need to meet? Would that be helpful?

Howard Stevenson: Yes, it would be very helpful.

Q89 Dr Hudson: At the moment, the Government buying standards refer to legislation, but potentially there is still some wiggle room within that. Would it be helpful if it was articulated in a little more of an objective fashion?

Howard Stevenson: Yes, objectively and consistently applied. That is exactly where we would want things to go. We would want transparent, clear, objective standards that were the same. There should be no difference between us and the NHS. We should all adhere to exactly the same set of standards that are prescribed to us as very important public organisations within our society. We should adhere to those standards.

Kirstin Morris: I agree with Howard.



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Q90 **Dr Hudson:** I am really relieved to hear that, in all of your three experiences, none of you or the people you are dealing with is comfortable with enacting that exemption. Should a recommendation be that that exemption should be taken off the table? Should it be removed so that all debate is gone? Just a quick yes or no would be good.

Howard Stevenson: I cannot see the material benefits of having it.

Jason Swettenham: Yes.

Kirstin Morris: I agree with my colleagues.

Q91 **Chair:** You sounded like a politician then, Kirstin. I agree with you, Neil. I was thinking myself that perhaps that is one of the recommendations we might be able to make in our report: that we remove that exemption. It does not seem to me that it is necessary. Jason, did you give an answer to that one?

Jason Swettenham: Yes. It is not needed.

Q92 **Dr Hudson:** Was it the same with you, Howard? Did you say yes to that?

Howard Stevenson: I completely agree. It is not an exemption that is needed. It gives a get-out that is not needed.

Q93 **Ian Byrne:** The Lords Food, Poverty, Health and Environment Committee recommended this year that the Government should revise the GBS and “embed nutritional standards based on the Eatwell guide”. However, Dr Adrian Morley of Manchester Metropolitan University explained that the procurement rules have limited direct impact on healthy eating, because they largely relate to contractual agreements to purchase categories of food rather than the way meals and menus are designed. How much of an impact do procurement rules and standards have on healthy eating?

Kirstin Morris: Within the NHS we have our hospital food standards, which set out the basics of nutrition. We have dieticians who work on menu plans and things like that. Outside of patient feeding, which we need to think of as slightly different because 30% of our patients in hospitals are nutritionally vulnerable and therefore need different eating plans, we need to focus more on our staff and visitor dining. Within the hospital food review, it mentioned that staff feeding and how we can support it, especially out of hours, needs to be a focus.

As I have mentioned previously, CQUIN was a good scheme for trusts to be incentivised to make changes. That is on hold, as far as I am aware, for the time being, but it made changes to what the trusts were offering.

Howard Stevenson: The DPS sets out the general standards, as alluded to at the beginning. The further competition standards are then set by the individual local authorities. It is up to them to decide what standards they are going to go after. That is basically based on the values. The standards and the values are the two areas you would put in the further competition.



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It is up to each local authority to decide which standards it is going to adhere to, and a lot of that is based on the menu choices.

The added value can be around supporting healthy eating. If you are going for healthy eating options, you would put that within your quality part of your DPS and reduce the weighting on the price so you are more interested in making sure that you specify healthy options on your menu. You downgrade how much you are going to give a score to the price of the product because you are stressing the healthy eating option. That is determined by each individual local council rather than overarching and set by central Government. You get lots of variability in what we would do in a further competition based on each individual council.

Jason Swettenham: I disagree hugely with the professor, or whoever it was, from Manchester Metropolitan University. For Government buying standards or the contract, you have a responsibility to the person you are serving the meal to. It is how they are set up. I have mentioned that we are operationally focused. I scribbled three things down while my colleagues were speaking. One was operational input. I am operational. I am managing that contract. I am not just thinking about the pounds, shillings and pence; I am thinking about the people I am trying to make healthier.

We offer five choices per day for each person to choose from for lunch and their evening meal. With that choice is the ultimate test. Would you eat it yourself? Would you be comfortable for your child, your parent, your brother or your sister to eat that meal? There is a responsibility among people who are either letting contracts or managing contracts about what goes on plates. There is an ultimate responsibility around nutrition. We are reviewing all our menus now with Public Health England and a cracking guy from Oxford Brookes University called Jonathan Tammam. We are looking at every single meal that is served in the Prison Service and making sure that what we are offering is nutritionally balanced.

On the Eatwell guide, you have to practice what you preach. We instruct our governors to have the Eatwell guide at every single point of service in every single prison in the country. If you were to walk on the floors in HMP Liverpool or in HMP Wormwood Scrubs, somebody might have torn that down, but it is a baseline. My caterers go out when they are checking and make sure that the Eatwell guide is there. They do menu management. They do compliance with food standards. I make sure that, when I have my quarterly meetings with the contractor, the quality of what goes on a person's plate is there.

Q94 **Ian Byrne:** That was a passionate answer. Kirstin, in May 2019, the Department of Health and Social Care consulted on updating the nutritional standards in the GBS. The consultation sought to bring the GBS into line with the latest scientific dietary advice, but no further announcements have been made since 2019. You can see the tumbleweed. Should there be a minimum nutritional requirement across all food procurement? If so, what



should it be based on?

Kirstin Morris: It is tricky to have a minimum requirement that caters for the breadth of end users that we have. Whether it goes from schools through to patients, and especially nutritionally vulnerable patients, there needs to be some variation. Yes, there does need to be a basic within it.

As I understand it, the nutritional aspects of the Government buying standards are being reviewed as part of the food standards review. It is due out, I believe, early this month or next year. I do have some colleagues on that steering group. Nutritional elements will be included as part of that, but there needs to be some variation due to the breadth of users we have to cover.

Q95 **Ian Byrne:** What should they be based on? Is there any guide that you would recommend?

Kirstin Morris: I am not an expert on the nutritional basis, so you would need to ask someone else.

Howard Stevenson: I would echo a lot of what Kirstin has just said. The school population in the country is very diverse. There is also the element of—and I use the word advisedly—the fashion in food. There is a trend towards vegan dietary requirements these days, so we supply an awful lot more vegan products and plant-based products than we ever supplied before. Those kinds of things would not have been on a menu five or 10 years ago when I first started in the food industry; they are now. You need an element of flexibility within the standards that you are putting in to capture how things change over time.

What Kirstin said about the sheer diversity of what we have as a customer base, the users of our products, needs to be within those standards. The larger suppliers within the food industry have dieticians within their organisations. They have people who specialise in putting menus together. It is about pulling those people in to get their expertise. It makes it more difficult for the SMEs that might not be able to employ dieticians, but we need to be able to advise them. The larger organisations and central Government need to be able to help the SMEs get involved via: “What are good menu options? What are good products for us to be able to procure supply of?”

Q96 **Ian Byrne:** Is there an exemplar around the country? You said before that it was devolved to local authorities. Is there one outstanding local authority? We are talking about the nutritional element for our children in schools. Is there any one that is renowned throughout the country? You will say Yorkshire.

Howard Stevenson: I am going to have to choose my words carefully because some of them are our owning authorities, so we are publicly owned by them. I could end up upsetting one that I do not mean to. Kirklees, North Yorkshire and Bolton are all authorities that spend a lot of time thinking about the nutrition requirement within their menus and the



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options that they choose. I have probably missed out some authorities there. I will get a phone call from them tomorrow to say, "You never mentioned us."

Ian Byrne: No, you cannot be blamed for that.

Howard Stevenson: They all spend a lot of time menu planning. What is the dietary requirement on the menu they have? They are children at the end of the day. They are quite picky and they want two or three options on the menu. They want a different choice, and we need movement away from: "Today is pizza and chips." Very rarely do you see pizza and chips as the menu option. We need to provide that breadth, but in a way that brings in SME suppliers that can do that.

Jason Swettenham: We should have nutritional baselines and then build up from that. If you look at our population, we have men, women and about 500 young people as well, 15 to 18-year-olds. They all have different dietary requirements with regard to the recommended daily intake. You can also look at their individual needs. As you might imagine, at Pentonville, just down the road from me, there are people in their care who have been on the streets around King's Cross, emaciated and addicted to drugs. We are trying to get towards a basic nutritional standard, but they are going to have additional requirements.

I am saying "basic plus." I agree with my colleague about vegans. We are seeing an increase in that, so we have to give them supplements and certain things to make sure we complement their diet. We have particular issues with brittle bones, et cetera. We have a diverse range of religions as well. We support, quite rightly, and allow everybody to practise their cultural and religious rights in custody. We have a very small number of orthodox Jews, which makes it really tricky when you are trying to cater for people with a really high-level requirement like them.

I suppose my point is that we should have a nutritional baseline. From that, we can build according to need. Again, it is easy for me to say because we are a national contract, but it is important.

Ian Byrne: That is fascinating. Thanks for the answers.

Chair: Can I thank Kirstin, Howard and Jason very much for a very good session this afternoon? We had a very good panel to start with. We have had some really good evidence this afternoon to help us put our report together. Howard, if you have missed out any local authorities, you can always put it in written evidence. But I say to you all seriously, if there is something you suddenly think of when you have finished this session—"I should have said this" or "I could have put that in"—please feel free to do so. We will take written evidence for a little while longer before we put our report together.

I appreciate your answers, your attending us today and the evidence you have given. I thank all three of you very much for attending, and I will now



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allow you to go. I thank all members for their participation and questions.
I will wish you all a good afternoon.