

John Foster – Written Evidence (LUE0052)

I write as an individual with a farming heritage. I have worked as an agricultural journalist and currently as a marketing consultant with a particular interest in agriculture, food processing and the land-based economy. I have campaigned at national and local level on visual amenity for many years, including as a member of Ofgem working groups and in community engagement with BEIS.

Land use policy in England has lost direction. The result is inefficient and inappropriate use of scarce resources, uncertainty across the farming industry and increasing loss of confidence in planning and amenity issues. Rural communities are angry. Many developers also claim the system is “broken”.

Several steps are needed to correct these harmful trends as well as to meet both current and future challenges.

Further improvements are required in the detail and delivery of the Government’s agricultural transition plan. While many of its objectives have widespread support, the detail often appears to lack a thorough understanding of farming practicalities. Earlier guidance is sometimes more comprehensive and of better quality. Greater clarity is essential.

The need to improve food security is currently self evident. This entails maximising the availability of agricultural land for efficient and sustainable production. Best modern farming practice embraces environmental conservation alongside economic production. Further promotion of best practice and refinement of guidance provided for support schemes in order to accommodate the many localised differences in land type, climate and agricultural production would yield significant benefits.

The trend towards replacing animal-based protein for human consumption with plant-based alternatives seems likely to continue. The benefits are well documented but local and national policy seems poorly prepared for

this change. There is currently relatively little support for research relating to production and use of new varieties or crops not normally grown in the UK that may benefit this sector.

Competing demands on land are not well regulated by the existing planning system. For example, very large areas of high quality land are being tied up in contracts for energy generation, such as solar farms, for periods well in excess of the useful life of the technology. These projects have relatively little impact on energy security. Far more efficient systems will be providing sufficient energy to meet UK demand long before the contracts end. There are also more appropriate locations, including commercial roof tops. Despite claims to the contrary, this land is effectively lost to farming. Energy infrastructure is likewise consuming more land, especially in the East of England. The updated National Policy Statements give too much weight to old technologies and will exacerbate the problem. At local authority (LA) planning level frustration at delays in updating Local Plans, completing neighbourhood plans and in processing applications are causing frustration for all parties. There is an increase in the number of decisions at local and national level that are contrary to the recommendation of planning officers and inspectors. This may be perceived as democracy in action but it is doing nothing for consistent and equitable administration.

The land classification system is less useful than when first devised. Land of lower Grades is now important for vegetable production, for instance, especially in areas where irrigation can be used. This does not mean that the best and most versatile land should be downgraded or devalued for planning purposes. Rather, the value of other land types should be recognised and periodic re-classification should be carried out.

Diversification has been important in supporting Britain's farmers since the 1980s. Many have become very effective at their chosen

supplementary businesses. As pressures on agriculture increase such projects have often replaced the original farming enterprise. Some progressions – such as the evolution of dairy farm to ice cream enterprise with visitor attractions – can add value for the community and the national economy. In these instances agricultural production is reduced but could be resumed and there is flexibility for the future. In other cases the business may eventually completely replace the farm and result in an industrial premises of large scale, creating pressures on inadequate rural infrastructure. Local policies should be put in place under national guidance to accommodate this evolving picture and provide appropriate protection for ecology and community alike. The cumulative impact of multiple projects should be fully recognized and mitigated.

The health and wellbeing benefits provided by England's diverse landscape have been well documented. Government supported reports such as the Dasgupta Review of the economics of biodiversity have been widely praised. Unfortunately, by no means all recent policy reflects this understanding. To benefit from improved biodiversity humans must be able to experience it. Protecting rare species is important but so are the agricultural, managed habitats that people enjoy close to their neighbourhood. Achieving this balance requires thought and planning for the longer term. It also requires more cohesive policies at national and local level.

To meet these objectives improved coordination is required between Defra, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, BEIS and the Environment Agency. Agencies and departments already collaborate on specific projects. Such cooperation should be extended and enhanced.

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