

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Public sector procurement of food, HC 469

Tuesday 12 January 2021

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Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Ian Byrne; Geraint Davies; Rosie Duffield; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Julian Sturdy.

Questions 97 - 166

Witnesses

I: Victoria Prentis MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Ananda Guha, Deputy Director, Food Exports, Promotion and Partnerships, Agri-Food Chain Directorate, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Simon James, Director, Constitution & Borders, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Written evidence from witnesses:

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



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Victoria Prentis MP, Ananda Guha and Simon James.

Q97 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's meeting on food procurement here at the EFRA Select Committee. We have Victoria Prentis, our agriculture and fisheries Minister, with us. Minister, would you like to introduce yourself, and then, Simon and Ananda, would you please also introduce yourselves for the record?

Victoria Prentis: I am Victoria Prentis, the Minister from DEFRA. Happy new year to you all; it is good to see you.

Simon James: I am Simon James, director of constitution and borders in DEFRA.

Ananda Guha: I am Ananda Guha. I am deputy director of the Agri-Food Chain Directorate in DEFRA.

Q98 **Chair:** Thank you, Minister, very much for coming to talk about food procurement, which is the subject of our inquiry this afternoon. As you well know, I am hoping to finish the questions on food procurement by 4.30, and we will hopefully have about half an hour on the present state of our borders, and exporting of fish in particular.

Victoria Prentis: It is a good opportunity. The situation is very fluid at the moment. Even if we do not have all the answers to all of the questions it is a good opportunity to air the issues.

Q99 **Chair:** I appreciate your co-operation in these matters. We will get stuck straight into the first question on procurement of food. Why are the Government buying standards for food and the balanced scorecard not mandatory across the whole public sector?

Victoria Prentis: They are mandatory in most of the public sector in terms of hospitals and the Prison Service and all Government Departments and their agencies. The section they are not mandatory for is schools. It is fair to say that the same standards are embedded in the school standards. The GBSF and the balanced scorecard are great documents. We will refine them and continue to work on them, but they are documents that I am sure most of your members would wholeheartedly support. The real problem with them is not whether they are mandatory; it is whether they are actually enforced. My worry and what we have to seek to address in this space is that we have to encourage public services to abide by these standards. They are mandatory across much of the public sector at the moment, but that does not mean that they always happen.

Q100 **Chair:** We will be talking a bit about the South West Food Hub in a minute, so I do not want to take the whole question away, but what we have been finding out throughout our inquiry is that having local food and British food procurement does not necessarily put up costs. Some of the



public sector organisations are always worried that having British food to a higher standard will cost them more money. Somehow or other, DEFRA—you in the Ministry—needs to get that through to everybody. As far as I can see, a lot of the rules are okay, but it looks to me, as you say, that not everybody is going along with them. Some of them are perhaps worried it is going to cost too much money to do it. How do you become more proactive in getting this message over?

Victoria Prentis: We must do that. You make a very valid point. This is a manifesto commitment; it is something I personally feel very passionately about. Some of the work going on in the country is superb, and we should seek to roll that out.

There are three notes on my to-do list in this space. The first is that we need to engage with Henry Dimbleby, with his food strategy. I have been in touch with him today, in fact; we are in frequent contact. He says he has new and exciting ideas that he is going to give us very shortly in the spring, when he publishes his strategy. We as a Department then need to respond to that. As you know, we have six months to write a White Paper. At the same time as writing our White Paper, we are also going to consult on a new and refined GBSF, which will take us to the middle of the following year.

The next thing on my to-do list is to implement the future food framework. This has been badly delayed, slightly by covid—we will talk about that later in the session, I suspect—but the thing that strikes me as interesting from that is that I hope we will learn that it is not always more expensive to procure locally. I really want to know more about using audit bodies to do the enforceability check for us, because that is the weak point at the moment. We do not have the data and we do not have the enforceability.

The last thing is that I then need to use all that learning and make sure that we encourage public bodies across the nation to use the best learning we can get from the south-west. This works well in areas that are very good at local food production and are very proud of local food production, like the south-west, from which we have many representatives on this Committee. Robbie, I am sure it would also work in Yorkshire. There are areas of the country where there is not the integration between the local enterprise partnership, for example, and small and medium-sized food producers. We really need to learn from the south-west and roll it out.

Q101 **Chair:** It is about making sure that you have a system of best practice and trying to get that rolled out everywhere. If we are going to be sensible about procuring British food, we are also going to have to have some seasonality in what is being served up. It is all good food, but it will need seasonality. Sometimes it is just easier for big organisations to carry on with a food supply—the same type of food, the same actual foods—all year. It is not necessarily wilful obstruction, but it is there. That is what I would like you to really drill down on.



Victoria Prentis: Seasonal food is broadly cheaper food, which is an important point to get out there. One of the things that we may talk about later is the rules. We will still be constrained by international buying rules and WHO rules on procurement. We will not be able to say, “You must buy British”, in terms, but we will be able to say, “You must buy local. You must buy seasonal. You must buy sustainably sourced. You must buy organic”, if that is what we want to say. Those are the ways that we will encourage the uptake of food from small and medium-sized British food producers.

Q102 **Robbie Moore:** Welcome, Minister. My question is about monitoring and compliance. How many public sector bodies comply with the Government buying standards for food, and how do the Government obtain such data?

Victoria Prentis: As I was saying earlier, this is the weak point. Our data is really not good enough. In fact, I am not even prepared to tell you the extent of public procurement spend because we have not had good information on that, probably ever and certainly not for at least 10 years. It would not mean much if I were to tell you the data we have.

In DEFRA we do an annual survey of Government Departments; some of the responses we get are excellent and some are not. This is the area we really need to focus on. This is where change can really happen. We need to work at how we enforce our good rules. We will undoubtedly do further work on these rules in the next 18 months, but they are already good and gold standard—the sort of things we all approve of. Enforcement is the key to this.

We are having a national conversation at the moment about enforcement of rules. With that, it is probably the case that advertising, encouraging and showcasing good practice is going to be what truthfully makes the difference. Otherwise we would have to pay for a whole new world of enforcement, which I do not see central Government appetite for. We can definitely do more within the system; we have to see what is going on, and I am sure that will take place, but most of this is nudging, encouraging, advertising and showing.

Q103 **Robbie Moore:** You have acknowledged that the data is weak at the moment. How are you intending on improving that? What are the next steps specifically to get that data, because obviously that then generates better decisions down the line? Also, can you specifically say how you intend to improve monitoring of compliance with those standards?

Victoria Prentis: On the data, particularly at the moment, in the middle of the pandemic, we are not going to be able to have the bandwidth to do real change and get a whole new army of enforcers out there. What we are hoping to do is to use the south-west trial that is going to be part of the future food framework to provide us with real, granular data that we can then read across. I have temporarily forgotten the second part of your question.



Robbie Moore: It was about specifically focusing on improving monitoring for compliance.

Victoria Prentis: Truthfully, I hope that is one of the things that Henry Dimbleby will tell us in his food strategy report due in a couple of months, which I am very excited about. I hope that one of the things we will learn from the future food framework is that independent audit is very much part of the way forward. I do not know that, but that is what I am hoping. For example, the Soil Association has an audit body called Food for Life Served Here. It is already used. We cannot mandate it as the only audit body to use, but that strikes me as a sensible way of enforcing standards that we all like.

I am also encouraged that in a recent health report—Ananda will remind me which one—it was recommended that the Care Quality Commission do an audit on hospital food, with a specific hospital in mind, as part of its inspection. That already happens in the public service I am most familiar with, which is the Prison Service; you get independent audit of food as part of your general inspection. I am really keen to promote that. As Government, we have not yet accepted that recommendation from the recent health report that came out last summer, but that is the way to do it, because only then do you get the granular detail that you need.

Q104 **Mrs Murray:** How will leaving the European Union allow the UK to change its domestic food procurement rules?

Victoria Prentis: That is a really good question, because the perception of many of us has been that we have been held back from saying, “Buy British”, by being a member of the European Union. We have of course been part of the EU’s state aid rules for a long time. Truthfully, we will still be bound by the WHO state aid rules, which are not all that different. Where leaving the EU really changes our perception is that we are now starting to focus—you know, because you and I discuss it regularly—on our agricultural policies and fish policies as an independent nation. Leaving the EU, regardless of how we all voted in the referendum, has given us oomph and confidence as a nation in our food supply in a way that has really changed the focus. While the rules will not be all that different, we are still going to have to say, “Buy local. Buy sustainable. Buy organic”, or however you want to say it. We will not be able to say, “Just buy British”, but there is now a real appetite—sorry to use the word—for this work, and a real sense of urgency within Government that we take this forward, which perhaps we have not had in the last few years.

Q105 **Mrs Murray:** Do you agree that EU rules did not stop us from sourcing more food locally and that the UK could have done more by using proxy quality measures such as seasonal?

Victoria Prentis: Yes, I completely agree. It is interesting to see what other EU countries do. The French equivalent of the Agriculture Act says that 50%, I think, of food in public canteens should be organic or local or



produced to certain standards. It does not say anywhere, “You must buy French food”, but the net result is that this definitely favours French farmers. I am sure as a Committee you are already looking at that, but that is the sort of thing we need to be looking at. We do not need to put it in primary legislation, but we can build our own guidelines around that.

The Netherlands are also really interesting in the food space, not least because they have done a lot of work on obesity that seems to be working. Of their Government spend, 40% has to be either organic or have sustainable properties of some kind. In Italy, I think 40%—it is a lot—of the food in schools has to be organic. That would not work for us because our organic sector is very much smaller, but it is possibly an aspiration and something we could look at, going forward. It is really useful to look at what other countries do within the rules.

Q106 Chair: Minister, before we leave this, for years we have complained in this country that we could not buy more British food because of the European Union. That was one of the great cries of everybody. I want you to be a bit more forthcoming, dare I say it, on how we are now, as we have left the European Union, actually going to make sure that the food that we eat in our schools and hospitals, and that our forces eat and everybody eats, is British. The Italians are also past masters at this; they even create their own geographical indicators that have absolutely nothing to do with Europe. I am not saying that you necessarily go down the Italian route, but we have to be much more proactive. We have an opportunity. Can I have you say on record that you are going to be much more proactive in getting this system right?

Victoria Prentis: Yes, definitely. You can definitely have me on record as saying that I will do everything I possibly can to encourage the public sector to buy more local, sustainable, seasonal food. What I will not do, because I am not terribly keen on breaking the law, is say, “We must buy British food”, but I am very happy that the result of saying, “We must buy local, sustainable and seasonal food”, will mean that many British businesses get a look in.

Q107 Chair: I would expect a lawyer to say that you comply with the law, so I am necessarily going to argue with that. There are ways of interpreting the law, and in Britain we are not always brilliant at doing that. I say that in all sincerity; we are sometimes far too rigid.

Victoria Prentis: When I came into the Department and I had my first meeting with Ananda, who I hope you will hear from in a minute—I do not want to hog all of this—we were both very excited by the prospect of a world where procurement of local, sustainable, organic, locally sourced food in the public procurement space would be a much bigger deal. I must confess that, as a Department, we have been side-tracked by the pandemic. We have been working and continue to work very hard on making sure the nation has enough food to eat, particularly the vulnerable people in the nation.



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To a certain extent, I confess quite freely that the foot has come off the accelerator on this. However, with vaccinations there is light at the end of the tunnel. We are still having meetings regularly about this and about planning the strategy. I gave you the timeline, which is Henry's report in a couple of months, then our reply, then the year it is going to take us—we will not wait for our White Paper to do that—for the rejig of GBSF, and then the future food framework. I am disappointed that the timeline for that has slightly slipped, but I completely understand why. It is run by the CCS, which is also running test and trace. I am really sorry that the timetable has slipped a bit, but there was no other option.

Q108 Chair: We understand the pressures. I do not want to go too far off the subject, but, while we are talking about that, we will be asking you back at some stage to talk about food for vulnerable people, because we will follow up on our previous Covid report.

Victoria Prentis: That is really helpful. I am always happy to come and talk to you, publicly or privately, but whether we do that in the context of Henry's report, before or after, is entirely a matter for you.

Chair: We will discuss it in our Committee and we will also come back to you on that. Ian, I stole some of your question, but I am sure you have plenty more to ask.

Q109 Ian Byrne: You did steal it, and Sheryll touched on the second part of the question about the French sourcing targets, and the Minister answered it quite well. I think it is 40% within the brief.

Victoria Prentis: I think it is 50%. Ananda will know, as he used to work in the British embassy in Paris.

Ananda Guha: There are a variety of different initiatives that the French are running. Their agriculture and food Act talks about 50% in public canteens. There is a general remit, which is about 40%, across the piece. The difference between us and the French, which we will no doubt talk about, is that we do not centrally procure that much. It is quite a diverse, disparate set of procurers, which is where monitoring and evaluation is quite difficult. The French system is far more centralised.

Some of this boils down to the understanding that we can be a great food nation. The reason the Minister and I are so passionate about this is that we think we need to persuade others that we are a great food nation. We have to do that to our own people, but also externally if we are going to sell more overseas. The French do that very well; I know that from living there, but also fundamentally people will generally say that French food is of high quality. It is the same with the Italians and so forth.

Can I just mention one thing related to what we can and cannot do at the moment? As the Minister said, the state aid rules that apply to the EU do not apply wholesale, but we are constrained by some WTO rules. We are also constrained by something called the Government procurement agreement, which is all about distortion of trade, but fundamentally what



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we can do—the French have done this—is cite things like local variety, seasonality and SMEs. These all feature in our existing Government buying standards for food and the balanced scorecard. We are looking to enhance that and make it a bit more accessible so that the take-up is greater in that. That is the kind of thing that will help us get towards something like a French-style target.

Q110 Ian Byrne: That is really interesting. Minister, we are talking about a great food nation and buying British, which we would all agree about. Look at something like the Preston model. If we are talking about a great food nation, the pictures today that we have seen on social media shame the nation with regard to what people are getting for their vouchers. We are talking about targets. Do we need to be discussing a minimum spend target for private companies applying for public contracts? We see them consistently prioritise profits over wellbeing and quality. What we have seen today should never happen again. I would like to know what the Government are actually doing to ensure that whatever people on free school meals are getting for the £30 is not replicated from today, because I am sure every one of us here is absolutely outraged by what we have witnessed today. It is beyond the pale that companies are actually operating within the country and think that it is okay to give a family that. I would love to know your answer on that, Minister.

Victoria Prentis: You and I have often discussed the concerns we have about food poverty in the nation. That is a fair challenge. I should say, though, that this is a Department for Education lead; the Minister responsible is currently in Westminster Hall doing a debate on this very issue. She is doing a call for colleagues later tonight.

Q111 Ian Byrne: Minister, do we not think that it flows into procurement?

Victoria Prentis: Yes, absolutely. I am going to answer it. I was just putting it in context. Of course it flows into procurement. I have been in touch with her today because clearly it flows into procurement. As a group of food Ministers, we keep in touch frequently and often have contact with each other, particularly during this dreadful pandemic. She has told me that the position is that the images are very concerning. They have asked the company responsible for providing hampers—there are two companies—to verify them, to say whether those images are real or not, and to tell us where they came from. One of the companies has told her that those images definitely do not comply with what they say they should put into their hampers.

The Department for Education has provided extra funding to enable these parcels. They increased that last week from £11.50 per child per week to £15 per child per week. Of course it is worrying, because the items that were shown on Twitter do not represent a £15 spend; you and I would not think that was the case at all. The Department for Education is investigating that at the moment. It is working with schools, encouraging schools and catering teams to work together to provide food parcels of about £15 per child per week.



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She also reassured me that schools can consider voucher solutions or locally arranged solutions if that works better for them. The national voucher scheme for free school meals will imminently be reopening. I hope that is some reassurance. I am sorry that I do not have all the answers; I have seen it on Twitter like you have.

Q112 Ian Byrne: Thanks for that quite comprehensive answer. It goes to the crux of where we are, where you have companies who are profiteering out of this Covid epidemic. That is where we have to question the morality of companies that are applying for public contracts; that is what we need to be doing as a Committee, but also you as a Government, to make sure that companies like this are nowhere near supplying food to our children, if there is no explanation forthcoming to the Ministers.

Victoria Prentis: What I would say to that is that food is a private good. It is something we buy and sell in this country. I will be very interested to read your Committee's report. I really hope you can debunk the myth that good locally sourced food has to be expensive, because, particularly in the very difficult circumstances in which we all find ourselves at the moment, with people losing their jobs and being in real food poverty, we do not want to be seen to push up the cost of food, or indeed to do so.

Q113 Chair: Ian, I was very happy for you to bring that question in because these food parcels are just not acceptable. The sooner we can get back to food vouchers so that people have the choice of exactly what they can buy and where they can buy it, and can present those vouchers to some of the more cost-effective retailers, the better. Ian makes a really good point. When you know more, could you come back to us in writing, please?

Victoria Prentis: Shall I ask the Department for Education Minister to do that, because she very much leads in this policy area. We work very closely as food Ministers over the course of the pandemic, I suspect much more than has happened for years. I am meeting her, Minister Quince and Minister Churchill to discuss food this Thursday. We have daily contact at the moment about one problem or another.

Q114 Dr Hudson: Thank you all for being before us today. I wanted to focus in on the Government buying standards scheme and the balanced scorecard, and really look at some of the exemptions. The GBS says that all food must be produced in a way that meets UK legislative standards for food production and animal welfare, or equivalent standards. It adds that if in any particular circumstances "this leads to a significant increase in costs which cannot be reasonably compensated for by savings elsewhere, the procuring authority shall agree with the catering contractor or supplier to depart from this requirement". I want to explore that particular exemption. I am encouraged that you said the GBS and balanced scorecard are going to be looked at by Government, but how can an exemption that allows substandard food production and animal welfare on the grounds of cost be justified? I wanted your thoughts on that.



Victoria Prentis: That is a very good point. It is a point that I asked when I first started to engage with this policy area. Ananda will correct me with the details, but broadly I was told that this was a clause that was put in in about 2011 at the request of the MoD. It concerned eggs and bacon, basically; it was pork products and eggs, which the MoD needed to buy to feed its personnel in continental Europe. It was not a lowering of EU standards; it was lower than the extra standards that we have in the UK, so the difference between the UK standards and the continental European standard. That was because it was difficult to procure the products to the extra UK standards wherever they were stationed, because they were not in the UK.

I was quite satisfied with that explanation; it struck me as very limited, and I could understand that in other countries it is not always possible to buy food produced to UK standards. They are not seeking that exemption again when we review the GBSF this year. Ananda, would you like to tell me if I got any of that rather garbled explanation wrong?

Ananda Guha: You are right in saying it is the exception rather than the rule. It is not a backdoor route in for chlorinated chicken, hormone-fed beef or anything like that. It has been used in the past in exceptional circumstances. It is not the norm, and when we have talked to other Government Departments they have said they do not see it as a way of getting round the rules. It is worth saying that for central Government GBSF is mandatory and that remains the case; I can assure you of that. That will not change when we refresh GBSF and associated provisions.

Q115 **Dr Hudson:** Given that the use of this exemption is, as you said, the exception rather than the rule, if the use of this exemption is happening it should be noted and recorded. Could you tell us how frequently this exemption is or has been used?

Ananda Guha: I am not sure how often it has been used. I know it has been used in the past. It is properly audited because it is signed off by a senior official, presumably in the Ministry of Defence. As I say, I am not aware of instances where it has been used. We can ask the MoD and revert, but it is not something that is done on a regular basis. I would hazard—unfortunately it is just hazarding a guess—that it is not used at the moment.

Q116 **Dr Hudson:** You are saying that it is just MoD; it is no other Government Departments? It is only the MoD.

Ananda Guha: That is my understanding, but I do not have chapter and verse on that.

Q117 **Dr Hudson:** Rather than putting you on the spot now, Ananda, Chair, with your permission, could we ask for the Department to seek that information from the MoD and potentially any other Departments as to how frequently this exemption has been used, and provide that in writing to the Committee, because that would be very helpful?



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Victoria Prentis: Are you happy to leave it with me if it is, as we have explained to you, a fairly de minimis use, rather than go into enormous detail for something that may have happened 10 years ago?

Q118 **Dr Hudson:** Yes, it is about current usage. If this is the exception rather than the rule, and we are keen on upholding our standards in our food procurement in terms of animal welfare and food standards, can we not just get rid of this exemption?

Victoria Prentis: It is very likely that we might. I am told the MoD is not seeking it again, which is partly why I am slightly relaxed about when it has been used. I do not get the impression it is something it is seeking to use at the moment.

Q119 **Dr Hudson:** Equally so, if people are saying that they are going to be seeking to use it or not, can we not just be a bit firmer, Minister, and say we are not prepared to allow this exemption moving forward?

Victoria Prentis: We could, but if they made a good case that they needed to buy locally sourced eggs and bacon for squaddies' breakfasts, if it was signed off by a senior official, which is the rule, I would be willing to listen to that case. This is not a question of standards slipping below the EU levels at all.

Dr Hudson: As we know, some of our UK standards are higher than the EU.

Victoria Prentis: Yes, absolutely. This is the point. Our UK standards on both of those areas are higher, which is exactly the problem that is being addressed. We cannot expect everybody to work to our standards. If our Government bodies are procuring abroad, then I understand that they have to source their food abroad, broadly.

Q120 **Dr Hudson:** You are saying this is used on an MoD basis abroad, but it would be helpful if we could get the assurance, when Ananda and the Department get back to us, that this is not being used at all on the shores of the United Kingdom.

Victoria Prentis: Yes, that is perhaps the way to go with the new GBSF. We cannot slip beyond our own standards in this country. There is no way that could be happening or would happen in the future, because those are the rules.

Q121 **Chair:** Before we leave this question, we are really keen, Minister, that we as a Government lead by example, through our Ministries, and actually buy British food. We had the Soil Association before us saying that there are times when schools decide to go for lower-quality food and purchase it from abroad as well. We need to know the facts when this is happening and we need to be able to draw it out into the open so that it does not continue. A lot of the rules are right, but they are not necessarily being focused on and they are not being publicised enough. That is the key; it is not exactly to name and shame, but to go in that



sort of direction, so that it is not too easy for schools, prison authorities or the forces. When the prison authorities came before us, they were, on the whole, pretty good, because they also grow, naturally, quite a lot of their own food as well. We really have to get to grips with this. We will look forward to some of the written evidence that you will give us on this matter.

Victoria Prentis: That is fine. As you know, I have a background in the Prison Service. There is a very interesting report, which you may well have considered, about the effect on prisoners' behaviour of what they eat. It is important to look at that as well. I have been very interested in prison food and the effect it has on management in prisons for a very long time.

Q122 **Geraint Davies:** On the issue of nutritional standards, you will be aware of the Eatwell standards in the NHS. Are you ensuring that all food procured by Government, whether it is for prisons, schools or other groups, is properly nutritious? You did mention prisons. In the case of Parc Prison, for example, which is a private prison that is cutting its cloth, can you ensure that they will have sufficiently nutritious food?

Victoria Prentis: As I said earlier, prisons are assessed for the quality of their food when they are inspected by the independent body that inspects them, which is one of the reasons why they were able to come before you, I suspect, and assure you on the quality of food in prisons.

In terms of the nutritional content, the Department of Health focuses specifically on that. I am told that the body that looks at that specifically will publish more guidance on nutritional standards very shortly, by the end of February this year, which will in turn feed into the work that we are doing on the GBSF this year.

Q123 **Geraint Davies:** You will update your guidance and the GBSF to comply with the Eatwell guide.

Victoria Prentis: Yes. I would not call it a rip up and start again; I would call it a refresh. We will certainly say that definitely we will be updating the nutritional standards very shortly following the report in February this year.

Q124 **Geraint Davies:** Given your assurances about nutritional value for money, can I ask how you explain that between March and July the Government bought 4.7 million food parcels that it gave to people who are clinically vulnerable for covid at a cost of £208 million from Bidfood and Brakes, which I understand is £44 a box compared to something like £26 in the supermarket—that is a 69% mark-up—that did not meet nutritional standards? There have been reports that it did not meet special needs for people with particular conditions like cancer, or religious needs. Muslim people were receiving pork sausages and the like. Much of the food had actually gone off. It was of poor nutritional standard, poor value for money and overall poor quality. How do you explain that?



Victoria Prentis: I have a completely different perspective on delivering nearly 5 million boxes to the clinically extremely vulnerable in a very short period of time. I definitely view it as a Government success. It was led by MHCLG. We were able to assist with our contacts in the food space. It was a delivery that was rolled out by Bidfood and Brakes at very short notice in the midst of a pandemic. If you remember, there were limited amounts of food on the shelves in supermarkets. People had been told to stay at home with no notice and no ability to prepare. These were often the people we were most worried about, and indeed are still most worried about—the oldest and the sickest in society.

At that point, if we cast our minds back, there was no vaccine and no end. We had no idea what would happen. I am very impressed by the work that was done, by all the people in the food supply chain and at Bidfood and Brakes, and the deliverers who got that food to the people who needed it at very short notice.

Q125 **Geraint Davies:** Bidfood and Brakes charged 70% more than the supermarkets were charging for the same food, and the supermarkets were providing nutritious and not-gone-off food, so you are saying we could not have done any better than Bidfood and Brakes and you are recommending them for the future, if we ever do this again, are you?

Victoria Prentis: Not at all, no. That is a complete misinterpretation. We were not able, because of the urgency of the problem, to go through a normal procurement process. I accept that. That is reasonable in the circumstances. Of course, you could buy cheaper and more nutritious food that suits you, whatever your particular needs are, yourself, but those were not the circumstances. The circumstances were that we had suddenly ordered very elderly and vulnerable people to stay at home. This was not normal and, God help us, it will never be normal again. We had to step up very quickly. We did not have companies falling over themselves to bid for those contracts, let me tell you. Bidfood and Brakes, with no run-in time and no preparation and in a very challenging food environment, because of other people's buying habits, did an extraordinarily good job, and I, for one, am very proud that the Government were able to deliver that.

Q126 **Geraint Davies:** Bidfood and Brakes were better at operating food sourcing than, say, Tesco and Sainsbury's? They could not have done it better? It does not seem convincing that this company could just do that.

Victoria Prentis: I am not saying that at all. Tesco and Sainsbury's did a fantastic job of what they do, absolutely. Tesco and Sainsbury's were busting a gut, with lots of new restrictions, to feed their shoppers, to make sure that there was social distancing in their stores and to really ramp up their delivery and click-and-collect networks. Not just Tesco and Sainsbury's but all of the larger supermarkets were doing that and continue to do that, and I am really grateful to them and all their staff for the work that they do in that space. That is not what we are talking about. We are talking about getting food to the door, which is not what



most supermarkets' work is at all. We are talking about getting food that is bought, that is provided temporarily by the Government because of an emergency situation, to the door of very elderly and vulnerable people, who really could not access it themselves. That is not at all the same as a normal shop in a large supermarket. The two cannot be compared.

Q127 **Geraint Davies:** If we do it again, are there any assurances that you can give about not having a 70% mark-up and poor nutritional standards?

Victoria Prentis: In the second lockdown we had, we did not need to step that up again. It is not at all where you want to be. It was never intended to be a long-term nutritional solution for anybody. It was very much a short-term emergency solution. We did not do it in the second lockdown. My team and the team I led across Government, working on food for the vulnerable, did an enormous amount of work with the supermarkets and other providers to make sure that online delivery and click-and-collect were ramped up to the levels we have now. We were able to put, via charities or local authorities, vulnerable people directly in touch with supermarkets, to make sure the most vulnerable got those slots. Supermarkets have been brilliant in this. They do not always make money from delivering to people's homes, but they have been really willing partners of Government in this space. I am so pleased with the work they have done.

In the second lockdown and, sadly now, in the third lockdown, we are finding that we do not need to do a box delivery scheme. I am pleased about that because food, as I said earlier, is a private good. It is really something that we buy and sell in this country. Providing food boxes to people is not a matter for Government, except in the direst emergency, which it was last year.

Q128 **Geraint Davies:** Do you accept that 7 million people are food-insecure at the moment? We are in a pandemic and there may be issues about blockages at the borders and harvesting, so we will have millions of people in hunger and we may need to deliver some more parcels in the future, the way things are going. Can you give an assurance that such parcels will be nutritious?

Victoria Prentis: We will have to deal with each challenge—and, goodness knows, this year, we have learnt things that we did not know about challenges—as it comes. I would hope that we do not need to do direct door-to-door box delivery again. There are better, more person-focused solutions, which is what we have at the moment. I am concerned about food poverty—it is what I think a lot about for much of my day job—and so are many other Government Ministers at the moment. We work across Government on this. There are no easy solutions, but it is important that we keep talking.

Q129 **Barry Gardiner:** Minister, can I just take you back to what you said to Ian Byrne? That was about trying to ensure that, in fact, in the future, the boxes would be reflecting £15 a week and more up to that mark. Is



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that not also a case where, in fact, nutritional standards are more important even than the money, even though we can all baulk at what was delivered for that money?

Victoria Prentis: I have not been involved at all, I am afraid, in the discussions about those boxes. They are being rolled out at speed by the Department for Education. I understand that the Department for Education is not, in fact, mandating what is in the boxes. They are very much encouraging that to be done at a local level between schools and local caterers in local area. I understand as well that the Department for Education will be reopening the national voucher scheme as soon as we can. As I said earlier, boxes and parcels are not the ideal way forward, because it will never be as person-focused as somebody doing their own shopping. I accept that.

Q130 **Barry Gardiner:** You said you were going to have conversations with your colleagues, and we all welcome that. When they are talking about local delivery and sensitivity to local and perhaps different cultural and ethnic food needs, will you raise the issue of nutritional standards with them?

Victoria Prentis: That is really DEFRA's role in all of this. I spend my life raising the issue of nutritional standards.

Q131 **Barry Gardiner:** Could you also assure the public that this particular contractor, which has raked off its profit from some of the poorest people and the poorest children in this country, will never again be a contractor for the Government in such a matter?

Victoria Prentis: Barry, I take your point, but let us check the facts first. I did try to check them with the Minister who is finding out what happened. It is important that we do that before we, as a group, behave like Twitter, if you see what I mean.

Q132 **Barry Gardiner:** It should always be evidence-based, and I trust you to make the appropriate points about the appropriate juncture.

Victoria Prentis: When we get to the bottom of it, I am sure I will pass on your views as well as those of the Department.

Q133 **Barry Gardiner:** I want to explore with you how we can strengthen the food procurement standards. In 2014, the Government buying standards introduced a scorecard for key elements of the public procurement. Those included environmental standards and animal welfare standards. In your response to the Chair, you said that the real issue is not whether they are mandatory but whether they are enforced, but it is difficult to enforce them, is it not, Minister, if you do not even monitor them? Of course, when you were talking to Mr Gibb, you said that they were not even properly monitored. In fact, DEFRA has not audited the public sector food procurement plan since its introduction in 2014, so it is difficult to see how one could possibly know whether the buying standards have improved public sector procurement. You talked of your to-do list.



Victoria Prentis: Barry, we have lost your sound, but I got the gist. The bit I am going to answer is about how we know if standards have improved and where they are. The answer to that section of your question is that we have had some reviews of hospital food, for example. We asked patients, who, after all, are the right people to ask in hospitals, and the feedback that we got on that was that about half of patients think food is good or very good. That is only half of patients, but it is an indication. We have also had evidence from school surveys that school food has improved a great deal from the low of about 2005, which is when we all started talking, if you remember, about turkey twizzlers and so on. School foods have improved a great deal from that time.

However, as I said, the future probably lies with auditing bodies and assurance bodies, such as the scheme, but not exclusively, Food for Life Served Here, run by the Soil Association. We do not have an army of enforcement officers in DEFRA in this space and we never will, so it is important that we find other ways of ensuring what goes on.

We do have an annual survey from Departments, and one of the pieces of work we need to do is on ensuring that they fill it in properly and that there is some transparency as to what is, in fact, going on.

Ananda Guha: We have talked about perceptions, cost, quality and nutrition. The other thing worth mentioning is that the Department of Health and Social Care did a report on compliance with hospital food standards in the NHS three years ago and found that around 90% of hospitals are partly or fully compliant, and 52% are fully compliant. That is the best that we can offer in terms of data that is there. The Minister mentioned that the review of hospital food talked about the importance of having some sort of auditing. That was the Prue Leith-led review that talked about the CQC.

It is worth mentioning that food is a devolved policy area, so the various devolved Administrations do things slightly differently. They do already have some degree of auditing in, say, the Scottish education system. When we come to review GBSF, we will look at all these aspects of best practice, both at home and abroad, and we will also try to make the rules simpler and easier to understand in order to both monitor and increase take-up. That is worth emphasising.

Q134 **Julian Sturdy:** Minister, the Government talked about strengthening food procurement standards and guidance to emphasise environmental outcomes, which we need to touch on, so, for example, making sustainable guidelines mandatory and aligning standards to net zero commitments. Where are we with that at the moment?

Victoria Prentis: I am going to bring Ananda in. We are working on it as part of our review of the GBSF, but I do not know exactly where we have got to. Do you, Ananda?



Ananda Guha: GBSF is a document of its time. It is 2011. It talked about things like environmental, energy, water and waste obligations. In Government, with the 25-year environment plan and other things, we are in a slightly different place. We want to make sure that we talk about sustainable food, resource usage and so forth. Our plan is for DHSC to do the nutrition bit, notwithstanding the review we are going to do, but we want to make sure that we reflect those net zero commitments and all the current state of play, so that, when we talk about being proud of our food, we can say that it reflects good resource usage. That is where the issue around cost, localisation and so forth comes into play. It is part of it, but it will be one of a menu of things that we will encourage procurers to look at.

Q135 **Julian Sturdy:** With that in mind, are we saying that that will also apply, when it is in place, to imported products, so that we make sure that we do not export our environmental damage, i.e. putting our homegrown producers at a disadvantage? What I am really asking for is whether we can get that level playing field.

Ananda Guha: If you look at Henry Dimbleby's independent food strategy, the terms of reference talk about not exporting environmental ills. Clearly, when the Government provide the White Paper response to that, we will reflect on that, and it has to underpin what we are doing on food procurement as well. We would be hypocritical if it did not.

Victoria Prentis: That is an important point. We are never going to procure everything locally, I suspect, so it is important that we look at what else is procured. That is a very important point.

Ananda Guha: The traceability aspects are important.

Q136 **Julian Sturdy:** The key point that I want to get across is making sure that it is judged on a level playing field. No one is going to argue against higher environmental standards and making sure that they are in place for the procurement process, but it is about making sure that we have that level playing field across the board and we are not just raising our standards and exporting our environmental damage, which I know has been touched on.

Victoria Prentis: "Traceability" is the key word as well.

Q137 **Chair:** Minister, it also goes back to this question. We can have the best rules in the world, but if we do not enforce them, we are just wasting rainforests of paper if we are not careful. As we improve the situation around what we are going to buy and how we are going to buy it, let us make sure that we can publish data at the end of each year as to what the public sector has bought. That would then make a difference because, once we saw what was happening, we could monitor it more closely. At the moment, we do not entirely know, sometimes until it is too late, what is happening. I am sorry to keep on about it, but it is the crux of the matter.



Victoria Prentis: We are never going to be in a position to say that HMP Parc buys eggs from whatever producer. What we will be able to do, I very much hope, is to say that HMP Parc, for example, has been assessed by an independent body, which says that the quality of food is X and 60% is sourced locally. What I hope we will be able to do in DEFRA, bearing in mind that we do not have a team of enforcement officers, is to get a good return from other Government Departments, with meaningful information in it, which will give the information that we need to publish for the public and to tell you what is being procured by the public purse.

Dr Hudson: As a quick final point, I understand the difficulties in enforcing and monitoring, but we have a real opportunity as a country and as a Government to change the rules and remove exemptions and loopholes that mean that substandard food can come in. We have an opportunity to make the rules better.

Q138 **Chair:** Coupled to that, Minister, we need to publish what has happened as well, because that way we can see what is happening and put pressure on those who are not conforming to what we wish to happen. I know that you cannot force everything, but if it was published afterwards, we would know what is happening, which we do not necessarily know now.

Victoria Prentis: We have not been into it in this session, but I know that you had a very good evidence session with the south-west partnership. That is very much the way forward. It will give us data and traceability, and that sort of organised hub will produce the right result. My goal is to roll that out nationally.

Q139 **Chair:** That is good, because it also showed us that it saved something like 6% in costs, so we do not have to be frightened of public procurement being local and costing more. Sometimes this is what scares the public sector buyers, is it not?

Victoria Prentis: Yes, definitely. That is a key message. The other key message that I would like to land is that auditing can be done by a variety of assurance bodies. The answer to this is not for DEFRA to employ a team of officers but to encourage, advertise, nudge and ensure traceability, and I am very determined to do that. I know you want to talk about borders.

Q140 **Rosie Duffield:** How important is the future food framework pilot that is being run by Crown Commercial Services for increasing market access for SMEs? I am pretty keen that that includes Kent producers. When will the pilot begin? What are the Government doing to ensure that it is not unnecessarily delayed?

Victoria Prentis: That is what I was just touching on. At the moment, the pilot is in the south-west, not Kent, I am afraid, but this pilot is going to work well. The south-west is a very food-focused area, if I may call it that. It has really good relationships between the LEPs and the food producers. This is a really thought-through piece of work, which I am very excited by. The difficulty, as I explained earlier, is with the CCS just



being overstretched at the moment and, very sadly, they have had to delay the pilot from quarter 2 this year to quarter 2 next year. DEFRA pushed back a bit on that, as did Henry Dimbleby, but I accept what they tell me, which is that they have their hands full running test and trace at the moment. It is irritating, but it is another irritation of the pandemic, which I am afraid we have to accept.

What is important to me is that I get on with the work of getting the policies in places, so that when we eventually start this pilot and rollout properly, we will be ready to go with a new and refreshed document, we will have done the White Paper in response to Henry Dimbleby's review, and we will be really ready to act on what we have learned.

Q141 **Rosie Duffield:** The current one is planned in the south-west, but will there be the opportunity for Kent producers to take part or be involved at some point?

Victoria Prentis: No, not in that pilot, but I am very hopeful. Kent is another area that is proud of its local produce and that works well as a food-producing area. Yorkshire was another area that sprang to mind with Robbie on the call. Not all areas of the country are as good at SME self-promotion as your area and the south-west. I want to really encourage that seasonal, local feel. Ananda was talking about it earlier in the context of France being very good at self-promotion. This is the way forward for food standards and SMEs in this space, I am sure, and Kent is very well placed to take advantage of those opportunities.

Ananda Guha: It is a three-stage process. The 6% figure that you referred to, Chairman, is a pre-pilot in Bath and North East Somerset. That has concluded and has been very successful. Lots more SMEs have been involved. The south-west one, as the Minister said, starts next year because of inescapable delays. Then the idea is that we have a national rollout of what is, essentially, dynamic food procurement, which we are confident will result in better take-up and more access for SMEs. That is where Kent and other good food regions can really benefit. We want to go national in 2023. It is later than we in DEFRA wanted, but needs must.

Q142 **Chair:** We accept that. It is always wonderful that, where the West country leads, the rest of the country follows. You would expect me to say that, would you not, Minister? Seriously, the evidence that we took from the Bath and North East Somerset model showed that it was working well, so we look forward to that, and the support that you can give them would be good.

Just before we get on to the border questions, you were prisons Minister. When we had the prisons representative here, he was saying that, traditionally, there were many more farms within the prisons, which worked very well. Probably for financial reasons and others, they have been sold off. I would just ask you perhaps, although it is not your exact brief, whether DEFRA can help to see whether we can reinstate some of those prison farms. It would be good for rehabilitation of the prisoner and



also produce some excellent food. It is just something that I would like to throw into the mix.

Victoria Prentis: I have never been prisons Minister, but I was a member of the Justice Select Committee that reported on prisons, and I was an official who worked with the Prison Service for many years. I am always very interested in what goes on in prisons, and I agree with you that prison farms can be really useful.

Q143 **Chair:** Let us move on to the border questions. First of all, are the problems being faced by food retailers and suppliers since 1 January going to worsen or get better? This is both on exports and imports of food generally. We are going to talk about fish later. How is it going, Minister? Is it all going well?

Victoria Prentis: It is going all right. It is going slightly better than anticipated, certainly by some of us. Whether because of perceived worries about the border or because of covid, we are dealing with very much reduced flows at the border, so things are flowing. We have had an extraordinary situation where, of course, we saw the border shut before Christmas, which was not something we had anticipated in all our no-deal planning for many years. It was absolutely firmly shut. We always anticipated that there would be a bit of flow, and it was shut because of covid, so that was a very difficult situation, and all credit to those who worked very hard to clear that backlog.

Since then, we have been pleased with the way things are going. We have about half the usual traffic at the moment. That is not nothing; 2,227 Kent access permits were applied for yesterday. Not all of them were used. The border operations centre is expecting traffic to go back up to almost normal levels next week. We had an initial problem between 1 and 3 January with an HMRC IT issue, which we were able to resolve, so we were very pleased about that. However, there are niggles, which we are finding out about on a daily basis, with filling in the new forms and paperwork that has to be filled in; we have to work through those.

We met the Irish yesterday, who gave us a checklist of issues that we are working on, and we will then communicate those findings to stakeholders. We met the French this morning, and Simon may have an update on that. We are meeting the Dutch tomorrow. At the moment, we are very much at the granular, nitty-gritty detail of what colour ink to use and where to put the stamp in the box. Those things are important, but we are pleased with the work that has gone on.

Q144 **Chair:** How much of the problem at the border now is the paperwork, and how much is it the drivers being tested for covid? That is also holding up quite a lot of export and import, is it not?

Victoria Prentis: From figures for the day before yesterday, 53 lorries were not allowed into Kent, 51 of which were due to failing to produce covid tests. That was a major issue the day before yesterday. Simon, do you have more up-to-date info on that?



Simon James: You are reading off the same information as I am, Minister. It is true to say that there are turn-backs in Kent. Our data shows the vast majority of those being due to covid. I have to unpack that a little bit and say that, if you are showing that you do not have a valid covid test, there is not then a check of your paperwork and you are just turned back round, so there may be some masking there of the broader paperwork. The Minister is absolutely right in that, of those getting through to the French side, a number of issues are being highlighted about the paperwork. We have a list of those and we are working through them day by day.

Q145 **Mrs Murray:** Minister, I think I know some of the answers to this because I heard the Secretary of State on my local politics show, but I am going to ask you, so that everybody else can hear it as well. How are the Government going to support seafood exporters whose trade with the EU has been badly affected by the new export regulations and procedures? Could you perhaps explain exactly why things got held up and what improvements have been put in place?

Victoria Prentis: That is a huge question. Many seafood exporters have had a hell of a year. Some 70% of our seafood, in the broadest sense, is exported to the EU, so the market is there. Because of covid, which has really been the major issue over the last year, for seafood as well as for the rest of society, those markets have dried up. Much of our great-quality seafood is eaten, as you know, in hospitality settings, and we simply have not been able, either here or in continental Europe, to go out and enjoy it as we would want to. That has been the worst problem over the last year. As you know, we did a scheme for those who were worst affected by the collapse of their market since the beginning of covid.

Since then, we have also left the EU, so there have been a few border difficulties for some stakeholders from Scotland and the south-west. We have set up a twice-weekly—it is probably more often at the moment—stakeholder meeting with some of the big Scottish fishing organisations, as well as some very significant ones from the south-west, including Waterdance, which your Chairman has mentioned to me several times as being in or near his constituency. They are well represented and we are very much talking to them on at least a bi-weekly basis at the moment.

They have made useful suggestions to the Department in recent days about simplifying EHCs, ways we could speed up export and import declarations, and how we can correct commodity codes on catch certificates—very granular and sensible points. All I can say at the moment is that we will continue to work with them and continue to work very closely with the member states that we need to work with in order to iron out the difficulties, but the communications are good. I would like to thank the team, who are working around the clock on this.

Q146 **Mrs Murray:** Initially, I understand there was a problem with the French software in some of the ports. Has that been ironed out now? Could you explain what that problem was?



Victoria Prentis: I know there was a problem with the customs software that we were able to resolve. That was days one to three, which I suspect is what you mean. The difficulty, as I understand it, was that Calais, as a port, was not properly described in the way that you applied for where you were taking your goods. We also have slight niggles with the Fish Export Service at the moment, which does not contain all the required customs codes that we might need to apply for a catch certificate. We resolved the customs glitch completely, although there may still be some residual problems that flow from that, and we are currently resolving the Fish Export Service glitch. Is that right, Simon?

Simon James: Yes, that is correct, Minister.

Q147 **Mrs Murray:** Just lastly, before I hand over to Barry, presumably the problems you have just mentioned with Calais and also with Boulogne have been resolved. The traffic through Dunkirk, which seemed to be overwhelmed because of diversions, has gone back to normal, as far as you are aware.

Victoria Prentis: I check several times a day and, just before I started this call, I was assured that the traffic is now flowing through Calais to Boulogne, as it should do. As you know, we are dealing with this on an hour-by-hour basis.

Q148 **Mrs Murray:** If I can just say, I know I have raised this with you, as have a lot of colleagues of all political colours. We are very grateful for all the work that the Department has done to make sure that that flows.

Victoria Prentis: That is really kind. I talk to the team several times a day and I must say they are looking tired. This is not a political issue but an issue for the whole nation. We have to get this right. It is nothing to do with what you voted in the referendum. It is just an essential thing to get right now. I know that the team will appreciate your thanks, because they are working very hard.

Q149 **Barry Gardiner:** Minister, I do not know where we have got to, but it is probably best that I write to you with all the questions that I have.

Victoria Prentis: That is absolutely fine, or if you would like to arrange an individual call, any time. As Sheryll said, I am talking to a large number of colleagues, as are the great team in the Department. We genuinely want the feedback from your industries because we need to know what is going on.

Q150 **Barry Gardiner:** Moving to fish, just for clarity, Sheryll talked about the computer and barcode problems in Calais and Boulogne. My understanding is that Jimmy Buchan, who is the chief exec of the Scottish Seafood Association, has said that there were computer glitches on both sides of the Channel. Is that fair?

Simon James: The main issue was as the Minister described, which was the EU IT system, NCTS. That was certainly the main issue. Whether that



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was masking any teething problems at our end, I do not have the information on that, but it is fair to say that, whatever they were, there are now no systematic issues. There are, of course, the ongoing individual issues that apply to everything, not just fish.

Q151 Barry Gardiner: Let us go to the export health certificates for both wild-caught and farmed salmon, which are affecting traders so much at the moment. At what point did you know that the export health certificates would be a problem?

Victoria Prentis: We have always worried about people having to fill in EHCs and having to comply with that obligation.

Q152 Barry Gardiner: At what point did you quantify the time that it would take to comply with the EHC? I understand that it is up to five hours.

Victoria Prentis: We have been wargaming this for years, and certainly increasingly intensely for the last few months. There are delays at Larkhall in Scotland, which are, I suspect, what you are referring to, or are you referring to other delays?

Barry Gardiner: I am simply trying to feed to you what the Scottish Seafood Association has said.

Victoria Prentis: If it is Scotland, I am guessing but I suspect that they are concerned about delays at DFDS in Larkhall. These forms are new for everybody. Both the business and the person checking the forms need to learn how to fill them in. There have been difficulties with businesses filling them in correctly. This is, of course, a devolved matter. We are working very closely with Scottish Government officials—we are in touch with them all the time—to make sure that we can ramp up our help and training for businesses to make sure that they are filled in properly. The problem is that some EHCs that had been incorrectly filled in resulted in DFDS pausing mixed consignments, which caused some holdups, but I have been reassured by Scottish Government officials that things are getting better. Is that your understanding, Simon?

Simon James: Yes. There was some media reporting of this recently, which did relate to Scottish seafood exporters. On the issue of export health certification, there are two major things that could be a problem. One is trader readiness, for want of a better word: do traders understand what is required of them? The other issue potentially is the capacity of vets and other experts to fill in the forms appropriately. Our understanding is that it is firmly the former. I do not want to say it is just trader readiness, because it is a significant issue and one that we are working very closely on with the Scottish Government and others.

Q153 Barry Gardiner: Is it the case that the new rules require every box of fresh seafood to be offloaded from lorries and inspected by vets before they leave Scotland?



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Simon James: I cannot give a definitive answer to that. Exactly where the checks take place is going to depend on a number of things. We are getting to the whole issue of groupage certification. It is complex. I cannot give you a definitive answer now, but we would be happy to follow that up and provide you with a longer answer.

Q154 **Barry Gardiner:** Just so I am clear here, can you explain why it cannot be explained? Surely either it is the case that every box has to be offloaded, checked by a vet and certified, or it is not the case. Are you saying that sometimes it will be and sometimes it will not, in which case what are the sometimes?

Simon James: I do not have that information in front of me, I am afraid, which is why I am going to have to come back and confirm.

Q155 **Barry Gardiner:** Given that you have been wargaming this, as the Minister just said, for several months, surely this was one of the things. In fact, I remember the Permanent Secretary appearing before the Public Accounts Committee and talking about the difficulties that checks such as this might pose but assuring us that there would not be problems.

Victoria Prentis: On groupage, we are working through the exact requirements of different member states at the moment. We are having meetings, as I said earlier, although you might have missed that bit, Barry. We had one with the French this morning. We had a very useful meeting yesterday with the Irish and they gave us around 10 points that they wanted to work on in terms of the ways they wanted us to present our lorries. We are doing this on a very granular basis and finding out whether it is acceptable, for example, for the lorry, if it is carrying one type of goods, to be sealed, which we think it is. If you are a lorry with Scottish salmon on it, we think it is probably all right for the seal to be applied to the lorry, but we are working through those details with different member states, and this is taking some time.

In the meantime, we understand that flow is happening. The French have indicated to us that they were prepared to be fairly tolerant of our efforts to export for the last few weeks. That has been going, as I said earlier, relatively well. We are not complacent about it and we continue to work very hard on the details.

Q156 **Barry Gardiner:** If I return to Sheryll's original question about what support the Government are going to give to seafood exporters, I understand that hundreds of thousands of pounds of fish are being turned to landfill as a result of these delays. What compensation payments or what support are the Government going to give to those who have lost their fish?

Victoria Prentis: There are different types of support. At the moment, our support is training and help with filling in the paperwork and working closely with a large range of fishery producers to make sure that their exports can flow, bearing in mind that this is a very difficult time for them because much of their market has simply been affected by covid, as we



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were saying earlier. In terms of financial support, we have not yet taken any decisions.

Q157 Barry Gardiner: There will be representatives from the fisheries industries who are watching this very carefully. Can you give them any assurance that the matter of financial compensation for the exports that they have lost and had to put to landfill is going to be discussed? Is compensation for that going to be discussed by Government in an active way?

Victoria Prentis: My priority is to ensure that things are exported efficiently and effectively. That is my understanding of what is happening at the moment. We want to avoid any waste of fabulous Scottish products going to landfill.

Q158 Barry Gardiner: It is already wasted. Their question to you, Minister, will be about who is going to pay for that loss.

Victoria Prentis: I certainly do not have evidence of that waste at the moment. We did have a problem before Christmas, when the border closed; I absolutely accept that. We encouraged people not to send their trucks to Kent at that time because the border was closed due to covid. At the moment, we are dealing with day-to-day, real situations to ensure that the borders keep flowing and that goods keep flowing. That is our priority at the moment.

Q159 Barry Gardiner: You, as the Minister, are not aware of any consignments of fish that have had to be put to landfill since the covid problem before Christmas was resolved.

Victoria Prentis: No, I would not say that because the border was closed for several days and it then took a lot of time to clear that border. I cannot unpack the two problems. We have had covid problems and we continue to have covid problems. We also have a new border operating model, which we are managing extraordinarily well. This is not the time to be talking about money and compensation. This is the time to be focusing on making sure that we keep that border flowing.

Barry Gardiner: There may be fishermen who have sustained substantial losses who would disagree with you, but we will leave it there.

Chair: Minister, I know you are working very hard to get the border flowing, so we will wait to see the evidence on this as to exactly what is happening. You are aware, as everybody is, that the value of fish drops quickly because it is so perishable, but I echo what Sheryll Murray said. We thank you for the work that you and the Department have done. There is a lot more to do and we will try to work with you to deliver that. Barry, we will take evidence, if necessary, from the fishing industry, but today is not the time to do it. Today is about getting that border moving and keeping it moving and making sure that the French do not dispute the colour of the ink on the forms and things like that. We have to get away from pettiness and get the border flowing, and I know that



everybody is working hard.

- Q160 **Dr Hudson:** We all know that the pandemic has really hit the tourism and hospitality sectors very hard around the country, not least in my area in Cumbria, but with the increased lockdown, there have been increased changes in terms of the food procurement issue, which is hitting people in different sectors of the food supply chain. Minister, are the Government going to be thinking about providing any additional support to the food suppliers and wholesalers who have been hit both by the hospitality closures, with increased restrictions that we all understand, as well as the changes in physical school provision, which are impacting wholesalers and food suppliers as well? Is there any thought about Government providing additional support in those sectors?

Victoria Prentis: I am aware that wholesalers do not feel as if they have been included in some of the other HM Treasury schemes at the moment. We very much hope that we can repurpose food and make sure that it enters the food chain. We have no problems with food supply at the moment. It is stable, which is a great relief to me, but we want to make sure that that situation continues. Where possible, we very much hope that people are able to shift food that was going into public procurement, for example, where it is no longer needed, over and supply it via retailers to people in their own homes.

As a Department, we have done everything we can to allow easements and to allow for those discussions to happen, which, under normal commercial circumstances, would not happen, in order to cope with food supply in the pandemic. It is probably too early to talk about financial compensation. What is important, certainly as far as I am concerned at the moment, is to make sure that food supply remains stable and that the borders remain open.

- Q161 **Dr Hudson:** That is very helpful. I echo the Chair and Sheryll's comments thanking your Department for everything you are doing in these challenging times. Could you give us the reassurance that DEFRA is certainly keeping a watching brief everywhere along the food supply chain of people, businesses and areas that are being particularly hit hard and will keep that under review?

Victoria Prentis: Yes, very much so. We watch food supply from farm to fork with a very eagle eye.

- Q162 **Geraint Davies:** Minister, we mentioned earlier that something like 4.7 million food parcels were delivered previously to shielding people. I know that you are moving away from that, but would you accept that there are millions of people who are in food insecurity and millions of people who have been excluded from financial support, whether they are self-employed or on zero hours? There is a significant group of people who have very little money and who, in the coming months, may be forced into employment when they should be shielding or may be on a track-and-trace list. What provision are the Government putting in place to



support with food for people who are extremely vulnerable and need to shield? How are they going to do it? For example, are they going to provide the money to local authorities to provide the food parcels for those people? How is it going to work?

Victoria Prentis: That is a great question but a very large question. I would refer you to the winter support package, which the Government put in place before Christmas. As I said earlier, we worked together as a group of food Ministers on that. That work is often paid for by DWP, which is the Department that leads on poverty and alleviating food poverty in that respect. The Department for Education is clearly involved. It is very important that other Government Departments, such as MHCLG, which led on the package for vulnerable people, are also brought in where necessary. Government are working closely together and across Government on this.

From the DEFRA point of view, the bit that we are responsible for at the moment is a second tranche of £16 million or so, which we have rolled out in order to pick up the pieces that have not been reached by the larger winter support package. I would refer you, as part of this answer, to evidence on the winter support package, which is much wider than what I am talking about, but I do not want to annoy the Chairman by going into it in great detail.

The £16 million that DEFRA has been responsible for is a second tranche of £16 million. We did another one last summer. This was rolled out just before Christmas. FareShare is the organisation that is making sure that it reaches those who need it on the ground. It is a great organisation. It uses other organisations, broadly, in order to roll out the food to people who need it. That is going well. We are anticipating that that pot of money will last until the end of March, and that is very much a mop-up grant to reach people who have not been reached otherwise.

I have heard evidence from the Trussell Trust and others that the most successful intervention was via local authorities, because they know who their needy families are. That intervention, which we had last summer and again just before Christmas, topped up as part of the winter support package, is the intervention that I feel has been most successful, but our additional FareShare package is very helpful too to help the parts that we have not otherwise reached. This is a real issue.

Q163 **Geraint Davies:** Minister, so that I am clear, you spent £209 million before, so is the £16 million distributed across all local authorities?

Victoria Prentis: No. Sorry, I mis-explained. The £16 million is not the local authority package. That is what I have talked about before and what I referred to in our winter support grant. We could have a whole session on this. The £16 million is just the top-up fund to FareShare, which goes out to food charities.

Q164 **Geraint Davies:** If you have individual extremely vulnerable people who



cannot put food on the table because they do not have any money—

Victoria Prentis: The people who we are trying to reach with our £16 million are the people who are not being reached by their local authority, for whatever reason. The best way to reach people is via DWP and benefits, or via their local authority through the top-up payments that the Government have done, but the fund that I am talking about and for which I and DEFRA are responsible is an additional fund to help where those other funds have not managed to reach.

Q165 **Geraint Davies:** You can guarantee that extremely vulnerable people will not be without food during this pandemic.

Victoria Prentis: Nobody can guarantee anything during this pandemic, but what I would say is that this is a joined-up and robust approach, and we are doing our best, as Government, to work across Government as imaginatively as possible. DWP has the benefits system and has put vast amounts into that over the last year. We then have local authorities doing targeted grant work, which we know works. The Trussell Trust, the Children's Society and others tell us that that has been effective. The fund that I am talking about is an additional fund to help where those other funds have not reached, for whatever reason.

Q166 **Geraint Davies:** Are you measuring the number of people? The Food Foundation said that 2.6 million people are in food insecurity.

Victoria Prentis: We are very much measuring it and we are very much in touch on a very gritty and day-to-day basis with those who are working at the frontline with food charities.

Chair: Thank you, Minister. You have been very generous with your time. You have answered our questions very straightforwardly on food procurement, borders and food supply to the most vulnerable. We will be having you back again to talk about food for the most vulnerable. I know you take a real personal interest in this and I thank you for the personal effort that you put in, not just the Department's.

Again, I echo what Sheryll said. We appreciate the work that you and the Department were doing along with Border Force and the Foreign Office to try to get this new system of exports and imports to work. The stakeholders group is a good one, and we will carry on monitoring and scrutinising it, because that is our role as a Select Committee, but we do wish you and all of those working so hard to deliver it well.

This is the new deal, and we must try to make it work, because we did give some concessions on fish because we have the market. The one point that I would make to you, Minister, is that we need to make sure that that market works, and I know that you are doing your best to make that happen. Thank you very much, and can I also thank Simon and Ananda very much for their contributions? You have gone above and beyond your duties this afternoon, so thank you very much.

Can I thank all members for their time? Thank you very much,



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everybody, and I look forward to seeing you all next week. Minister, thank you very much for keeping me briefed. We will work with you as a Committee but, of course, we will take our scrutiny role very seriously. Thank you very much.