



## Briefing Note: RED Talk 5 Agritech & The Future of Food

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 – Rural Economic Development Talks – to investigate the key issues impacting on rural economic development including the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, national food strategy and Brexit and to help rural businesses to succeed in this unprecedented climate.

The RED Talk on Thursday 2nd July 2020 looked at scientific and technological innovation in farming and food production, and how it will help UK industry become more efficient, increase productivity and ultimately become more price-competitive as competition from all over the world increases after we leave the European Union. There is no getting away from one simple fact - the trade deals being struck will allow for greater penetration of the UK food market by our trading partners. The sector needs to be ready to fight back and agritech is a key weapon in its armoury. Investment in new technologies, reskilling the existing workforce and attracting new talent, the need for applied research and the absolute necessity of consumer awareness and education about the link between food standards and health all formed part of this lively discussion in which we also heard the latest on the Agriculture Bill, the Agriculture & Trade Commission and the government's direction of travel.

We were delighted to welcome a stellar line up of speakers and panellists:

- Neil Parish – Conservative MP and Chair of the EFRA Select Committee
  - Rosemary Shrager – Chef, Cookery Author and Media Personality
  - Mark Lumsdon-Taylor – Corporate Financier and Founder & Chair of Rural Policy Group
  - Jeremy Kerswell – Principal of Plumpton College and Landex Board Member
  - Phil Acock – Managing Director of Fourayes Limited
- Sarah Calcutt (RED 5 Chair) - Chair of the National Fruit Show and NED of Covent Garden Market Authority

### Watch again

A link to the full RED Talk can be found on our website [www.ruralpolicy.group](http://www.ruralpolicy.group).

### Summary of insights

- International trade deals will open up the UK food and drink market to greater competition from imports.
- Technological innovation is one of the biggest levers the food and farming industry can pull to become more competitive in the fight to fend off imports.
- Industry and education must work together to deliver technologies, a relevantly skilled workforce and an appetite for change.
- Consumer education and public awareness of food production, food standards and cooking are essential to building demand for British grown and British made products.
- There cannot be a technological revolution in agriculture without government funding to support it. There are simply not enough private grants and investors to do the job, and we need a national focus.

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- Growers are concerned that if the current, minimal, level of returns continue development and investment will stall, hence the need for central support to ensure continued development, improved efficiencies and greater self sufficiency
- Issues of food insecurity highlighted by COVID-19 are helping government to give greater priority to the UK food and farming industry, food standards and food security for all.
- Food and farming businesses are sceptical about whether the Agriculture Trade Commission will deliver on support for food standards and British farming.
- Calls for self-sufficiency continue. 8 out of 10 businesses felt that the national diet should become more home grown-centric in support of our national food security.
- 60% of those in the industries think food businesses & farmers need a unified and coordinated lobby to engage with government and press the need for financial support for agritech and the associated reskilling. Neil Parish also urged the industry to lobby harder on a range of issues.

The following sections summarise the briefings we received from our main speakers and responses to the questions posed by delegates. To find out what was said in full, please watch the [recording](#).

### Keynote Speaker: Neil Parish, MP

*Health warning: as Chair of the EFRA Select Committee Neil Parish is independent of thought, so while he is a Conservative not everything he says is government policy.*

Over the next few years there will be a massive change in the way government supports agriculture. The European system of farm payments and subsidies is coming to an end and we are moving towards a system of public money for public good, although it still needs to be worked out how competitive farming fits into that scheme.

The move away from subsidised farming means there is an important role for new technologies such as genotechnology, biotechnology, computerisation and robotics on farms to help improve efficiency in order to keep the cost of food competitive; the independent evaluation of the benefits of genotechnology/biotechnology in the form of gene editing for example, has to be viewed in its wider environmental as well as cost benefit. Though robots zapping weeds sounds like science fiction technologies like this and others are very nearly there. There is a question around what degree of government support we will see for developing and implementing new technologies as there is not enough detail in the Agriculture Bill about food production generally.

The EFRA Committee recently launched an enquiry into food supply during COVID-19 as access to food and affordability for all has been a serious problem for the country. The Agriculture Bill deals primarily with high-end food supply in its aims for more organic production, less fungicide use and greater access to local and regional food. However, 95% of food is still bought through large retailers at very competitive prices so farmers and food producers need to do everything possible to produce good-quality, competitively priced food. The poultry industry is an example of a sector which has long been under-subsidised and as a result has become very efficient and effective. It produces some of the best poultry and eggs in the world at a price which is acceptable to consumers.

The big question is how can the industry produce good food such as cereals, vegetables and meat with the use new science and technology to help drive competitiveness, quality and efficiency. Much of the work to implement new agritech needs to be done by companies and industry with colleges who have an important

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role in training the men and women who take up these new jobs and the reskilling those already working in the sector, government funding will be needed to provide this training.

The Prime Minister has sympathy with agriculture, food and the environment but is absolutely determined to get trade deals with the rest of the world; there will be greater competition in food production and farming in the future. Exiting the EU brings challenges and plenty of opportunity. Leaving the European Union means the UK now has an opportunity to diverge from the EU system which has been very poor at the development of agritech due to a powerful green lobby using BSE and GM as evidence against progress. We don't need to go as far as GM but we do now have the opportunity to go in the direction of geno-technology and biotechnology. It will be interesting to see how much flexibility we have within a trade deal with the EU to determine our methods of food production, specifically with reference to using new tech.

Let's link colleges and businesses and see if we can revolutionise food production and farming on a commercial basis. Trials are often small-scale and do not demonstrate how technologies work commercially and at greater intensity. Applied research, education and industry together can get new technologies over the line so they are fit for use in commercial, competitive food production.

Competitiveness leads to growth and we need a thriving food and farming industry to become more food secure. Food security is an important consideration for continuous innovation in agritech. Can new technology help the industry produce food more efficiently with fewer chemicals? Can it help produce a blight resistant potato that is actually edible? Many scientific and technological advances are very nearly there with reducing cost, more efficient production and a good quality product. The technological revolution in agriculture is coming

The government cannot go on offering subsidies just to keep sheep and cattle on the land; the land needs competitive and profitable food production business to secure the future of British farming. Those farmers and food producers at the sharp end are so important in coming to government with ideas. The EFRA Select Committee will listen; it regularly produces Initiative Reports for government. The younger generation coming through are embracing new ideas and new ways of working. The future for agritech and food is bright although we cannot take anything for granted. At some point HM Treasury will start to question the need to subsidise food production (when we have competitively priced food available from the rest of the world) and the money will disappear.

The future of the food system will also need to make sure our intensive production remains at an exceptionally high standard, and that the public understands intensive farming welfare standards.

In summary, people need good quality food and a sufficient quantity of food at competitive prices and produced in this country as much as possible.

**Question from Teresa Wickham, Food Supply Chain Expert and Commentator:** Do we know the scope and terms of the Agriculture & Trade Committee?

**Neil Parish:** Not yet - we want an independent chair with experience of farming and food production and how the food trade works in this country. There is a name in the frame I am very happy with but the chairperson is still to be decided. We want members who know what they are talking about and are relatively independent to give the committee strength in their dialogue with the Trade Department. The Prime Minister is on board with a strong, independent committee so I am optimistic about getting the right people in place. It is going in the right direction but I am watching like a hawk.

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**Question from Phil Christopher, PR and Freelance Journalist:** In UK farming there is no shortage of only partially adopted technology such as long-proven vaccines for cattle but without an appetite for uptake new tech is pointless. What priority is given to innovation-hungry mindsets and how can we encourage uptake?

**Neil Parish:** Parts of the Agriculture Bill talk about competitive farming and government help for new technologies, whether vaccines or other. The government needs to decide if it will spend enough money to create a new type of farming with new technologies and medicines, although that will be a challenge to fund and execute. I would say to the industry, come in with an ask and let's see what government can do. There is a real opportunity here to eradicate disease. With a specific project in mind, the private sector and government can work well together.

**Jeremy Kerswell:** Thinking broadly about planning for future skills requirements mindset is right at the top of the list for success criteria for a number of reasons. There are mindsets and attitudes that need to be challenged within the industry through professional development in the existing workforce, and the industry needs to attract new talent. New talent coming in will in many instances have a greater willingness to adopt change. However, the perception of farming as a 120 hour a week job with three days holiday per year needs to be challenged to attract new talent in the first place. We also need to raise aspirations and ambition in the industry and part of that is exposure to the best standards, kit and innovation. Whether that's achieved with a peer-to-peer approach or giving young people and new entrants exposure to the most innovative parts of the industry colleges have a role to play.

### British Farming Advocate: Rosemary Shrager

There is not a more important debate right now than how we feed ourselves – now and in the future. The importance of knowing how our food is produced and arrives on our shelves has never been so high as now our health is being threatened with sub-standard imports and lockdown has highlighted the fragility of our food supply chains and exacerbated the number of people who live with food insecurity. And the financial toll for business and consumers remains undefined whilst the impact of COVID-19 fully unfolds. I fear the situation may be worse than we think.

As a 40 year veteran of the food business running restaurants all over the UK I have seen fads come and go. One of the most unfortunate, although we still learned a lot from it, was Nouvelle Cuisine. People paid lots of money for very small amounts on a pretty plate. However, sometimes we need to just simply put what is important into perspective. Good food is important. And how we present good food is important; I'm talking about presentation in the educational sense rather than the visual one.

My priority has always been to get the best produce and food, locally sourced to make the best meals. Of course, people buy from all over the world as we cannot produce everything we need here, such as tea and coffee or exotic fruits and vegetables which need warmer climates. The problem we have is this obsession with buying out of season. I would rather not buy from abroad and prefer to shop locally for British food wherever possible, not rely on out of season imports from all over the globe. As I have said before, why do people want tasteless and expensive imported strawberries at Christmas. We need to support our local farmers in order to sustain quality, investment and standards in British food. We need to buy British.

We don't know yet what regulations will be imposed on imports in the trade deals. It worries me that the food may be detrimental to our health and there are rumours that misleading labelling may be allowed to confuse consumers into buying lower quality food. This gives rise to people unknowingly ingesting carcinogens, food fraud and masking traceability. This cloaking of the origin of our food makes me feel even more strongly that

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local seasonal food needs to be enjoyed and eaten. Nowadays people in general do not understand when food is in season and that food at its best when it is in season. Seasonality is so important for several reasons. It's cheaper which helps stretch the family budget. It is more delicious providing you cook it right. It is more nutritious and better for you.

The lack of understanding about food and cooking comes from home economics being removed from the school curriculum. The next generation may not be able to prepare vegetables and will end up eating the wrong things and relying on convenience foods. It was our grandparents that taught us how to cook – so who will teach this lot now? The problem is cookery has been taken from the curriculum but the kids still need to learn how to prepare food – these skills need to be in the vocational program overall. You may think 'just' learning how to cook is a pillowy soft subject but believe me, if people can't cook, they won't buy fresh food and the economic consequences for farmers and food producers will have a disastrous impact. The world is more fast paced now and people are more comfortable relying on ready meals. Educating people how to cook and about the enjoyment of cooking and eating good food can change that.

During lockdown we have seen more people cooking from scratch and people are going to their local farm shop and eating seasonally. So, will the lockdown changes in eating habits be sustained? I doubt it. Old habits will return. It saddens me to hear stories that police were called to a takeaway chain soon after reopening to deal with antisocial behaviour and fighting. It really is a bad reflection on society and what people consider to be 'good food'.

So, when lockdown started restaurants stopped dead. They gave away all their food stocks which would have been a lot of money to lose and that was just the start. 75% of restaurants may not survive post lockdown. Many will reopen on 4<sup>th</sup> July to serve a fraction of their normal customers while incurring all the normal costs. Plus, enticing staff out of furlough will be tough, implementing social distancing rules and the added cost of all the extra health and safety measures will make it very tricky to make money. The impact on owners pressure-wise and their mental state cannot be underestimated – I know personally restaurant owners who are in a tough place. I ran restaurants and it's a cash business, and you have to pay people up front. It is so difficult to balance the books in a situation like this and smaller niche restaurants have tough payment terms. You pay suppliers upfront.

In contrast, in fast food chains (and we all know who they are) everything is line cooked, with stringent quantity control and the volume makes it a cheaper process. They employ people who are not chef's, not particularly skilled and often work for much lower wages. They make their money around franchising and it is an unbeatable formula. Carluccios and others, which are mid-range dining franchises have had to position themselves in geographical areas which are more affluent so restaurants like these may survive, although some will close. Those restaurant owners that are thinking outside the box – using local producers and local businesses – potentially and hopefully will not disappear altogether. They will have loyal followings who cannot get the same food or the same experience elsewhere.

As a side note – food bank usage is on the rise and supermarkets do very well supporting them. Supermarkets always have high stock levels to meet the expectation of the customer at 8am or 9pm, and therefore will always have waste. It is mad to stock so much but it's a good thing that some of this waste goes to food banks (like the one I work with in Hastings).

In the next few years, the agenda for government and regulatory bodies must be about health and supporting the customer; helping in the dietary situation and encouraging people to eat properly and healthily. We forget that 'fast food' is not necessarily always from a chain; it can be fast meals from supermarkets which are easy

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to heat, full of chemicals and sometimes have the same fat or sugar content as a takeaway. Having a takeaway is not a bad thing. We all enjoy a takeaway, but not every night – it's a treat!

So, I think that we need to 'support British business' and get behind the farmer or producer. Make sure we buy British where we can and educate the public to make the best food choices they can for their health. This is a real tricky thing: getting people to give up some time to cook the right food, buy seasonal and encourage their children to follow along the same lines with so much temptation out there and everybody leading such busy lives. The government, in my opinion, does not hold food education in high enough regard. If we just started earlier there is a chance habits will change and demand for British food will be sustained. We need to be positive and find solutions to make people want to maintain their lockdown food habits and ensure everybody has access to healthy food and knows how to cook it regardless of their budget.

### Business and Finance Speaker: Mark Lumsdon-Taylor

The food and drink industry contributes £121 billion to the country's economy and employs around 480,000 workers, with rural business controlling 70% of land. Further, 90% of economic agents are small or family businesses and two thirds of farmers have diversified into wedding venue hire, farm shops, glamping and other ventures to provide much needed support for the core farm business.

The industry has some fantastic opportunities and career paths, and many roles within food businesses and farms pay well. It is important we tell this story so food and drink can attract the best and brightest into its ranks. Implementing the new technologies business will need to remain competitive and innovative is going to require a reskilling of existing employees where possible and bringing in new technical specialists. Lights out manufacturing is no longer a piece of science fiction; there are factories operating autonomously which need no human presence to facilitate production. Instead of workers on the line, these factories need computer scientists, engineers and roboticists to operate the systems.

Influences such as new science and technology in the upstream manufacturing process can have an impact all along the supply chain. The revolution in technology actually brings with it an opportunity for industry and government to work together to ensure a fair distribution of profit throughout the supply chain and bolster the perilously thin margins for farmers and processors. Improving customer understanding around food safety, food standards and high-welfare production methods will help them apportion a more realistic value to their food and further support the argument for a more equitable redistribution of profit downstream.

The industry is constantly changing. Time and again farmers and food producers have shown themselves to be resilient and innovative in the face of adversity, now they also need to be investable in the face of increasing competition from abroad. New tech costs money and some, indeed many, will need financing to invest in the technologies that will make them more competitive and enable them to survive outside the protection of the single market. As we heard from Neil Parish there is provision in the Agriculture Bill for competitive farming and food production technologies (though we don't yet know what form that funding will take or who will be the recipients) and subsidies will taper off at some point. At this point in time it is not prudent to rely on future government support, so businesses need to be fighting fit to be attractive to investors and bank managers. Competitiveness and ultimately success in both the domestic and export markets will take good people and plenty of money. It sounds simple but they are both difficult to come by and need careful planning to retain.

To reach its full potential the food and farming industry needs to embrace new technology, make its case for government support based in the scale of its contribution to the national economy, lobby for a fair share of profits through the supply chain and meet business objectives with sustainable and ethical practices.

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Sustainability and ethics are both key drivers of consumer decision-making, and many upstream businesses being required to have sustainable/ethical supply chains.

The food industry is complex and will become more so as new technologies come online. The learning required to reskill labour and train new entrants will be more complex and land-based educators need to respond to that demand with appropriate courses and facilities. It is important colleges, universities and other training providers have adequate funding to develop new programmes and deliver them.

So how do we secure the finance of food? Help government understand the industry and its challenges, promote the industry, redistribute profit share through the supply chain and pitch ourselves as being at the forefront of ethical and sustainable policy.

**Question to Mark Lumsdon-Taylor:** What would you do if your business were on the line and had to change with limited cash?

**Mark Lumsdon-Taylor:** This situation raises difficult questions for business owners. You need to start by asking yourself if your business is still relevant and has a future, and whether the workforce can evolve. Having your team behind you and willing to adapt is half the battle. You need to look at the bills which need to be paid, prioritise the most essential for payment and then try to come to an agreement with other creditors. This is also the time when a good relationship with your bank comes into its own; a relationship with a business bank that understands your business and your industry is invaluable.

**Question to Mark Lumsdon-Taylor:** How do you overcome that the fact that food and farming are low margin businesses with limited cash and financing options?

**Mark Lumsdon-Taylor:** First, businesses sitting downstream need to lobby for profit to flow right through the supply chain. Staying with the analogy, barely a trickle reaches the farmers. With so few buyers it is difficult to get a foothold in negotiations and in many cases farmers and producers are forced to take whatever price is offered. This is where producers of a commodity need to come together to negotiate with buyers, lobby for better terms and involve government. Nobody should be forced into accepting a price below cost for their product or to labour without compensation.

Secondly, creating consumer demand for your product through branding, social media marketing and direct digital sales will also give you leverage in negotiations. Your buyers will want to profit from the customer loyalty you have built and as a result you become a more valuable partner with more power to secure a better margin. In response to delegate questions raised during the debate about how this works in practice for commodities, I'd like to add that developing an identity is trickier but not impossible. Shoppers are drawn to your values and what makes you (not your product) unique. So if you are a farmer who goes above and beyond in the preservation of ancient woodland or have a commitment to restoring the bee population for example, share that on social media and you will find customers who support your business because they share your values. However, with substitute products the greatest negotiating power will always come from uniting with your 'competitors' to lobby for a better price; if you are not willing to undercut one another then compromise on behalf of the buyer will be needed. The saying "united we stand, divided we fall" comes to mind.

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## Panel discussion

**Question from Diana Spellman:** Teaching the population about food basics is useful but it cannot cover the dynamics of ingredient sourcing, recipe formulation, global sourcing and the requirement for consumer convenience and trust in the UK food system. Our supply chain transparency, traceability and regulation need to be much tighter to serve our population. Currently I believe its too weak and as Mark points out the major decision-makers in the process are supermarkets. How can we address this?

**Neil Parish:** Making sure the system of imports as well as what we produce here provides for clear and accurate labelling is the most difficult part of the system going forward. It is unrealistic to move towards total self-sufficiency and the public is keen on trying different recipes and eating exotic food so our challenge as we do trade deals with the rest of the world is being able to trace what we buy so we know where it comes from and how it was produced. With bar codes and smart technology, we should be able to do this better than we are currently; government needs to move faster and our trading partners need to be on board as well.

**Rosemary Shrager:** We have social media at our fingertips we can use it to help us understand where our food comes from. Our society is very cosmopolitan, and our national diet reflects cultures from all over the world so it is important that consumers understand where our food comes from and how it is produced. The story behind our food is often an interesting one and can be told on social media and other channels as entertainment. Public awareness is about food labelling, education and food becoming more important to us again as a society.

**Question from Rob Ward NSch:** Help is needed in the seed investment stage of agritech. This area is really struggling. Other countries are doing a lot more e.g. the EU Rural Development Fund. Can you cast any light on what's going to come next for us?

**Mark Lumsdon-Taylor:** Finding seed funding and capital is not the easiest thing. Grants sit primarily with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and in the southeast they have given out millions of pounds. There is money out there from smaller funds but you have to hunt really hard for it and it is often a relatively small amount, say £5000 - £10,000. There are some funds with grants up to £100,000 but they are few and far between. There isn't a national source of funding for agritech – which is something that may need to be reviewed. The Rural Payments Agency may help in some cases although usually they contribute a certain amount and the balance needs to be raised separately. My advice would be to talk to an advisor who specialises in finding and securing funding; they will be able to navigate the funds out there, find an appropriate fit and help write the proposal to optimise the chances of success. Match contribution grants can be high risk if it requires you to take on borrowing so it is better to try and combine several grants to fund investment in new agritech.

**Neil Parish:** There is not enough help. There is a certain amount in the Agriculture Bill but no specifics about how it will be spent so the industry needs to lobby very hard. The EFRA Committee may do an enquiry into biotech and how we further our new technologies in the new year; the Secretary of State Victoria Prentis is quite keen on it and government is aware of it. We just have not put enough money into agritech yet. It would be money well invested as it would create more efficient agriculture, more efficient food production and cost-effective food. COVID-19 has shown us that we have got people who can ill afford food and it is rightly going to become a very big political issue. What we haven't got in the Agriculture Bill at the moment is the link between food production and food delivery to the whole of the population which is going to become more and more important. So, the answer is that not enough is being done at the moment, but it is moving in the right direction. Lobby hard and I'm happy to help.

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**Question from Robert James, Technical Director at Thanet Earth and AHDB Board Member:** Thanet as a business has invested significantly in high tech horticulture and crop production. It is now one of the largest growers producing tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers for the home market. UK horticulture is highly efficient, highly productive, it directly serves its markets and is unsupported by government. Horticulture is already highly technical whether it's energy generation, efficient water usage or crop protection methods. However, there are opportunities for new technologies to improve our capabilities and make our businesses more sustainable. To go further, we must adopt new technologies as we cannot stand still in such a highly competitive market with low margins and increasing costs. How do we sustain the required investment curve if we need to keep food prices low?

**Neil Parish:** It is a huge challenge. The reality of politics in food is you need to have very cost-effective food and the Prime Minister is very keen on doing trade deals so it will become even more competitive. We must not tie our hands on technology; we have got to open up new technologies and we have got to be more adventurous on using them to keep ourselves competitive. New technologies such as genotechnologies and blight resistant crops will make us even more competitive. There has not been enough focus on new technology in the horticulture industry and this is something we need to correct because good quality fruit and vegetables delivered to our population is very important and we have to link our food production methods to delivering food to everybody.

**Rosemary Shrager:** It is incredibly wrong to make people feel bad about buying cheaper food for their families, as we did a few years ago with chickens. We need to make good food affordable for everybody.

**Phil Acock:** Margins in horticulture are wafer thin in the first two parts of the supply chain, which Fourayes are a part of as growers and processors. I do worry about what is ahead in terms of us all playing on a level playing field (with regard to imports) and I fear we have a government that doesn't view food security with the level of seriousness that we need. We will see cheap imports coming in and it is going to make it even more difficult for food businesses to survive and I think margins will be eroded further. Government needs to step in and level the playing field on food standards, and off the back of that we need to ask how that levelling will happen, are we going to see more support back into the first two stages of the supply chain for farmers and processors in the form of funding and grants? Ten or twelve years ago processing and marketing grants drove investment in technology and efficiency in all its guises. The grants got dropped here but continued in Europe. Putting schemes like that back in place will help domestic producers compete with imports.

**Question put forward by Bethan Grylls, Editor of New Food at Russell Publishing:** We've discussed the Secretary of State for International Trade's decision to set up an Agriculture & Trade Commission and it is fantastic that Liz Truss has acknowledged the industry's call. However, what a lot of people are not highlighting is that this is an agreement in principle. It also has an advisory role only. So, can you envision the government taking on board what the commission has to say, or will the UK see the acceptance of lower food standards and lower animal welfare despite protests?

**Neil Parish:** I am much heartened after a virtual meeting with Liz Truss when she accepted the need for an independent chair. The Commission will have to report to Parliament so it is up to all of us who have an interest in maintaining good quality food and good production standards in imports as well as in the UK to make sure it sticks on the agenda. There will always be work to do – the direction of the government is very much towards doing deals across the world and so more pressure will be put on our imports of food. The Commission has put us in a better position than we have been in for some time, but the devil is in the detail,

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and we don't yet know the detail. We do not want a Commission set up that just does what the Trade Department wants. It has got to be independent to do a good job and if you are going to put tariffs on food that doesn't meet the UK's high production standards in order to make it less competitive then you need a food commission to work out how you are going to do that and what the equivalence of standards would be. I am optimistic the government will listen to the Commission.

**Question put forward by Dr Rob Verkerk, Founder and Executive & Scientific Director of Alliance for Natural Health International:** As one of the scientists interviewed for the National Food Strategy my concern is that the Prime Minister will go ahead with trade deals whatever. Do you think there is a possibility that the National Food Strategy, which seems to be one of the most intelligent ways to link sustainability with the healthcare of the population could just become a PR exercise? Or do you think that it could become a real framework for the future?

**Neil Parish:** Just a few days ago Henry Dimbleby was part of a panel discussion about the impact of COVID-19 on food, so the National Food Strategy is being taken very seriously by government. The Prime Minister is keen to do trade deals, but he is also keen to maintain good food production standards in this country. So, we in the food and farming industry have to push as hard as we can. There needs to be a stronger link in the Agriculture Bill between food production and delivery of healthy food to the population at all levels of affordability. The Strategy is not off the agenda, it is not just lip service, but we do need to keep it in the public eye and drive it forward. In the government's desire to secure a great trade deal we must make sure we do not trade away food standards. We can do so much more in this country to get food and specifically horticultural produce such as fruit, vegetables, and salad to those that most need it. There is a challenge ahead but one we can rise to.

**Jeremy Kerswell:** In a recent dataset of manufacturing across all industries the UK is classed as a laggard compared to the rest of Europe when it comes to efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness. If we are to truly become more competitive on a global scale and therefore more productive, skills have a pivotal role to play. Equally, so does research. In the last 10-15 years the government has pulled billions out of research. Particularly around food production, agriculture and horticulture. Moving forwards research funding has to be available and research activity has to be undertaken on farm in an applied nature and it has to be accessible. The challenge is not just about skills. Skills and research are intrinsically linked when it comes to encouraging change. You need to demonstrate change, incentivise change and take the industry with you on the journey. Engaging with industry in terms of what the benefits are and more importantly know how they can get on that journey and take part in the technological revolution. Applied research will have a massive impact on industry engagement with new technologies.

**Question put forward by Sarah Dodd, Partner and National Lead for Agriculture at MHA MacIntyre Hudson:** How do we keep food production a priority for those families balancing a tight budget?

**Mark Lumsdon-Taylor (MLT):** The link between how we eat, our nutrition and how we produce food has to be more important to government. Defra sits right at the bottom of the Cabinet table and that speaks volumes. If it moves up the table – literally and metaphorically – there will be more government support to deliver healthy food to all parts of society. Raising the price of food will only cause more food insecurity amongst those on the tightest budgets. On the other hand, ensuring food is available at very competitive prices so there are healthy options for all members of the population impacts on the margins within the supply chain and is detrimental to the future of the UK's food and farming industry. It is very difficult to square the circle and we do not want to create a two tier society where one tier can afford nutritious food and has the privilege of good health while the other is reliant on cheap, sub-standard imports with limited health benefits. Agritech is undoubtedly part

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of the answer as productivity gains make high standard food more competitive. Another part of the answer lies in consumer education surrounding the link between food production, food quality, nutrition and health which is absolutely key for all families regardless of budget. However, it is particularly important for families on tight budgets, who have fewer healthful options, to know how to cook healthy meals within their price range. If one multiple I can think of can offer a three-course meal for two with a bottle of wine for £10 (which is a lot of food and drink for the price, though I hesitate to call it good value), every family should be able to afford a healthy meal. So maybe yet another part of the answer to this question brings us back to the need to review margins at the different stages of the supply chain, and at what point does price setting become detrimental?

**Rosemary Shrager:** About 50 years ago 40% of our income was spent on food and now it is far less. Has the cost of living gone up? Is food less of a priority? Or should we look at it from the other way round, why haven't we got the money to spend on food?

**Neil Parish:** Since Michael Gove began talking about the National Food Strategy which was focused towards the high end of the market COVID-19 has shown that we still need cost-effective food and the ability to get it to those that most need it. The challenge now is to provide good quality food at affordable prices, and to look at the social security system and how it delivers money to poorer people. The government could take more direct action to deliver food because then it can make sure people receive the right food and eat healthy amounts of fresh fruit and vegetables and so on. After COVID-19 the economy will take a while to recover and there are going to be more people unemployed and more pressure on society so how we deliver food is important. Let's not keep food prices down by importing cheap food, let's use technology to produce more competitively priced food. If we do not adopt new technology we will not be able to get food to people at competitive prices. The political landscape is changing and all being well we will see changes for the better because of COVID-19.

**Phil Acock:** To piggyback on what Rosemary said, the proportion of household income spent on food has more than halved over the past 60 years whilst spending on housing costs has doubled. Food in this country is cheap.

**Question put forward by Phil Acock, Managing Director of Fourayes Limited:** Farming is looked upon as the bottom of the food chain but that's wrong. Farmers are the most important part of the food chain and deserve to be at the top. Fourayes are fruit growers and processors so we are in the bottom two parts of the supply chain. It is pretty uncomfortable, and we are working on wafer thin margins. If we are playing on a level playing field UK farming and processing will be hugely successful and can supply more than the current 50% of what we eat. We can maybe even get up to 70% so we are more self-sufficient as a nation. If the trade deals being done to prepare for Brexit allow for unfair competition the government will need to step up and put in policies to help level that playing field so farmers can remain competitive and we stand a chance of becoming a more food secure nation. How can farmers and processors get their voice heard by government? Are we going to see the return of grants to drive investment and technology which continue in other countries?

**Neil Parish:** Government will need to put grants in place. We will leave the EU come hell or high water so while we are putting trade deals in place let's also help ourselves to be competitive. Marketing grants are an obvious way forward and we need to push for them. As we move forward into the new world we will need to support ourselves as there is greater competition on the way.



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### Take home statements from the panel and guests

#### **Neil Parish, MP**

##### **Member of Parliament and Chair of the EFRA Select Committee**

The debate has highlighted that we need to be competitive, and we need to give help to new technologies, the means of production, the methods of production and marketing to achieve that competitive edge. We need to keep farming going, produce great food at prices shoppers can afford and put a system in place to support those that need the most cost-effective food.

#### **Rosemary Shrager:**

##### **Chef and Advocate for British Farming**

Education is the absolute priority. It is about marketing, teaching people how to cook, teaching people where food comes from and about production. If people cannot cook, they won't buy raw ingredients and they won't support British farming.

#### **Mark Lumsdon-Taylor**

##### **Corporate Financier and Founder & Chair of Rural Policy Group**

We need to promote the value and worth of the food and drink industry to attract greater levels of investment and funding for new developing, acquiring and implementing new technologies. And we need to be at the forefront of ethical and sustainable policy so we are teaching the next generation how to do things right.

#### **Jeremy Kerswell**

##### **Principal of Plumpton College and Landex Board Member**

Colleges have a key role to play in the adoption of new technologies and future competitiveness of British food. They need greater flexibilities in funding for people to upskill or continue their professional development. They need capital investment in resources and facilities; colleges provide vocational training and need resources to be able to demonstrate the best and most innovative industry practices and work with industry partners in applied research. If government can commit to that funding it will make a big impact on accessibility of training for farmers and new entrants, challenging perceptions and raising ambitions.

#### **Beth Grylls**

##### **Editor of New Food magazine**

We need more action on food insecurity. The use of food banks is at an all time high and we need to learn from the pandemic and be ready to support the food insecure in the event of a second wave.

#### **Phil Acock**

##### **Managing Director, Fourayes Limited**

Neil [Parish] is a great advocate for farming. It is comforting to have someone flying the flag in government. Farmers should be regarded as being at the top of the food chain. If we can't have a level playing field in trade deals we need more support from government to level the field domestically. As a nation we need to become more food secure and try to move from 50% to 70% domestic production.

#### **Rob James**

##### **Technical Director at Thanet Earth and AHDB Board Member**

We need to find a way to articulate the value of food to government to support policy. The industry is very responsive, market driven and wants to improve. We need to find a way of linking science and research with horticulture and agriculture so investment in one side has an impact on industry so we can continue to deliver healthy nutritious food to the whole population.

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**Sarah Calcutt (chairing)**

**6<sup>th</sup> generation farmer, NED at Covent Garden Market Authority & Chair of the National Fruit Show**

It is time for us to come together with a single voice for British farming to inform government and inform consumers. How will we get what we need unless we have a single voice with concise messaging and very good data behind it? We are never going to reach our potential without good communication, we cannot continue to see ourselves as disparate parts of the same industry.

## The polls

Rural Policy Group sought to gain insight into the dialogue between the food & farming industry and government.

**Poll overview:** the polls showed that the industry is sceptical about whether government will support it in trade negotiations and as such businesses continue to call for policy changes and express a desire for a more united lobbying force to represent them at government level.

**Poll 1: Following the support for the proposed food standards amendment from Neil Parish MP, do you think the new Agriculture Trade Commission chaired by Liz Truss will deliver support to environmental and animal welfare standards, and ensure there is no unfair competition from imports?**

- 08% Yes, it is a good result for rural business
- 56% Maybe, but only with clear policy outcomes and proper safeguards
- 28% No, the outcomes will be weak and not protect business
- 10% Not sure

Food and farming businesses are sceptical about whether the Agriculture Trade Commission will support our food standards and protect the industry from unfair competition from our international trading partners.

**Poll 2: Should we be more self-sufficient and change the national diet to the more home grown-centric?**

- 02% No, we have a role in supporting the agricultural systems of developing countries
- 19% No, the UK has a global food culture; you're not going to change that with a farming policy
- 00% Don't know or care
- 29% Yes, we need to cut down on food miles
- 12% Yes, we need greater self-sufficiency for pricing and trade reasons
- 38% Yes, a thriving agriculture industry is good for GDP and exports

The food and farming industry continues to call for greater self-sufficiency. It is good business, good for the British economy and with fewer air miles it is good for the environment. 8 out of 10 respondents felt that the national diet should support self-sufficiency and become more home grown-centric.

**Poll 3: Innovation in financing technology and skilled labour is an ongoing fundamental opportunity and challenge to the food and farming sector. What is the best way we can get the sector to unify and get this agenda higher up the Cabinet table? What is the simplest and most effective way?**

- 38% We come together in a clear and coordinated government lobbying strategy that is positive focussed on benefit (for less government investment) and less about the negative issues.
- 22% We redefine our needs for skills and technology by sub-sector and reset the clock.

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- 15% Set a self-sufficiency target and stick to it!
- 22% We as a sector come together and coordinate more effectively our voice in government
- 03% Accurate and robust data to support our case is needed
- 00% None of the above

60% of those in the food and farming sector believe the most effective way of moving financing for technology and relevantly skilled labour up the government agenda is for the industry to form a unified and coordinate lobby.