Briefing Note: Food After Brexit
15th April 2021

Rural Policy Group is a visionary think tank shaping the future of the rural economy; established in 2019 it supports economic actors in the rural economy with a programme of knowledge exchange and debate. The group brings together the best minds in politics, economics, business, finance, medicine and science to discuss the big issues of the day and support rural leaders to find and seize opportunities for progress and growth.

We were delighted to partner with Fourayes and an exciting panel of speakers for the second debate in the Food Price Wars series:

• Phil Acock	Owner & Managing Director, Fourayes and Vice Chair of British Apples & Pears
• David Missen	Head of MHA Agriculture & member of the ICAEW Farming Group
• Prof. Louise Manning	Director of Knowledge Exchange, Royal Agricultural University
• Daniel Zeichner MP	Shadow DEFRA Minister
• Mark Lumsdon-Taylor	Senior Corporate Consultant & CFO (seconded) in the food industry
• Chair: Sarah Calcutt	6th generation farmer, Chair of the National Fruit Show, Founder of PiP, NED of The Covent Garden Market Authority and Director of British Apples & Pears

Summary of insights

We will never know what the impact of Brexit would have been without the added shock of a global pandemic. Brutal was a word which came up repeatedly from the contributors, in terms of Brexit's effect on individual businesses and the international agri-food trade for the country as a whole. However, that does not reflect the whole picture as some businesses are adjusting with greater ease. Structural change towards shorter supply chains and higher levels of self-sufficiency is needed to deliver food security, food safety and informed consumer choice.

- Food security, particularly security of supply, has become more critical since Brexit. The nationalistic approach by the EU to securing the interests of the bloc with disregard for legal contracts, as demonstrated by the Covid vaccinations, puts our food imports from Europe, or passing through Europe in jeopardy.
- The costs and administration required to trade with Europe, and even Northern Ireland, have increased.
- Migration policies restricting the inflow of farmworkers need to be reviewed to enable farmers to harvest crops and improve the level of self-sufficiency.
- Lack of clarity around the future of food in the UK is businesses' biggest barrier to planning for a successful future.
- The shocks of the past year and uncertainty about the future are storing up succession problems as the younger generation are more uncertain about taking on the family farm, and new entrants are discouraged by the downward pressure on pricing.

- Diversifications which shorten the food chain have gone well and created greater connection between farmer, food and consumer.
- Potentially 42% of farms will be loss-making when the Basic Payment Scheme ends and would need to cut costs by 10% to compensate for the loss of direct payments; now is the time to forecast the impact on cashflow over the next seven years and plan ahead for greater efficiencies and opportunities available under ELM.
- The politicization of food began with William the Conqueror and continues today in the crafting of trade deals. Quite often granting access to food imports is the key to unlocking lucrative financial exports.
- Tackling equivalence of food standards is a complex issue as some countries from which the UK imports work on product liability legislation rather than the precautionary principle used here. The two systems are almost opposing; one starting with the belief that a food is safe until it kills someone and the other starting from a point of believing a food is unsafe until it is proved otherwise. Further, evaluating the risk in what we consume is an emotive issue for much of the general public rather than a scientific endeavour based in fact and evidence.
- Trade into Europe declined dramatically in the first months immediately after Brexit and we have yet to see whether exports will return to pre-Brexit levels. Unfortunately, there are likely to be some casualties among businesses which struggle to adapt and evolve.
- Most people want to maintain high food standards, but the government refuse to write equivalence of standards into law, leaving flexibility to compromise standards as part of future trade negotiations.

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.

Food Business Speaker: Phil Acock

Fourayes has been farming for 67 years and is one of the larger Bramley growers in the country. By far the larger part of the business is fruit processing and Fourayes is the largest fruit processor in the UK. Fruit for processing is sourced from neighbouring farms wherever possible. It is mostly class 2 fruit which the supermarkets do not want. We turn the fruit into purees, jams, fillings and fresh diced and sliced apple which is sold to manufacturers who go on to make the finished ice creams, desserts, cakes, sauces and so on, including the famous Bramley apple pie. However, we cannot source everything we need in the UK and with a range of 300 products we need to import ingredients such as sultanas, spices, peptins, fructose and glucose. We also export products such as the aseptic fruit purees, although export is only a small part of the business.

So, are we experiencing free and frictionless trade with Europe? While we are still trading it is not free and it is not frictionless. Post-Brexit we are dealing with much longer lead times. Products/imports which could be ordered with one week's notice now need two to three weeks. Transport rates have gone up and there is an extra 50 EURO charge per consignment. If you are buying multiple truckloads the extra 50 EURO is not a big deal, but if you are buying in small quantities, it is a significant on cost and SMEs are disproportionately harmed. There is also the added burden of additional admin involved in import and export. However, I do believe that these added frictions will diminish as robust systems and processes are put in place. Getting information on the documents wrong though causes lots of problems.

Trade with southern Ireland and Northern Ireland has continued and been fairly straight forward. It is worth noting though that more export documentation needed for Northern Ireland than for Ireland. While we are not technically exporting when products are destined for Northern Ireland, the reality is that shipments are being treated like international exports.

On a general note, we still have an abundant food supply and 50% of it is imported. 26% of our food imports are from Europe. This is no surprise, but it is discouraging that independence has not been accompanied by food security. All the while we are reliant on Europe for food, we cannot be truly independent of the EU. We need policy and endeavour to achieve greater food security and a roadmap to 60% or even 70% self-reliance. Just think back to March 2021 when the EU threatened to halt AstraZeneca Covid vaccine exports to the UK with complete disregard to the contract between the UK and the supplier. Before that, in December 2020, France closed its borders to the UK for 48 hours with no notice. There was no movement of people or freight. Had the closure gone on for longer, then we would have seen food shortages. We need greater self-reliance so our national security cannot be threatened in this way.

As soon as we knew the UK would be leaving the EU, food security became the main topic of conversation up and down the supply chain (if not in more political circles). Everyone was examining whether imported goods could be replaced with domestically produced foods. Security of supply coupled with inflationary price pressure placed on all imports by the EURO falling from 1.30 to 1.10 will encourage UK buyers to take this issue seriously. However, price rises have not necessarily filtered through to the customer. Sainsbury and Asda customers saw the price of food fall, while food is more expensive for customers of Tesco and Morrison's.

The experience at Fourayes is that Covid has been more costly than Brexit. There has not been any benefit from Brexit and there has not been any detriment. If I had a magic wand, I would want to see trade deals crafted to protect the interests of British agriculture, food security made a priority with policy aimed at achieving 70% self-sufficiency, the myth that food is expensive is dispelled and replaced with an understanding of the true value of food, the average age of the British farmer come down from 59 to the mid-30s, farmers' efforts and mindsets moving on from securing labour for the harvest to producing fabulous sustainable produce and lastly, the nation realising the value and deliciousness of British-grown produce.

Business & Finance Speaker: David Missen

The last twelve months have not been too bad for commodity producers. Most commodities are up by between 15% and 36%. The anomaly is pigmeat, which was down in 2021 after an artificial high in 2020 when the Chinese needed to replace rapidly dying herds.

Moving on to views from around the country, our first stop is East Anglia. The fears around grain tariffs in summer 2020 led to a few people selling land, although ultimately farmers and the market have settled after tariffs were better than feared. Covid has had very little impact on the arable sector; you sit in your cab for 50 weeks of the year and it is very solitary anyway. Although the loss of shows and social activities has had an impact on mental health. The weather has a greater impact than the pandemic did. On a positive note, consumer shopping patterns have changed to the benefit of farm shops, online farm shops, and farm gate sales. The pandemic has also seen more people visit the countryside with the inevitable misunderstanding of animal welfare practices & farm life and footpaths encroaching onto farmable land. One farmer though has collection boxes along the footpaths to help pay towards maintaining bird boxes and so on, and this year the collection will go quite some way towards the rent too.

In Lincolnshire, poultry farmers are selling fewer birds to the supermarkets but more to local butchers which gives them a better margin and reflects the changing shopping habits. The preference for shopping local also benefitted farm shops in the area. However, farms which have diversified into weddings had a difficult year with all the covid restrictions. Diversification activities seemed to be boom or bust; there was not any middle ground. The combination of Brexit and Covid led to huge labour issues as they restricted the inflow of foreign labour. When farmworkers did arrive, the weather meant they preferred to work in the chicken factories rather than the fields. Some farmers eventually had to resort to using gang masters and paying whatever the market would bear to get their crop in. One farmer I know in Norfolk had to let some of his asparagus crop rot in the field because they could not get it all in.

In Hampshire, the perspective was different again. The farmers I spoke to were primarily concerned about whether the tenants would pay the rent and on the whole they did. There were very few requests for reductions or deferrals. The picture around holiday lets varied. April, May and June were lost before trade picked up in July, August and September, although the upturn was probably not enough to make up for losses earlier in the year.

In Wales, the view was generally that the uncertainty surrounding Brexit was worse than the reality. There has been a tangible benefit in IT improvements. Farms are getting data quicker and management information is coming through quicker. They would like some clarity around what is happening with agricultural policy in Wales and a discussion paper has just come out. Wales appears to be a couple of months behind England and Scotland is further behind still. The has been a greater degree of farm innovation, such as milk vending machines. Welsh dairy farmers have picked up on the government powers to review unfair contracts, which were legislated for in the Agriculture Act 2020, and would like some of the milk contracts reviewed.

Around the country the next generation of farmers are reluctant to take over, having experienced the difficulties of Brexit and a global pandemic, so farm succession is a worry for many. However, there are many positives. Diversifications which shorten the food chain have gone well resulting in a greater connection between consumer, food and farm. Farming has a higher and more positive public profile and there is greater appreciation of local food.

Post-Brexit subsidy reform should be the biggest concern for farmers. The Health & Harmony consultation on agricultural reform came out over three years ago and the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) will disappear over the next seven years. At that point, 42% of farms will potentially be lossmaking. Some details about the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELM) are starting to come out and it could be quite helpful for some farms. The combination of high product prices, BPS, Brexit and Covid are all good excuses for not doing anything about structural reform and this inertia is inhibiting progress.

A few figures around withdrawing from BPS:

- Average Farm Business Income (roughly equates to accounting profit) was £37,000.
- Direct payments comprised 61% of FBI. Rising to 83% for tenants and 98% for farmers in the Northeast.
- Direct payments made up 9% of total farm revenue on average and 21% in Less Favoured areas.
- 42% of farms would have made a loss without direct payments. These farms would need to reduce costs by 10% to break even – plus whatever they need to live on.

I am working with my clients to project cashflow over the period the direct payments will be reduced and plan for a sustainable future. One of the things we are looking at is yield mapping. The maps highlight which areas can be put into stewardship schemes to attract a subsidy and reduce cost inefficiencies of growing a crop on the least productive land. Farmers cannot stand still. Being proactive now will pay dividends. My quick seven point plan is to (1) quantify the impact of BPS losses (2) carry out an analysis of available skills and resources

(3) benchmark yourself (4) go with the governmental flow – identify poor land and put it into ELM (5) share land, machinery and staff with neighbouring farms (6) diversify where possible (7) consider succession or retirement if you cannot make the business work.

Agri-food & Supply Chain Speaker: Professor Louise Manning

When I became a professor, I got to choose my job title. I came up with Professor of Agri-food and Supply Chain Security because I believe that food security and nutrition security are essential elements of how we support everybody on the planet, and security is not just about the commodity or the added-value product. As we digitise our supply chain more, we have a whole new aspect of security in terms of data that we need to think about.

We will never know what the impact of Brexit would have been without Covid and that is a challenge for the general public, for businesses and for farmers. All of us have been affected by these two simultaneous shocks and businesses have had to respond with resilience. The two impacts on business are the shock of a major disease outbreak coupled with a major political change and a squeeze on the supply chain. The squeeze of low prices or low levels of supply of a particular product. When we think of businesses seeking to be resilient now, those two factors are at play.

We must also consider that food has always been politicised – ever since William the Conqueror laid waste to the North after the Battle of Hastings (1066) and the Doomsday Book (1086) captured the assets and infrastructure of food production in the UK. That politicization continues in the crafting of trade deals today. Quite often agriculture and finance sit on different sides of the room and allowing agricultural imports is the price paid for financial exports. Agricultural trade cannot be viewed in isolation.

We also have to remember when we think of standards that some come countries will still work on product liability. Our legislation changed after the Food Safety Act in 1990, but in many countries, a food is safe until it kills you under product liability legislation. Then after a death the lawyers need to prove that a particular food led to the person's demise. Current litigations in the US totally focus on whether there is evidence to show a food was unsafe. Europe adopts the precautionary principle and all our legislation which has come from the EU has stemmed from that principle – a food is unsafe until you prove it is safe. They are two vastly different types of legislation and require, for businesses seeking to enter a different market, vastly different emphasis.

We also need to think about the fact that although there is a legal requirement for traceability in food, there is no legal requirement for transparency around food and how it is produced. The onus is on the businesses which describe food. As we more into a digitised food supply chain, consumers have the opportunity to ask far more about their products and how they are produced. Indeed, consumers are asking more questions.

The other key aspect is risk. If I am scientist, my perception of risk is based on a risk assessment and sufficient evidence, such as farm practices and standards, to determine whether a food is safe or unsafe. However, the public and consumers base their risk assessments on fear and dread, and the perception that life can sometimes be risk free. The interaction between a scientific perception of risk and a perception based on fear and dread can be seen in the acceptance of the coronavirus vaccine. Many prescription medicines are in common use around the world which carry the risk of blood clots, and they are accepted and used by millions, if not billions, of people. Yet, the news focuses on what is an acceptable level of risk for the vaccine. This is really important because when we look at the risk assessment associated with food, the risk assessment associated with medicines and the risk assessment associated with food supplements the perception of risk varies dramatically. The focus on agricultural imports has been around food standards which is a complex issue. How we perceive the risk associated with different food and different methods of production will vary depending on whether we are looking at this from a consumer viewpoint, a citizen viewpoint or a scientific viewpoint.

Political Speaker: Daniel Zeichner MP

I chuckled slightly when Louise mentioned the politicization of food. How right she is. Earlier today I was in the chamber for the international trade questions and asked Liz Truss about the problems faced by The Cheshire Cheese Company. Like many small exporters into Europe, they have faced huge problems over the last few months and I could not resist reminding the Secretary of State of her infamous passion for cheese. My point was that when the company raised issues about the problems they were facing, officials apparently told them to look for markets elsewhere. It seems like an extraordinary piece of advice for the government to give UK producers. To say that if it is too difficult to get products into Europe, our nearest and easiest market, then producers should look further afield. That is symptomatic of the problem we have at the moment. There is an argument going on about the trade figures which showed a dramatic fall-off of trade into Europe from the agri-food sector in January and some bounce-back in February. The government is using the February figures to claim all is well, but if you talk to most people, it is a long way from all is well. It has been a pretty brutal process so far and clearly some businesses will not survive in their current form. I suppose that was the advice the officials were giving – to evolve the business – but it is a pretty crude way to run an economic policy and economic system in my opinion and there will be a lot of relatively innocent casualties. I am dealing with a lot of the detailed secondary legislation.

One of the questions raised in the discussion is what is going on with Northern Ireland and we could probably spend an entire session talking about just that. There are a whole range of extraordinarily complicated problems and an intractable philosophical conundrum about being in the EU and not being in the EU.

There are some extremely difficult problems but my job as a shadow minister is to help people find a way through this and get to a situation where we retain as much of our trade with Europe as possible. We are not over all the hurdles yet, some of the deadlines for checks on produce coming into the country have been put back as it is all proving a lot more difficult than the Prime Minister suggested at the end of last year when the trade and continuity agreement was agreed, but our job as politicians is to try to find ways forward.

One last thought – for a lot of the primary producers the change to the farming support system that is coming down the road later this year is a growing cause of concern. While the replacement system is laudable, it looks to be extremely complicated and will not be instantly available to everybody in a way some would have assumed. So, there are challenges for farmers and other primary producers around the support they will be receiving.

Question Time

Question from the audience: In 2005 the UN World Food Conference concluded there would be food shortages in Europe by circa 2025, mainly because rising living standards in third world countries mean higher consumption and less available for export. How can we raise the UK government's interest in home-production to ensure greater levels of self-sufficiency?

Daniel Zeichner MP: The food security issue is really important. It came up with Covid, it has come up again with Brexit and it came up in the Agriculture Act last year which prompted a debate in Parliament as to when there should be an assessment of our food security. The assessment has been brought forward as a result, but there is still no timescale on when that report will be carried out. It is a really important question, although I personally do not think we will be having food shortages by 2025 because one of the positives to come out of the last year is the remarkable resilience the food system has shown. We are still awaiting part two of Henry Dimbleby's National Food Strategy Report which will be helpful, though I am not sure the government will necessarily welcome all his conclusions. To what extent we want to increase our levels of food security is a very big question. There are plenty, including myself, who would like to see us importing less grain from environmentally challenged areas around the world. It would be a significant change for the UK food system and would need to happen in a way that works for domestic food producers. I had slight worries last year that government was supporting greater food insecurity by producing less food in the UK and relying on trade deals to provide cheap food from elsewhere.

Professor Louise Manning: Talking about Europe as a region, I would say we already have food insecurity. There are many communities within Europe who have nutrition insecurity. The disparity in the impact of Covid across Europe has been stark and is driven in part not by calorie insecurity, but by nutrition insecurity. So, I think all governments in Europe need to think about how they are going to ensure that all people in all communities have equal access to nutritious food and nutrition. For example, Vitamin D has been highlighted as a key issue in how Covid has impacted people across the country. We have to really think about the right to food. Many countries are not thinking about whether a right to food should be enshrined in legislation because in many countries that does not exist. It has to be thought about as a fundamental piece of legislation.

We also have to think about the impact of some of the ways we seek to address climate change and how they will impact on all communities. The farm to fork organic policies in Europe are going to have an impact over time, potentially causing food insecurity.

When we look at the mass urbanisation happening in Africa, as an example, and the food being consumed in cities, we are seeing the issue of malnutrition in rural areas because of a lack of access to food and in cities we are seeing malnutrition from obesity and greater consumption of the processed foods which are coming into those cities. The challenge in many countries where people are coming in to contact with processed foods for the first time is that levels of obesity are equivalent to some European countries within one generation. To answer the question, food insecurity in Europe is already here.

Phil Acock: If it is true that there will be food scarcity issues in Europe by 2025, the example I gave earlier about banning Covid vaccine exports when Europe felt it did not have a fair share is quite ominous. Europe acted quickly and brutally to protect its regional interests without thought to or concern for the detriment to other nations. It gives an indication of how they would behave if there was an issue of food insecurity within the bloc. It forces us to think about how much of our food we produce domestically and how easily we can feed our own nation if we could not obtain food from Europe. I certainly need no convincing about increasing our self-sufficiency, it is an issue I feel strongly about. We also know that consumers would like more locally sourced food and that long complex supply chains lead to food scares such as the 2013 horse meat scandal when horse meat was found in foods advertised as containing beef. Partly as a result of incidents like this, consumers prefer locally sourced food with shorter supply chains, greater visibility and produced to the highest standards. Demand is there, but it needs reinforcing with government policy to help make the transition. The UK's biggest export by a long way is cars, and this is the direct result of government policy in the 1970s. It shows how an industry can grow with government will and action supporting it.

Question from the audience: How do we ensure food imports are grown to the same standards and environmental rules as we have in the UK? For example, oil seed rape (OSR) crushers are using larger volumes of imported seed grown using neonics (a type of insecticide) that are banned in the UK, but still used in some European countries and the reason our UK coverage is not vastly reduced.

David Missen: It is not just rape, sugar is another crop this applies to and the thought takes us into the poultry world and the infamous chlorinated chicken. If we are to try and enforce welfare standards, the answer must be to set standards for food being imported into the UK. We would almost certainly see the reverse for our exports to Europe.

Daniel Zeichner: Standards were the big topic last year. There was a long political battle when the Agriculture Act and the Trade Act were passed with the government resolutely refusing to write into law that we should not import food produced to lower standards. It raises questions about why the government would want to do that when there was such strong opinion from the farming community and over a million signatures on the NFU's petition from farmers and consumers alike. I think the answer is, and it could be seen again this morning from Liz Truss's answers, that they want to leave themselves flexibility for negotiating future trade deals. This is a real risk; America, Australia and New Zealand have all made it clear they want access to our food markets as part of any deal. Standards in those countries are different and it poses a real threat to producers here. Liz Truss was saying this morning that standards in those countries are extremely high. That comment provoked big disagreements and so food standards will go on being a political battle. Most people in the UK do want to maintain high standards, but I fear that over the next few years trade deals will be signed by the government which compromise those standards. What makes me even more nervous is that the government continues to deny the level of parliamentary scrutiny other countries have over trade deals and even this morning Liz Truss was evasive about whether a higher level of scrutiny would be allowed in the UK.

Louise Manning: We already have two tier food standards. If you look at the food we import from the EU, there is a regulatory standard and there are market standards. Some businesses will have higher standards than those in the baseline legislation. We have already seen in the UK, quite recently, a major recall on Polish chicken due to salmonella concerns and deaths in the UK. The focus on standards exclusively outside of the EU is misleading. We already have a two tier system in which some people can afford to pay for higher-welfare, higher-standard products while those that cannot afford it need to source food outside of the major retailers that can be produced to the minimum standards of the EU with little traceability. When we talk about trade deals outside the EU introducing a division in standards, we are missing the point that it already exists. People on lower incomes with more restrictive shopping budgets eat lower standard food. It is really important that when we talk about trade deals, we recognise the inequity that is already here.

Comment from Steven Morrison Cairns, Director at Event & Food Solutions (in the audience): Food security could be helped by working hard to cut our food waste nationally. We need a more pronounced food waste strategy.

Sarah Calcutt in the Chair: This debate is being had right across the food industry. At British Apples & Pears, Phil [Acock] and I have been working on a report which looks at that narrow band which makes it into the retailer packs. There are many good reasons why it is the economically sensible way to be marketing that fruit, but then the challenge for producers, whose product is impacted by the environment, is what happens when the product falls outside of the narrow guidelines. Frost has recently thinned the crop so what happens if the remaining fruit grows too big?

Louise Manning: When we think of food waste we must differentiate between food loss in the supply chain and food waste post-retailer or food service because we need to implement a whole range of different strategies depending on whether we are looking at household food waste, which requires a unique set of policy drivers, and post-harvest food loss, or having very tight specifications for some elements of a crop and the rest of the crop not meeting that spec and not having a recognised home. When we look across the world, the lack of refrigeration in many areas is leading to significant post-harvest loss. So, we need to think about how we develop a whole set of policies which are targeted to all the causes of food loss and food waste along the supply chain. Some retailers which have processed or manufactured product lines are starting to think about whole-crop purchase; the part of the crop which meets the higher specifications goes straight onto the shelf and new specifications are being set up so the remainder of the crop can go into their manufacturing lines. From a marketing viewpoint this is a really exciting development, but we also need policy from government to look at other areas.

Daniel Zeichner: I largely echo what Louise has said. It is staggering how much is still wasted and it is not necessarily from a lack of effort from a range of players over a long period of time. I understand the large supermarkets throw away the equivalent of 190,000,000 meals per year and there has been a dramatic increase in effort during the pandemic, as we have seen a rise in foodbank use, to find ways of minimising food waste. In France there have been legal changes to address food wastage and there is more that could be done by government in the UK. Henry Dimbleby does not seem overly optimistic in his review that we will be able to change consumer behaviours to address food wastage in the home. This is a particularly difficult issue for politicians to tackle because historically food has been cheap and that does not encourage people to use it wisely. However, I would not want to see food prices rising because for a significant section of our population food remains unaffordable. This is a big political dilemma requiring big societal changes, but in the meantime trying everything we can to reduce levels of waste given the global challenge of feeding the planet and addressing the environmental crisis. There is widespread support for these ideals, but how you actually do it is a complicated issue.

Question from the audience: As a proportion of income, UK food prices are the third lowest in the world after the USA and Singapore. Food expenditure now hovers below 14% of income. How do we reconcile this with lack of access to food for some parts of the population and how do we change it?

Louise Manning: There is a real danger with averages because they do not highlight that some communities would have to spend 70% of their disposable income on food to consume the recommended five fruits and vegetables a day. In terms of calories, and I go back to sugar and cereals here, we have the lowest price in the world. If you look at nutrient dense food, we do not. People who are concerned about food waste and food insecurity are less likely to buy perishable food; they may not even be able to afford to put the fridge on. So, we have to look at the wider context and remember that there are a proportion of billionaires in this world that skew average income statistics. I think we need to look at whether food is valued properly as it is not just about price.

Phil Acock: When we talk about food being unaffordable for a percentage of people in this country, it is not a complete sentence. We need to look at why food is unaffordable. Over the past 60 years, food costs have halved while housing costs have doubled. Affordability of food needs to be viewed within the wider context of necessities for which we all need to pay.

Daniel Zeichner: Food is a necessity, as is housing, and for some people one of the reasons food is unaffordable is because their housing costs are so high. Food poverty is a huge issue for society, but it is not about food, it is about poverty of income and the state of the welfare system in this country. Significant sections of population face harsh choices about how to spend their money and food is one of those choices. The answer in recent years has been the rapid growth of food banks, but this is not the right way to address the issue and it is not sustainable. There are bigger issues within the concept of food poverty than simply the price of food.

My other worry is that in the endless pursuit of cheap food, which is driven by a ruthlessly efficient supermarket-led system, there is inordinate pressure on the producers. And, inevitably with the new trade systems being developed there will be further downward pressure on producers. Then, take out the £3 billion of public money that is going into food support at the moment and you have an even bleaker prospect up ahead. I would say we need a much bigger rethink and many of us in the opposition are waiting to read Henry Dimbleby's report, although I do not think he will have all the answers and the government may not be keen to hear what he has uncovered. We will be moving on from his conclusions to determine what we will be presenting as an alternative in the future.

Environmental & Social Governance (ESG)

Louise Manning: ESG is coming to a range of big businesses. In the past it has largely been driven by a customer requirement for corporate social responsibility policies, environmental policies, policies for social policy factors etc. However, in the UK we are seeing the rise of businesses having a clear strategy with regard to environmental and social factors such as modern slavery and community engagement. Businesses are being asked to develop a strategy and increasingly they are able to develop a set of metrics to establish a baseline performance and put measures in place to achieve continuous improvement.

Comment from the Founder of Rural Policy Group, Mark Lumsdon-Taylor

I have listened with interest to the wonderful speakers today and would like to thank them all. We are discussing the topic of food after Brexit because Rural Policy Group was set up to support the rural economy and allied industries, and everything within that remit is related to food and food production.

I have seen first-hand, as have all today's panellists and I expect many of those in today's audience, how each little Brexit hit can reverberate through the rural economy and the food system. For example, a port dispute can have a material impact on a business simply by slowing down delivery when it operates on a just in time stock system.

We started the Food Price Wars series of RED Talks by discussing the price of food and what it means for the future of the UK's food and farming industry. This is the second talk in that series as Brexit is the main factor in establishing a 'new normal' in a reconfigured global trading landscape. As politicised as food is, we will never hear calls from government to make food more expensive for the many reasons around accessibility we have discussed today. However, the profit margins at different points in the food chain need re-evaluating to address inequalities and make primary production more resilient, sustainable and attractive, and we need government support to make change happen. There are some encouraging signs in the Agriculture Act 2020, but we await details around regulation and implementation.

Our primary purpose at RPG is to move agricultural and rural issues up the political agenda. We want to see these issues become a higher priority for governments and given more weight in policymaking. Rural is not spoken about in the right value terms. Yet when you look at the value-added in the sector and the vital role it plays for every person and every business in the country, it is clear we need to move that lexicon forward. The pandemic has shown what can happen when ill health becomes pervasive and there is no industry more important to the creation and maintenance of good health than the food industry, in fact food is essential for our very survival.

Brexit has shone a light on the fragility of our food security, and we need to address this with policymakers while weaving in environmental and social governance policies to secure our future as a self-sufficient and sustainable food producing nation.

The Polls

A poll was taken during the debate to capture how farmers and businesses leaders are feeling about the future of the food industry.

Poll: What support does your business need to prosper post-Brexit?

06% Financial assistance
26% Information and advice
38% Greater certainty
29% Changes to government policy

Farmers and food businesses across the UK echo those in Wales in feeling that uncertainty around the future of food after Brexit is the biggest hindrance to prosperity and named greater certainty the most needed input. Surprisingly, only 6% placed financial assistance as a top priority. Possibly reflecting the resilience and innovation the food industry consistently shows when facing crises and change. Overall, the picture is one of business needing more information and government support in order to plan for a prosperous future.