**Briefing Note:**

**RED Talk 3 - Is the Pandemic an Opportunity to Review our Food System?**

Rural Policy Group is a visionary think tank shaping the future of the rural economy established by Mark Lumsdon-Taylor earlier this year. It holds a series of debates – RED Talks – to investigate the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on rural economic development and help rural businesses to succeed in this unprecedented climate.

The RED Talk on Thursday, 21 May looked at whether the UK food system is broken and how it could be fixed. The pandemic has changed how consumers value food; how they shop and how they eat. The RED Talk looked at the implications for the economy and the food supply chain, how food and drink enterprises can flourish and the importance of food security at an individual level.

The Talk was held in partnership with our panellists the National Fruit Show, Plumpton College, MHA MacIntyre Hudson, Whitehead Monckton, Fourayes and Rosemary Shrager, and with thanks to key speakers Daniel Zeichner, MP and Teresa Wickham.

A link to the full Talk can be found [here](https://ruralpolicy.group/red). Below are summaries of the main speaker briefings and quotes from speakers and panellists. At the end we have the results of three polls taken during the debate which provide new and somewhat controversial insight into how players in the food and farming industries perceive the future of food in the UK.

# Summary of insights

* The coronavirus pandemic is a stimulus for reviewing our food system and creating a healthier, more sustainable version in which less food is wasted, more people have the financial means to access nutritious food, supply chains are shorter and all economic actors receive fair terms and a fair price.
* There is consensus we need change and doubt over whether we will get it. The Brexit imperative to secure international trade deals will more than likely overshadow the positive shifts in consumers’ food behaviours which are reshaping our domestic market for food.
* Consumers may be more important than Government in determining the future of our food system and the level of self-sufficiency we achieve. While we live in a regulated environment, retailers are driven more by what consumers want. They buy and sell what consumers want.
* Consumers can be empowered to make healthy food choices with more education about the link between diet and nutrition, and how to cook from scratch.
* Economic actors in the farming and food industries feel positive we can create a food system in which both producer and consumer benefit.
* Farmers prefer proven foreign labour to developing a new British workforce. To misquote Prince Charles dreadfully and inappropriately, foreign pickers are stickers.
* The number one priority for farming and food enterprises is a self-sufficiency target and Government commitment to achieving it. This is seen as more important than tariffs on imports.

# The speakers: Daniel Zeichner MP and Teresa Wickham

The debate started with briefings from Daniel Zeichner, MP and Shadow Environment Minister, and Teresa Wickham, prominent grocery and food supply chain expert and Non-Executive Director of Covent Garden Market Authority. Below are the summaries.

Daniel Zeichner, MP paid tribute to workers in the food supply chain for their extraordinary response during the pandemic, particularly in the early days when people were worried about empty shelves. The Member of Parliament for Cambridge continued, Coronavirus has brought the issue of food security and food insecurity much higher up the political agenda. There has been a worrying rise in the number of people experiencing food insecurity during the pandemic; the Trussell Trust reported to the Environmental Select Committee that they estimate two million people are now dependent on their network of food banks.

On top of growing concerns about food insecurity and the climate crisis, our food and agriculture policy is being completely refashioned because we are forming new relationships the rest of the world in light of our exit from the European Union. The accelerated timetable for conducting trade talks, driven by Brexit, has distorted what should have been a full and open discussion about the future of food policies. The Henry Dimbleby review of the food chain has been pushed back despite many in Parliament believing the delivery of a national food strategy needed to precede the agriculture, environment and fisheries bills, in order to provide the framework for those bills. This way round, legislation will be in place which may circumscribe the scope of the food strategy review – or may prevent UK business and citizens from getting the greatest benefit from their national food strategy. The pandemic is overwhelmingly an opportunity to review our food system but Zeichner and many others are less optimistic about whether we will take that opportunity, largely due to timeframes being dogged by the Brexit imperative. However, there are grounds for optimism for the future of food and farming in the UK; the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is being replaced by the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELM) which is a far more environmentally-friendly system.

So what does the Shadow Environment Minister expect from our food system? The same things so many of want. We all want to eat tasty food, we all want universal access to healthy food to combat the obesity crisis, we want our food produced to the highest animal welfare and environmental standards. Many of us want shorter supply chains with more of our food produced locally and regionally, and we want more careful use of land. We want to create better jobs; should we need to move people across the world to make our food system work? We want innovation in terms of food variety, new production methods and disease prevention in crops and animals. Importantly, we want everybody to be able to afford to make good choices. And all this needs to be encompassed within our idea of rural Britain, which is a cornerstone of our national identity.

Many in Parliament fear Government wants to look wider across the world for our food; it will be cheaper and we have the transport to make it possible. The case to support this fear is strong. Over half of farms are vulnerable to the withdrawal of direct payments from the EU, which will be lost before the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELM) starts making payments in 2024. The Neil Parish amendment to the Agriculture Bill to insist imported food is produced to UK standards did not get the support of Government earlier this month, although other parties such as Labour were overwhelmingly in favour. So foodstuffs produced to standards which are illegal for our domestic suppliers can be imported and sold cheaply, undercutting British farmers and food businesses who cannot price-match while investing in high animal welfare and environmental standards of production. Financial and legislative levers are being pulled to encourage greater reliance on imports and putting our homegrown food and farming industries in further jeopardy. The result would be fewer farms here and more imports with long, complex supply chains from across the Globe. And with a smaller farming community we not only disadvantage our food security, public health and economy – we will lose our national identity. Without farmers to act as environmental custodians we will no longer be the “green and pleasant land” of our shared national consciousness.

In short, the coronavirus pandemic is an opportunity to review our food system; many hoped it would be led by the Dimbleby review but we are up against the Brexit timeframe and that may mean we have trade arrangements in place before we have determined what is best for our country.

Teresa Wickham responded from the perspective of food retail and agreed that now is undoubtedly a good time to review our food system but also had reservations as to whether it will happen. As an advisor to Sainsbury’s, Teresa Wickham reminded us that while we live in a regulated system, retailers are driven more by what the consumer wants. Prior to lockdown supermarkets were already responding to changes in consumer behaviour; people were becoming less likely to travel to large out of town supermarkets preferring to use local convenience stores instead, and more customers were ordering online.

When the country went into lockdown there was initially panic, particularly among a generation of food shoppers who are used to buying food daily and do not have huge amounts of kitchen storage in their homes. Resultingly, there was a huge leap from 7% to 10% in online grocery shopping which doesn’t really make a profit for supermarkets due to the additional costs of fulfilling an online order – someone picks your shopping off the shelves and someone else delivers it to your door. However, the main issue with panic-buying was the ‘just in time’ supply system which means supermarkets do not carry much stock.

At every point during the pandemic we had enough food but getting it to the right people at the right time was problematic. Suppliers work seven days a week to put food on our shelves but we need a system in which they can shift dynamically between retail, hospitality and wholesale markets to follow demand. Lockdown has been a disaster for the hospitality sector and its suppliers - the market evaporated overnight. Many of the fruit and vegetable wholesalers at Covent Garden Market who traditionally supplied restaurants have successfully switched to box delivery schemes. There are many other examples of innovation around the country such as farm gate drive-thrus, milk vending machines on dairy farms and fresh fish from Cornwall being delivered right across the South. While eating more locally and regionally sourced food may be desirable, global supply chains will always have a place in our food system. Global food offers consumers more choice. UK suppliers who supply supermarkets with fresh produce 52 weeks of the year source from abroad as well as the UK primarily because they can get the labour and even factoring in import costs, it is worth their while. A move towards greater self-sufficiency would also be a move to less choice on our supermarket shelves as the price of some domestically produced foods escalates beyond what customers may be willing, or able, to pay for it

Corresponding with the decline of eating out is the rise of home cooking. The shortages of flour and eggs indicate that with more time on their hands people are cooking from scratch. We do not yet know whether the rise of home-cooking will stick after lockdown is lifted; it will depend on what shape our lives take. It is likely more people will continue working from home than before and this will have an impact on the future of shopping and eating trends. If people are pleased with the quality of box deliveries, they will carry on.

One of the big changes in our food system will be driven by consumers; greater awareness of the link between diet and health. Not just obesity but the importance of nutrition – nourishment – in a more holistic sense than the narrow focus on fat and calories. We need to examine the nutritional quality of our food from the soil right through supply chain. Another big change which will impact every stage of the food chain is technological innovation. Technology will continue to change how we buy, how we harvest, how we grow and even the level of nutrition we can achieve in our food. Health is so important to us. What we eat and how we buy it will continue to be up for debate.

# Quotes from speakers and panellists

**Teresa Wickham**

Advisor to the CSR Board of Sainsbury’s, Non-Executive Director for Covent Garden Markets Authority and President of The National Fruit Show

“The Pandemic has given us a chance to re-look at our food supply chain and our relationship with food. Retailers responded rapidly coping with increased demand especially online. However, those supplying the hospitality sector found themselves with plenty of product but unable to get it to the consumer. This was mainly due to lack of packaging. We have seen a growth in box deliveries from farm shops, convenience stores and local food outlets who have used this opportunity to either develop or grow their existing business. The lockdown provides people with time to think about their food and eating habits, in many cases eating together and cooking together. Previously they may not have had time to do this. Online will continue to be a major player and it will be interesting to see if people retain their loyalty to local food suppliers who have served them well during this period. We also need to look at the link between nutrition and health. A full review should include looking at the supply chain from soil to table to provide what we need to maintain good health”.

**Daniel Zeichner**

MP for Cambridge and Shadow Environment Minister

“Great discussion – confirmed my view that we need an urgent and better plan to address food security. Labour’s call for an emergency food plan should be heeded”.

**Rosemary Shrager**

Chef and food entrepreneur

“Because of prices we have to have complete visibility of the food to ensure that everyone understands and pays and gets paid fairly. Everyone wants everything cheaper, times are hard, but we need to find another way for people to spend the right amount to support producers and eat healthy food. Seasonal produce must be at the centre of this – why do we need to be global when we really have the most amazing farming and agriculture industry at our fingertips. They need the right support”.

**Sarah Calcutt**

Chair of the National Fruit Show and Vice-Chair of Rural Policy Group

“Labour has been an issue to the wider food sector for a number of years and will continue to be for a while yet. Food and farming offers such exciting opportunities, we need to tell our story better to bring the best people into the sector”.

**Christopher Longden**

Partner at Whitehead Monckton

“Be optimistic, keep looking for opportunities, innovate where you can, and always focus on quality”.

**Phil Acock**

Managing Director of Fourayes Ltd

“Food in the UK is CHEAP. We are the cheapest in Western Europe and come in 8% less than the EU average. In the last 60 years the proportion of household income spent on food has halved, whilst at the same time our spending on housing costs have doubled. We import 50% of our total requirement, which does not give us food security as a nation and our farmers are not getting a fair share of the income. British farming needs to be at the top of the Government agenda to deliver proper food security for our nation and profitability for our farmers, and as a result we might see the average age of our farmers start to come down from the ridiculous age of 59!”

**Mark Lumsdon-Taylor**

Corporate Financier and Founder & Chair of Rural Policy Group

“The agri-food industry GVA is worth £108 billion – 10% of UK GVA. The profile, definition and priority of rural needs to be championed consistently, logically and financially. It is not something that should just sit at the end of the political table”.

# The polls

Rural Policy Group sought to gain business insight into key issues facing the food supply chain and national food security by polling the delegates.

Poll 1: Can Henry Dimbleby’s landmark review of the food chain create a sustainable food system that is healthy, safe and affordable regardless of how much people earn and be a thriving contributor to our urban and rural economies?

Farmers and businesses within the food supply chain are overwhelmingly positive about our ability to create a more sustainable food system in which both producer and consumer benefit. 77% believe that high quality yet affordable food is conducive to thriving local economies; though some sounded a note of caution that the Government needs to create the right environment with greater regulation and a high self-sufficiency target. A minority were concerned that the high costs involved in farming and food production would inhibit affordability, with lower pricing wiping out profits and livelihoods.

Poll 2: Labour is an ongoing, fundamental challenge to the food and farming sector. How would you ensure we can fill our thousands of vacancies each year?

Opinion was divided over how to fill the many thousands of seasonal vacancies. There was widespread support (42%) for a campaign such as Pick for Britain to raise public awareness of employment opportunities within the farming and food industries. However, the most popular solution - with the support of nearly one in two businesses - was to accept that foreign labour is fundamental to food production and build this into the national workforce strategy. This indicates a slight preference for proven foreign labour over developing a new British workforce. To further reinforce this preference, only 25% of those in food and farming thought introducing ‘benefit holidays’ to allow the UK’s claimants to take up seasonal roles was a good idea.

Poll 3: What would be your one priority for supporting the food agenda in 2020?

The number one priority for farming and food industry actors is a national self-sufficiency target backed by the appropriate Government policy apparatus to support them with the transition. It came as a surprise that trade tariffs were a top priority for less than one in 10 food businesses; equal to the number who prioritise the creation of a technology development fund and less than the number who would like to see an inquiry into the cost of food production vs the price of food. What is clear is that players within our food chain are calling for the Government to support them in creating a healthy, sustainable food system, and the Henry Dimbleby review cannot come soon enough.