



UK Research
and Innovation



Briefing: 100 days of Labour - where are we heading on food, farming, climate & health?

Based on an AFN Network+ webinar, held 16.10.24

About the speakers & this briefing

About this briefing:

This briefing is based on a webinar with Hannah Brinsden and Andrew Meredith, given to the AFN Network+ community on the 16th October 2024. It is written and edited by Jez Fredenburgh, Knowledge Exchange Fellow for AFN; the transcript has been lightly edited to paraphrase in parts. You can also [watch the webinar](#).

About the webinar & this briefing topic:

Labour is back in power, but with a brimming in-tray for matters related to food, farming, climate and health: There's Defra's missing net zero plan; farmer confidence at rock-bottom; fruit and veg growers leaving the sector; increasing health inequalities, and the NHS in 'serious trouble'. All of this while facing a more unstable world politically and climatically, and what looks like very big budget cuts domestically. Yet food and farming do not feature as one of Starmer's five key 'missions', so where does that leave it?

One hundred days into Labour being in office, we examine what the new government has done so far, and look for evidence about where things might be heading. Our two speakers spend their time trying to understand the workings of policy in food and farming and will help us delve into this topic.

This webinar was chaired by Jez Fredenburgh, with input from Prof Neil Ward, col-lead of AFN Network+. Both Jez and Neil are based in the Environment Department at the University of East Anglia.

This webinar is part of a monthly series run by [AFN Network+](#) which explores net zero in the UK agri-food system with leading movers and shakers. Expect deep and varied insight from across the sector, including farmers, scientists, policy analysts, community leaders, retailers, politicians, businesses and health professionals. The series is organised by Jez and Neil. Explore our back [catalogue of webinars](#).

About the speakers:

Hannah Brinsden

Dr Hannah Brinsden is Head of Policy and Advocacy at The Food Foundation where she oversees their policy and public affairs portfolio. Hannah previously worked for the World Obesity Federation as Director of Policy and has extensive experience in food, health and obesity policy at the national and international level. Hannah has a PhD in Food Policy from City, University of London and a BSc in Nutrition and Food Science from The University of Reading.

Andrew Meredith

Andrew has been Farmers Weekly's Editor since January 2021 after first doing stints on the business and arable desks. He is the youngest editor in the magazine's 90-year history. Before joining the team, he studied agriculture at Aberystwyth University and then worked on his family's upland beef and sheep farm in mid Wales as well as at Welshpool Livestock Market as a drover.

Summary of key points

Food, health and poverty – key points from Hannah Brindsen, The Food Foundation

A promising start, but guess work since then

- There was a clear sense of purpose and progress in the first few days and weeks after the election, but since then it's become more "closed doors" and difficult to work out the government's direction. Things may become clearer after the Autumn Budget. This "stop/start" feel may have been down to having summer recess and party conference season almost immediately following the election.

Hints of progress on food, health and poverty

- The appointment of a health under-secretary for 'public health and prevention' (Andrew Gwynne) shows promise for integrating food and diet into the health agenda, although the focus on overhauling the NHS is likely to dominate and may prove a challenge for creating action on primary prevention – on the other hand, it may aid it.
- Labour has shown it wants to stick to many of its manifesto pledges: It has introduced restrictions on junk food advertising and sales of energy drinks, and is pushing ahead with free breakfasts for all primary school children. However, we are yet to see any indication of further measures to improve healthy and sustainable diets.
- The National Planning Framework is being reviewed, with some suggestion that health could be better incorporated into that. This could help improve the situation for local communities' access to healthy food, and healthy high streets more generally.
- A [Child Poverty Task Force](#) has also been announced. As yet, there's not much detail about what the priorities will be, and it's likely to be well into next year before anything like a strategy is published. But it's very good to see it, as poverty was not

talked about much under the previous government, despite rates increasing and more households affected by insecurity.

We are yet to see any action on a number of key areas on food, health and poverty/ inequality

- School food beyond breakfast, including standards and monitoring of standards to make sure that schools are providing healthy, nutritious food, including that the fruit and vegetable scheme for infants is offering good quality produce.
- Free school meal entitlement, or improvements to Healthy Start - a policy that gives low income families money towards fruit, veg, milk, etc. This was a Labour policy originally and there is a need to review it so it can reach its potential, including auto-enrolling families, making more families eligible, and increasing the value to keep up with rising food costs.
- Concrete steps to decrease food insecurity and poverty: The UK has a big issue with food insecurity, and while it's mentioned/ touched upon, there haven't been any signs of strong policies or action yet.
- New commitments on horticulture to support supply chain fairness and the sector to boost production of fruit and vegetables and consumption across the UK: Commitments were made by the last Conservative government, then dropped, and then mentioned again, but we haven't seen any new commitments from the new Labour government.
- Further progress on the [Food Data Transparency Partnership](#): It moved ahead very slowly under the previous government, and it went from being mandatory to voluntary. However it still offers a lot of potential.

Barriers to progress / to discuss with government

- The major headline coming from this government has been that the national Budget is very squeezed – that will be the biggest barrier to progress, as many policies on food, health and poverty require immediate investment. Government needs to recognise that health, diets and the food system are longer term investments with longer-term pay-offs, including for national productivity and many of its other longer term goals and missions.
- The focus on overhauling the NHS is likely to take up most of the health department's bandwidth - it will therefore be important to show the government how food can be part of prevention and saving the NHS.
- Food is not one of the government's core 'missions', so there is a need to figure out how Defra will fit within those missions. Government needs to be helped to understand that food is critical to its missions, and shown how it can be embedded across missions, e.g. health, opportunities, employment. The next few months will be key.
- Shifting the focus on individual responsibility for diet towards an understanding about how critical the environment around us is in diet choice and accessibility, will also be key.
- There have been signals that the government is looking for quick wins rather than addressing wider systemic issues – for example the announcement that people with obesity who are out of work due to sickness, could be given weight-loss jobs. This quick-win attitude will need to be navigated if action on the food system as a whole is to happen.

- Party lines are quite tight on policy areas around poverty and benefits – this could make it challenging to comment on and have good dialogue with government on these issues. Being aware of this, and trying to encourage debate within the Labour party will be important.

Emerging opportunities for progress on food, health and poverty

- The public is quite aware of food issues and supportive of government regulation to improve the situation, such as junk food advertising restrictions. This base of support can help advance policies, particularly given that the voter base is quite volatile currently and there is no guarantee that Labour will continue in government for another term.
- The [Children's Wellbeing Bill](#) might present opportunities for talking more about food standards and local procurement in relation to school food, and The Food Foundation is working to ensure that food insecurity and food related issues are embedded in the Child Poverty Task Force's measures of success.
- There have been some positive comments from Daniel Zeichner, the Defra Minister, e.g. supporting the National Food strategy.

In conclusion; there are opportunities on the line and it's not all doom and gloom, but we're yet to see some really concrete action on food, health and poverty, and this exposes a lot of gaps that we hope will get filled over the coming weeks and months.

Agriculture, land use, and net zero – key points from Andrew Meredith, Farmers Weekly

8 things that Labour has done in farming / land use so far

1. Badger Cull – culling is to be gradually phased out “by the end of this parliament”, alongside a new bovine TB eradication strategy that includes vaccination and better testing. The ending of culling is of concern to many livestock farmers.
2. SFI [Sustainable Farming Incentive] – rollout has continued in England, even though, according to some officials, there had been a question mark over this due to the Treasury not wanting to commit to the spending so soon. Contracts with farmers have continued to be signed, but at a slower rate than last year; just 800 or so live SFI 2024 agreements in place so far.
3. Land Use Framework – this is apparently now scheduled for next month (November), but may face challenges over the decisions and trade offs.
4. Solar farms – four new large units signed off by energy secretary Ed Miliband.
5. Wind farms – planning restrictions on onshore wind farms have been lifted.
6. Planning and Infrastructure Bill – included in the King’s speech, to accelerate housing development.
7. Gene editing – will be allowed, to encourage precision breeding techniques.
8. Animal disease – restricted personal imports of pork and sheep products to cut the risk of animal disease entering the UK (particularly given the Blue Tongue outbreak).

8 things that Labour has NOT done in farming / land use so far

1. Provided any clarity on the future of farm support budget – neither dismissing rumours that a £100m underspend will be returned to the Treasury, nor committing to any increase in the £3.6bn annual budget. This is expected to be made clear in the Autumn Budget on 30th October.

2. Paid anything to farmers from the enhanced Farming Recovery Fund – with the £50m earmarked for flood damage repair still sitting in Defra coffers.
3. Launched the Countryside Stewardship Higher-Tier scheme – leaving farmers in the dark while the clock ticks down on their legacy schemes.
4. Confirmed the appointment of a tenancy commissioner – one of the key recommendations of the Rock Review.
5. Committed to the continuation of the Seasonal Worker scheme beyond 2025.
6. Made exporting to the EU any easier by cutting red tape.
7. Announced any measures to tackle unfairness in the supply chain, except mandatory abattoir price reporting for the sheep sector.
8. Revealed a strategy to boost national food security.

Is Labour conflating ‘stability’ with stasis? Does it have any further plans for farming?

- Labour’s pre-election budget was policy-light on farming, with just 84 words dedicated to the sector. Many people suspected that it was a strategy – that they didn’t want to give too much away and be dragged into discussions in the election period. But people suspected that behind the scenes, there were a lot more plans that would be unveiled. This may be, but some people are starting to suspect that many of these promises around farming stability are actually a bit of stasis, and perhaps there aren’t as many plans in the background as thought.
- Of more concern to some, is the lack of government action that could, in the view of some commentators, have been taken regardless of budget. For example, Defra could have given farmers further certainty on older Countryside Stewardship schemes and how these would be integrated into new environmental schemes.

- There is perhaps policy work and communication that could have gone on in this intervening period despite the budget hold up. It's hoped the Budget will offer clarity. But the Oxford Farming Conference (in early January) is often the set place for the Minister to make big announcements – and so the sector may have to wait until then.
- The £100 million Defra underspend has driven headlines and many suspect this will be Defra's cut when the Budget is announced on the 30th – but it could be bigger, or smaller. But with the political and economic tone coming out of the Treasury, a bigger cut is looking more likely, particularly as Defra is an unprotected department.

required? Is the cash incentive sufficient? Are there other cultural, social and regulatory barriers, including those thrown up by the government itself, such as tax policy, that stand in the way? Farmers Weekly research in July showed that over half of farmers would have difficulty surviving without area payments, despite SFI. Fundamentally, if farmers' backs are against the wall and they feel their businesses are at risk of failure, the impetus may be to freeze, rather than change rapidly. That mental ability to contemplate wide-scale change while in financial turmoil will drive a lot of the farmer action or inaction over the next four to five years. It's going to be a very sobering and interesting one to watch.

Three dilemmas for government

1. Government may face the dilemma of how to “buy change” from farmers through environmental actions, in order to deliver all of the commitments it has already made, but with a reduced budget, or a budget that is not increased but worth less due to inflation. This will limit ambition compared to 5-10 years ago. Could it be that farming businesses are made to pay for those changes rather than be funded?
2. To what extent should the government look to the private sector to help fund changes in agriculture? Lots of activity in the private sector, particularly banks and retailers examining their Scope 3 emissions, is pushing on-farm change to reduce emissions. Complementary private sector funding was the original ambition of Michael Gove's post-Brexit farming reforms, after all.
3. Do farmers have the resources needed to make the environmental changes

Webinar transcript

Speakers: Hannah Brinsden (HB), Andrew Meredith (AM), with chairing from Jez Fredenburgh (JF), and input from Prof Neil Ward (NW).

Hannah Brinsden presentation on food, health and poverty/ inequality

(HB) We've all been following the new government, with lots of hope and ambition for what it can mean for food, health and farming. The first thing to kind of reflect on, is that it's been a really strange 100 days. It's not been what you would necessarily typically think of as the first 100 days, because we've had summer recess not long after the election, and then conference season, which is a whole different kettle of fish in terms of the discussions I had. So it's felt quite stop-start in a way that you wouldn't necessarily expect from a standard first 100 days. That's really important to the context of where we've got to now, and where we might get to potentially in the next 100 days.

The other thing to reflect on, in terms of the government's approach, is that quite early on after the election, there were a lot of signs of assertiveness. If you think back to the first days and couple of weeks after the election, the key Secretaries of State were in their departments - Wes Streeting was there, talking to doctors, and Keir Starmer had all the mayors to Number 10 to talk about what could be done with devolution and in their areas. And there was this really clear sense of public progress.

And I think because of some of the things that I just mentioned around the first 100 days, it's become a little bit more closed doors, and knowing what's going on has been a little bit less easy to follow and to really understand where the government is. I think the Budget that's coming up at the end of October is going to shed a lot more light on where the direction could go in the coming months and years.

I work at the Food Foundation, a charity focused on access and affordability to healthy, sustainable diets for everyone. And as part of that, we look across a wide range of issues. So health is one of them. But we do a lot of work through the lens of inequalities, food insecurity, poverty and interrelated factors. And we look at the food system through the lens of consumption. So we look a lot at food environments, what that means for the availability of food, access to affordable, healthy food, and we also look at things like horticulture and fruit and veg consumption as markers of a healthy diet, and making sure that we're doing whatever we can across the food system to support better consumption of fruit and vegetables.

One thing to note on food and health from a nutrition perspective, is that we've got a minister, Andrew Gwynne, who has [been made Parliamentary Under Secretary for Health and Prevention]. That's a really important indicator that there could be progress or opportunities [on using food in prevention]. But on the other hand, we're seeing a lot of focus on the NHS, and that could take up a lot of the bandwidth of the department over the coming government term.

Over the first 100 days, there's been quite a strong indication that the government wants to stick to some of its priority manifesto commitments. So restrictions on junk food advertising, for instance, have been rolled out, as has a ban on energy drinks that was indicated in the King's speech. So that's positive, although actually was a Conservative policy that didn't quite get over the line. But it is absolutely fantastic to actually see the junk food advertising [ban] progressing.

We've also seen a review of the National Planning Framework with some suggesting that health could be better incorporated into that which is really good at a local level, and for improving communities and high streets around us.

Another area, and one of the other strong commitments that we've seen from Labour, that they are pushing forward with, is free breakfast for all primary school children. This was originally announced quite a while ago through the lens of supporting parents and childcare, but has also been badged as a health/ diet improvement, as well in the context of child poverty and making sure that children are not at school hungry, which is, of course, really important. Although looking at school food more broadly, we are yet to see any indication that they are going to do anything else, which is a little bit disappointing.

We've also seen an announcement of a Child Poverty Task Force. We haven't got that much detail about what exactly that's going to look like. There is a terms of reference, but we're not quite sure where that will be and what the timings will be of any strategy that comes out of that task force. We're looking well into next year at this point.

But again, it's good to see some commitment from the government around child poverty, which is something that hasn't been spoken about much over the last few years, and we know that this is a really big challenge in this country. We know that many households with children are badly affected by food insecurity - a recent analysis that we published showed that the cost of a healthy diet would be about 70% of disposable income for the lowest income quintile in this country. So it's good to see this emphasis on poverty, and how that can link back to food.

Some of the things that we've not seen, are concrete steps to decreasing food insecurity and poverty. We know we have a big issue with food insecurity, and it's kind of mentioned, touched upon, but actually, in terms of good policies and action on that, it's a bit weaker. We've not seen anything, as I say, on school food outside of breakfast, including the standards and monitoring of standards to make sure that schools are actually providing healthy, nutritious food, either as part of lunches or breakfasts, or making sure that the fruit and vegetable scheme for infants is offering good quality fruit and vegetables.

We've not seen anything around free school meals entitlement, or around Healthy Start - a policy that gives low income families money towards fruit, veg, milk, etc. That was a Labour policy that has been kept over the years, but we would hope to see some improvements on that. For The Food Foundation, it's one of our priority areas that we're trying to get more traction on by getting more families eligible and also increasing the value so that it keeps up with the rising cost of food.

Horticulture is something that we're really interested in too, and it's something that was kind of committed to by the last government, and then it was dropped, and then it was mentioned again, and we haven't really seen any new commitments on that under the new government. But it's something that we're hoping will come out over the coming months, or something related to that sector to support supply chain fairness, and the sector to really boost fruit and vegetable production and consumption across the UK.

We're also still hoping to see movement on the Food Data Transparency Partnership. This is a mechanism to make mandatory reporting of sales of healthy food, or big businesses tell us what they're selling, and really using that to underpin priorities in policy. It's been moving ahead very slowly under the previous government, and it went from originally being mandatory to voluntary. But again, it's another area that we're yet to see what the direction of travel will be. I think it could offer a lot of potential for improving the policies that we have in this country.

One of the biggest barriers that we're facing in terms of progress, is budget and money. We know that's the big headline - a lot of policies do require investment, and it's trying to encourage the government to have that longer term view. So what might be an upfront cost, actually, is a longer term investment that can really boost population health, reduce food insecurity, and that has long term impacts on things like productivity, which we know the government is interested in. So it's really trying to get that recognition that health, good

diets and a good food system are actually really important for those longer term goals and missions of the government.

Another challenge is the NHS itself taking up a lot of bandwidth of the [health] department when we also need to be thinking about [disease] prevention, and linking up on food and diet.

And then there's Defra; we have these government missions and it's a bit opaque about what that's actually going to mean in practice, but food obviously isn't one of those missions. What we want to figure out is where Defra fits within those. There's a lot of question marks around that at the moment, but I think it's going to be absolutely critical for making sure that food is embedded across a lot of those missions, whether it's health, opportunities, employment. I think we know that food is really critical to that. So really trying to understand that is going to be important over the coming months.

A couple of other issues that continue are things that we've seen a lot of emphasis on, things like personal responsibility around diet and actually, what we know is that we need to be improving the environment we live in, not just focusing on what people can do, because we know that that's impossible with the environments that we have.

And I think an example of some of the kind of emphasis [coming from government] and the quick wins in this regard are evident: Yesterday Wes Streeting was talking about treating people who have obesity, who are out of work due to sickness, to try and get them back into the workforce. And showing a mindset of quick wins, while not really thinking about the bigger system. And that is something that we're going to have to navigate if we want to get some of these big system/ food system things changed over the coming months and years.

And the final thing that is quite a challenge that we're seeing a lot at the moment, is how tight the party lines are on a lot of these policies. And that could present difficulties along the line, in terms of the ability to comment on and have good dialogue on the things that are being passed through, so being aware of that as part of the political landscape that we've got. I mean, that's relevant across the board, but it's relevant on things around poverty and benefits and where the party line is, so it's important to try and encourage that debate within the party.

There are, however, lots of opportunities. We know that the public is quite aware of food issues: We know that there's a lot of interest in regulation and some of the most supported manifesto commitments from Labor were the energy drink one and advertising one. We've seen the suggestion that things like taxes are quite well supported by the public.

So we know that that sort of base of support is there, and that's really helpful for advancing any policies, particularly when we know that the voter base is quite volatile at the moment, in terms of, yes, there's a big mandate at the moment for Labour, but I don't think anybody thinks that's guaranteed in any way to continue into another electoral term. So, having that public support for policies is really helpful for demonstrating that there are things that the government can act on.

We've also got the Children's Wellbeing Bill, which is what [school] breakfast come under. And that might present opportunities for talking a bit more about food standards and local procurement. [With] the Child Poverty Task Force, one of our priorities is to make sure that food insecurity and food related issues are embedded in not just the actions that are recommended, but the way that they measure the success of that task force and progress.

And then also we've had some positive noise, or language, coming from Daniel Zeichner at conferences, for instance supporting the National Food strategy. So there are sort of opportunities on the line. It's not all

doom and gloom, but I think we're yet to see some really concrete action in this area, and this exposes a lot of gaps that we hope will get filled over the coming weeks and months.

The Food Foundation has done some analysis of the manifestos and the various speeches over the last couple of months, over the 100 days, which are all on our website if you want to see them. And we have a podcast coming out this week reflecting on the last 100 days with someone from the Institute for Government, the Green Alliance, Unison, and then Rosie Boycott from the House of Lords.

Andrew Meredith presentation on farming, land use and net zero

(AM) I have a lot of sympathy for Hannah and the work of her colleagues in the great difficulty around food policy, in that it is cut across so many different departments and the pure politics of trying to unlock change is so difficult. And of course, farming policy isn't immune from that, even if it is a little bit more consolidated in Defra, there is that ambition, obviously, to link it up more broadly with health goals and other things.

Farmers Weekly is 90 years old, and I was reflecting on the 100 day phenomenon. In effect, this is a marker around all sorts of Western governments – how governments perform after they take office in that first 100 days, perhaps I think since FDR and his remarkable government in the 1930s which is roughly around the time we were getting up and going ourselves.

I thought I would just take you back to 1964 - I always take great comfort from our archive at times of upheaval, reminding myself of all of the monumental changes that have gone before. And in 1964, [looking at] adverts on the cover, judging by this one, farmers were also very concerned about the weather then and looking for technological solutions to get around it, very much like today.

But in 1964 we were also on the cusp of a landmark election a little bit later than the one we had this year...and [looking at] what was the rather antiquated ladies section of the era, the advice for the election night supper. It was Harold Wilson then that brought Labour in from the cold. They'd been out of power for 13 years, and he was the only Labour Prime Minister to form four governments following different general elections in the 60s and 70s.

He had the misfortune of becoming the only Prime Minister that I'm aware of anyway, that farmers plotted to kidnap because he was so unpopular. Eventually, by the 1970s over the government of the day's management of us being integrated into the EU, and the upheaval then over the change in support systems. And now, of course, we're dealing with the legacy still of exiting the EU and the change in farming and environmental policy.

So eight things that Labour has already done: We've talked a lot about stasis and how it's been a slow start for the government as a whole, and that's obviously true, and there's been a lot of upheaval, hasn't there - sort of political problems, largely of their own making, but the action has occurred, and I'm not going to run through all of these exhaustively.

From a farming perspective, probably the badger strategy has perhaps been the one that's been remarked on most: The concerns among some livestock farmers over the tapering off of the badge of cull, and the great hope that vaccines and other treatment measures will come in behind this and better testing to try and help the scourge of TB.

The SFI [Sustainable Farming Incentive] rollout has continued, and I understand from talking with some officials that there was a question mark. I think the Treasury even wanted to fully pause that roll out, because effectively, they are making further spending commitments then on that basis with the latest iteration of this lowest tier of the environmental and management scheme, the SFI. But offers are still being

made, contracts are still being signed, but at a slower rate, I think, than certainly this time last year, when SFI 2023 was really firing on all cylinders.

And then, of course, [there are] some broader things which reach into farming and agriculture, but are not directly related to them: [There is] a lot of talk, obviously, around land use policy, with solar farming and onshore wind farms. And you can see there the point later about the long awaited land use framework, apparently now scheduled for next month, and writing in this week's Farmers Weekly about the challenges facing civil disturbance as they deliberate over the decisions and trade offs for that would be a very interesting document when it is published. This week, we've been looking at it in the context of water management.

And then finally, animal disease – some changes there at the border in terms of scrutiny, hopefully we'll see our borders protected from animal disease being brought in via illegal imports of pork and sheep products that [would] then spread to the domestic flocks and herds. But of course, they can also come in on the wind too, as we're seeing with the Blue Tongue outbreak at the moment.

What haven't Labour done? We know, of course, that it was a policy-light budget for many sectors, but particularly for farming – 84 words directly about agriculture, many commentators said. I think a lot of people suspected that it was a strategy; that they didn't want to give too much away and be dragged into a lot of discussions in the election period.

But people suspected that behind the scenes, there were a lot more plans that would be unveiled. Now there may be, and they may have simply been held up by this interminable period between them taking office and the Budget that is now on the 30th. But I think some people are starting to suspect that many of these promises around stability [for farmers] that we've had from Food Security Minister Dan Zeichner, are actually a bit of stasis, and perhaps there aren't as many plans in the background as some people suspected.

That £100 million underspend has driven a lot of headlines. That is what people are suspecting will be the cut to the Defra budget that we learn about on the 30th. That's obviously still a matter of conjecture – it could be a bigger cut, it could be a smaller one, but with the economic backdrop and all of the warnings around the deficit in year spending versus tax receipts, all of the betting is certainly on a cut to the unprotected departments, of which Defra certainly is one.

But perhaps of more concern to some is this idea that it is not just the budget, but actually the action that is needed that could, in the views of some commentators, be going on, regardless of the budget shenanigans – and stability and stasis being conflated is that issue. The Nature Friendly Farming Network has been particularly vociferous on this, looking at things like further integration of Countryside Stewardship and SFI and ELMS as a whole, giving people certainty on how those people with the older CS agreements are going to be integrated into new environmental schemes, so there isn't that cliff edge.

Is there policy work and communication that could have gone on in this intervening period despite the budget hold up? Perhaps. But hopefully there will still be a lot more clarity once the budget wrangling process is over – and I suspect the traditional farming policy update, this set piece moment for the Minister, is often the Oxford Farming Conference, in early January. So there may be a lot more to share immediately after Christmas rather than before.

So I just wanted to wrap up today, by thinking about the rest of the parliamentary term and three dilemmas. [There is a] dilemma, if there is a budget cut, between [government's] ability to buy change from farmers through environmental actions, to deliver all of the commitments that [government has] made... and their diminishing ability to do that if there is an actual cut. But also the diminishing size of their budget in

inflationary terms, if there isn't [a] budget increase. Both of those combined, are going to limit, compared to five or 10 years ago, certainly the ambition that they will be able to exert purely in economic terms. So how are they going to reconcile lower budgets and these impending deadlines?

We could have spent the whole half an hour on that, but that is something that we are thinking a lot about, and could it be that they raise the legislative minimum in certain cases and make farming businesses pay for those changes rather than funding it?

Or could it be they rely more on the rest of the private sector, that web of agri businesses that surround farming, those that sell them products and those that buy them? And this is another area I'm sure many people on this call are very familiar with, with scope three emissions, that idea that business has scope one and scope two, which are directly under their control, or emissions in products they're buying directly and the emissions associated with them. But then scope three are the emissions from their value chain. And so in farming terms, because farming is a big emitter, we are starting to see a lot of activity now as large corporates gear up to try and grapple with this problem of trying to reduce their scope three emissions, particularly from the banking sector.

And so of late, we've seen Lloyds TSB team up [with] Soil Association Exchange, to do a large pilot baselining the emissions of many of Lloyds' farming customers and then setting out action plans for them. We've seen the agriculture and horticultural development board, the levy board that farmers fund. They've got a big pilot going on on this. We've seen activity in Northern Ireland, where they've already baselined all of the farmers [in order to receive] funding directly from the department for agriculture.

So all of this is pushing towards the private sector, as well as government, funding on farm change that could help reduce emissions. And while there is a lot of suspicion out there among farmers about the sort of motivations of businesses in trying to tinker more directly with how they do their business, rather than simply buying their goods, it may be that there is a healthy marketplace for buying positive changes that will help the government out effectively, if there is an additional funding pot from the private sector that is complementing what they are hoping to do as well. And that is, of course, as those of you who have been studying this from the Michael Gove era will know was the original ambition, but it's been very slow to get going.

And then finally, I just want to close with the dilemma for farmers themselves. Our Transition project is in its fourth year now - although we have content all the time on grappling with the sort of changes that are arising from the tapering off of area payments and the incoming new environmental schemes to replace them in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, England is furthest down the path. Our transition project has been very focused on the changes that they are having to make in particular, and so our research that was conducted or published in July of this year showing that over half of farmers still feel that they are going to have great difficulty in surviving at all without those area payments.

So the dilemma for farmers, as they are, being dragged in some respects, to try and do the right thing, [and] having the resources to do it. Do the resources that are on offer to buy those changes, persuade them to adapt their businesses to deliver them? Is the cash incentive on offer sufficient? Are there other cultural, social and regulatory barriers, including those thrown up by government [itself] around tax policy, throwing opposition in their way to do that?

But more fundamentally, I just think, is when you have your backs to the wall, and you're feeling like your business is potentially at risk of failure in the next few years, there's often that impetus not to change rapidly for a lot of people or businesses, actually, but to freeze. And so I think it's that mental ability to contemplate wide scale change when your business is already in financial turmoil that will drive a lot of the farmer action

or inaction over parliament over the next four to five years. So that's going to be a very sobering but interesting one to watch.

Q&A session

(JF) I just wanted to kick off with a question around the idea of different missions and something that's cross cutting. If Labour was to really understand or really see the opportunity of a more cross cutting view of food and farming, what do you think that would look like in practice? And I'm wondering about something like procurement, and the ability to hit quite a few things on the head, in terms of supporting more sustainable methods of farming, and that difficult farming transition you're talking about, Andrew, with that lack of certainty, but also to hit things like health on the head, health inequalities and things like that. Can you think of something that, if Labour was really going to take this seriously...what would it actually look like?

(HB) I think your framing of your question, or your example of procurement, and the way you frame that is actually quite an important part of the answer to that question, i.e we need to look at things like procurement, or whatever it is, and then all the different sort of outcomes, and think about what all the different things are that it could hit. Rather than, let's look at procurement for one reason and one reason only, and then only channel it through that kind of department or purpose.

And I think it is about taking the parts of the food system and thinking about what we can address...and on something like procurement you've got your local growers and supporting that, but then you've got how that could be used to help create healthier menus in public institutions like hospitals and schools, how that can feed into better meals for the children, how you can engage children in local food, how it can improve the fruit and vegetable scheme and actually get better quality food to [children].

So I think there are a lot of areas...and also making sure that you can get local fruit and vegetables onto high streets, whether it's through markets or community food hubs or whatever it is, again, there is a lot that you can do, and that increases access for people who are currently living in areas where they just don't have access to fresh food, they've got access to expensive corner shops, and that's all they have to choose from. So it's not a choice, and it's not even what they can afford, it's actually what they can get to.

So, taking certain policies and looking at all the outcomes, flipping everything on its head, I think could be a really good way for the government to look at it. Whether they will or not... if you take something like what I've just mentioned, that involves DFE, Defra, DH, Treasury, maybe some devolution in there, because you're looking at local policy, there's different planning that comes in, like there's so much that touches on it, and that's where it gets complicated, but it's absolutely where we need to be in our ambition.

(AM) I think Labour really grappled in opposition to define how to articulate a policy to support this, and they ended up on what I think is probably quite a simple one, although others who will know better than me - this idea around 50% of public sector procurement being British, nobody could ever tell me what the percentage was at the moment, although we have spoken to, I think one person who says it's near enough about 50% now, so it's hard to articulate how ambitious that proposal is and how much of a lever that would have actually in supporting domestic food production anyway.

So I'll be interested to see over the next few months, whether now they're surrounded by those civil service policy teams, and they have more access, perhaps, to lobbyists and NGOs who've done work on this, whether they have a more nuanced or, in fact, complex approach that may be more ambitious, but it does all come back to this cross government ability to work together. And I really think if it's outside these main priorities, it feels like it's going to struggle to get momentum.

(NW) I was reading Wes Streetings piece in The Telegraph yesterday. I just wondered whether Hannah or Andrew, felt that there was likely to be a different sort of a stance with this government in relation to taking regulatory action for public health and other sorts of reasons. There was a sense, not just the last 14 years of the Conservative administration, but also New Labour before that, that there was a real caution around that accusation of 'nanny statism'. And I've just detected in a few Labour politicians a greater willingness to either take that head on or brush it off. I just wondered whether you thought that bode for a different approach to some of these health and environmental issues?

(HB) Well, I think to the point that I made earlier around polling, we know that actually the public is quite open to regulation, and I think that's really helpful in terms of trying to shift the government on that same kind of trajectory. What the government's trying to grapple with, it's this balance of feeling like they're pro business, while also regulation and trying to unpick how you can do both. And we do work with investors, who will know quite loudly say what we need is a level playing field, and that's the only way we're going to get action.

You need the progressive companies to have that sort of supportive direction from government. So I think the more that sort of message lands, the more likely it is that that will get somewhere. And I think there's just a whole reframing thing that needs to be done on the nanny state, to be honest. ..where I think you know, the nanny state isn't about restriction. It's about opening up opportunities for people. It's about creating environments. It's about allowing people to live healthier lives, and making sure that we're supporting that, that the government is supporting that.

There's this kind of perception that it's all about restriction, restriction and restriction. And if we put our population first, it's actually about finding ways to help them to live healthier lives and give people equal opportunities, access, affordability, etc. So there is still a process that we need to go through with this government. I don't think we can immediately assume that they're not worried about nanny state perceptions, but I think we can hopefully progress the agenda a bit more.

(JF) There's another question here that relates to framing, which is a question to both of you, really, which is from Phil Stocker, who I'm guessing, if it is *the* Phil Stocker, then Andrew will know him – Phil heads up the National Sheep Association, and he's talking about the kind of tension between the framing of farming being an economic activity, and food and diet increasingly being talked about as a kind of National Service and National good. And he's saying; is that a conflict, and can the two be effectively reconciled while they're both framed differently?

(AM) Farming is framed as an economic activity, but it is also, I think, an activity that the general public do feel like they have a stake in and they want to support beyond economically, the type of farming that they feel like is beneficial, and they have a view of what the the landscape should be for society's benefit as well as for economic benefit. So, perhaps farmers see it more purely as an economic activity, albeit also as a cultural activity, to a greater extent than perhaps the general public. And I think the general public are interested in it beyond the price of a leg of lamb or a loaf of bread.

(HB) I think the only thing I would say is...on awareness of farming and the role it plays, I think a lot of the food security issues that we've had recently as a result of COVID, Brexit, Ukraine, what, etc, climate, I think have brought this kind of food conversation a little bit more into people's minds in terms of fresh produce, and remembering that it doesn't just appear out of nowhere, and that it is a bit more volatile.

And I think that's brought the whole food security, and in turn, farming and how we farm, and what we farm, up people's awareness. They don't necessarily know what to do about it. We've not necessarily got a public

that's calling for more action necessarily as a result. But I think more awareness that it is something that needs to be considered. And it's really important, it's definitely there.

(JF) There's a question here from Ellie King, who is asking about how the ambitions of The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ), which is obviously all around renewable energy - how do they align with Defra or not? And specifically, she says the tension around how we use finite land for both energy, solar, fuel, crops, etc, and food. And it's worth considering what we know; Ed Miliband, who is Secretary of State for DESNZ, he recently mentioned the land use strategy in Parliament. And he didn't really say much, but he did show that he was thinking about it. We've also got Chris Stark at DESNZ now, and fairly recently, on a webinar with us, was talking about how DESNZ's [strategy for a renewable energy transition] could be used as a blueprint for a transition within farming as well. So we're wondering about your general thoughts on DESNZ and Defra, and whether those two departments are going to come into conflict, or whether there is a bit more of an opportunity there.

(AM) I suppose in an ideal world, it will be the land use strategy that does articulate the rules of the game a bit better than the absence of an articulation to an extent at the moment, and then particularly around energy versus food. So I don't think there's going to be, you know, delineated lines on the map as to say, this is where we do food, and this is where we do energy, and if you straddle that line, or you can't cross that line with your solar panels.

And I recognise the complexity of what they have set out to do. And the reason why it has been delayed is not just purely because of the change of government and what have you, I think it is simply that the more you get into this topic, the more complicated it becomes, and the more you do have to confront certain trade offs.

What a lot of farm lobbyists are hoping for is a better articulation of food production alongside the ambition for environmental goals, so that in some way, hede is being paid to this idea that domestic production, maintaining it, at the very least, is certainly a contributor to food security. And I know that this is also a very complex debate about what food security actually is, and it isn't just about domestic production, but there certainly is a fear that in pursuit of ever more needs from our land, it is food that ends up being the loser.

(JF) What are the biggest priorities for Labour if they want to regain farmer confidence? Andrew, did you want to take that one? And I think Hannah, if I could put it back to you as well and widen that to groups that campaign for health equalities etc.

(AM) It's recognised more generally, across government, that secretaries of state that succeed actually set out to do very few things, but they do them well, and they're relentlessly focused upon them. So I think in an ideal world...Steve Reed's been very focused on the water companies, because that was his big election promise...he's been very focused on that since he came into government, and he has delegated as somebody who leads a big department has to do, to junior ministers to take control of the other briefs.

I think he probably needs to come to Oxford or pick another forum within the next few months, explain how he is the Big Boss, what he wants to do for farming, set himself some narrow goals and then focus his teams on hitting them on time and don't over promise and under deliver - that's probably the easiest thing to do for farmers, and you'll earn some begrudging respect, even if they aren't exactly the goals that the farmers wanted, I think.

(HB) On the health side, I think actually not dissimilar to the question Neil asked around the nanny state and regulation. I think it is actually recognising that regulation on unhealthy food, on junk food, can actually

be helpful for business as well as health, and it's absolutely critical that we do take more action to really shift the balance of our high streets and food.

We've got a Labour government now, so having some really concrete action to reduce poverty and food insecurity - it feels like a necessary step to have that confidence. And although we've got words and a Task Force and things coming out at the moment, I think that the kind of commitments that are going to see a reduction over the next 5-10, years, hopefully sooner, are yet to come. So that's what we're holding out for.

(JF) Is there anything before we wrap up? Is there anything else either of you wanted to add about what you would hope to see from Labour in the next year or so, in terms of action on food, farming, health and climate? What are one or two big asks that would make the biggest difference?

(HB) Something that effectively addresses the points that I just made, something that really helps to address food insecurity, I think will be really important. And addressing the unhealthy foods that we have just marketed everywhere on our high streets, and that's so easy to access and displaces healthy food. I think that would be my number one thing.

(AM) Even if the ambition for environmental schemes gets pared back, and I hope that they don't, I think really driving forward with support in terms of capital investment to help farmers make their businesses greener, particularly around slurry storage and capturing and using methane, there's so many virtuous outcomes there – you're reducing on-farm emissions while also having green energy to power your own on-farm energy use, maybe up to and including actual tractor power.

I think there's a lot of wins out there, but they all come at a price. But the final point, with over half of farmers still really thinking that they may struggle to survive at all, it is just absolutely supporting the transition to a sector, potentially with a lot fewer farmers, that allows as many as possible that want to leave, to do it with dignity, and also doesn't have a terrible impact on food production at the same time.

[ends]

About the AFN Network+

The AFN Network+ (UKRI Agri-food for Net Zero Network+) is a unique network of 2,000+ academics, researchers, third sector organisations, policy makers, and agri-food industry professionals from farmers to retailers.

Together, we are working to identify key research gaps that may be holding the UK food system back from transitioning towards a net zero UK by 2050, while also enhancing biodiversity and healthy ecosystems, nurturing livelihoods, supporting healthy consumer habits, and minimising the environmental impacts of overseas trade. Our findings will inform the next decade of research investments in this area by UKRI (our funder and the UK research councils umbrella organisation).

Alongside our core research, we run in-person and online events, produce topical resources, and give out hundreds of thousands of pounds of funding a year.

The AFN Network+ is coordinated by the University of East Anglia, University of the West of England, University of York, and University of Leeds, and is a £5m, 3-year project funded by four research councils; the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, and the Natural Environment Research Council.

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