

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The future of farming, HC 527

Tuesday 16 December 2025

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Members present: Mr Alistair Carmichael (Chair); Sarah Bool; Juliet Campbell; Charlie Dewhurst; Sarah Dyke; Terry Jermy; Jayne Kirkham; Josh Newbury; Jenny Riddell-Carpenter; Henry Tufnell.

Questions 241 - 299

Witnesses

I: Dame Angela Eagle MP, Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, DEFRA; Emily Miles, Director General for Food, Biosecurity and Trade, DEFRA; Mike Rowe, Director for Farming and Countryside, DEFRA.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dame Angela Eagle, Emily Miles and Mike Rowe.

Q241 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody, and welcome to this meeting of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. We return to our inquiry this morning on the work of the Department and we are delighted to have with us for the first time since her appointment to this job the new Minister, Angela Eagle. You are very welcome, Angela, to the Committee. For the benefit of those who are following our proceedings and for our own official record, can I invite you to introduce yourself and your colleagues to the Committee?

Dame Angela Eagle: Thank you, Chair. It is a great pleasure to be here. I am looking forward to a good session today. I am Angela Eagle. I am the Member of Parliament for Wallasey. I am the Minister of State for farming, fishing, rural affairs and various other bits round the side. I will leave my colleagues to introduce themselves.

Emily Miles: Good morning, everyone. I am Emily Miles, director general for food, biosecurity and trade at DEFRA.

Mike Rowe: Good morning. I am Mike Rowe, director for the farming and countryside programme in DEFRA.

Q242 **Chair:** You are all very welcome to the Committee. Since this is your first formal public engagement, Minister, let me say that we appreciate your attendance. We appreciate the engagement not just on days like this but in those moments when we have engagement between the meetings. It is an important relationship for the delivery of better outcomes for us all—we understand that.

You have not inherited an easy brief, and probably not for the first time in your career, it has to be said. By my reckoning, you are the sixth Farming Minister in 10 years. I could maybe make that seven or eight because we had a revolving door for George Eustice at one point. You come in at a time when 51% of farmers are considering leaving the industry; 56% of farmers fully or roughly understand DEFRA's vision for farming; and 72% are not at all confident that changes to schemes and regulations will lead to a successful future for farming.

I suppose that, statistically, you might expect to have a couple of years in the job, but I am a Liberal Democrat and that makes me an optimist, so let us say that that gives you three or four years. Where would you want these figures to be at the end of your time as Farming Minister and how are you going to get there?

Dame Angela Eagle: I would like them to improve.

Chair: There is not much room for them to get worse.

Dame Angela Eagle: Given what you have just read out, it sounds like there is a great deal of chance to improve them. They also are not



surprising because of the huge uncertainties and change that the farming sector—and by that I mean the wider agricultural sector—has been through in the last few years. It continues to face some degrees of uncertainty. That uncertainty comes from various places. It started with Brexit and the disruption—I am not saying plus or minus—of all that. The introduction of the farming transition, which is just about coming to an end now, has disrupted a system that was not popular but was fairly stable for farmers and turned it into an environmental system and a purchase of public goods.

I was struck when I came into the Department and looked at the environmental land management schemes by how much chopping and changing there had been and how many parallel schemes, legacy schemes, new schemes and different iterations of the same schemes the Rural Payments Agency is having to deal with administering. I am not surprised that people are worried about that and certainly I want to see what I can do to stabilise some of that.

At the same time we also have climate change, which means that weather conditions are not as predictable as they used to be, as we have seen from the yields this year being very much down due to the overly wet weather later in the year. We also have general pressure.

I am not surprised at the figures you have read out, but I would like—if I get the time—to have a good run at this, to get us to a situation where we have made farming much more profitable, made sure that it is done sustainably, so we are on a path to improving our soils, and made farming more productive because of the use of and increasing opting into agritech opportunities. I would like to see those opportunities extended to tenant farmers as well as landowners. If we can get it right, we could be in a situation where we can transform farming and make it much fitter for the future than in this period of change we have been in over the last 10 years.

Q243 **Chair:** It is interesting that you talk about the farming transition being almost complete. By that you presumably mean the support mechanisms.

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes, I do.

Q244 **Chair:** The European Union has done another 180 degrees and its transition is complete, taking it back to more or less where it was before, with support for production and basic payments based on area. Is that likely to have an impact, do you think?

Dame Angela Eagle: If you are asking me whether we will do that here, the answer is no. We have our environmental improvement legal requirements. We have moved to a system where we are paying for public goods and the provision of improvements in soil and nature, as well as farming more sustainably. If we were to switch back that would be another huge disjunction, which would create yet another system. We need to stabilise and simplify our current system and have some



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consistency going forward, so farmers know what it is that we want them to do.

Q245 **Chair:** If we are going to get rid of this uncertainty, the Government need to be telling farmers what they want them to achieve. You have a bit of a backlog to clear there. You had Minette Batters' review on 31 October. Are we going to see that before Christmas?

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes.

Chair: We will?

Dame Angela Eagle: This week, hopefully.

Chair: If it is Wednesday, it is good news. If it is Thursday, it is "take out the trash" day. Is it going to be Wednesday or Thursday?

Dame Angela Eagle: I have read the Batters report. It is a very substantial piece of work and it certainly is not trash. We will, when it is produced, have an initial response and deal with some of the larger areas and recommendations. I hope that, in the months that lie ahead, we will be able to do more work. This is a substantial piece of work on farming profitability that is going to be influential.

Chair: It is going to be implemented.

Dame Angela Eagle: It is going to be influential, yes.

Q246 **Chair:** Influential, right. Above that, you also have the farming road map. You have the land use framework. We have a refreshed food strategy. We had SFI closed last March. Daniel Zeichner told us it would come sometime over the summer. After the summer, he told us that it would be next year. We still do not have any clarity on that. Are you able to put dates on the points at which we will know when these things are going to happen?

Dame Angela Eagle: Let me first deal with the strategies that you have listed off there. It is important that we get the profitability report—the Batters report—out there first.

Q247 **Chair:** Would it not have been sensible to commission that before you commissioned the road map, the land use framework and the food strategy?

Dame Angela Eagle: You will have to talk to our predecessor Secretary of State about that. These issues were inherited and on the books when I came into government. I think that it is good to have a strategy rather than not have a strategy, because I am a chess player and I tend to think that—

Q248 **Chair:** How many strategies are you going to have?

Dame Angela Eagle: One strategy, probably. But if you do strategy, that can guide you. The farming road map is at the pinnacle of that,



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because that will demonstrate the way forwards. In order to do that, first you have to have the “what”, and that is the profitability report, which will be coming this week. Then we have the land use framework, which is going to be a tool to make it much clearer “where”. As we come to the farming road map, that is going to be the “how”. I hope that that will be a strategic direction that everybody will understand. We are in that period where these things are incubating and about to be delivered. I hope that, in three or four months’ time, you will be able to—if you wish to have me back—have a much clearer view of where we want farming to go and how we want to work in partnership with farmers and the food production industry to make sure that we get there.

On SFI, I know that it is frustrating. When I came into this post, I was fairly astonished at the complexity. If you look at SFI 2023, there were, I think, 23 actions in that. SFI 2024 had over 100 actions in it and was massively complicated. I suspect that it was just to get money out of the door. I am not sure. Those who were there would have to talk to you about that.

We have a system. When I came into this post, I asked to see what the distribution of that money was, and 25% of the money goes to 4% of farmers. I do not like that kind of distribution. Perhaps that would not be so much of an issue if the end of basic payments was not coming up. We have our environmental improvement legal duties to deliver. That means that, in my view, we have to have far more farmers involved in the system if we possibly can.

I have looked to see how we can change that distribution in a way that will allow us to meet our legal requirements, but also support more farming and more farmers. We are looking very carefully at that. I hope that, when we reopen the scheme, which will be in the first part of next year—and we will be very open about the requirements around it and how we want it to work—that we will be moving towards a system that is much more stable and much simpler. I hope that that will endure going forward, rather than having this chopping and changing.

Q249 Chair: Stability and simplicity would be very welcome, especially among smaller farmers. We have heard this. It is always the big boys, who have the resource to pay for the consultants, the land agents and the rest of it, for whom these schemes work.

Dame Angela Eagle: I do not have anything personal against land agents, but I want to have a system where, after you have been in the fields all day, you can come back and make your application without having to go through hell or employing somebody to do it. I have had the Rural Payments Agency in my office to show me how the system works. If I could say it is worse than IPSA, you would know what I mean.

We are seeing what we can do to make it more user-friendly. Some of that will rely on new tech, which is not available for this year. I am



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hoping that we will be able to ensure that the new tech is developed alongside the shape of the scheme I want to see in the future.

Q250 **Chair:** Looking at the Batters review, are you able to give us any sort of insight? Is it going to tackle the high costs for farmers, by reducing the cost of inputs, access to cheaper finance or anything of that sort?

Dame Angela Eagle: It is a very wide-ranging review. You only have to wait a small number of hours now to see it. I certainly hope that, taken together, it will be able to deal with quite a bit of this.

Q251 **Chair:** Your manifesto at the last election talked about greater use of public procurement policy to help domestic farmers. When are we going to hear a bit more about that?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are considering all that at the moment. It is a very complex sort of landscape, given the way that food distribution now works. It has rather moved away from local distributions, so it is a question of how we can see what can be done much more locally. It is more difficult than I had hoped, simply because of the way that food supply chains and food buying works at the moment.

Q252 **Chair:** I genuinely hope that you are able to do the things that you are talking about, because it is good. It has been unsatisfactory that we have had various tactics all over the place with no overarching strategy to give any idea of vision. That is why you get the figures that we spoke about right at the start. Even with that, you are looking at a situation where we will be at least 18 months, maybe 20 months, into a five-year Parliament before farmers have any clear idea what is expected for them. You cannot undo that, but what lessons should we learn from it?

Dame Angela Eagle: It is quite difficult to undo what has come before. Well, it is impossible to undo what has come before, and we have three to five-year schemes that do not run out, so by definition you have to run these things in parallel. If we can get the approach right, and with the fact that the Batters review ought to be looked at cross-party, we may be able to get ourselves into a situation where there is broad agreement that can go across Parliaments about the direction.

We are in a much more dangerous global situation. We have to ensure, for our own food security, that we can feed ourselves. We are not doing too badly with respect to that, in my view. I think that we produce 65% of the food that we eat and 77% of the food that we can actually grow is produced here. That is very different from the inter-war years, when it was only about 39%. We ramped up to 85% after we dug for victory.

We have to get some resilience in the system, but we also have to get to the stage where we can take advantage of some of the new trade deals that are being done, rather than just be done to in imports. That is also an important part of how we might be able to increase the business opportunities for farming more generally.



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Q253 **Chair:** We heard yesterday at the Liaison Committee the Prime Minister's frustration that, every time he pulls a lever, he finds that he has initiated a whole series of consultations, reviews and the rest of it.

Dame Angela Eagle: DEFRA is extremely good at that, I might add. I have discovered that since I got here.

Chair: On the question of diversification, Charlie, do you want to pick up the point about tackling the blockers?

Q254 **Charlie Dewhurst:** Yes. If you will indulge me in the festive spirit, Chair, I will just go back a second, Minister. Thank you for coming in today. It is no secret that you have had the Batters review for a few days at least, or two weeks, maybe.

Dame Angela Eagle: We have had it since 31 October.

Charlie Dewhurst: Exactly, so it is no secret. Why is it going to be snuck out on the last day before Christmas?

Dame Angela Eagle: It is not being snuck out on the last day before Christmas. It is not. There are a great number of reports across Government that have to be got out. There is the infamous No. 10 grid that you may remember from previous Administrations. We have to get the sequencing of all Government announcements right.

I do not think that getting it out before Christmas, on whatever day, is an attempt to hide it. It is a substantial report. The Secretary of State is very enthusiastic about the recommendations in it. We will be doing our best to give an initial response on the big recommendations and then see how we can adopt and adapt to some of the suggestions in the recommendations, of which there are very many, in the new year. I do not accept at all, Mr Dewhurst, that we are sneaking it out.

Q255 **Charlie Dewhurst:** Are you confirming that it is coming out on Thursday?

Dame Angela Eagle: No.

Charlie Dewhurst: Is it tomorrow?

Dame Angela Eagle: It is coming out before Christmas.

Charlie Dewhurst: There are two days left. Is it tomorrow or Thursday? You must know. Come on.

Dame Angela Eagle: You will have to wait and see.

Chair: It is the No. 10 grid, Charlie. It is another way of talking about gridlock.

Q256 **Charlie Dewhurst:** I am sure that it is complex. On another matter, you have talked about the huge uncertainty farmers have faced. You mentioned Brexit, climate change and other things. We did not mention covid and Ukraine.



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Dame Angela Eagle: Yes, they are also in the mix.

Charlie Dewhirst: There is an elephant in the room here, and I appreciate that this was not on your watch, but do you think, therefore, that this is not the right time to be making sweeping changes to inheritance tax regimes on farms and family businesses?

Dame Angela Eagle: The Government have policy, the policy is decided and supported by the Government, and I am not going to become a commentator on it. My job, as Minister for Farming, is to see what I can do in a positive way to improve the prospects for farming and farmers across the whole system. That is what I am concentrating on: things that I can have an effect on.

Q257 **Charlie Dewhirst:** With that in mind, would you encourage colleagues at the Treasury to look at this again and nuance their policy?

Dame Angela Eagle: I deal with the situation as it is in the Department I am in. That is what I am doing.

Q258 **Charlie Dewhirst:** I can only make a plea that you listen to the farming community, the wider agricultural economy and the family businesses that operate in it, because there is a huge impact. It is very serious—people committing suicide. It is not funny. We need to do something to change that. That is my plea to you today.

I will move on to something that I hope we can perhaps agree on, and something that will cost the Government no money at all. I hear time and again, back in my constituency up in East Yorkshire and from the wider agricultural economy, that planning is a major issue. It is virtually impossible to get anything through in certain parts of the country due to the stance of certain local authorities and the way in which they have interpreted guidance from Natural England, the Environment Agency and elsewhere. What is your view on that? Will you work with MHCLG to find a way forward to unlock those hundreds of millions of pounds' worth of planning applications stuck in the system?

Dame Angela Eagle: There is going to be a statement this afternoon from MHCLG, which I think you should look at very carefully, which I am quietly pleased about.

Q259 **Charlie Dewhirst:** Good, because there needs to be guidance. DEFRA needs to be clearer with other Government Departments, down to local authorities, to say where they should not be acting in the way that they are. Frankly, we are in a situation in certain parts of the country where you cannot even get a new barn built due to biodiversity net gain, nutrient neutrality and all those things, which can be interpreted in any which way you might choose to. Thankfully, there are still some authorities that are acting sensibly and things are getting done. If you want growth and to see money pouring back into the rural economy, we need to get things built.



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Dame Angela Eagle: We agree about that and I would ask you to keep your ear open to what is happening later.

Q260 **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter:** Can I follow up on that point? I represent Suffolk Coastal in the east of England. Water is one of the things that are holding back my farming community quite considerably. I know that it is not your brief, but how are you working with Minister Emma Hardy? Are you looking at how water security, and including reservoirs in planning applications, can support growth in the agricultural sector?

Dame Angela Eagle: Absolutely, yes. It is particularly important, given the wide variations in rainfall that we are now seeing, to ensure that farmers can abstract water and have reservoirs on farm so that they can distribute over the year much more effectively. I am well aware of the planning issues that Mr Dewhurst was just talking about and how that impacts. Again, I hope that there will be some good news coming on that.

The Water Minister, Emma Hardy, and I get on extremely well. We are in offices a short walk away from each other and we are co-operating, I can assure you. Obviously in the east of England there are some issues with drought and scarcity that are different from those in some other parts of the country. I know that she is looking at what can be done about it.

Q261 **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter:** Yes, she is. I have shared examples in my constituency. I will say that it is one of the biggest things holding back farms in the east of England. There are amazing innovations happening in the east that we could be looking at with just a bit of support for planning regs and so on, but thank you for that.

I have a second follow-up question, on the point about procurement. That is one of the things that we can do. Can I urge you to continue to look at that, at pace and with real determination? It is one of the things that we can have the biggest impact on. I appreciate what you said earlier about challenges, but where the Government are bringing forward procurement contracts, there should be, I would imagine, quick wins in there.

I will give you an example, again from my constituency: Sizewell C. That is a workforce of 10,000 during the construction phase. We are funding a huge amount of Sizewell C as a Government. There is an opportunity to write food production and procurement into those contracts at this point. I will leave that with you, but it is a huge thing that we could unlock, with so much potential to support the farming community.

Dame Angela Eagle: I am aware of the potential of these things. I was Procurement Minister at the Treasury very many years ago, so I understand how fragmented the system used to be and what the potential opportunities are if we can get it more strategically focused.

Q262 **Chair:** The Treasury has not made your life easy here, has it? It is not what Treasury is there for, I suppose.

Dame Angela Eagle: I do not think that the Treasury ever wants to make anybody's life easy, especially when money is scarce and we are



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spending £100 billion on servicing the debt that we have taken out. That makes it a lot harder for us to do some of the things we might want to do in slightly financially easier situations.

Q263 **Chair:** You have referenced already two consecutive bad harvests as a consequence of severe weather events. That was the sort of thing that you used to be able to get through because you could fall back on your basic payment, but the basic payment was taken away much more quickly in the Budget last year. Then you had the inheritance tax. It is very difficult for you to articulate the vision that we were talking about when nobody wants to talk about anything else other than inheritance tax. Is it really worth the candle, politically?

Dame Angela Eagle: People are allowed to complain about tax increases and changes to the tax system. I was Exchequer Secretary for a while and I got well used to it then. They often, while they are complaining about that, say they want more grants and resources from the money that you get with the tax take. It is always a balancing issue. I certainly hope that the £2.7 billion—I think it is—a year in grants that we got out of the comprehensive spending review can be used to their maximum effect in order, as I say, particularly to focus on areas that have not been given support, and by that I mean smaller farmers.

Q264 **Chair:** Of course, if you went back to the point where we were when we left the European Union, that £2.7 billion would be nearer £3.5 billion, I think, would it not? That money has never been put back into farming.

Dame Angela Eagle: We are where we are on that because of the new systems that were created to purchase public goods. I am fairly astonished, but not surprised, at how complicated the system that I am now having a look at has become in that short time. We have to look much more at deliverability and simplification, to see how we can stabilise and go forwards with a system that is much more predictable. Is it easy? No, it is not. We have to stay within our CSR budget constraints. That is the situation we are in because of the financial situation the country is in.

Q265 **Chair:** In policy terms, do you think that we give enough emphasis to the production of food as a public good?

Dame Angela Eagle: If I could put it this way, the Department I am now in looks at the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat. I cannot think of anything more important. Politically and economically, it is not seen as being as important as that, simply because the percentage of GDP and the number of people employed is much lower than it used to be before the agricultural and the industrial revolution.

I want to try to change the attitude to that in and among policymakers across Government. It is vital. We are in an era, and coming into a different era now, where it will become even more vital. Therefore we need to make sure we get our food and water resilience properly sorted. We have been in a more benign era where it can be taken for granted,



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where we have had world trade that is particularly predictable. We saw when Ukraine was invaded that not only did it put the price of inputs up for farmers and those who are producing our food in the food production industry, but it took 20% of the world's grain supplies offline immediately. We know the problems that that can cause if you are not resilient. Anyone who thinks that these areas are not important needs to have another examination of history and reconsider.

Q266 Chair: Amen to that, but one in 10 say that they have downsized farming operations since the Budget and 21% of farmers say that they intend to do so before April next year. It does not sound like DEFRA is yet the growth Department that the Secretary of State wants you to be.

Dame Angela Eagle: There is massive potential to grow, not only with respect to our food production and food manufacturing. Let us not forget that area of food production, because it is many more jobs. It is the largest manufacturing sector in the country. The potential for change, with adoption of new agritech, new farming methods, precision breeding and issues like that, means that there is a huge potential for growth. That is without talking about rural growth itself. Some 85% of small businesses in rural areas are not actually about agriculture at all. If you could get some growth there, it would distribute evenly across the country. The potential there is very great.

Chair: That comes back to Charlie's point about diversification and the blocks on it. We have done long enough on this topic, so we will move on to the farming and countryside programme.

Q267 Jayne Kirkham: I want to look a bit more at some of the schemes and programmes that are going on in the Department at the moment. You have just said that we are going to hear more about the SFIs in the first part of next year. To clarify the timeframes, does that mean that they will be coming in in the next financial year in April?

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes.

Q268 Jayne Kirkham: Brilliant. That is really good news. I think everybody will be pleased to hear that, because we have been waiting for news about the SFIs for a long time. The EU is now, with its land-based subsidies, looking a bit more at smaller farms. It is restricting the amount of subsidies it gives to the larger ones and focusing more on the smaller farms. Is that something that you are doing for the SFIs—looking at particular areas and maybe focusing on smaller farms, tenants or horticulture? Is that something that you are looking at specifically for the SFIs—making them more focused in that way?

Dame Angela Eagle: You heard me talk about the distribution of the current scheme, where 25% of the funding has gone to 4% of farmers. That is not a distribution that will help deliver our environmental improvement requirements and I do not think that it is fair. Therefore, I am looking to see what we can do to have more of a focus on small farmers.



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These schemes, from their inception, have relied on farmers applying. We can see what we can do to make it more likely that farmers will apply, but we cannot force small farmers to apply. In my mind, when I am thinking about how we can do this administratively, I am thinking about whether we can have more convenient ways of helping smaller farmers, who do not have time or the money to pay agents, to get themselves involved in the schemes. In the past, because the basic payments have been exiting, perhaps there has been no real requirement for them to think about very complex Rural Payments Agency applications. That money is now going and therefore I hope that we will be able to persuade smaller farmers that it is now worth their while and we are going to make it easier for them to access the schemes.

Q269 Jayne Kirkham: It has not been simple. A lot of small farmers say that. Obviously they have a lot of other things to do. It is very hard to fill in the multiple forms and work with the RPA sometimes. Up to now, the SFIs have run on a kind of pick-and-mix basis. Farmers have looked at things like hedges, or maybe soil and herbal leys, and applied for those. Is some kind of more cohesive scheme, where you are looking at packages of measures rather than that piecemeal approach, being considered for the new SFIs?

Dame Angela Eagle: Absolutely, yes. Some of the constraints we have are in our IT. It was ever thus. If you look at the distribution of what has been bought with these schemes in the past, we have over-bought various things, such as herbal leys.

Q270 Jayne Kirkham: How do you stop that?

Dame Angela Eagle: There are ways to do it, which I am currently considering.

Q271 Jayne Kirkham: The other thing about SFIs is that they are for environmental measures, soil health and that kind of thing. Everyone except for us is still subsidising food production, basically. How will the balance hold between those environmental measures and food production? How will we stimulate food production?

Dame Angela Eagle: We have to farm more sustainably. We will increase productivity and results if we can improve soil health, for example.

Q272 Jayne Kirkham: That will take time, so what will happen in the meantime?

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes, but we have to do it. The context in which these moneys are paid is our environmental improvement requirements. Therefore, it is important, if we are going to reach some very stretching targets that have been set on all that, that we can ensure that these moneys go to many more farms than they go to at the moment. At the moment, we have something like 44,500 SFI agreements in operation, covering about 50% of farmed land. If we are going to get our



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environmental improvements, we have to create a circumstance where the SFI can assist in the areas that have not so far engaged.

We are dependent on farmers applying. I hope that, once the full outlines of the scheme become clear, we can then evangelise about them applying and make it easier for them to apply. That would be the sweet spot I would want to hit.

Q273 Jayne Kirkham: We have had the problem before where there have been no applications, and then a flood of applications, and targets have been hit and no one has noticed. We have had schemes opening and closing quite abruptly. The fruit and vegetable aid scheme, for example, is due to close at the end of the year. We had the SFIs closing very abruptly. The countryside stewardship schemes were extended at the last minute. How will we avoid that? That is disruptive and does not increase confidence. How will we stop that happening?

Dame Angela Eagle: I want to be much more transparent about how it is going as we are going along. We are working on what we can do to communicate that in real time.

Q274 Jayne Kirkham: The countryside stewardship schemes have been extended at the last minute, for another year. We are not sure what will happen after that. What plan do the Government have for reforms of that more ambitious part of ELMS?

Dame Angela Eagle: Our big landscape recovery schemes are the things that will deliver a lot of environmental improvement. They are whole catchment areas, involving many different landowners. We are looking to see what we can do to increase involvement in them.

There is a certain amount of money that can be redeployed when schemes come to a close, but we are dealing with a situation where some schemes run for three years and some run for five. Some of the legacy schemes have run for 15 or 20. All of them are coming to an end at different times of the year and on different days of the week.

I would certainly want to create something that is a bit more manageable and deliverable, from an administrative point of view, for the poor old Rural Payments Agency, which has to try to cope with all of this, as well as the farmers who are applying. I cannot sit here and guarantee that what has been done in the past will inevitably be delivered in exactly the same form in the future.

Q275 Jayne Kirkham: You talked a bit just now about targets, goals and how we could be sure that we hit them, or we are getting to where we should be.

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes, on environmental improvement.

Jayne Kirkham: The National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority does not have confidence that the farming and countryside



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programme will hit those goals to time and cost. Do you agree with that? How would you respond to that? I am talking about evaluation and monitoring as we go forward?

Mike Rowe: We have had NISTA working with us over the summer, ever since the programme reported a red delivery confidence assessment back in April. We have a clear action plan that we have been discussing within the Department to get us back on to amber.

One thing we are looking at is how we can streamline the scope of the programme and make it clearer what the critical success factors are, because the programme was set up some eight years ago and the challenge that was before our predecessors then is different from what we have now. Predominantly, the big chunks of work that we need to conclude on that programme are around what the Minister was talking about, in terms of relaunching SFI next year, but also developing the new IT. We are working really closely with NISTA to take all the necessary steps to get us off that red delivery confidence assessment. That is something that we hope to clear in the new year.

Q276 **Jayne Kirkham:** One thing that has been really helpful to farmers is the farming resilience fund and some of that advice work. That finished, I think, last March. I think everybody agrees that farmers need that more whole-farm approach to advice. What work has been done to expand those advisory services? Where can farmers go to get that kind of advice? The Wildlife Trust down in Cornwall is doing a really good job working with farmers. There are some organisations that do this. How are we going to make that a bigger thing in the future?

Mike Rowe: Advice is something that might feature in a report the Minister was mentioning that is due to come out before Christmas. There are different sorts of advice. There is advice in terms of how we can help farmers learn from each other so that we can promulgate productivity across the sector and get best practice to be adopted more widely. There is also advice in terms of how we can get farmers and land managers collaborating better in delivering environmental outcomes, so that the sum of what we get is greater than those parts.

There is a range of models that we have used in the past, both within the Department and with private sector provision. One thing that we are looking at with the Minister right now is how we can use some money that we have earmarked under the spending review, which comes on stream from next April, to improve our response on that, alongside looking at regulation and funding.

Q277 **Jayne Kirkham:** Does that mean that we are going to open up more of those advice schemes? Is that going to expand? We really need that.

Mike Rowe: We fundamentally recognise the important role that advice can play, especially if it is the right advice to the right person from the right source.



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Jayne Kirkham: Yes, on-farm holistic advice.

Mike Rowe: Yes, exactly that. We have some options that we are in the process of putting through Ministers in terms of how we might best approach that.

Q278 **Chair:** Is that the sort of thing that we know in Scotland and recognise from, for example, SAC Consulting, which is a public body but giving farm-by-farm advice in an affordable way to the smaller farmers that the Minister is talking about?

Mike Rowe: We are trying to look at all options and other ways in which it is managed. Previously, there has been state provision of advice in this country. We are looking very closely at the Teagasc model in Ireland. We have good experience of grant schemes and working through DEFRA delivery bodies but also working with industry sources. There is a range of different approaches.

Dame Angela Eagle: I have a feeling, and this is ahead of any decisions that might be made, that peer-to-peer advice is really important. There is a real skills and onward training issue in farming and agriculture that we probably need to be more coherent on, especially as agritech and the big changes that are coming up have to be taken into account. We will be doing some things around that, which will, I hope, make it more coherent and less ad hoc.

Q279 **Chair:** I will read Mike's answer over later and I am pretty sure that I will understand it eventually. I am not entirely sure that I do at the moment.

Angela, you have been very candid with the Committee about the situation that you have inherited, and that is perfectly legitimate. You have been in the job since September. Emily and Mike, you are the continuity here. How well served have Ministers been by the advice they have been given hitherto?

Dame Angela Eagle: I think that is more for me to say. All I can say at the moment is that we have robust discussions. I am given all the advice and information that I request and I do not think that I have any problems with officials giving me candid advice. You have to ask the right questions as well sometimes.

Q280 **Chair:** Let me try to unpick that. You are suggesting that maybe some of your predecessors have not been asking the right questions.

Dame Angela Eagle: Far be it from me to have any such view about that. They can make their own observations.

Q281 **Chair:** Is that really how the civil service is supposed to work, though? You should not be reliant on asking the questions. You have the expertise behind you.

Dame Angela Eagle: It is a two-way thing with civil servants. They give you advice and information; you ask questions. Then it is up to the



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Minister to decide what needs to be done, in accordance with whatever the manifesto commitments or values of the political party that happens to be in that Department at the time are, and in accordance with the situation that you find when you get there.

Q282 **Chair:** There is a 100-question application form for SFI. I am pretty sure that it was not a Minister that wrote the 100 questions.

Dame Angela Eagle: But it probably was a Minister—I do not know; I was not there—who decided to increase the number of things that you could apply for from SFI '23 from 23 to well over 100.

Chair: We shall move on to domestic food production.

Q283 **Terry Jermy:** Good morning, Minister. I want to pick up one point that Jayne made in the last section about support schemes. One of the support schemes, which is literally due to end in a couple of weeks' time, as was mentioned, is the fruit and veg scheme. We know from Ms Miles that it is something that you are personally aware of, because she confirmed that when we questioned the Secretary of State. That has been incredibly successful and is a relatively small amount of money. Is it something that can be continued?

Dame Angela Eagle: No. It was a legacy EU scheme that we do not intend to continue. It creates producer organisations, which only 20% of the horticulture sector actually uses. We need to support the horticulture sector in a different way than using an old EU scheme. The horticulture sector has its particular issues and I am very interested to see what we can do to support the sector as a whole, given its particular needs. I do not think that the legacy scheme, which is about producer organisations that only 20% of the sector uses, is the right way forwards.

Q284 **Terry Jermy:** To ensure that there is no gap in support, is that something that perhaps will be prioritised, given that it is due to end in December, and I think Scotland and elsewhere are continuing some sort of support scheme? We would not want English farmers who are involved to miss out.

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes, but it supports almost like collective organisations to try to sell, and only 20% of the horticulture sector uses them. We have to start looking at the particular needs of the horticulture sector. Some of that is with respect to energy, some of it is with planning issues for glasshouses and polytunnels, and some of it is how we can support innovative ways of ensuring that fruit and vegetables can be grown. There is a particular issue with the decline of fruit, although vegetables are growing—literally, but also the percentage of vegetables that we grow and eat in this country has gone up.

We are having a very close look and liaising with the sector to see what we can do. Going forwards, there is a useful issue about looking at farming in different sectors to see what we can do to help it improve its productivity and potential to produce for export but also for UK produce.



Q285 Terry Jermy: You mentioned climate change in your opening remarks, and we have already touched upon the particular impact on East Anglia. I am in Norfolk. It is hugely important for food production. There are significant pressures from climate change—yes, from drought, but also often from flooding and the devastation of soil wash-off.

How much is being spent within the farming and countryside programme to help farms adapt, and what is the timeline for developing resilience? Even in the short time I have been involved—the last few years—there have been incredible pressures and change. Some farms will stop being viable because of drought, particularly where I am. How quickly can we get that support with adaptation?

Dame Angela Eagle: We have to look to see what we can do. This is part of the resilience issue. We have this paradox of having flooding and drought at the same time. My colleague Minister Hardy is looking to see what can be done with respect to shifting water resources around, so that they can be where they are more needed. That is more of an infrastructure issue. The infrastructure issues I tend to deal with are on-farm reservoirs and planning issues. I can assure you that we are looking very closely at that.

Q286 Terry Jermy: It is fair to say that not everybody is sold on the idea that nature recovery and nature recovery schemes do not impact food production. It is a live debate in my constituency on a regular basis. I also have some fantastic farms that are adamant that there should be no impact on food produced if they do so in an environmentally friendly way. How are you ensuring that the Department is getting the evidence out there that demonstrates that nature recovery can support food production?

Dame Angela Eagle: I agree with you. Nature recovery can and does support food production. We have to change the way we have done things in the past, not only to deal with farm pollution, which is really important. The more we deal with other greenhouse gases, the bigger the percentage farming pollution will become if we do not tackle it. There are also issues about biodiversity and soil health, in particular, that we would be very short-sighted to ignore.

There is a win-win with these issues. Farming more sustainably is an absolute must. We have to make certain that we facilitate that shift in thinking among all the farming communities so that we can farm in a much more sustainable way. That is the aim of a lot of the changes that we are making in our environmental improvement targets, which are legally binding.

Q287 Terry Jermy: There is a worrying trend towards intensification of farming. I see that in Norfolk, particularly with large-scale intensive livestock facilities. It is pigs and chickens, in particular, where I am. I am always concerned, because often that reduces the number and quality of jobs in rural communities.



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From a food production point of view, I worry about food security, because there is a huge reliance on imported feed. You have mentioned Ukraine. It makes us very unstable. I know that we have spoken a lot about the Batters report and the overarching strategy, but what are we going to do to support smaller-scale family farms and rural communities in this sort of merge towards intensification and a mega-farm approach? We have to have a balance in farming.

Dame Angela Eagle: If you look at the structure of farms by the land that they own and the size of the companies that run them, there are very large farms at the top that produce a far larger percentage of our food than the land percentage that they are farming. There is then a very long tail of family farming businesses as well. We have to make certain that the change in attitude for sustainable farming practices goes all the way down that chain; otherwise, we will not achieve our environmental improvement legal requirements.

In terms of intensification, it is difficult to generalise. It has to be done in a way that is as environmentally friendly as possible. It is difficult for me to sit here and say that I am against this or for that, but I absolutely understand the points you are making. In the past, the Government have intervened on the grounds of animal welfare, requirements for regulations to farm in particular ways in an intensive area and not to pollute. It would be a different thing to suddenly decide that we had a view on how intensive farming should be. The issue is that we have to minimise the externalities caused by that kind of thing and ensure that animal welfare is properly respected.

Q288 **Terry Jermy:** Do you accept that there is a challenge that, while we are moving towards more environmentally friendly farming in this country, if we do not think about things globally, the import of feed, in particular, and the impact on the environment and animal welfare abroad massively undermines what we are trying to do with our own farming system?

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes, of course, but we have to get our own house in order before we can lecture other people about it. You say we import feed. We do, but a lot of our arable land is taken up growing feed for the animals that we raise in this country. I think that when I last looked, staggeringly, it was 70%.

Q289 **Terry Jermy:** It is fair to say that land is increasingly coming under pressure from housing and energy projects. We have mentioned Sizewell. Various organisations, such as the NFU and CLA, have produced statistics and talked about domestic food production falling by a third in 25 years because of land use changes, but that is something that the Government dispute. They think that we can maintain the current level of food production despite land use changing. How have the Government arrived at such a different conclusion? To what extent will the land use framework look at food production and, in a sense, prioritise it against all these many competing pressures?



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Dame Angela Eagle: One has to produce food. One also has to have somewhere to live. Planning authorities are all about deciding how to do that. The land use framework, when it is published, will be a tool for deciding how those balances need to be struck. They have always been struck, over the years, as we have developed as an economy. They will continue to be struck. If you look at, for example, the new national forest that was announced the other week, that is in among the creation of a new corridor between Oxford and Cambridge for housing.

We can get a balance if we get these things right. It may need more awareness of potential planning issues on a wider scale than perhaps we have been used to in this country. We do not have five-year plans. We do not do that kind of centralised planning. The land use framework will give people the tools to see what the trade-offs are so sensible decisions can be made.

Q290 **Sarah Bool:** We know that some areas are going to be disproportionately affected by solar farms. I think that 9% of some constituencies will be taken up by solar. In my constituency, there is the Green Hill solar farm, which is mainly going to be built on high-grade agricultural land, with 65% of it on grades 1, 2 and 3a, which distinctly contradicts Government guidelines. That is over 850 hectares. We are going through the DCO process at the moment. Part of the DCO assumes that the land will not be used for food production for the life of the scheme, which, unusually, is 60 years—a lot longer than most solar. Based on that, what evidence do you or the Government have that solar is going to help food production?

Dame Angela Eagle: It is a question of scale. I do not know the details of the application in your constituency and I certainly would not want to comment on things that are live going through planning. At the moment, 0.1% of land in England is under use for solar. Half of that is also used for food production, usually by sheep grazing at the same time. If we get to the 30 by 30 aim that having solar on the land is a part of, that percentage will go up to 0.2%. We have 0.7% of English land at the moment in golf courses and 4% of English land on grouse moors. It may be big in your area, but as an overall percentage it is quite small and containable.

Q291 **Chair:** The Venn diagram of land that would be suitable for a solar farm and land that would be suitable for a grouse moor would probably not show much overlap, I suspect.

Dame Angela Eagle: I am not trying to say that we should put solar on grouse moors. I am trying to establish the size of the issue. I think that it goes to 0.4% by 2030, which is still about half as much as we use for golf courses at the moment.

Q292 **Sarah Bool:** In my community, this is absolutely devastating. There are tenant farmers who had to end their tenancy. They have been farming this land for hundreds of years. The reality is that we do not have the grid capacity to cope with this. You have a scheme this size; one of my



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villages, Easton Maudit, is going to be surrounded on three sides by solar panels. This is going in front of Ed in the next few weeks. It is just outrageous.

I appreciate that you say, "Oh, well, holistically it doesn't affect," but to the areas it does affect, it is huge. This is another assault on farming. I would ask that the Government have another look at their policy. It is pushing green incentives and green initiatives, but I think you are damaging food security. National security and food security are linked, according to the Government. Schemes like this are short-term gain, but long-term pain for the wider area.

Dame Angela Eagle: You have made your point about that particular local issue very strongly.

Q293 **Chair:** A conversation with Ofgem might be useful here, if Ofgem determines the size of the installation. I also wonder whether we have maybe got the answer to Terry's question about how you have such a wide disparity between what the NFU and CLA say in terms of the future prospects, and what the Government say, by contrast. If you are using that quality of ground, which runs against guidelines, that surely determines, or has a bearing on, how you see the future prospects.

Dame Angela Eagle: I absolutely hear you, but I am not going to comment on a current planning issue.

Chair: No, indeed.

Q294 **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter:** I want to follow up on one of Terry's points about an unintended consequence of the family farm tax. One concern that I have is that the land will be sold to mega-farms. Some people think it will be sold to housing developers. I do not think it will. I think mega-farms will buy up the land to pay for the inheritance tax.

That is not going to be good for farming. It is not going to be good for the environment. It is not good for animal welfare. Standards are generally lower. It is not good for our rural economy. They will employ fewer people. The money will not be spent in the local economy in the same way that it is on family farms. There will be unintended consequences on animal welfare and environmental standards.

Do you have a view on this? I would urge the Department to look at that and see what assessment it makes, if this does go ahead, of what impact it could have if land is absorbed into mega-farms. I appreciate that you do not have a view as a Department on mega-farms per se, but the unintended consequences for nature, the environment and rural economies could be incredibly severe.

Dame Angela Eagle: Okay.

Q295 **Charlie Dewhurst:** On the solar point, reservoirs might be quite good sites to put more solar panels. There is some technology that might be worth looking at, if that crosses your desk.



On the intensification of farming, it is important that we get some clarity here. Even the Henry Dimbleby report in 2020 on the food strategy recognised the importance of intensive farming in protein production, particularly pigs and poultry. Intensive farming seems to be a dirty word to some people, but it is an important part of our agricultural system. It is also really important to note that, while there will always be a welfare debate around indoor-outdoor farming, intensive farming indoors is better for the environment. A pig in a barn is better for the environment than a pig in a field because you can control what is coming out of the pig and you can treat the slurry, etc.

As we have that debate going forward, whatever you might be discussing about welfare and future farming strategy, it is important to recognise that, if we want to have domestic food security in this country, there is a need for intensive farming. I just wanted to get your view on that.

Dame Angela Eagle: As I said earlier, the Government have not taken a view on what size farms should be or how production should be organised, except regulating for animal welfare on such farms—

Charlie Dewhirst: We have the highest standards in the world.

Dame Angela Eagle: And regulating for pollution and all the externalities that can occur. I know that consumers in the UK value high-welfare animals. We have to make sure that labelling is appropriate and correct. As a Department, we have not taken a view on how people should farm, so long as they farm within the animal welfare and pollution regulations.

Q296 **Charlie Dewhirst:** That is encouraging to hear because it is important to note that, if the Government were to take measures that discouraged certain types of farming and therefore reduced our domestic production, that would no doubt be replaced by imports produced at lower welfare standards than the ones we would expect in this country. We always have to bear that in mind, because we should recognise the very high standards we have in this country.

Dame Angela Eagle: This comes across my desk all the time whenever there is a trade deal in the offing.

Q297 **Henry Tufnell:** What is your view on food production targets?

Dame Angela Eagle: Are you asking whether the Government should have a food production target?

Henry Tufnell: Well, they do not. I am just wondering whether you have a view on it.

Dame Angela Eagle: My view is that, for resilience, we should ensure that we have a healthy farming and food production industry that can adapt very quickly if we should have an issue. Part of food security and food resilience is our connections with the countries that we trade with.



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For example, during the winter months, we can get fruit from countries in the southern hemisphere that have their summer going on while our winter is going on. Food security is a two-way thing.

If you are asking me whether I want to be a sort of food production tsar and set five-year plans, the answer is probably not, but if it looked like we were getting to a situation where we would be unable to produce basic foodstuffs that we need to feed ourselves, of course I would be concerned. At the moment, we produce 65% of all the food we eat and 77% of the food that can be grown here. If that got down to 5%, or 50%, I might be worried.

Chair: In the interests of historical accuracy, we should reflect that, in fact, tsars did not have five-year plans. That only came later with Stalin, I think.

Dame Angela Eagle: That is true. The collectivisation of the kulaks caused problems.

Chair: Let that be a warning to us all.

Q298 **Sarah Dyke:** Minister, I want to quickly go back to labelling. I have just hosted a breakfast reception on tackling misinformation in the food industry for animal-derived products. DEFRA has previously consulted on a mandatory method of production labelling and has recognised its importance. Your Government have promised the highest rise in animal welfare standards in a generation, but we are still waiting for that to be delivered. How are you going to act on those consultations and deliver that meaningful change? Over what timescale do you expect that to be done?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are still considering a method of production labelling. The slight issue that we have at the moment is the SPS talks with the EU. We cannot suddenly diverge and do things completely differently, if we then have to dynamically align with EU labelling methods. In between me personally and us wanting to have as much information that is useful for consumers as possible, we have this issue with the SPS talks. The EU is moving towards different ways of doing those kinds of things. There are many different privately run labelling methods at the moment. It is important to work with the food supply industry and the supermarkets before we make a move, but the more information that is useful and not misleading that we can get on to packaging for people to make consumer decisions, the better, in my view.

Q299 **Chair:** We have sympathy for you on the SPS point. If you see the Paymaster General, we would love to have a discussion with him about that.

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes, I know. I know that is a sore point because I have been reading your hearings.



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Chair: We will now move on to questions on fairness in the food supply chain.