

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Covid-19 and Food Supply: follow-up, HC 1156

Tuesday 23 February 2021

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Members present: Neil Parish (Chair); Ian Byrne; Geraint Davies; Dave Doogan; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Derek Thomas.

Questions 50 - 109

Witnesses

[I](#): Victoria Prentis MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Defra; Will Quince MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, DWP.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Victoria Prentis MP and Will Quince MP.

Q50 **Chair:** Welcome, Victoria and Will, to this afternoon's meeting of the EFRA Select Committee. We are discussing Covid, food supply and food to the vulnerable. For the record—I will start with ladies first, Victoria—will you please introduce yourself?

Victoria Prentis: Hello, it is Victoria Prentis from Defra.

Will Quince: I am Will Quince. I am the Member of Parliament for Colchester and the Minister for Welfare Delivery at the Department for Work and Pensions.

Q51 **Chair:** If it is alright with both of you, I will refer to you as Victoria and Will. If you want to be referred to as "Minister", you must tell me. Otherwise, we will keep it informal. We are really pleased to have both of you here, because we have been doing some very serious work on the delivery of food, not only through to the hospitality sector and through to the general food supply, but also trying to get food to the most vulnerable. We are delighted to have both of you here this afternoon.

I am going to start off with the first question. What is the Government's long-term plan for supporting the food and drink business in the hospitality sector? I ask that especially because we now know that the hospitality sector is going to be a little bit delayed in being able to open because of our Covid restrictions, which is understandable but will have a real effect upon those businesses. Victoria, I will open with you on that one. I know some of it is a Treasury matter, but where are we on this? How are we going to keep these businesses going so that they can open when they are allowed?

Victoria Prentis: It has been a really difficult year for the whole hospitality sector, has it not? We know that in Government and we know that within my Department, Defra, because we meet very frequently with representatives from across the food supply chain. My next meeting with the F4, as we call them, is first thing tomorrow morning.

We have done our best as a Government to make sure that jobs in particular can be supported, with various job support measures, which you will have heard about from the Chancellor, with access to business support grants, access to Government-backed loans, a one-year business rates holiday for part of the sector and the temporary cuts in VAT. You will remember that the Treasury also gave an additional one-off grant of £9,000 to hospitality businesses that have been forced to close.

I could not possibly begin to steal the Chancellor's thunder. We will be hearing from him next week in the Budget. I would expect, given the consistent way in which he has supported the hospitality sector through this pandemic, there to be further easing if necessary and if possible.



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We know it has been a really tough time. In Defra, I am glad to say that we are beginning to focus with the food supply chain on reopening, which is a good place to be in.

Q52 Chair: The problem is that it will be a long time still before they will be able to open on any scale. This is the problem I can see. What is absolutely right is that they are not opened up and then shut down again, because around Christmas that caused an awful lot of waste of food, waste of money and affected them very badly. I get the fact that, for the reasons of controlling the disease, we need to open up very cautiously. I am sure that the food and drink industry and businesses and hospitality get that, but, again, it is a long time. Anything that you can do in Defra with your links to the hospitality and food sector, feeding that into Treasury, would be good. Every month you go on, it is more difficult to keep these businesses going, is it not?

Victoria Prentis: I am sure that is right. Business has also spent a lot of money on social distancing measures, screens and so forth, and put a lot of energy, both physical and emotional, into opening in a way that was as safe as they could possibly make it. I belong to an extremely useful ministerial group with Minister Huddleston, Minister Scully and a senior representative from the Treasury. We have been talking for probably just over a month now about the needs of the hospitality sector in some practical detail, with very senior representatives of the hospitality sector there, about their needs as we move towards reopening, we hope forever.

Q53 Chair: Will, this one is not particularly your brief. Is there any particular comment you would like to make on this? I do not want to exclude you from commenting.

Will Quince: Chair, you would be tempting me to stray into the brief of another Minister. That would get me into trouble.

Chair: Would you not like to become Chancellor for the day? The answer is probably not, I would imagine, at the moment; I accept that. We cannot emphasise enough, especially in many parts of the country, and especially parts of the country that a lot of members of this Select Committee represent, such as the west country, Wales and the north of England, that the hospitality sector is so important to our economy, especially if you are in any type of rural or coastal area. That is why we are very concerned that these businesses keep going and that they will be there to open again.

Q54 Mrs Murray: I understand that part of this question really falls under the Treasury, but it would be good to hear your views as the Minister responsible for food. I know you have a massive brief and you must be stretched in all sorts of directions at the moment. Is the Government planning to provide any additional support for suppliers to the hospitality sector, particularly during the reopening, when there is a higher risk of failure? We have already heard about the waste of food that happened over the Christmas period. Have you looked at whether you could support some of these suppliers?



Victoria Prentis: That is a good question. We are very aware that some of the measures that I outlined for helping the hospitality sector have not been available to the wholesale sector. We are very grateful to the wholesale sector. Speaking very broadly, about 70% of their business is normally aimed at the hospitality sector. About 30% is aimed at the public sector and, of course, they have not been able to close, because it has been very important, perhaps more important than ever before, that the public sector—hospitals, prisons, schools and so on—continue to receive the food that they need from the wholesale sector. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those from the wholesale sector who have worked really hard under extremely difficult circumstances to keep food going in public services.

We work very closely with them in Defra. There is a Federation of Wholesale Distributors that we meet with very regularly. We have a task and finish group meeting I think this Thursday—it is certainly later this week—and we have a monthly wholesale survey, which has been very informative. We have a large number of bilateral and one-to-one meetings with representatives of the wholesale sector. There are concerns within the sector. They have had difficulties with debt, storage and quite volatile costs across the supply chain. We are conscious that, in anticipation of reopening, we need to support this sector to enable them to do their best for the whole supply chain when we reopen. We have enhanced engagement. We are really stepping it up and there is a meeting later this week. We are looking at what is required to help them to get through this next stage.

There has been some support available to them from the Chancellor. You are right that this is partly for him. They have obviously been able to access CBILS, bounce-back loans and the additional resources grant. I know that furloughing has been very widely used by the wholesale sector and has been very helpful to them. I am also aware that they are calling for business rate support. I know that. In fact, they have given evidence to this inquiry about it. That is not really a matter for me, I am afraid. That is a matter for the Treasury. I will be watching the Budget very closely next week.

Q55 **Mrs Murray:** It would be very remiss of me not to include another part of your brief in this. We have seen the fishing sector very seriously affected, not only by the closure of UK hospitality but by the problems with the exports. I know that recently we have announced the help for the catching sector, but there are some fish merchants who perhaps have seen a lot of waste and who do not export; they feed the domestic market. I know some in my own constituency have been affected in this way. Would they be included in the wholesale sector in general, with any meetings or any support you give them?

Victoria Prentis: Sheryll, as ever, you are the best champion for the fishing industry. It is always good to talk to you about fishing. If there are any specific issues, could you please pass them on to me? I will take them



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forward. It is difficult because the supply chain is so huge and so varied. We talk about trying to help hospitality and then we think about wholesalers, who of course mainly feed hospitality but not entirely. The same goes for the fishing industry. We have exporters who export. We have wholesalers who buy for selling domestically. We are really trying, both as a Department and as a Government, to provide support where it is needed. You are right that we made some changes to the fishing scheme recently. That was the right thing to do.

Mrs Murray: That was very welcome, Minister.

Victoria Prentis: What we have to do now is make sure that we are working with these sectors in a very practical and granular way to make sure that they can reopen successfully and that there are still viable businesses there. That has been the focus of the Chancellor all the way through the pandemic. Please pass on the details of the processes. I would hope, with the vast amount of engagement we do as a Department, that they are already included in one of our groups. If they are not, I will make sure that is picked up.

Mrs Murray: I am sure that Derek Thomas has also heard that message.

Q56 **Geraint Davies:** Minister Prentis, clearly, as has been said, the fishing industry and other exporters of food are facing major problems. We are about to open hospitality. Will you be actively encouraging the hospitality industry to promote and sell fish that are more difficult to sell, including cockles and mussels from south Wales and elsewhere, in order to have joined-up intervention in the market, perhaps even with incentives for hospitality people to sell British so we can keep businesses going with nourishing British food?

Victoria Prentis: Yes, we have had a very difficult year in the fishing industry. We really have, because so many fish, particularly shellfish and fish that people do not routinely cook at home, goes through and relies on the hospitality sector for its sales, both at home and abroad, truthfully. As we reopen, we have the road map now to plan for that, which is really helpful for the food supply chain generally and the hospitality business in particular. There will be an increasing role for domestic sale, both at home and in restaurants, for locally caught fish. It is something I have given evidence to the Committee about before. With the Henry Dimbleby report being published in the spring, and our response to that as a Government and as a Department coming over the course of the six months following that, I feel very strongly that this will be a year when we really start to talk about buying local and buying sustainable. Fish is very much part of that conversation.

Q57 **Geraint Davies:** There is financial support we would want. Will you be actively promoting it? Will the Government be saying, "Look, get out there and buy British fish," and encouraging people to go and ask for British fish in restaurants to encourage the demand?



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Victoria Prentis: We have supported previous schemes. There was a very good scheme that did promote seafood most recently, called Sea For Yourself, which worked really well. We know that sort of scheme works. As we come out of the pandemic, we hope the economy will start to bounce back and hospitality will boom again. You heard from the Prime Minister yesterday of his real ambition in this space. The buying local and buying sustainable message will be very much ingrained in that. That is what the Department is working towards.

Q58 **Geraint Davies:** You will include lamb, presumably, as well as fish.

Victoria Prentis: Yes, of course. There will be Welsh lamb. This may not be the moment, but there is certainly a good reset moment after Brexit for looking at the way we deal with geographical indicators in general across the board. I know you know of my love for Swansea, but Wales is very well represented in the geographical indicator space and will be able to grasp a lot of those buying local opportunities.

Q59 **Chair:** Naturally, through our public procurement report that we are about to finalise and that you gave evidence to, if we could lead by example as a Government and as public institutions by buying British, that would be good. Again, it sends the right message to everyone.

The wholesalers and those supplying the hospitality sector will want the confidence to be able to carry on and give these businesses credit as they move forward and open again. Could there be some reassurance from Treasury on the ability for them to do that? I know it cannot cover all debts, but there has to be confidence from the wholesalers to be able to deliver the food to a lot of the hospitality sector as they reopen, because there is a lot of loss of confidence, as you can imagine, in the wholesalers supplying some of these businesses. I do not know what you can do about that.

Victoria Prentis: That is true. We should also recognise that very real financial outlay will be required from wholesalers as they stock up again and they get ready to reopen. That is why, in anticipation of reopening the hospitality economy, we are very much stepping up our engagement with the sector to see if there are ways in which we can help. I do not want to jump ahead, but we have found from the supermarket sector that there are practical things that we can do that are not necessarily financial. The easements that we put in place on competition laws and drivers' hours, for example, were really beneficial. We need to look at this very practically.

On the public procurement stuff, I have given evidence before. I really applaud what this Committee is doing. It very much dovetails with the work we are doing in the Department on buying local and buying sustainable. That is going to be a real mantra for us all this year. I hope it is.

Q60 **Geraint Davies:** Minister Prentis, on the issue of supermarkets, there is a concern about the over-reliance on supermarkets, which have almost complete responsibility for the nation's food supply in terms of alternative supply chains' resilience and the relaxation of competition law. Are you happy with that? Do you not think we should have a more diverse



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approach? Are we putting ourselves at risk, putting all our eggs in one basket?

Victoria Prentis: Over the course of the pandemic, people have started to access food in different ways. People have started to buy more locally. Box schemes, for vegetables, meat, and fish, have become more available and more welcomed by people who are at home. Also, because people have been encouraged to stay as local as possible, they have accessed, and possibly had time to access, different sorts of shopping opportunities.

This is an opportunity, as our Secretary of State said this morning at the NFU conference. We have had a bit of a reset with our relationship with food, farmers and fishermen this year. That is a welcome development and is something to be built upon. I do not want in any way to downplay the enormous efforts that the supermarkets have made to feed the nation, particularly over the course of the pandemic. We are very grateful to them for that. Supermarkets definitely have their place and remain a cost-effective way of delivering large amounts of food to large amounts of people.

Q61 **Geraint Davies:** By way of example, would you support initiatives by local authorities to set up digital platforms for local retailers and suppliers of food and other products? People could buy locally—food and other stuff, from hardware shops or whatever—so they did not all have to buy from Amazon, cutting local business, losing local jobs and giving money to people who do not pay tax. They could give it locally instead, with a margin to local authorities to pay towards services as well as supporting the local economy.

Victoria Prentis: We are very keen to promote buying local. I gave evidence to your previous inquiry about how we are working to do that. We have this fabulous pilot. We have had one and we are doing another one in the south-west. I am conscious that those are not easy to set up and we will have to put real effort into making sure that we can roll that out across the nation, but, yes, buying local and buying sustainable is going to be what we talk about.

Q62 **Geraint Davies:** We know that there are constraints on exports, so we have already talked about how we can encourage people to consume more of those. Downstream, in a couple of months' time, we are going to have a few constraints on imports as well. Are you actively looking at producers providing import substitutes to feed into the food market so that we do not have sudden shortages? We need to be eating what we cannot export and producing what we cannot import.

Victoria Prentis: We are a nation, as you know, that has had good food security. Food security is very important to us. That is not just from locally produced items. We traditionally produce about 60% of our own food and import 40%. That figure is volatile. In fact, I am pleased to say that we produced slightly more last year than we have done in recent years, which I consider to be progress.



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The point that you make is a good one. We are working very hard as a Department at the moment for the next stages, bringing in import checks. We are working with industry. We have an enormous and unprecedented amount of engagement with businesses at the moment. What we have learned over the last few months about exporting is that businesses have often prepared very well—some have, some have not, some need extra help with that preparation. For some, it remains very challenging. Codes change and import systems change. We have had difficulties with some countries' customs systems and not others. We are working through that extremely hard at the moment. We are very conscious that this year is going to be transitional, in that checks will come in at different times, and we are working to each of those dates.

Q63 Geraint Davies: Will there be a food shortage from imports being constrained in a few months' time?

Victoria Prentis: No, we are confident that food supply will remain good and we are working hard to ensure that that is the case. We knew that the period over Christmas would be bumpy, as we transitioned. In fact, we did not see the anticipated dreadful hold-ups at Dover. We saw them before Christmas when the border was shut for Covid reasons, but we are broadly quite pleased with the work that has been done. We are worried about the few sectors where we are having disagreements—namely, with the Commission, such as on live bivalve molluscs from class B waters, which affects Wales in particular. We still have a few difficulties that we need to get over and we are working hard to address those.

Q64 Geraint Davies: Will food prices go up mid-year because of constraints on imports? George Eustice suggested that they might.

Victoria Prentis: We monitor food prices very closely. We only have them as far as November to date. So far, there is evidence that they went down slightly last year.

Q65 Geraint Davies: We have not put the constraints on yet.

Victoria Prentis: We do not anticipate food price increases. This has been a volatile year for world food because of the pandemic, but we are broadly pleased with the way things are going in terms of food prices at the moment. We are monitoring the situation extremely closely. We are working hard and practically to try to ensure that businesses can cope with the new checks. It is not easy, and I would like to thank everybody in businesses. I am very conscious that the system is working broadly at the moment because people are putting a lot of effort in and learning new systems, which I am grateful for. I am pleased to say that we have good food security.

Geraint Davies: It sounds like food prices might go up or might not.

Q66 Chair: Victoria, you mentioned the fact that relaxations on competition law and other things have helped through the pandemic. Of course, the big beasts eat the little beasts in the retail sector. If you are not careful, if you



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leave this competition law relaxed for too long, the bigger beasts will get even bigger and the smaller beasts will get even smaller. What are you going to do? When are you going to bring normality back to the retail sector? I am always very concerned about the dominance of the very big players in the retail sector. The pandemic has made that even greater. I am not taking it away from them that they have done a reasonably good job in supplying food, but you have to be careful you do not damage the sector overall. Where are we?

Victoria Prentis: Those specific laws come to an end on 31 March. I hope that provides you with reassurance.

Q67 **Chair:** As far as you are aware, there is no desire to keep them beyond then.

Victoria Prentis: I very much hope that then we will all be looking towards a place of reopening, rather than backwards. Of course, none of us can predict what this dreadful virus is going to do but, assuming we are still planning for the reopening, our energies will be focused there, I am sure.

Chair: Thank you very much for that precise answer. We will look forward to those laws going back in place. It just gives the smaller supply chains a chance in the retail sector. Thank you very much for that.

Q68 **Dr Hudson:** Thank you, Ministers, for coming today to our Committee. First of all, Victoria, can I echo your comments and thanks to the folk in the wholesale sector for the tremendous work that they have done through the pandemic? To widen that out, you mentioned shop workers and supermarkets as well, and there are food heroes across the spectrum, from the farmers through to vets, meat processors and delivery drivers, who have kept the nation fed during this crisis. I want to put on record our thanks from this Committee to everyone. Thank you for raising that. I just wanted to echo that thanks to all of those important key workers, effectively—a term that has now been redefined.

Our report in July recommended that Government should consult retailers and charities specifically about making reasonable adjustments for disabled and elderly customers. That is in the physical shopping setting but also in the online world. What are Government doing to ensure that retailers are making adequate, suitable, and reasonable adjustments for this very important cohort of disabled and elderly customers? Things that have been raised include waiving delivery charges or getting rid of the minimum spends that they need for online shops. Can we have your thoughts about the online sector but also the physical sector, in the shops as well?

Victoria Prentis: We have been working quite closely with various disability charities and other charities that represent vulnerable people and often older people who have needed assistance with shopping during this pandemic in particular but in fact also on a regular basis as well, as you have so rightly said. We have an emergency dashboard with a whole group of voluntary and charitable organisations. We monitor that regularly. We have had meetings. I have had meetings with a group of disability charities.



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I have also taken part in meetings organised by the Disability Minister. I have spoken to him regularly throughout the pandemic, most recently about the large number of people with learning disabilities who are employed by supermarkets. I wanted to make sure that their needs were being met in terms of both testing and which vaccination cohort they should fall into. I am glad to say that has broadly reached the right conclusion. I would say that relationships were close with the Departments involved and that we work well together.

I have given evidence with the Minister for Disabled People and with Minister Whately from DHSC jointly to the Committee chaired by Caroline Nokes. We gave evidence specifically on what we were doing to make sure that people with disabilities were getting the help they need throughout the pandemic. We assume, rightly—there is a legal requirement—that supermarkets will make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities. That should happen at all times, in the pandemic and out of the pandemic. We expect them to anticipate those needs, not wait to be asked. It is right that we continue to make sure that everybody can access the food that they need in the way that suits them.

We have obviously, as I have given evidence about before, done a vast amount of work during the pandemic to ensure that the clinically extremely vulnerable have been fed. We have also done work, which I have talked about before, to ensure that supermarkets are matched with people who require a delivery slot. I really am very grateful. You have talked about food heroes across the supply chain, but I am just going to highlight the supermarkets, which have worked in great practical detail, with us as a Department and with local authorities, to make sure that nobody falls through the gaps.

Q69 Chair: Will, the DWP has responsibility for this. It is not your portfolio, but I am sure you could answer, please.

Will Quince: I would echo all of Victoria's comments there. It is, as Victoria mentioned, the responsibility of the Minister for Disabled People, Justin Tomlinson, but this is a really good example of how Government should work in terms of joined-up Government. The Minister for Disabled People has the relationships ongoing with charities that support disabled people. The Defra Ministers have the contacts and connections in relation to supermarkets and suppliers. It is very important, therefore, that Ministers work together to work quickly with individuals and charities to identify where problem areas may be occurring, and then work across Government to try to put them right. I think it has happened in this case, and I know that Victoria and Justin work very closely in this sphere to make sure that, where issues are arising, we are making sure they are flagged to the supermarket chains and others as quickly as possible.

Q70 Dr Hudson: A lot of that, as Victoria touched on, would be in legislation in terms of physical access to shops and supermarkets as well. What about the online setting, where potentially some vulnerable customers have been told that they have to have a minimum order or high charges for a priority



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slot? These are people who perhaps were not necessarily using these services before, but now, because of the crisis, they are. Is that something that has come across Government's radar in terms of there being some issues there?

Victoria Prentis: Yes, it was very much part of the work that I did chairing the taskforce for vulnerable people last year, which Will was a very major part of. We worked very closely with the industry to make sure that the target cohort, who were by their very nature vulnerable, often very elderly, and possibly not as digitally engaged as the rest of us have learned to be, were catered for. We did that in a variety of ways. We met the group of 27 charities that I mentioned earlier. We met the Equalities and Human Rights Commission. We engage with them regularly. We met Will's Department to make sure that we were asking the right questions. We then had to put in place practical solutions for that.

Some of that was via local authorities. Some of that was via direct referral routes from charities to supermarket delivery slots. Age UK, for example, was able to refer customers directly and assist with that, and indeed is still doing that. Local authorities have been really pivotal in the way we have delivered this report, because they know their vulnerable people and they know what needs they have. Working together, as Government, supermarkets and the voluntary sector, has been very successful. It was difficult and it was very difficult to set up, but I hope that we will look back on it as one of the success stories, when we look at how we responded to the pandemic.

Dr Hudson: Thank you. That is really encouraging. In subsequent questions we are going to come on to the role of local authorities. It is really encouraging to hear from Will and Victoria about the importance of how cross-Government working has helped in this, with the Health Department, Defra, DWP and local government as well. It is so important that we have all seen Departments working together to solve some of these issues. Thank you for that.

Q71 **Chair:** Just before we leave this question, I would say to both Ministers that, certainly at the start of the pandemic a year ago, there really were problems with getting enough slots for disabled people and for those that were shielding and so on. Are you reasonably confident now that that situation has been rectified?

Victoria Prentis: Yes. We had a large addition to the shielding list fairly recently. We obviously met to discuss whether we were worried about the availability of delivery slots. We felt, and it has been borne out that we were right, that the situation was challenging but that the supermarkets and other systems could continue to meet the demand.

I am very pleased with what we have put in place. There are the supermarkets' own offers, the local authority offers, the charity engagement straight-to-supermarket offers, and then there is a vast amount—it is being provided locally to me by our local butcher, by our local



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Co-op—which shops have done of their own accord because they know, understand and care about their customers. Neil is right: we need to thank everybody who has worked so hard this year.

Chair: I would very much echo that, because so much food has gone out to very vulnerable people. That is good.

Q72 **Derek Thomas:** We all agree that there is a growing unease across the nation that people are living with unacceptable food insecurity. We know that many go hungry and there are all sorts of reasons for that. This Select Committee, it would be fair to say, generally believes that greater focus should be given to food insecurity and hunger. In fact, I am pretty sure that we have called quite recently for a Minister for hunger. First, who actually is responsible for food insecurity and hunger within the Government? Where do they sit? Who is it?

Victoria Prentis: Defra is responsible for food security in the widest sense. As we talked about earlier, that means food in the food supply chain, but it also has an economic element. We have become especially aware over the last year of the importance of departmental co-working on food. I view that as an asset. The more Departments that are working on this area, as long as they are doing it in a way that is cohesive and strategically organised, is a good thing and can be genuinely helpful in this area.

Will and I worked together, first on the food for the vulnerable taskforce but then in other fora that Will is organising, to make sure that a cross-Government group of Ministers are all seized with the important task of dealing with food poverty.

Will Quince: It is a really good question, because food insecurity and food poverty is one of the issues that I know keeps me up at night sometimes. I know Victoria is the same. We work very closely on this issue, alongside other Ministers. Food insecurity traditionally sits with Defra, but actually the publishing of stats around poverty, of which hunger and food insecurity is part, sits more with the Department for Work and Pensions and within my brief.

There are two ways you can look at this. You could set up a specific Minister to look at hunger and food poverty, or poverty more generally, but the danger of taking that approach is that, in effect, you make one person, one Minister and one Department responsible for tackling poverty, when it should be all Government Departments and the whole of Government working together to tackle poverty. As far as I am concerned, there are two issues in question. The first is the immediacy. What do we do with hunger and poverty now?

There is a second and perhaps more complex question: if that is the symptom, what is the cause? How are we working together across Government to tackle the causes of poverty? Hunger and food insecurity may be a symptom, but is it poor, unaffordable and insecure housing? Is it poor educational attainment? Is it the geography and regional disparity?



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Is it a lack of employment? Is it the cost of living? Is it low wages? Is it health issues? Is it drug addiction or gambling? Is it divorce or separation? Is it debt? We know that these are the causes or the drivers of poverty, but not one of those levers sits firmly within one Government Department. That is only an issue that across Government we can tackle. That is why we work really closely.

Victoria and I sit on numerous panels, in particular looking at food insecurity and food poverty, hence why we came together and worked up the plan for the local welfare assistance scheme, the £63 million scheme over the summer, and came together again to work on the Covid winter grant scheme, the £170 million scheme over this winter. That is dealing with the immediacy in terms of the financial disruption that people were facing as a result of the pandemic. We continue to also work very closely to look at what the drivers of poverty are. Yes, they may have happened several years down the line and led to the point at which someone is now in crisis, but, nevertheless, it is important that we look at tackling them, because a lot of them are not short-term fixes.

Q73 **Derek Thomas:** You are right about that. In Cornwall, our argument would be that house prices and the cost of rent would put great pressure on families' budgets and present food insecurity. You are right that it is a massive issue that probably cannot all be dealt with in one place.

Will Quince: Can I come back on that? That is one of the reasons we work very closely with MHCLG and why we have put in an extra £1 billion last year, which has been matched in cash terms again by the Chancellor, to the local housing allowance. We know that people have their universal credit standard allowance or their legacy benefits, but they are still having to spend too much of that money topping up their rent. Rent in some areas, in particular our big cities and towns, is still a problem. That is why we have put that additional money into the local housing allowance. Housing, the topping up of housing and the availability of low-cost affordable housing is an issue, without question. That is why we work very closely with MHCLG colleagues.

Victoria Prentis: On that point, it is important to remember that for the people in the lowest income brackets, the proportion of their income they spend on food is very low, historically, at the moment. The cost of the food is one issue but, as Will has just outlined, it is very much not at the heart of most of the problems.

Q74 **Derek Thomas:** I accept that. It is a complex thing that could take an inquiry on its own and probably not by this Committee. When will the Government publish their response to part 1 of national food strategy? Who does that sit with and do you know when that will be?

Victoria Prentis: That is me. We have already done a reply to part 1. We published that relatively recently, within the last week or two. I will make sure that is shared with the Committee if it has not been already. However, Henry Dimbleby is doing his full report and is publishing it in April or May.



He is working that up at the moment. We have said we will reply within six months. As I said earlier, I am anticipating that food will be on everybody's lips this summer. It will be an important discussion to have as a nation about what we want to do in terms of buying local, buying sustainable and what sort of food we want to eat going forward. I am very much looking forward to being involved in that conversation and promotion.

Q75 Derek Thomas: I have done quite a bit of work in Cornwall, and have done for the last three or four years, around End Hunger. There is a really good network of organisations that are driving that agenda. I am going to see a group tomorrow that literally uses food that is leftover, which is perfectly good to eat but otherwise would be thrown away. They make nutritious meals. Do you think there is an appetite in Government—excuse the pun—to really end hunger? If so, do you think that can be achieved, and in what timeframe? It is a big challenge and a massive question.

Will Quince: The answer to that is yes. As far as I am concerned, one individual or child that goes to bed hungry is one too many. We have to do all in our power to avoid that. The question is about whether this is an issue about hunger or whether it is a broader issue about poverty, and then we look at the drivers thereof. For example, we know that people will prioritise certain outgoings over others. People tend to prioritise things like housing costs, because they consider the roof over their heads and their families' heads to be their number one priority. Then they rate bills, other utilities and other things accordingly.

It is some of the underlying drivers of poverty that we need to and continue to tackle. Hunger and food insecurity is one of the symptoms. One thing we need to do, Derek, is far better understand this issue. That is why we commissioned additional questions on food insecurity for the first time into the family resources survey. That was done in 2019. We now have the first results of that, and they will be published in March. That is really important.

The second piece of work we are doing is working very closely with food bank providers, including some of the large organisations like the Trussell Trust, to better understand the drivers of food insecurity, but also to better understand whether those that are using food banks are actually getting all of the benefits that they are entitled to and, if we work far more closely with them, whether we can make sure that people are getting all of the support from the state that they are eligible for. We find in many cases people are not getting all the support that is available to them. There are all sorts of reasons for that.

We came very close, just before the pandemic, to launching a pilot in sites across the country to test this model. Unfortunately, that had to be paused because of Covid-19, but we are very keen to get that established and up and running again, because the more data and better understanding we have of the drivers of food insecurity, the more tools we will have at our disposal to be able to first identify the issues and then target our response accordingly.



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Victoria Prentis: The learning from this year, not that any of us would have wished it, is going to be quite extraordinary in this space, because Government have directly funded FareShare, for example. You also touched on waste. We have directly funded that in a large way, with £15 million of funds going to it, to tackle how we redistribute food and how we make sure that it is not wasted.

You mentioned Henry Dimbleby's interim report. Two of the relevant recommendations that he made, which we have acted on very speedily, are perhaps going to be useful to this inquiry. I would just draw your attention to them quickly. He recommended that we work hard on holiday activities and food programmes. That is being worked up, as you know, by the Department for Education. Vicky Ford has been a key and critical member of Will and my food Ministers group. Her work on that is worth considering when you write this report.

Henry Dimbleby also suggested we increase the value of the Healthy Start vouchers, which is something else that has been acted on. Minister Churchill has also been a key member of our group, with the other Ministers most involved being from DCMS and MHCLG.

To come back to the original question, it is useful to have more than one Department responsible for alleviating food poverty.

Derek Thomas: I completely agree. Minister Quince, when I talk about ending hunger, you are right: I fully understand that it is a whole breadth of challenges that need to be addressed. It is no easy task, but there is nothing like hunger to galvanise the minds and motivate the political will, so all power to your elbows. Thank you very much.

Q76 **Chair:** In our last report on food security, we talked about having a Minister for food security and having a cross-departmental responsibility. We have a Minister for Disabled People with that responsibility across Government, so why not a Minister for food security?

Will Quince: My gut instinct is it is not a particularly good idea, because it is a symptom, not a cause. We should really be looking at a cross-Government effort to address the causes, which we are doing across Government and the committees that Victoria and I sit on, with evidence of that. Things like the local welfare assistance scheme and the Covid winter grant scheme are further evidence of that.

The only thing I would say is, if we were to have a Minister with such a niche policy area, albeit a very important one, it would be key that it did not sit in any Government Department. We have Ministers that have a very specific, targeted focus like that. To some extent, we have that with the Veterans Minister. It is really important that they sit within Cabinet Office, so they are able to reach across Government and ensure that they have that reach across.

As I say, looking at the root causes of poverty and food insecurity, the levers do not sit within one Government Department. In fact, if I look at



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my own Government Department, the Department for Work and Pensions, I only have two levers that I can pull to tackle poverty. The first is increasing the rate of benefits, which is invariably and nearly always a very expensive thing to do. The second is to support and empower people into work, which we have been very successful at doing as a Government since 2010. What we now face, of course, is a very difficult labour market, which is making that tricky, but we have our £30 billion plan for jobs and a clear plan about how we are going to support and empower people into work.

My honest response is that I do not think it is a great idea, because working cross-Government now, as we are doing, is working.

Q77 **Chair:** If we did have one, it would be in the Cabinet Office.

Will Quince: That would be my suggestion.

Q78 **Chair:** Victoria, do you want to add anything?

Victoria Prentis: In the food supply sense of food security, we have a Minister. It is Lord Gardiner, and he sits within Defra. We monitor food security, in the wider sense of the word, very closely within Defra; it is right that we should do that, because it is very much part of our role. However, I totally agree with everything that Will has said. Will is chairing two committees at the moment, which are together providing this cross-departmental oversight. I feel that they are working well.

Q79 **Chair:** We are particularly concerned about getting food to the vulnerable. That is where we will probably press our case, I suspect. I must not second-guess what might or might not be in our report.

Victoria Prentis: The taskforce for the vulnerable, on which Will sat and I chaired, which we set up nearly a year ago now in response to the pandemic, was very useful in terms of dealing with the crisis in food. It proved its weight, but we have now moved to a more long-term strategy, which Will has outlined, which I must say I am happy with.

Will Quince: Can I just add one more thing on that? Victoria is absolutely right. When you are in a pandemic and you have all Government Departments pulling in the same direction towards a common cause, with Treasury approval, it is almost like pushing against an open door.

In ordinary times, it is not always like that. Individual Government Departments are always competing for Treasury spend and then Treasury will decide. That is why it would not be a great move to have it sitting within one Government Department and one Minister responsible, because ultimately you would struggle to get the necessary buy-in from all other Government Departments. You would only have one Department putting in a budget bid, when what you really want is multiple Departments, with cross-Government departmental working, where a bid is supported by multiple Government Departments towards a common purpose and objective.



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Victoria Prentis: Even during the pandemic, we found that the cross-Governmental approach to obtaining the £63 million we got last summer and then the much larger winter support package worked very well, because multiple Ministers were making that case loud and clear.

Q80 **Dave Doogan:** I am concerned. I have listened very carefully to Minister Quince and Minister Prentis discuss this situation. I am just worried that it must be, without question, a crisis. We talk regularly on this Committee about the fact that food prices as a proportion of income for less vulnerable elements of society are lower now than they have ever been—farmers will very readily tell you this—yet we are looking at the challenge of increasing and systemic, or almost systemic, food insecurity.

I accept what Minister Quince has said about the need for cross-departmental working on this within Government, but the difficulty is that when it is everybody's responsibility, it is very close to being nobody's responsibility. I would be very interested to know how the Government collectively and Ministers collectively will ensure that it does not fall between dozens and dozens of different stools.

Finally, to demonstrate that this is a question, are both Ministers today content that the Government are taking this seriously, in terms of actions and not just ambitions, and that we will see deliverables? Ambitions are great and we all share them, but what we need are deliverables and milestones to check that Government and officials are delivering against those ambitions.

Will Quince: That is a fair question. I would suggest the evidence is the over £280 billion that has been put in to support individuals, businesses, jobs and livelihoods over the course of this pandemic so far; an additional £7 billion into our welfare system; and then, in addition to that, the work of our own taskforce specifically looking at supporting people with food and essential items, which led to the £63 million scheme and the £170 million Covid winter grant scheme, which are both unprecedented in both their level and scale.

I completely understand that reservation, because I have sat on committees before, which I have convened, and you do get the impression that there are Ministers around the table who have been forced to go there by their Secretary of State, but it is questionable whether they are going to then a) agree with you, or b) support the budget bid that you want to put forwards. In this endeavour, I have never felt that. In fact, both with the original £63 million scheme and the £170 million scheme, it was all arms of Government pulling together because we recognised the significance and importance of getting this right. We know that people are facing unprecedented financial disruption as a result of this pandemic.

I do not share the cynicism or scepticism about this approach, in part because of how I have seen it working so far and because of the Ministers you have around the table, who are passionate about tackling this issue.

Q81 **Chair:** Victoria, are you happy with that?



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Victoria Prentis: I am very happy with that. Tackling poverty in all its forms is a real priority for this Government. I agree with every part of Will's answer. This is not something we are in any way trying to minimise or downplay. It is important that we accept that people have found the last year really difficult, and we must continue to strain every sinew in Government to ensure they get the help they need from us.

Q82 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you to our two Ministers. Victoria, first I need to say thank you. We asked for an annual report on food security. You wanted a five-year report. You have compromised and given us a three-yearly report, so thank you for that.

Victoria Prentis: It is a maximum of three-yearly, Barry. It may well be appropriate to do it more often. I would suggest that the pandemic was one of those moments.

Q83 **Barry Gardiner:** I am pleased to see that the compromise is continuing in the right direction. The first of those reports is going to be produced before the end of this year. What data will it contain on how many people are food-insecure? How will Government use that information to guide the implementation of their net-zero and natural environment objectives, the sustainability of supply chains and the levelling-up agenda? Will it have teeth to enable it perhaps to give power to the supermarket adjudicator to take any necessary action?

Victoria Prentis: There is a series of questions there, Barry. We are anticipating that the food security report will include statistics from the living costs and food survey, the family resources survey, which Will mentioned earlier, and the FSA's "Food and You" survey, which comes out every six months. We are very much looking forward to the next set of statistics, which will give us a real sense as to what has been happening in the most recent period that we are concerned about.

Probably, this year, the first report that is going to be of interest to this Committee in this space is going to be Henry Dimbleby's report in April and May. Then you will want to look very closely at the Government response to that. That is a really significant report that is going to touch on all aspects of food supply and security and will mention many of the environmental issues that you raised in your question. The Government have asked for six months to respond to that, but I am anticipating quite a public conversation—I am hoping for one—over the course of the summer, as we start to discuss many quite difficult issues.

There are issues relating to obesity that we need to address as a nation. There are also issues relating to the cost of food versus where it comes from and whether there are trade-offs to be made in that space. I have given evidence about that before. There are not always trade-offs to be made in that space with sustainable food, but it is important that we talk about those openly. I suspect that will lead to a conversation about labelling. When we actually get to your first food security report, we may



have had many of the discussions that you and I are keenly anticipating. I am certainly hoping that is the case.

One of the reasons we pushed back on doing a food security report every year was that we wanted it to be strategic and to look at a range of data, covering several years. I am hopeful that it will do that. Whether we have to do something specifically after the pandemic, which we hope we are getting to the stage of looking at, I suspect you are right and we will want to. I suspect this Committee may want to be involved in that again. In terms of the wider food security report, let us deal with Henry Dimbleby's report first, which I think is going to be really important. We will then move on to that. I will talk to you about that in future evidence sessions.

Chair: We will look forward to it.

Q84 **Barry Gardiner:** One of the potential difficulties here is that this year, in a sense, is going to become a perverse baseline, given that it is the first report that is being done into this. It is being done at a very particular time where people have been on furlough and there has been a great increase in the number of families who are struggling and in need of food banks. There are going to be specific responses that may be appropriate this year, which may be less appropriate in future. In particular, the strategic responses you have talked about are the ones that I am keen to know that you have the levers to implement. One of the things that the recent NAO report on net zero in Defra and Defra's contribution to that has shown is that, as a Department, you lack many of the levers that are required to deliver on the environmental objectives that the Government hold. This is a very strange year in which we will have this first report. How are you going to baseline? How are you going to be able to implement the policies you need to deliver on the Government's objectives, given that Defra does not have many of the powers available to it, or indeed the resources?

Victoria Prentis: As I said earlier, we will have to view the pandemic as a special time, as you are suggesting. That was very much the tone of Henry Dimbleby's interim report, which was published at the end of July last year, which of course, as we now know, was only at the beginning of the pandemic, sadly. None of us know what is going to transpire over the course of the next few months. We are hoping that we are in the home straight now. Let us get Henry's report and the response to it done this year. Let us engage with it fully and energetically, as a Committee, Department and nation. We have not set ourselves direct timelines as to when the next report is going to take place, but I agree with you that this period has been an unusual one and should not be used as any sort of baseline. We have really good learning, though, from this period on cross-departmental working, dealing with crises and tackling access to food in ways we have never had to think about before.

On the climate change front, we of course have the Environment Bill coming up later this year, and COP coming up later this year, which will be the focus for a lot of those discussions. I think it is right that I do not try



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to give you a timeline now for the next food security report. We are going to have to review when we know where we are with the pandemic at the end of this year.

Q85 Barry Gardiner: What about the question of the powers for the supermarket adjudicator?

Victoria Prentis: We will continue to keep the powers of the supermarket adjudicator under review. I think that is right. I am sure that will be part of Henry Dimbleby's strategic review. I am quite sure we will respond to that as part of the Government response. We have said that we will do that within six months of his review being published, so it will definitely be with you by the end of this year.

Q86 Ian Byrne: Minister Quince, we know shortages of money from welfare payments are a key driver for food insecurity. That is why we are seeing the outrage about the removal of the £20 uplift to universal credit. Can you outline what percentage of, say, a weekly payment of SSP is sufficient for food?

Will Quince: It is quite hard for me to set that out. In effect, with the universal credit you have your standard allowance, which is £342.72 per calendar month for someone under 25. If you are over 25, it is £409.89. Then you have additional elements for disability, housing or children.

In relation to the uplift, I completely understand that there are a lot of people waiting to hear what the Chancellor is going to say next Wednesday in relation to the future of the uplift. To give you a level of comfort on this, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, throughout the course of the past year, has consistently stepped up to support the poorest, lowest paid and most disadvantaged in society. He has not flinched in terms of his support for people, with their jobs, businesses and livelihoods, putting an unprecedented additional £7 billion into our welfare system. I see absolutely no sign of that stopping now. We have the light at the end of the tunnel—the vaccination programme is going incredibly well—but people are still struggling at the moment.

Q87 Ian Byrne: Minister, this is pre-Covid, from 2010, when we had 70 food banks in the country. In 2020 we have 2,000. This predates. You mentioned data and that there is a report coming out next week because you have asked questions in a questionnaire. I am trying to delve into how much of universal credit the DWP believes should be spent on food and if there is enough. Is that data available? We can see, when we have 15 million people in poverty, that whatever data you are analysing potentially is not the right set of data.

Will Quince: We do not specify how an individual or a family should spend their benefit payments. Every single individual and family is different. If you look at our long-term strategy in terms of tackling poverty, it revolves around universal credit.

Ian Byrne: It has failed.



Will Quince: It revolves around universal credit, because all evidence shows us and suggests that the best route out of poverty is work and, in particular, full-time work. That is why, with our universal credit, unlike the previous legacy benefits system, it supports, empowers and incentivises people into work. At the moment we have a challenging labour market. That is why the Chancellor has supported this Department.

Q88 **Ian Byrne:** Minister, I must pull you up on that. When 60% of people who are accessing food banks are actually in work, there is an issue with work as well. Is the DWP looking at that as well?

Will Quince: Yes, of course we are. In-work poverty is a real area of focus and progression for us. Universal credit supports people with that. People forget that universal credit is an in-work and out-of-work benefit. Around 40% of people on universal credit are in work. That is why a lot of our work, in terms of nearly doubling the number of work coaches across the country, is around supporting and empowering people into work, but also to progress in work too. We very much have an ABC approach: a job, a better job and then a career. We do not just get somebody into work and then leave them there. We continue that relationship and support them into better work and into careers. Progression is absolutely a focus for us.

In addition to that, we have the In-Work Progression Commission, which will report in the coming months on the barriers to progression for those in persistent low pay. It will also set out a strategy for overcoming these. You will not have very long to wait.

Q89 **Ian Byrne:** I really look forward to seeing the strategy. Minister Prentis, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's definition of destitution means going without the essentials we all need to eat, stay warm and dry and keep clean. In the north-west, the number of households living in destitution rose from 0.7% to 4.5% through 2020, according to the NIESR estimates. The NIESR predicts that the number of households in destitution across the north-west will reach 5.6% in 2021, eight times worse than before lockdown began, with hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people in destitution.

We are seeing levels of poverty not seen since the 1930s. That is why we have had the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Liverpool City Region declare themselves right-to-food regions. They are asking Henry Dimbleby to include the right to food in the national food strategy, with many other councils and local authorities to follow across the country in the coming months. With all the data we are seeing on food poverty, will the Government consult on whether a right to food should be given a legislative footing?

Victoria Prentis: You and I have discussed this before. We had a useful debate in Westminster Hall and then a second debate about this Committee's previous report in this area. It is an idea that I know you have championed. You often use the evidence from your Fans Supporting Foodbanks charity and the evidence you have gleaned from your own work



to talk about this area. I know that Liverpool and Manchester are going to be in contact, probably with both me and Henry Dimbleby, about this.

As I said earlier, I am looking forward very actively to Henry's report, which is coming in a couple of months' time. I would expect that we would have the conversation I am hoping to have and then the reply to his report within six months, so before the end of the year. If it is an issue that he wishes us to address, I am sure that we will address that in our response. The reason for waiting for that response to Henry's report is that we would want to consider all the legislative changes that he suggests as a package. It is right that we go through the process that we have set out in terms of that.

Speaking personally, I am not sure that this would assist at the moment. I am not in any way trying to downplay the food poverty that people are genuinely suffering from and the role of food banks we are finding at the moment. We have found, over the course of the pandemic, that Government have worked directly with food charities to distribute money in a way that has not happened before. I remember having this debate with your Chair over some of the Agriculture Act provisions. I am never sure that putting things in primary legislation is a silver bullet and that just saying there is a right to food magically makes it happen. I am determined to make sure that we alleviate poverty in all its forms and work really hard across Government to do that.

Will Quince: I know this is something that you have discussed with Victoria before. It is a relatively new concept to me, in that it has not been raised with me specifically previously. I am interested to better understand, conceptually, exactly what it is you are proposing. If it is about ensuring that people receive food, that is one thing. If it is about people receiving more money, which may lead to them being able to afford more food, that is another. Perhaps if you can clarify I might be able to provide a little bit more.

Q90 Ian Byrne: For the right to food, we are looking at a set of duties that we want enshrined in law, which make up the right to food. I do not want to give too much away, because we are creating a submission for Henry Dimbleby, so it would be for Henry to decide to put it into the right to food and it would obviously be for the Government then to implement what we are actually proposing. I am happy to sit down and have a discussion on what the submission is going to entail, after we give it to Henry. I would be absolutely delighted to sit down with you and Minister Prentis on that and get some feedback on what we believe the right to food is.

We have already outlined the situation where we are now. We are at levels that have never been seen before. It cannot be a sticking plaster. We need systemic change and we need to fundamentally change the future direction of the 11 million people in this country who cannot put a meal on the table. We are the fifth-richest country in the world. It is untenable. You are the Government of the day. My job is to pressure and push you into actually doing something to change those people's lives, because what we are seeing in our communities is absolutely outrageous.



The right to food and to put it on a legislative footing for the Government of the day is something I am extremely passionate about, as are many other people on this call; I know Geraint is going to ask a question in a minute. We think that is what it needs to change and affect the future of the people who we are talking about. I am happy to sit down after the submission to Henry and have a discussion with you, Will, to see what your thoughts are on that. I do not want to give too much away about what we are going to put in.

Will Quince: They are the trade secrets. I would be very happy, for my part, to sit down and hear that proposal in further detail.

Ian Byrne: Wonderful. I will enjoy that.

Will Quince: The challenge for me is that we are looking to address the root cause, not the symptom. For example, if somebody cannot afford food at the present time, is that because their benefits are insufficient or is it because they are spending too much of their benefits topping up their housing? Is the issue actually the affordability of housing locally? If it is the latter, we really need to address that. Otherwise, if you give someone more money in benefits, it will again be swallowed up by housing costs and it acts as a sticking plaster. I agree with you. I would much rather find long-term, sustainable solutions to some of these issues than more sticking plasters that will just need replacing periodically.

Ian Byrne: That is a good answer. I appreciate that, and the tone you gave the answer in as well.

Chair: I know you feel very passionately about all of this, Ian, and Geraint does, and we all do. I appreciate your questions and I appreciate both of the Ministers' answers.

Q91 **Geraint Davies:** So we are clear here, there are 7 million people in Britain today who are in food insecurity—in other words, they go hungry for a nutritious meal virtually every day. My question to the DWP Minister Quince is whether you agree that there should be a right to food, by which I mean sufficient income to have daily nutritious food after already covering for other essentials like warmth and shelter?

Will Quince: This is the first that I have heard of a concept specifically of a right to food per se. Some context might be important, and I do not recognise that 7 million figure, so perhaps you could email me where that has come from.

Geraint Davies: It is from evidence to the Committee from FareShare, which we have published.

Will Quince: It is from FareShare, okay. I suspect it is data that is then extrapolated up. Either way, we want to have a better understanding of food insecurity. That is exactly why we commissioned and put questions into the family resources survey. As Barry rightly pointed out, everything in the last year is going to be skewed because of the pandemic. We have



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had unprecedented numbers of people facing financial disruption. Nevertheless, the first year of data will be from April 2019 to 2020. It is always a year in arrears anyway, so the first year, which will be released in March, should give us some good quality data on which to look at that in detail.

Over the course of the past year, we have invested about £280 billion supporting people and an extra £7 billion into our welfare safety net. Some context is important, in terms of what we actually spend on an average year on benefits for working-age people. It ranges between £100 billion and £120 billion a year. To put that into some kind of context, that is three times the defence budget. We spend more on family benefits than any other country in the G7, at around 3.5%, notwithstanding the points you rightly make, because neither I nor anybody in Government wants to see anybody going hungry or going without food, in particular children. That is why we have put this extra money into our welfare system. We review benefits annually. Last year we increased them by 1.5%, in line with CPI. This year, in April, they are increasing by a further 0.5%, in line with CPI. We will continue to reform our welfare system so it encourages work, while supporting those who need help.

Q92 Geraint Davies: I realise a lot is happening and you are listing a lot of it. I want to ask a very simple question, if I may. Do you believe, as a Government Minister, that people in Britain, in the sixth-richest nation, should have the right to food, by which I mean sufficient money for daily nutritious food alongside other essentials of warmth and shelter? Do you think we should all have that right?

Will Quince: If your question is whether I think anybody in this country should be going hungry, the answer to that is no. As a Government, we need to better understand the root causes and reasons that are leading to anybody in this country finding themselves in that position, and then we need to tackle them.

Q93 Geraint Davies: I understand it is very complicated and you have described that. I am just going back to basics, if I may. We live in a rich country. There are millions of people who are going hungry. I realise it is complicated. I wanted to know whether your start point is that people should have the right to food and the right to basic warmth and shelter in Britain today.

Will Quince: It is not about a right. It is the fact that nobody should be going hungry in this country, period, end. We need to better understand what the drivers of that are, and then we need to tackle them. And we need—

Q94 Geraint Davies: Do Government have a duty to provide enough money to ensure they do not?

Will Quince: And we need to tackle the long term too. I'm sorry, I missed what you said.



Q95 Geraint Davies: Sorry, I did not mean to interrupt—I apologise for that. I want to be clear: I am talking about the right to food and other essentials, like warmth and shelter. If you put it around the other way, as you just did—that you do not think anyone should go hungry—do you accept that Government have a duty to act in such a way that people have enough basic income so they can have food, basic shelter and warmth. We are not talking about luxury here. This is something that is supported by the Local Government Association, Disability Rights UK and The Trussell Trust. They are basically saying, “We should have a welfare system where you have enough money for enough nutritious food a day, some warmth and some shelter. Everyone should have that right”. They are agreeing. Do you agree with that?

Will Quince: I absolutely do. That is why we have a welfare safety net and a benefit system that is one of the most comprehensive and generous in the world, in terms of the amount we spend on benefits.

Q96 Geraint Davies: It is not working, is it, to be fair?

Will Quince: Actually, the system is working incredibly well. If you look back over the course of the past year, the legacy benefits system would not have coped. It has now nearly doubled, so we would have seen an extra 3 million people on benefits, and they would not have got the support they so desperately needed as quickly as they did if it were not for universal credit. Incidentally—I have to make this point, even though it is a political one—it is a system that your party, Geraint, wants to scrap. It is a system that we could not have done without over the course of the past year. It is the only reason we did not see queues down the streets outside job centres and people not getting the money.

Q97 Geraint Davies: I am not going to try to defend any particular party, but obviously the current Government have been in power for 10 years. In the last year alone, the number of people in destitution has doubled to about 470,000 people. The welfare system, in terms of delivering what you want, which is the right to food and other basic essentials through the welfare system and safety net, has not delivered this year for those people, or indeed for the millions of people in food insecurity. More must be done. I am not saying nothing has been done.

Will Quince: There are now 6 million people on universal credit. There is a smaller number but still people on the legacy benefit system too. For the vast majority of people on universal credit, the system works incredibly well for them. Where you are right is that there are people for whom, for all sorts of reasons, the system does not work. By that, I do not mean universal credit does not work for them. I mean that historic issues—I have covered some of them—act as the reasons for and the drivers of the poverty they find themselves in.

We as a Government have a responsibility to tackle that. That is why we work across Government, and I work with Victoria and others, to look at what we can do in addition to our welfare system to support people who



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need that extra support. That is why, for example, over the course of the past year we have put in place the local welfare assistance scheme. Do not forget that local welfare assistance already exists, I think to the tune of around £130 million by local authorities prior to the creation of the £63 million scheme and the £170 million Covid winter grant scheme too. That was designed to support people who find themselves in crisis in relation to food and essential items during this pandemic.

Consistently, we look at our policies. Where it is necessary to review or change them, we will do so. We do that regularly. The system works for the vast majority of people. Where we have those who it does not work for and who are struggling, that is why we have additional support available.

Q98 Geraint Davies: I will ask the question again to Victoria Prentis; it is the same question, really. We have had evidence that there are 7 million people who are in food insecurity. They do not have enough nutritious food each day. There is a problem. Do you believe, as a Government Minister, that they should have the right to food as a guiding principle? By that I mean sufficient money for daily nutritious food, alongside other essentials of warmth and shelter.

Victoria Prentis: I have heard the course of this discussion and I would very much echo the evidence that Will Quince has been able to give about what his Department has done over the course of the dreadful year; many people have had to step up and step in to assist. We accept that there are cracks. Some people have not been able to access the system in the way we would want and as quickly as we would want, which is why we set up the special packages to deal with their needs—the £63 million last summer and the winter support package. They were there to help people in crisis and they have been brilliantly delivered by local authorities, which are very aware of where their vulnerable residents are, how to reach them and what they need.

In terms of your more general question on whether this right to food should be put in legislation, I am parking the answer to that until we have heard from Henry Dimbleby. I have said that we will do a Government response when we have moved this conversation on a bit. Ian is keeping his cards close to his chest on the submission that is going into Henry Dimbleby. It is something we will look at. As you know, because you have heard my views on the Agriculture Act and putting aspiration in primary legislation, I am not always keen on that. In terms of whether this Government want to help people who are in need, yes, absolutely, we do. We are doing that and we are determined to look at every means within our disposal to target resource where it needs to be.

Q99 Geraint Davies: Targeting is key, is it not? We know a lot of money is being spent. Even if a lot of money is being spent, which it is, would you simply accept that, if we still have 7 million people who are going hungry, either we need more money or for it to be more effectively spent, so that, rather than the crack in the system, the chasm in the system is closed up, so people are not going to bed hungry in their millions?



Victoria Prentis: We are doing our best, as food Ministers involved in this space, as we have talked about for the last hour and a half, to fill whatever gaps there are that mean that people have not received the benefits in time, have not been able to access them or have not applied for them. We have done that in a variety of ways, which I set out before. I believe, and the Trussell Trust, for example, believes, that the local authority route is the most targeted and helpful one for getting support to the vulnerable. Where that does not work, we have used unprecedented means to target food charities via FareShare, for example, so an extra £16 million as part of the winter recovery scheme. We will continue to think outside the box. These are extraordinary times and it is important that we respond in every way we need to.

Will Quince: The most important word Victoria used there is “targeted”. Every single family is very different. If you take one family, for example, on universal credit, they may be very happy with their overall benefit award, and yet another family that might have housing arrears, historical debts, court fines or an ongoing housing payment deficit may be struggling. It is very important that we target it. The broad-brush approach through the benefits system of more money for all those on universal credit is not necessarily the answer. It also runs into several billions of pounds. That is why we are looking at more targeted solutions via local authorities, identifying the most vulnerable and disadvantaged and getting that support to them as quickly as possible.

Q100 **Geraint Davies:** Target the 7 million.

Will Quince: I do not recognise that figure.

Q101 **Chair:** Why did the Government stop providing parcels for shielding people but encourage schools to adopt a food-parcels-first approach? Given the importance of parcels for wholesalers, who made losses after the sudden closure of schools, why was there then a knee-jerk U-turn away from school food parcels? Bluntly, the question is: what is the Government policy? Is it vouchers for food? Is it food parcels? Where are we? We have had mixed evidence in this inquiry, so I would be very keen to ask both of you as Ministers: where on earth we are? Is it food parcels? Is it vouchers? What is the most successful way of getting food out to the most vulnerable?

Victoria Prentis: We have had to do different responses at different stages of the pandemic. It is right that that has happened. 4.7 million shielding boxes were delivered. They may not have been exactly what you would want to eat every day of your life, but they were carefully selected to ensure there was food available to critically vulnerable people at a very difficult time. In some cases, there were only five days between the announcement of shielding and the delivery of the box. I view the system as a success. It was not ever designed to be a long-term solution. It was designed to fill an immediate crisis need, which it did, very successfully, while we boosted other measures to increase confidence in the food supply chain. If you remember, we had food shortages at that stage of the pandemic—



Q102 **Chair:** Sorry to interrupt. When it comes to a food parcel, especially for children, a lot of the parents said that the children just did not eat the food that was in the parcel. That became a real issue. Where are we on that? Is it now vouchers, parcels or a mixture of both? We have to be much more careful with what we put in these food parcels if they are going to be useful. Otherwise the food gets wasted and people do not have enough food themselves.

Victoria Prentis: I had launched into a defence, if you like, of the shielding parcel scheme, which is what I thought your original question started with. I would defend the shielding parcel scheme to the hilt. It hit the spot where it needed to be hit at that particular moment. However, parcels are clearly not the best way of buying food on a general basis. Food is something we buy best for ourselves, because we can then meet our own needs.

Schools have set up a system where there is freedom to choose at a local level from lunch parcels, where that is appropriate, local vouchers and the DfE's national voucher scheme, which has been restarted and set up again. It is right that those decisions are made on a local level. There may well be reasons, to do with the wholesale supply chain, for example, as to why a food parcel is appropriate. Some schools have been providing fantastic parcels. There is one in Banbury, St Mary's, where the food supplied was genuinely exactly what I as a mum would want to receive for my children.

There is a range of options available now. In terms of the general debate on parcel versus voucher versus money for food, there are different needs at different times. This has been an extraordinary year. Government have had to react very quickly. The shielding packages we provided at the beginning was the right response at the time. I am glad that we have confidence in the supply chain and sufficient measures in place, which we talked about earlier with delivery slots, to mean we do not have to do that now.

Q103 **Chair:** You are confident that there will not be any rogue companies out there that will be delivering substandard parcels.

Victoria Prentis: In school terms, the Department for Education has set up a special hotline to deal with the very real issues that we saw on the last day I gave evidence to your Committee. We saw some dreadful examples of items that had been delivered to replace lunch. The Department for Education has worked very hard to make sure there is a range of measures in place and that there is a good system for any complaints that result.

Will Quince: I would add to that in terms of the debate between vouchers and food boxes. In terms of the food boxes, the challenges are the lack of choice, the specialist diets and things, as you rightly say, that people will not eat. Also, to some extent they need a certain knowledge of cooking to be able to use some of those items that are in the boxes, which, to be frank, some people will not have, or will not have the time or inclination to



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do. On the flip side, it guarantees food coming into the home that will be eaten, including fresh fruit and veg.

On the other hand, the voucher scheme is not money, which is advantageous in that it does not get gobbled up by housing arrears and other things, or can be spent on other things. It is pro-choice and pro-diet. The only issue with the voucher scheme is that, while they are restricted in that you cannot buy alcohol or cigarettes, you can buy other things in supermarkets, so it does not guarantee that it is going to be fresh, healthy, nutritious food coming into the home. On balance, for me, the voucher system is a far better one, in terms of empowering families to make the right choices. I take the view, I think rightly, that instinctively every parent wants to provide good, nutritious food for their children. We should be doing all we can to empower them to do that. Vouchers are the best way of doing it.

Chair: That is certainly my line of thought.

Q104 **Dave Doogan:** Looking back, I wonder if the Government or our two Government Ministers here think it might have been better to give local authorities more power and the funding to go with that power earlier on, to help vulnerable people access food, rather than taking a national approach. Maybe by doing that we could have avoided some of the more calamitous headlines around where the initial vouchers were to be redeemed; I think it was at Waitrose and Marks & Spencer. It was not the finest hour. I wonder if our Ministers have a view on that.

Victoria Prentis: We worked very closely with local authorities right from the beginning. They have been an integral part of helping to feed the vulnerable over the last year. We have heard time and time again from those who work at the frontline of food poverty, if you like, in the Trussell Trust, for example, and other charities, that it is a local authority targeted approach that has been helpful. They have been very involved in the conversation. Of course, the pandemic hit very quickly, or got very serious very quickly, and we had to step up as Government very quickly.

The initial problems were not about economic access to food so much as physical access to food. That was a challenge that I do not suppose any of us had ever really anticipated—that we would simply not allow older and vulnerable people to leave the house to go shopping. That was a real challenge that we had not prepared for. The shielding boxes were a proportionate and appropriate response to that particular and peculiar set of circumstances, but I do not think they are a long-term solution.

Will Quince: The only other thing I would add to that is we have, through the local welfare assistance scheme and the Covid winter grants scheme, empowered local authorities to be able to support vulnerable people in their locality. Do not believe everything you read in the papers. I read exactly the same articles in relation to the vouchers being eligible at Waitrose but not, at the time, Aldi. I believe they were still able to be used at Morrisons, Tesco and Sainsbury's. It was only because some of those other



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supermarkets were not able to accept the vouchers through their till systems, the vast majority of whom have now found workarounds to be able to make that happen.

Inevitably, with any Government Department throughout the pandemic, it has been a learning curve. The DfE creating the Edenred system worked incredibly well, despite some teething issues at the beginning. I know that many local authorities, even today, through the Covid winter grant scheme, are using that very same scheme to get vouchers out to parents.

Q105 Dave Doogan: To follow up on that, Minister Prentis, you like nothing better than to tell me across the Floor of the House that you have spoken to Ministers in the Scottish Government about whatever it is I am asking you and they are all terribly happy. That having been said, you have a dual role in your Department. Departments like Defra have a dual role, in so far as sometimes you are discharging your responsibilities on a statutory basis in the interests of people who live in England, and sometimes you are doing that in the interests of the whole UK.

How have you found that tension in this situation with regards to the interventions the devolved Administrations made in support of their vulnerable with access to food? Notwithstanding the colossal asymmetry in the populations of the United Kingdom, how do we ensure we do not substitute scale for wisdom? How do we ensure that, if they are doing something very effective, standing up some statutory instrument very quickly in Stormont, Cardiff or Edinburgh, we learn from it and make sure that best practice, wherever it originates, is rolled out across those elements of your portfolio that have an English-only aspect to them?

Victoria Prentis: That is a fair question. At the beginning of the pandemic, we set up the feeding the vulnerable taskforce. The Ministers from the devolved Administrations were a valued and welcome part of those conversations. I was relatively new in post at the time and getting to know my fellow Ministers. I very much welcomed their contributions to all our discussions, as I am sure did Will and the other Ministers who were involved. We were able to have sensible discussions throughout our meetings about who was doing what and what particular challenges were being faced at slightly different times as the pandemic ran through the country. We were genuinely learning from each other, and I for one found that valuable.

Q106 Mrs Murray: On local authorities, all my own local authority did was act as an intermediary. They handed the money that was given to them to people like the Trussell Trust, the food banks and asked them to source and do all the work, and yet I was seeing in the local paper that the council was providing this money, with no recognition whatsoever that help had come from the Government. Was this a trend? Could you perhaps have put a condition on to ask them to recognise the Government's assistance?

Will Quince: That is a very good question. The tweets from Cornwall Council did not go unnoticed. It made reference to the use of the Covid



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winter grant scheme as if it had not come from the Government and it was somehow stepping in where the Government had not. That is not only misleading; it is also quite wrong for them to have done that. Nevertheless, we have empowered local authorities to make the decisions about how best to support their local communities. They will have to provide management information to us on exactly how they have done that. We had the first results of that in on 14 February. We will be able to publish them in early March. We will then have a second set of management information and that will all be published too. Your local residents will be able to see exactly how the local authorities spent the Covid winter grant scheme.

Chair, if it is helpful for you—this is an announcement that did not perhaps get as much pick-up and notice as it should have done as part of the road map yesterday—as part of the road map to cautiously lift restrictions announced by the Prime Minister yesterday, the Department for Work and Pensions will be extending the Covid winter grant scheme to 16 April 2021. It will be extending it by an extra two weeks and providing over £50 million of additional support to vulnerable households via local authorities. I do not think it has been widely acknowledged. This may be an announcement for your Committee here. The grant will now run until Friday 16 April. My officials are working through allocations and will be notifying local authorities accordingly.

Q107 **Chair:** You have made that very public here this afternoon, so thank you for that. Thank you very much for the evidence, Will, because I know you need to go. Thank you very much for the evidence you have given this afternoon. You and Victoria have been a very good team this afternoon. You show for us the fact that you are working together to try to deliver food across the board, especially to those who are most vulnerable and to provide income. That then provides food as well. We accept your answers. The evidence you have given this afternoon will be very valuable to us when we put our report together. We thank you for your time and will allow you to go. Thank you, Will, very much.

Victoria, this is the last question this afternoon. The Government are good; they give money to FareShare, quite rightly, and FareShare does a great job in delivering food and redistributing food. They gave £27.5 million to FareShare. You remember there is the £5 million to enable farmers to repurpose food waste at the farm gate, which is money very well spent. Why can you not give that money to help get that food waste, the food that would be wasted, which is still good-quality food, straight from the farm gate? It is very good value for money. I do not know if there is a straight answer for that one.

Victoria Prentis: It is fair that waste is something we have become increasingly interested in and keen to tackle as the Government. There was a 96% increase in Government spend on tackling food waste between 2015 and 2018, which is a good sign of that and evidence of that. We have been keen to support FareShare, WRAP and others with the £15 million food waste fund. I have always felt very passionately about this. WRAP is based in my own constituency. The issue of food waste is an issue that I have



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been interested in since before I was elected. I would expect this to be an area in which we continue to work as Government.

Q108 **Chair:** I would make the plea to you to keep this under review. I genuinely feel that this could be money well spent and get a lot of food to those who most need it and stop some food waste. Please can you keep it under review?

Victoria Prentis: Yes. I hope I have reassured you that the Government take food waste very seriously and will continue to do so.

Q109 **Chair:** This particular scheme from the farm gate is a good one. I would make that specific plea to you on that particular funding. Victoria, can I thank you for very good evidence again? We see you quite regularly these days, do we not?

Victoria Prentis: It is always a pleasure, Chair.

Chair: You were forced to say that through gritted teeth.

Victoria Prentis: It genuinely is. I always genuinely enjoy our discussions. The discussion we have had this afternoon is an important one.

Chair: I can genuinely say, for all members and across parties, that both of you, as Ministers this afternoon, have answered our questions well, whether we agree entirely with everything you say or think there are other ways we can do things. Our report will come up with that. We have different political parties represented here this afternoon in our members. We all appreciate the direct approach you take to the answers and the work you put in to trying to solve the situation. Like I said, we look forward to working with you again in the future. We look forward to all the evidence Ian Byrne is going to be putting forward to the Dimpleby inquiry. I shall take particular notice of that, Ian, when it arrives. We all genuinely want to work together to deliver food to those that most need it. Thank you all very much for attending. I appreciate your time. I appreciate your time, Victoria, and Will, who has now gone. It has been a very good evidence session and it will be very useful for us when we put our report to bed next week, all being well. Thank you very much.