



House of Commons
Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Committee

Defra's food strategy

Oral and written evidence

Wednesday 13 January 2010

*Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, Professor Robert
Watson and Ms Bronwen Jones, Department
for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 13 January 2010*

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 5774; the Committee's e-mail address is: efracom@parliament.uk. Media inquiries should be addressed to Hannah Pearce on 020 7219 8430.

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Oral evidence

Taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Sub-Committee on Wednesday 13 January 2010

Members present

Mr Michael Jack, in the Chair

Mr David Drew
Patrick Hall
Lynne Jones

David Lepper
Miss Anne McIntosh
Dan Rogerson

Witnesses: **Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP**, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, **Professor Robert Watson**, Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser, and **Ms Bronwen Jones**, Deputy Director of the Food Chain Programme, Defra, gave evidence.

Q1 Chairman: The witching hour of three o'clock is with us. May I welcome to the Committee, for this one-off session on Defra's document entitled *Food 2030*, the Secretary of State, Hilary Benn, and he is joined and supported by Professor Robert Watson, who is Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser, and Bronwen Jones, who is the Deputy Director for the Food Chain Programme. You are all very welcome indeed. Secretary of State, may I just put on record the Committee's appreciation for the very kind letter which you sent following David Taylor's death. It was very kind of you to write. The Committee recorded the contents of your letter on the record last week, together with other appreciations of David, and a copy of the transcript of those proceedings is going to be sent to his widow as a lasting testament of our appreciation of all that he did over the years since 2001 when he joined this Committee. We were very touched and, indeed, grateful for the kind words which you said about David.

Hilary Benn: Mr Chairman, thank you very much. I am sure Mrs Taylor will much appreciate that. I must confess I find it rather hard to sit in front of the Committee and to mention that David is not here. I know you must feel exactly the same way; he was quite some person. I think the many obituaries and tributes really did justice to who he was, why people respected him so much and the legacy that he leaves behind.

Q2 Chairman: Absolutely; I think we concur with everything that you said. Thank you very much for agreeing to come along this afternoon. The reason that we wanted to talk to you about this document is that, so far, Parliament has not been given the opportunity to scrutinise the fruits of your many labours over the last, I suppose, couple of years. Perhaps I could just ask why, for something which had commanded so much attention from government—both in terms of the work of the Cabinet Office and, indeed, your own department—you sought to launch *Food 2030* at the Oxford Farming Conference and subsequently did not choose to make a statement to the House about it?

Hilary Benn: I did lay a written statement, as you know, Mr Chairman. I hope very much that we will get an opportunity soon, indeed, to debate all of

these things. We have had a couple of opportunities in the last year-and-a-bit to talk about farming and food. Having laboured hard I was keen to get it out and I welcome very much opportunity of having the strategy scrutinised by the Select Committee this afternoon.

Q3 Chairman: We are delighted about that because we said that our own report was really the beginning of a process. I think, sadly, with the time constraints of the current Parliament, it will be difficult for us to revisit in detail many of the areas which all of the work that has been done in this area has turned up. Your document touches, though, on the way that some of that work is to be taken forward in the future, and we will probe that in some detail. Can I just ask you before we go into the detail of what you have written for what is your definition of "strategy"? What do you think one of those is?

Hilary Benn: I must say I was very much guided by the words of the Select Committee, which were (if I may quote them to you): "The vision and strategy in your report cannot be expected to supply all the answers but it must supply a clear direction and indicate what further work is needed." I think that is exactly what *Food 2030* seeks to do.

Q4 Chairman: The reason I ask that question is that I was taken by the contents of a paragraph, paragraph 5, in fact, in the first report from your Council of Food Advisers. What they said, in the initial part of paragraph 5 of their conclusions, concurs with what you have just said. They said, and I quote: "The overall strategy should set out a long-term, overarching vision that can be shared by all departments and by industry".¹ It seems to me that what you have produced as *Food 2030* ticks that particular box. However, it then went on to say: "It should define what needs to happen across sectors to help people make informed decisions. It needs to identify the roles of all players in the food chain; what changes can be expected and how success will be measured." I think it is on that aspect that I found

¹ *First Report from the council of Food Policy Advisers*, September 2009, p 15, <http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/policy/council/pdf/cfpa-rpt-090914.pdf>

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the document somewhat thin. I said this morning on the radio that it was long on rhetoric and short on detail. Did you intend it, in overall terms, simply to be a gathering together of visions and hopes rather than a detailed roadmap as to how you were going to get from where we are to where you want to be?

Hilary Benn: No, it was intended to be both, and I have read with interest the transcript of your interview this morning, Mr Chairman.

Q5 Chairman: And short, so it would not have taken you too long.

Hilary Benn: Indeed. I thought, if I may say so, there was a slightly different definition of “strategy” there to the one that the Committee gave in producing its report in the summer. The point I wanted to make was we have done a range of things that are already under way which seek to answer the question: what are we going to do about all this? As I have set out, the three tasks are: we have to produce more food; we have to do it sustainably and we have got to make sure that our diet safeguards our health. There is, indeed, a role for everybody. I suppose, in the last year I could have said: “Right, we will not proceed with anything, we will just save it all up, put it in the food strategy, announce it and then everyone will say: ‘There’s lots of detail here; that’s very good, thank you very much’”. However, if you reflect on what has been done, working in partnership with others, the Campaign for the Farmed Environment and its launch, the fact that we reached agreement on that, in my view, is hugely significant, because to see the NFU and the CLA, in partnership with all of the other organisations that signed up, going out to farmers and arguing the case for environmentally sustainable farming is, I think, a huge step forward, and that campaign has begun. The work of the Pig Meat Task Force has been up and running for some time, and the Fruit and Veg Task Force. The Committee asked, in effect, for that; you asked the Council of Food Policy Advisers to look at this, they recommended we set up a task force and it has already met and has got its sub-groups at work. You wanted more money for research; well, an extra £50 million has been announced since we last met to discuss this by the Technology Strategy Board for investment in food and agricultural research. There is the action plan on skills in farming, because without skills how are we going to do this? I was very struck, Mr Chairman, I had been in the job a couple of years and I reflected on the fact that the industry had not come and talked to me about skills. I thought that was a bit odd, so I convened the round table, and the plan is now being consulted and should be published next month. We have got the new diploma, the Healthy Food Mark is being piloted and we are working with the industry on how we are going to get emissions down from agriculture by three million tonnes a year by 2020, and that is the industry greenhouse gas action plan. We have got incentives around anaerobic digestion. The last thing I will mention in this list is just before Christmas I announced that we are extending to farmers eligibility for the Carbon Trust loans to help them to be more energy efficient—loans interest free,

£3,000 to £20,000. There is a list of things that we are getting on with. I would say that is quite a lot of detail; it is quite a lot of stuff being done. The second thing I would say, on milestones, is in part, if you look at the Food Security Assessment and the Food Sustainability Indicators, on page 74 and onwards of the strategy, you will see ways of trying to measure whether we are making progress.² However, on the second bit of the milestones (and it is a fair point that you raise) if you believe—and I do, and I think the Committee does, judging by your report—that we need to do this in partnership with the industry, the sensible thing, having now set out what it is we are trying to do in the form of the strategy, is to sit down with those who are going to be responsible for delivering it alongside government and say: “Okay folks, what do we hope to achieve by when?” That is the next stage that we have to do, but it seemed sensible to do the strategy first and then come up with the milestones, rather than the government just doing it on its own.

Q6 Chairman: Everything you have said you could not really disagree with anywhere because all of it is compatible with what your department’s overall objectives are: if one talks about sustainable agriculture then you are fully committed and you have been for a long time; you have dealt with the question of reducing emissions from agriculture in many ways; you are quite right in identifying that you have not fully engaged on the question of skills; we have talked about scientific activity (and we are going to come on and look at that in detail)—all of that seemed to me to be very sensible extensions of, basically, what you have been doing up to now. Going back to our own report, one of the things that we did say in there was that we felt that Defra should have identified the potential for UK agriculture. I can remember, I think, you were talking about an exercise within government to identify the strengths and weaknesses of agricultural productive potential. Take, for example, the arable sector. In our report we identified that yields could potentially double. Now, if the marketplace were to send the demand signals out to farmers that over the period of time we are talking about to 2030 arable yield should double, the question then falls out: how do you get there? What are the questions that you have got to answer? The next question that falls out of that is: what is the role of government to help the industry achieve that? If you like, that is what I am coming from, the strategic vision, but in this document I could not find anything where you identified what, if you like, the “national” or “English” potential was for our industry and, therefore, to drop out of that the kind of strategic approach that says: “What do we have to put in place by way of building blocks to enable our industry to realise that potential if the marketplace demands that it should occur?”

Hilary Benn: We thought long and hard about that particular recommendation that you made. Let us take wheat as a for instance: what is the potential for growing wheat? Well, it depends on, partly, price. We

² *Food 2030*, January 2010, <http://www.defra.gsi.gov.uk/foodfarm/pdf/food2030strategy.pdf>

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saw that in 2008, and it was a high price for wheat that gave us a record wheat harvest in the country, which showed, in one sense, what our agricultural potential is. However, what assumption would you make about how much land would be devoted to wheat as opposed to oats or barley? What assumption would you make about how much fertilizer would be stuck on the land to try and maximise the yield? How much grazing land might you take for arable in order to up your wheat production? Would there actually be demand for this product, because, potentially, you could grow a lot of some product but if people are not going to buy it is that very sensible? It seems to me there is a practical difficulty about trying to operationalise the Committee's recommendation. However, what we are trying to do through the Foresight study is to look at a number of studies that have been done that do not quite answer the question in the way that the Committee put it, covering both the UK and other countries (because it is absolutely a sensible question to ask). I did not see, on reflection, quite how you could do it, unless you decided what all those assumptions were, and quite what it would tell you at the end of the process, for the reasons that I have tried to set out.

Q7 Chairman: I perhaps could disagree with you.

Hilary Benn: Of course.

Q8 Chairman: In the sense that, for example, when the Committee visited Rothamsted they were about to embark on a very important piece of work to understand, effectively, what constituted soil. They had also got their long-term plots, for example, as you have seen from visits I am sure you have made, which give us a very clear indication, according to the intensity with which you use land and therefore fertilise it, of what some of the implications are for things like run-offs, pollution, sustainability and all of those factors. Bearing in mind that for any set of assumptions you choose about what UK agriculture might do (and nobody has a crystal ball to say what the marketplace is), certain things fall out as requirements. Defra, as the body that can hold the ring, bringing people together and resources together and make certain that work is going on in the right places, could attune, in my judgment, a strategic approach dependent upon the type of potential that might be there. So that, in other words, going back to what the NFU told us (which was, I think, that you could, roughly speaking, double the yield), what would be the implications if yield were to be doubled? You have implications over things like water supply, and the question of land use in relation, also, to the environmental responsibilities that agriculture has. In other words, all I am saying is that falling out of potential scenarios come things you have to do without being specific as such. I think that that is where I found the approach missing.

Hilary Benn: I think my response would be that I think we are getting on with doing those things, notwithstanding that we have not taken up that particular recommendation in the way that the

Committee envisaged. You mention water. Absolutely right. One of the bits of research that we have been funding which is referred to, as I recall, in the strategy is the research that East Malling is doing on water use in strawberry growing. We co-funded that. I have been to see the people doing the work and what they have shown is that by adjusting when you give the water to when the plant absolutely needs it you can grow just as good a strawberry with just as good a yield with about one-seventh or one-eighth of the water. We are funding that already. So there is one example. Better skills are going to be really important.

Q9 Chairman: Whilst I think that is perfectly laudable, I thought that in this document there might be something that sort of said: "Water: the key resource to agriculture. We will set up a group to do X, Y and Z to optimise the use of water across all agricultural sectors, to look at the different scenarios which could occur if demand goes up by X, Y and Z, and to plug that into the work that we are going to be doing over a longer period of time". That was sort of missing, really

Hilary Benn: It is an interesting idea, actually, whether you would take a group and say: "Let's look at water across the piece". Obviously, the demands and the needs are different for different sectors.

Q10 Chairman: It is such a crucial element in every aspect of agriculture. If you were looking, for example, to say: "Perhaps one of the things my strategy might have addressed is what actually are we good at in the United Kingdom", there is no analysis in the document that says, for example: "On the western half of the United Kingdom we have some of the best areas of pasture for dairy production". So, within the context of a revised CAP, where we might say to our European partners: if Europe is going to have to do more of the heavy lifting in terms of food production, if other parts of the world become challenged by climate change, for argument's sake, what are the implications for the UK doing more than is necessary to meet its own national demand for dairy products? Europe has to take a greater burden of supplying, if you like, part of the world with dairy. That is not a ridiculous hypothesis but it is one that says how do we make the best use of what we have got? That is what I mean about the potential. There is not any analysis to say, in theory, UK dairy production, get rid of quotas, what could we actually do? We produce what is it, about 13 billion litres, at the moment?

Hilary Benn: We do, yes.

Q11 Chairman: So what would be the implications if the opportunity to go to 15 or 20 billion came up? What would that mean to us, with all the implications on animal disease, genetic development, pollution—all of those things? Those seem to me to be the sort of strategic things that we need to be thinking about. Again, I did not get the flavour from the document that that was part of the approach.

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Hilary Benn: That is partly because the Foresight study is, indeed, precisely looking at that. Bob may want to say something.

Professor Watson: In addition to the *Food 2030* strategy document, there are three pieces of work that are ongoing that are relevant to this particular issue. One is John Beddington's Foresight study, which is looking at the potential for agriculture and the whole food system in the UK. It is looking at a UK perspective but placing it in a global context. It is asking the question: how do we feed over nine billion people sustainably in 2050? There are about 100 papers being produced for that particular piece of work, which Charles Godfrey is chairing. We are looking very critically at what degree you can actually model these systems. Indeed, Defra has already funded a couple of workshops on how these models can be used to ask exactly the sort of questions you are asking. So there is a lot of work going on on the Foresight study looking at these types of issues. Secondly, of course, we are doing the UK climate change impact and adaptation strategy using UKCP09. There, again, we are asking—

Q12 Chairman: Just for the record, could you just explain CP09?

Professor Watson: Climate projections that came out at the end of 2009. They are probabilistic projections of climate in the UK over the next 100 years at a spatial scale of 25 kilometres by 25 kilometres. We are using these so-called probabilistic projections which are for three scenarios of greenhouse gas emissions, low, medium and high, and we are asking what are the potential implications for those changes in climate on all sectors—agriculture, water resources, which is absolutely critical, sea level rising, coastal erosion, etc. The last study that has relevance here is the National Ecosystem Assessment that Steve Albon from Scotland and myself are co-chairing. We are looking back over 50 years to ask, effectively, how have ecosystems in the UK (not just England—England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) changed over the last 50 years, why have they changed and how have they affected human wellbeing, including agricultural productivity and human health? Then we are trying to look forward 50 years to ask: what are the plausible changes in the way we use our land and the way we might want to produce agriculture as one of the scenarios in the future? So there are three ongoing pieces of work that are indeed relevant to the exact questions you are asking.

Q13 Chairman: Do you think, Professor Watson, you slightly jumped the gun then in producing a document here which does have sprinkled on the first two pages the word “strategy” when, in fact, all of this excellent work is going on which could have provided an element of rigour which, perhaps, the present document lacks?

Professor Watson: I do not think so, to be quite honest. I think the *Food 2030* strategy lays out what we know. It has a vision there. In parallel to *Food 2030* another very important piece of work which

you might want to talk about in more detail later is John Beddington's UK cross-government food research and innovation strategy. All of these pieces of work are informing each other. The National Ecosystem Assessment will not be completed for at least another year, potentially even another 15 months, so why hold up the vision within *Food 2030*? Equally, John Beddington's Foresight study will take about another year to do, and the UK Climate Impact Adaptation, about another year. All of these things will build, and all of these strategies are adaptive. So I believe, personally, it was appropriate to move in the way it has.

Hilary Benn: I could not have put it better myself!

Q14 Chairman: Good. Does that mean that you will reissue the strategy and have it updated in the light of the sort of continuing input from all of these different strands of work that are going on?

Hilary Benn: I think it would be sensible when we have the benefit of the work that Bob has referred to. I think it shows that we are on the case on the point that you raised in asking your question. We then need to reflect on what the implications of what that work has to say are for how the strategy is going to be taken forward. This is not one shot and that is it; we are looking ahead to 2030. It is part of a process. Work is already under way, we have pulled it all together, we have set out a strategy and a vision, there is further work that is going to be done and, yes, we will find a suitable opportunity to report on progress and update the strategy as appropriate without covering all of the same ground again. It seems to me a very sensible thing to do, and we will.

Q15 Chairman: Two of my colleagues have caught my eye for supplementaries, David Drew and Lynne Jones, but can I just conclude by asking one question about the process, about how this document was produced? Did it go for approval to the Cabinet Sub-Committee?

Ms Jones: Yes.

Hilary Benn: Yes, it did. I am just trying to remember the last meeting that we had.

Q16 Chairman: Is that a problem? I was wondering how many times it has met.

Hilary Benn: We were having this discussion on the way over. I think it is four times the Cabinet Sub-Committee has met.

Q17 Chairman: Did they involve themselves in defining the terms, if you like, in broad outline before the final document was produced?

Ms Jones: Yes. We worked very closely with departments right across Whitehall, but, particularly, obviously, with the Department of Health and the Food Standards Agency, on this. All departments were involved at official discussions. The consultation that we launched in August was cleared round DA(F)³ and then the final product was cleared around DA(F) just before Christmas.

³ Ministerial Committee on Domestic Affairs, Sub-Committee on Food (DA(F)).

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Hilary Benn: That is what is quite new about this; this is a strategy for food that runs right across the whole of government. The reason we set up DA(F) originally was very much part of the recommendations that the Committee made, and it tries to join all of the bits together, because we can all see that they are interconnected.

Q18 Mr Drew: The strength of any strategy is how it can respond to crises and all the destabilising influences. Clearly, we have got one at the moment. We have seen from the Department of Transport that they have invented this idea of the salt cell, which you can make various comments about but, in terms of co-ordination and delivery of vital services, you could say that is very important. I know we are looking forward to 2030—but given this strategy was partly driven by what happened to the price of food and the riots that came on top on the back of that, can you just let me know, in simple terms, how would Defra respond if we had, let us say, a continual frozen period of two to three weeks with some supermarkets with no food on their shelves and with people beginning to really suffer quite badly? How would we respond to that?

Hilary Benn: That has not arisen, and we have had very cold weather for quite some time now, precisely because of both the resilience of the supply chain, the effort of a lot of people—not least farmers—and the way in which both the salt cell and the Department of Transport have responded in relation to drivers' hours. There have been no reports of serious problems in terms of food distribution—that is the first thing. Secondly, the retailers have been liaising with the local authorities about gritting, because the practicalities are you need to grit the roads out of the distribution depots, and you need to think about the delivery routes for the lorries that are taking the food to supermarkets. There were difficulties reported in relation to animal feed and milk collection and oil and calor gas delivery in rural areas (for reasons that will be obvious). We went to the Department of Transport and said: "Can you relax the drivers' hours?"; they responded very swiftly, the industry appreciated that, which helped. There had been one or two problems with milk collection but I think every effort is being made; farmers are working jolly hard and, obviously, it is difficult with making sure the livestock have got enough water. Some problems with harvesting crops have been reported—either because they are under the ground or they are covered in snow. The EA, for example, has just relaxed the rules relating to putting slurry and milk on the land in recognition of the emergency. In this test it has worked reasonably well, would be my judgment, if you look at the food supplies, and that is the import of your question, Mr Drew. However, what it does show is a very good reminder of precisely why we did the assessment of our food security, not just in terms of is there enough food being produced but how do you get it to where it needs to be? Obviously, one of the lessons I am sure that will be learnt as a result of all of this is, despite the work of the group that reported in the summer about salt supplies, and the Highways Agency went

in with 30 days, it will be very interesting, finally, to see how many days individual local authorities went into this winter with (they had all been advised to have at least six for heavy snow). No doubt lessons will be learnt about what is appropriate provision to make in relation to salt and grit in years ahead given what we have experienced. So I think it has worked pretty well, myself, but we need to keep a very close eye on it, and that is what we are doing through COBRA and through the work of the salt cell.

Q19 Mr Drew: Would you be talking, not necessarily now but in the future, to the major food distributors about what contingency they have? Given that we seem to put datelines on everything nowadays, if you got to a situation where some stores were, let us say, without most of the vital foods for 48 hours, would there be a way, as we have done with salt, of taking quite dramatic action to supply certain places that are at risk?

Hilary Benn: The supermarkets do have their own contingency plans and the distribution network is indeed their own distribution network, and that is both the major supermarket retailers and the companies that distribute the food for the convenience stores. Having been tested over the past couple of weeks, as I say, it has worked pretty well. It would depend very much on what is the reason for the difficulty. Is it the weather? Is it problems of access? Would it be fuel and so on? All of these were identified in the food security assessment that we undertook, and of course we will talk to the retailers after this period of cold weather is over to say, okay, what are the lessons that we can all learn? What worked well? What can we do better in the future? As I say, it is a reminder that a lot of what we take for granted in our society is dependent, actually, in particular, on distribution systems. I think they have done a good job, actually, and we should applaud them for it. Farmers too.

Q20 Lynne Jones: Just going back to the earlier discussion, we have heard about the plethora of committees, task forces, Foresight reviews, and so on, that are related to the development of the food strategy. Would it be possible to have some kind of a roadmap as to what all these things are and how they are all feeding into the process of actually getting to a point where we have got a fit-for-purpose food strategy and food policy?⁴

Hilary Benn: With pleasure we will try and draw a map of how they connect together. I am not at all in favour of setting up bodies for the sake of setting up bodies, and frankly they are to do a job of work. If you take the Pig Task Force, talk to the industry—do not talk to me—and see what they have got to say about do they think that has done an effective job. They will say that it has, and I would certainly say that it has, a very recent example being the work they are doing on labelling to try and get a code, which, as I said at Oxford, I expect all the retailers to sign

⁴ Ev 23

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up to. The Fruit and Veg Task Force—absolutely practical. Two questions: how do we produce more; how do we get people to consume more?

Q21 Lynne Jones: I am not criticising their existence, it is just very confusing (it is confusing to me, so I am sure it must be confusing to other people) to see who is doing what and how it all fits together.

Hilary Benn: I will do my level best.

Q22 Chairman: I think it is to achieve that: how does it all fit together in terms of the fact, Secretary of State, that you indicated that this is the start of a continuing exercise? The fact that you selected 2030, I presume, parallels the FAO's two key benchmark dates in terms of increasing population and the associated food production that goes with it. So nobody would expect everything to be instantaneously sorted overnight. Who is then going to be responsible, just to pick up on Lynne's point, for continuing the work and drawing this all together so that the strategy that you believe you have commenced, if you like, starting is going to be updated?

Hilary Benn: Defra will, as leading on this, working across government and with all of the partners who have all got to play their part in helping to make all of this happen, is the short answer.

Q23 Chairman: Are you going to be able to hang on, in doing this, to the undying support of the food industry? The feeling I get is that their head has been turned by the Department for Business, because they see themselves as business as opposed to part of what was, if you like, the old Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. You are the sponsoring ministry for the food and drink industry. Are you going to be able to keep them on board as a key ingredient to your work in the future?

Hilary Benn: Yes. I see no reason why that should not be the case.

Q24 Chairman: You have told Lord Mandelson to get off the lawn, have you?

Hilary Benn: No.

Q25 Chairman: Is that because you will not or just have not got the—

Hilary Benn: I am not sure what the potential problem is, to tell you the honest truth.

Q26 Chairman: The reason I say that is that there are many things for which his department has responsibility, as it does for every business in the country, which are very much what I call business-focused issues, whereas you come at it from the point of view of the department that has the responsibility for food and drink. It is a question of how you advocate your role on behalf of the food and drink industry in the rest of government, whereas from the companies' point of view they might say: "Defra is jolly good but we lean a bit more towards BIS".

Hilary Benn: It depends what it is that is being discussed at any particular point in time, because there will be decisions that BIS takes, because it leads

on that, that affect food companies and lots of other companies besides. I have just given the example of how it is the Department of Transport which, rightly, takes decisions about drivers' hours that affect the ability to collect milk and deliver supplies, and so on. You will have seen the welcome there was from the British Retail Consortium for the production of the strategy, and I have no qualms or worries on that score whatsoever, Mr Chairman.

Q27 David Lepper: This is related to that, in a way. The NFU, in their comment on the strategy, talked about the importance of Defra owning the strategy, being able to own and, effectively, draw up the policy across government, and referred obliquely to what happened over *The Lancet* report on emissions from animals and livestock reductions, and so on. They gave us an example of the role that Defra could play and should play for more effective control as a clearing department on issues related to food strategy. Is that one of the ways you see Defra going forward—having the strength to do that?

Hilary Benn: I think the production of a strategy is a demonstration of that. The fact that we have a Cabinet Committee, which I chair, on food policy is another sign of that. *The Lancet* report was not the greatest example of joined up government that I have ever come across in my life, but I think the Government is very clearly committed to working together to make all of this happen, and it is very clear that Defra is leading it.

Q28 Miss McIntosh: Welcome, Secretary of State.

Hilary Benn: Good afternoon.

Q29 Miss McIntosh: I was very taken by the comment that some food waste is unavoidable—eggshells and banana skins could never be eaten. That was, perhaps, rather touching. Just one omission that is quite striking: there is no mention of waste from catering sector services, which I gather amounts to some three million tonnes food waste a year. It is neither in the main body nor in the annex measuring progress for reducing waste. I just wondered if that was deliberate.

Hilary Benn: No, it is not deliberate but wherever food waste is being produced we all have a responsibility to try and minimise it. We are approaching it from, really, three angles: one is raising awareness of the problem, so the work that WRAP has been doing, as you will be aware—the Love Food Hate Waste campaign and the statistics that we collected on the amount of food that is being thrown out—has certainly got people debating this in a way that was not the case two or three years ago. That is a step forward. The second thing is the positive incentive we are providing for people to turn food waste into energy; one other task force we established, indeed, was the anaerobic digestion task force to do a very specific job of work and say: what are the remaining obstacles to getting this technology up and running and being used?—and it has done a cracking job. The third thing is the consultation that I will be initiating in about a month-and-a-bit, or so, saying: what is the next

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stage on food waste and other kind of waste? Should we continue to put these things into landfill? I have to say, in my view, I do not think we should be putting them into landfill. Why would you put food waste into landfill, when it produces emissions that add to the climate change problem, when you can turn it into energy? One or two other countries have said they have fixed a date when stuff would not go into landfill any more, and that will then further drive the market for recycling or, in the case of food waste, alternative use, and the obvious one is either compost or the generation of renewable energy.

Q30 Miss McIntosh: It is interesting you are very pro-anaerobic digestion, which is welcome, but the government seems to be very slow to support other forms of energy from waste, and particularly trying to educate the public that it is just perhaps as good as AD (anaerobic digestion).

Hilary Benn: I am very keen on energy from waste in the form of anaerobic digestion because it seems to me it addresses two issues that Defra has a particular responsibility for: one is food waste (the one that you have raised, rightly) and the other, of course, is the potential for slurry waste to be used in this waste. If you think about NVZs, it is important that we take action to deal with pollution of watercourses. However, the Government having done, I think, all that is required to provide sufficient incentive for AD—it doubled the ROCs in April last year, which will benefit from feed-in tariffs, and the Environment Agency has said the digestate will not be treated as a waste, which are all things that the AD task force addressed—I think we are just at the point for this to take off. As far as other energy from waste plants is concerned, we are supporting a number through the PFI credits, but you are absolutely right that there is a residue of a feeling that this is unhealthy. If you go to other European countries, I remember talking to my Danish opposite number and saying: “Tell me how controversial energy from waste incineration is in your country”, and she said: “What controversy?”

Q31 Miss McIntosh: Do you know why? I have to declare an interest. I am half-Danish. My uncle gets cheap distance heating, as they call it, because what they do is instead of sending the waste to landfill they burn it. There are no particles, there are no emissions, so they tick all the EU Directive boxes, and they win the residents onside (but you can only do it with new housing not with existing development) by giving them cheap heat. So there is no controversy whatsoever.

Hilary Benn: District heating schemes.

Q32 Miss McIntosh: This Government does not seem to have gone down that path, even when there is scope for it. For example, SELCHP has got the capacity (this is a different debate to be had) but we do not seem to have been as enthusiastic in educating the public here in the way that Scandinavians have.

Hilary Benn: It is the reason why we still send, although we have seen a big increase in household recycling rates—from eight to 37 per cent in 12 years—quite a lot of waste to landfill. If you look at

other European countries, indeed, energy from waste takes up quite a bit of that. My view is that attitudes are changing; we are supporting local authorities in that work as they take those projects forward and try and get planning permission. I think the public’s understanding of the health impact lags behind the reality, and I think we all have a responsibility to say: “Look, this is another form of generating renewable energy in these circumstances”. I think the consultation on the landfill ban will provide a further impetus alongside, obviously, the rising landfill levy, which is a very, very sensible policy for trying to make all of us think about waste in a different way.

Q33 Miss McIntosh: The NFU say, quite rightly, that if the policy is going to work in your strategy then consumers have a key role to play. Are you doing anything specifically on labelling, particularly relaxing and having more accurate labelling out-of-date?

Hilary Benn: Yes, we are doing a number of things. One is working with the supermarkets on this question of “sell by”, “display until” and “best before” because I think it is pretty clear there is some confusion in the minds of consumers. That is, of course, different from “use by”, which it is very important that we all observe because that is about food safety. We have already seen one major supermarket moving from “buy one get one free” to “buy one now and get one free later”, which is absolutely the same benefit for the consumer but has a contribution to make in minimising waste, and I welcome that. That is the first thing. The second thing is to recognise the extent—if we are talking about country of origin labelling—to which we have it already for beef, for veal, for poultry and eggs from outside the EU, for fish, most fruit and veg, and also honey, olive oil and wine. Actually, if you look in UK supermarkets, you find quite a high level. The pig task force is producing this code. If all the supermarkets sign up, and I hope they will, then that will lead to a further improvement in relation to pork and ham, which is coming along, in my experience—

Q34 Chairman: Excuse me just for asking this. It is a lovely conversation you are having here and it is what I call terribly good, very well meaning and—

Hilary Benn: It is very practical, Mr Chairman; it is getting on with it and making it happen.

Q35 Chairman: It is, but in the context of the strategy document, if I turn to page 56 and we look at “Our goals for 2030”, it says: “Food waste is avoided as far as possible”. Nobody would disagree with that. So you look and it says: “Supply chains are efficient and minimise waste”. Supply chains are efficient and minimise waste. I am not certain whether that necessarily follows.⁵ If you had put the word “if” at the beginning of that: “If supply chains are efficient waste can be minimised”, fine. However, then you go on to say how and over what period of time? Is there a target? Is there a benchmark? Is there

⁵ *Food 2030*, January 2010, <http://www.defra.gsi.gov.uk/foodfarm/pdf/food2030strategy.pdf>

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a potential for saving waste? To pick up on Anne's point, 45 per cent of the food-spend in this country is out-with the home. So why, in a crucial sector there, is there no mention of waste from the food service and catering industry and there is no mention of the work that is going on in the food industry to minimise its waste production? There are some very good achievements—the FDF initiative there, which was supported by one of your ministers recently at their Christmas reception to launch this thing. There is good work but there is nothing here that sort of says: “Right, what is the role of Defra to assist this process along? Do we have a role? Yes or no? If so, what is it and what do we think the potential is for minimising waste in the sector? What you do not waste you do not have to produce. That land could be used to do something else.” That is the point that seems to be lacking in terms of giving that sort of, I suppose, harder feel to what are very lovely phrases like “Surplus food is valued shared with and redistributed to vulnerable people”.

Hilary Benn: I will give you a very practical example on that: FareShare do a cracking job. I have just written to all of the supermarkets to say: “If you are not supporting FareShare's work it would be really nice if you could”.

Q36 Chairman: Please will you come back to my point? Where is the hard edge about how you are going to take forward, in the context of this approach, waste reduction in the three sectors of the household sector, the food service sector and the food manufacturing sector? What is government's role in helping waste to be reduced? What does government believe is the potential to reduce that waste? Where is the hard cutting edge?

Hilary Benn: The hard edge is, one, that you have to raise awareness of the problem, and it is a fair point in terms of referring to what the catering industry is doing in the document (I am sure it could always benefit from yet more examples); secondly, the landfill levy is very hard-edged indeed because anybody who is producing waste, including food waste, is going to pay a bigger and bigger amount of money to dispose of it; thirdly, by providing incentives for alternative ways of using that waste (and we have discussed anaerobic digestion at some length) and, fourthly, there is the commercial incentive that caterers and others have got to try and minimise the cost of stuff that, in the end, does not get used. The onus is on them to do that. I cannot think of a mechanism, unless you can think of one, Mr Chairman, where government would say to caterers—

Q37 Chairman: No, and that is the whole point. The Government has chosen, in this document, to make a statement: “Food waste is avoided as far as possible”. You have got yourself into this area and there are certain things that are happening, which, quite rightly, you point to, to say that the trends in waste could well start to come down. What I am saying is, if we are talking about sustainable use of farming and of raw materials, to have some indicator from government as to what it thinks the

potential is to reduce waste and to identify, if it believes it has a role, what that role is, would have, I would have thought, been part of what I call the cutting hard edge of a strategy, but that is missing.

Hilary Benn: With respect I do not agree because the steps that I have just outlined and the things that we are doing is indeed government's role in relation to this.

Q38 Chairman: Where does it lead to? What is the downward track of food waste reduction? Is it one per cent a year, two per cent a year? What would you think?

Hilary Benn: That is a debate about whether it is sensible for government from the centre to set a target.

Q39 Chairman: No, I did not say that. I talked about potential. I am talking about benchmarking. It is like saying: “Where do I think we can go with this technology?” I agree you cannot mandate industry, but you have the overview, you have the science and you make the statements that you think that something like this could occur, right, but where is the hard-edged information to give us some idea of what it all means? I pick on this deliberately because that is one of the themes that runs right the way through this. There are lots of wonderful, well-meaning statements that nobody would disagree with, but when you actually say: “Where is the hard edge? What does this mean? Where are the facts that will guide us in our strategic thinking?” they are not there.

Hilary Benn: In relation to government's role, with the consultation on whether we should ban food waste from going into landfill, that is a very hard-edged proposal. The consultation, as I said, will come out in the near future. We would have to think about a date by which that would come in but that would give you a very clear answer to the question: is food waste going to continue to end up in landfill? I do not think it is sensible that it should. That is the first point. Secondly, I will go away—it is a fair point you have raised in relation to those issues—because the people who can answer the question “what is the potential” in relation to catering waste is, indeed, the catering industry and the supermarkets themselves. The reason I said earlier, Mr Chairman, that in relation to milestones, rather than us, in drawing up *Food 2030*, saying: “Right, we think the potential for catering waste reduction is X per cent over so many years”, having set out what it is that we are trying to do (which nobody disagrees with, I grant you), if we then talk to the industry and say: “Okay, what do you think the potential is?”, given the incentives we are offering to use food waste in another way, given the incentive that you have got because of the cost of sticking it into landfill, we will see if we can come back from them with some indication of what they think the potential is. I think that is the right order in which to do it, and I do not apologise for not having done it in the publication.

Chairman: Anne, if you would like to finish your question.

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Q40 Miss McIntosh: I have a couple more on the other matter. Just to conclude that point, you could also look at page 78, “Measuring progress”, because it is really very clear on measuring progress as regards food waste. On page 8 of the document you set out, Secretary of State, that the Government’s core role is to correct market failures where they arise, and you also talk about special measures which may be needed in some cases to ensure help is given to the more vulnerable. You then talk about government trying to find ways to reconcile big choices and tensions between achieving the vision for food (and, obviously, we have all got to eat, so that is a core strategic role), and other major challenges. Can you give us an idea of where these tensions are, what are the different choices that you might be asked to make and how you might think you would reconcile those tensions?

Hilary Benn: We have already identified one in the course of the discussion so far, the availability of water and how much agricultural production may be possible in those circumstances. So there is one thing. Clearly, making the most efficient use of water is going to be very important for the future of agricultural production in this country. I think a second choice is to what extent do you give information, guidance (including better labelling—whether it is about country of origin, whether it is about welfare standards or whether it is about nutrition labelling) and other measures that can be taken to try and ensure that there is a healthier diet. I am, I have to say, a great believer in information because, ultimately, when it comes to what we eat we are responsible; we are responsible as parents and we are responsible as individuals for what it is we choose to eat. The evidence is very clear about the link between a good diet and good health. I think government’s role in those circumstances is to make sure that we have the information, the guidance and the encouragement. I pick those as two examples of choices that we are going to have to make, but there will be tensions in all of this, you are absolutely right.

Q41 Miss McIntosh: Are there any circumstances where you might feel that legislation is necessary to implement any of the aspects of the strategy?

Hilary Benn: There might be. Let us take a very topical example: the Government’s announcements today that we have accepted the Competition Commission recommendation in relation to the GSCOP. I think the press release described an enforcement to that effect, an independent person who can make sure that it is implemented. That will require legislation and we will consult on the most effective means of doing that. There is a really good example of where you have been weighing up those two things. The Competition Commission looked long and hard at this and we considered what they had to say very carefully. We have a very competitive supermarket industry and that has been to the benefit of consumers but, as they themselves said, it is also to our benefit that we should have long-term sustainable supply. It is about striking a balance. So there is a very current example of where you might need to use legislation, in those circumstances.

Q42 Mr Drew: You have cheered me up.

Hilary Benn: Good. I like to do that.

Chairman: Right after that bout of therapy!

Q43 David Lepper: It has taken a long time to get to that point, Chairman—not cheering us up but the Ombudsman. Good stuff. Can I just return to the first part of the quotation which Anne McIntosh has just read out on page 8, I think it is, of the document? “Government’s core role in the UK food system is to correct market failures where they arise . . .” Could you give us, perhaps, an example or two of what lies behind that? How might that happen? What sort of circumstances?

Hilary Benn: Let us take an example of what is going at the moment and look, talking about Europe, at Pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy. That is all about trying to use public money for public goods that the market does not reward. That is really important because we know that if we do not farm in an environmentally sustainable way then we are going to have trouble in meeting the increased production that is required. There is one example. Another would be pollution. I have just touched on NVZs and water pollution. If you describe that as a market failure, the Government needs to intervene, and it will be another answer to Miss McIntosh’s question about where you need legislation in order to protect one of the raw materials of our society, which is water. Emissions, integrated pollution control, I would say, is another; waste (we have discussed) is another; labelling is another.

Q44 Chairman: I am just intrigued. Those seem to be about not taking into account certain externalities, but market failure is where markets do not respond to market signals. In the context of the production sector of food, it has, by definition, to respond to the externalities of legislation, otherwise it runs into problems. On page 8, the actual quote is: “. . . where they arise (for example distortions to the food economy caused by poor information . . .” Give us an example of one of those.

Hilary Benn: I think the reason we are keen on labelling is precisely because in some cases there is poor information. So, to take the classic example, if you buy Wiltshire cured ham, a consumer probably would reasonably assume that the ham came from Wiltshire, and it did not. The code of practice which the Pig Meat Task Force is working on would deal with that, as we hope would legislation in Europe, which is why we are arguing in Europe to strengthen the provisions relating to labelling. Whether you call that an externality, a market failure or a lack of information for consumers, it is something that needs sorting, and that is why we are determined to try and do that.

Q45 David Lepper: I do see the point you have just made, Chairman. Giving an example in the document itself of a failure of price externalities, it conjured up for me an image of a situation where the usual to-ing and fro-ing of the marketplace somehow is not having the effect one might expect it to have, and that might lead, perhaps, either to

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extremely high prices or it might lead to shortages of some particular commodities where government might need to intervene. Is that what was suggested in the document by “market failures” and giving failure of price externalities as one example? Or have I read that wrongly?

Hilary Benn: In the example of the Ombudsman and the relationship between those who supply supermarkets and the supermarkets themselves, the Competition Commission came to the view that the market was not working quite right there and has proposed a remedy, which the Government itself has accepted—I think for the powerful reasons that the Competition Commission itself set out—and that shows that the Government is prepared to intervene in those circumstances where we think that something needs fixing or needs sorting. It depends on a case-by-case basis and it would depend on what the origin of the problem is and, therefore, what choices government would have about how it should respond. With respect, I would not read too much into it, it is just making the point that one of government’s roles is indeed to look at what needs to be done if the market is not working effectively. The market works effectively in quite a lot of other ways, which is the reason why we have very diverse choice of food and the average family spending 11 per cent of its weekly income on food now compared to 20 per cent 20 or 30 years ago.

Professor Watson: The market clearly does not work in the normal sense on environmental pollution, which is clearly where you need government intervention, not just in the agricultural sector but the energy sector, etc.

Hilary Benn: There is a cost on society that is not picked up by the market as it relates to the production of food or an industrial process which results in things being made.

Professor Watson: Exactly.

Q46 Chairman: We are going to pass on now to a little section which deals with the work of the Cabinet Sub-Committee and the Council of Food Advisers. I briefly touched on the Cabinet Sub-Committee, Secretary of State. You say it has met four times. Can you give us a flavour of what you have been up to in it? What kind of areas have you been discussing with your colleagues?

Hilary Benn: We have looked at a number of the things that we have just been discussing in the last hour.

Q47 Chairman: Do your fellow Secretaries of State turn up to it?

Hilary Benn: I would have to go away and look at the attendance list. We have had John Beddington there to report on the work that he is doing—the Foresight study; we have had Suzi Leather, who chairs the Council of Food Policy Advisers, reporting on the work that they are doing, and we have looked, as Bronwen explained, at the outline for the *Food 2030* strategy, and it is DA(F) that has cleared it. I am very happy to go away and check the minutes of the meeting and drop you a note on the

full range of things that have been discussed, if that does not breach anybody’s rules, if that would be helpful to the Committee.

The Committee suspended from 4.00pm to 4.13 pm for a division in the House

Q48 Lynne Jones: Why is there virtually nothing in *Food 2030* about the Food Strategy Taskforce and the Cabinet Sub-committee on Food?

Ms Jones: I suppose we thought it would be rather boring, because these are internal Civil Service issues of committee structure which we did not think would be of any interest to the wide world, but the task force was set up on the back of *Food Matters*, the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit report of 2008. It was a Cabinet Office group whose job was to oversee delivery of *Food Matters*. When we reviewed that after about a year, we thought that it was more appropriate—now that Defra has a formal lead in Whitehall on food—for Defra to chair a committee to oversee the task force and *Food 2030* and co-ordinate food policy, so we now have a Defra-chaired group which replaces the task force.

Q49 Lynne Jones: Oh dear, that is even more complicated.

Ms Jones: I told you it was boring!

Q50 Lynne Jones: What has it been doing? It has been overseeing the production of this document, has it?

Ms Jones: The production of this document, but also the very important job, which *Food Matters* highlighted and which the Committee has asked for, of being more joined up across Whitehall on food policy: so doing a bit of horizon scanning, what is coming up, and making sure that we are more joined up than we have been in the past.

Q51 Lynne Jones: It has now been replaced by Defra.

Ms Jones: A Defra-led committee, and it is chaired by my director, Brian Harding.

Q52 Lynne Jones: And then is answerable to the Cabinet Committee subsequently?

Ms Jones: Through Hilary.

Q53 Lynne Jones: The other body is the Council of Food Policy Advisers, which was set up. What have they been doing? I gather they have been meeting regularly. They are due to end. They were appointed for two years. What happens when their two years is up?

Hilary Benn: I will review that when we get close to the end of the two years. I set up the Council because I thought it would be helpful to have some additional thinking muscle from a wide range of backgrounds, experience and interest—because this is a sufficiently important area of work, as the Committee is only too well aware—a kind of sounding board and an additional pair of hands, if I have not mixed all of my metaphors. As you know, the three priorities are identified in their first report

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which was published in September: defining a low impact, sustainable healthy diet, which is quite complex and difficult and not straightforward, the Government tried to exemplify best practice in health and sustainability through public procurement and a plan for trying to improve production and consumption of fruit and veg. So the Fruit and Veg Task Force came out of the work of the Council of Policy Advisers. When they put that to me I said, "That seems like a really good idea, because that is a practical bit of work. We can bring together all of the people who have an interest in the fruit and veg industry and consumption", and it has got to work. There has been a very enthusiastic response. As I already indicated, Suzy Leather, who chairs it, has come and reported on the work of the Council, I meet them from time to time, and I think it is really valuable having this sounding board because some of the tensions which Ms McIntosh asked about a moment ago are played out in the discussions in the Council itself, and I think that is a good thing.

Q54 Lynne Jones: Again, there is little mention of the Council in the report. Presumably their report fed into this strategy. Have they still got a role to play now the strategy has been produced, or what has happened?

Hilary Benn: They certainly do. The Council produced its own report, which is there, and one does not need to duplicate that, but they are an important part of the process of taking this work forward and giving me and the Government advice on what the right things to do are. Another example of their influence would be the Healthier Food Mark. We have done the first pilot. They had some views about how it should be taken forward. Basically, they said you should think a bit more carefully about how you do this, and I met Suzy and I talked it through and I thought, "Yes, you have got a good point", so that is what has happened as a result. There are two very practical things that have been the result of the work of the Council's deliberations.

Q55 Patrick Hall: The Fruit and Vegetable Task Force has been around for ten weeks or so, part of which has been frozen up with Christmas and New Year and all that sort of thing, but has it met? How does it intend to go about its task of increasing fruit and veg production and consumption?

Hilary Benn: It has indeed met. As to the origin of this, I called together in a round table last summer a range of people who have an interest in this and said, "Do you think it would be useful basically to set up a taskforce, as a result of the discussion we have had today, to look at precisely these two questions?", and there was a pretty enthusiastic response. I was there for the first meeting before Christmas. They have now broken down into subgroups. It is intended absolutely to be practical, asking the questions, "What are the obstacles to more production of fruit and veg? What are the obstacles to more consumption? Who needs to do what?", and they

will come back to me with the product of their work in due course. I think those who are participating are really up for it, to use the technical term.

Q56 Patrick Hall: You are waiting.

Hilary Benn: Yes, they had to work, because they decided how they were going to divide up what it is that they want to do, and what I have asked them to focus on is practical steps that we can take, because in the end I am not quite so much into wrestling with concepts, I am much more into getting on and doing things, and there is undoubtedly potential here. It is partly to do with what people choose to buy, which links back to labelling. If people want to support British fruit and veg, buy it.

Q57 Patrick Hall: Are you hoping that what is going to come out of that process, dealing with fruit and veg, will be practical answers to what the Chairman posed in the lengthy debate at the beginning about how you translate the aspiration into strategy and then the practical effects, whoever has to deal with that, and not necessarily all Defra? Is that the sort of thing you are hoping to obtain from the task force?

Hilary Benn: Yes, indeed. I am hoping to get practical recommendations, ideas, things that people within the industry can do for themselves anyway. It is not just saying, "Okay, Government, here is a load of stuff for you. Go away and do it." Everybody has their part to play, and we have seen that very clearly with the successful work of the Pig Task Force. What is striking when you look at fruit and veg production, you look at successes. Strawberries is a really good example: the growing season has been extended in Britain; it is an industry worth £200 billion a year and growing (no pun intended). That is one example. British apples have made a bit of a come-back in the last four years. It went right down and then it has risen a bit if you look at the proportion of the market.

Q58 Chairman: You said "British apples". As the President of the National Fruit Show, are you not focused on English apples?

Hilary Benn: Both, Chairman.

Q59 Chairman: Good.

Hilary Benn: Why has there been the decline, and how has this recovery come about and how can we sustain it? We have fantastic conditions—you know better than anyone else, Chairman—for growing apples, and there really is no reason why we should not be producing more and eating more, but consumers have to do their bit and the industry needs to say, "This is what we require if we are going to be successful in achieving that objective", and, in the process, if we all eat more fruit and veg, that is great for our health.

Q60 Patrick Hall: I guess that apples and pears are devolved matters, so we can only talk about English ones in England! Could I turn to something that crops up in the document quite often, which is the challenge of climate change. In the context of the aspiration that we should produce as much food as

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possible, what sort of assessment is going to be carried out through mechanisms that are embraced by this document, as it were, of the impact arising from various climate change models or scenarios, not only on the existing range of agricultural production in this country, but on potential new crops that we do not yet commercially produce?

Hilary Benn: It sounds as if Bob wants to say something. Just by way of a prelude, firstly, we have the climate impact projections, which were published last summer, which are now available to everybody, and if you are thinking about the future, whether it is food production or anything else, that is important information that you ought to take into account in trying to plan. Secondly, of course farmers are increasingly conscious—you mentioned water earlier—of the availability of water. Although we have had three years where there has been quite a lot of it, we had two years in the South East that preceded it where we did not have a lot of it, and that does tell you about the future and being able to cope with both of those circumstances. Thirdly, more broadly on climate, this is exactly what the industry greenhouse gas action plan is seeking to address: because we have got an objective that we want to try to achieve, we want to work with the industry to try and achieve it and there is a range of things being looked at there: the way in which you use water, the way in which you till the soil, feeding regimes for livestock, a lively debate about the relative impact in carbon terms of feedlot production as opposed to grazed production of beef, where it is not straightforward trying to understand the impact of that and there is also a big potential for farmers and land managers to plant trees to help soak up carbon. Sir David Reid's report that was published, again, I think, in November really did illustrate the potential for tree planting on land—and, clearly, we would be talking about marginal land, not productive land—to help us achieve our 2050 greenhouse gas objectives under the Climate Change Act.

Professor Watson: That was a superb exposition. As Hilary just said, under the Climate Change Impact and Adaptation Strategy you have nailed it correctly. We need to understand, under three emissions scenarios what the implications are for current agriculture and potential new crops, because if we are unlucky and we do tend to have the higher levels of greenhouse gas emissions because we do not get a global agreement, as the UK and Europe would like, to significantly reduce emissions either on the medium or high emissions scenario, that we are seeing some of the more extreme climate projections that came out of this UKCP09, then, clearly, we can see very significant temperature increases throughout the UK, significant changes in precipitation: more rainfall in winter, less precipitation in summer, we would have to look not only at the implications for current crops, but also future crops. That is exactly the sort of analysis I am hoping does come out of the Impact Adaptation Strategy: where are the so-called winners and where are the losers? It should be a very integrated assessment. The challenge we have is to what degree is our scientific knowledge adequate, because it is

not only changes in temperature and precipitation summer and winter, it is pests and diseases, it is the positive effect of carbon dioxide, but also we still have low level ozone over parts of the UK. It is really how will the agricultural sector respond, having to do it crop by crop, to these multiple environmental changes. As we already discussed at some length today, water is absolutely critical, potentially more critical than temperature. There are some pluses to start with of a longer thermal growing season—in other words, you can plant a little earlier in spring, harvest a little bit later in autumn—so I think your question is absolutely the most important one: what will we have to potentially adapt to? The key part, though, is up to 2030, 2035, even maybe close to 2040, the projected changes in climate are independent of any emissions scenario, independent of anything that will happen in Copenhagen, and it will now be, of course, post-Copenhagen, Mexico City. What we need to do is a good study of what are the potential climate changes up to 2030, 2035 which are independent of the climate scenario. What are the impacts? How do we adapt? Then, beyond 2035 or so, it is emissions scenario sensitive, so these are the sort of calculation assessments that need to be done.

Q61 Patrick Hall: Defra is doing that?

Professor Watson: Yes, Defra is taking the lead.

Q62 Patrick Hall: How is what Defra is doing—and you have just described it—being communicated to the industry? As one example—I am just about to question the Fruit and Veg Task Force—is part of its likely work to look at impacts, threats and potential opportunities through various certain climate change scenarios?

Hilary Benn: Clearly, if you are looking at the future of fruit and veg production, that is absolutely one of the things that the task force is going to have to take into account. As I indicated, for a number of things farmers are already pretty darned conscious of this. I think of the apple farmer I met on Open Farm Sunday who pointed proudly to the new water tank that he provided in the corner of his field, because he is thinking ahead about availability of water. As I recall, he got the water from bore holes in the river down the bottom of the bank. Secondly, as a trial, he was growing—I wish I could remember what it was—a new fruit, to see whether the changing climate, which they have already experienced in that part of Hampshire, could become a commercial proposition. Those who were innovative within the industry are really thinking about this but, you are absolutely right, Mr Hall, this understanding and knowledge needs to spread right across. One thing is to do the research, the second thing is to make sure that the products of that—what you should be worrying about, what the potential is, what you can do, how you can use less water—is actually taken up and applied. That is about good information, good publicity and, ultimately, farmer talking to farmer, which is why the Campaign for the Farmed

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Environment is so important, because it is being led by farmers talking to other farmers, and that is really valuable.

Professor Watson: Of course, this assessment which is required under the Climate Change Bill, the first Impact Adaptation Assessment, will come out in early 2011. It will not be a one-off, but every five years or so we will continually update the knowledge base and, absolutely, as you say, there must be continued dialogue and communication between the academic community and the farming community all along the food chain and, obviously, Government.

Q63 Chairman: Secretary of State, in the document on page 39, in the context of what Mr Hall has just been quizzing you about, you talk about improving supply chain relationships, competitiveness and responsiveness to the markets with £600 million RDPE funding, and you say that will work through the Fruit and Vegetable Task Force, the Pigmear Supply Chain Task Force and the Dairy Supply Chain Forum. Is that new money, or is it a reallocation of the existing RDPE budget?

Hilary Benn: No, it is what we have already announced of that element of RDPE funding to help, and it is both. There is funding which is going out through the mechanisms that already exist, and then, separately, there is the work of the task forces.

Q64 Chairman: That has been announced. Is that still over the period 2007 to 2013?

Hilary Benn: That is the period, yes, set out for the current phase of the RDPE, and it supports, as you know, a range of activities. There are grants that are available. Indeed, I met another apple farmer about a year and a half ago who got a Defra grant under the programme. He was having trouble selling apples. Supermarkets looked at them and said, "They look a bit funny", but he was making tons of apple juice and selling all that he could provide. So that is a very practical example of how it was helping that farmer to take advantage of a market opportunity from growing good apples that make great juice.

Q65 Chairman: Let us move on to the subject of sustainability, because that is a key theme that runs through this emerging approach. In fact, I think Professor Watson touched on it in some of the observations that he was just making. Whenever politicians talk about diet, it usually triggers considerable problems and everybody tiptoes around the subject. If we are looking, though, at educating the public and producing what one might describe as a sustainable diet, it needs some assistance to get through what is quite a complicated message. Various food manufacturers have started with some of their labelling in approaches to tiptoe round the problem, but how is that work going to be taken forward? If we constrain ourselves to, say, the next five years, what is the work programme to get the message across about sustainable dietary habits?

Hilary Benn: There is sustainable in terms of health, and, obviously, as I indicated earlier, that is very much a case of information for consumers, raising public awareness, the 5-a-Day campaign, the Change4Life, which I think has been a very powerful encouragement to all of us to think about what we eat, the Salt and Saturated Fats campaign that the FSA has been running, the Healthy Start vouchers, Putting Cooking back on the School Curriculum. Those are all practical steps that will be taken forward.

Q66 Chairman: If we were benchmarking where we are starting from for people who have got some of these messages and are following what one might call a sustainable diet, in terms of any polling or follow-up work that you have done, how many people have got the message and follow a sustainable diet? Where are we starting from?

Hilary Benn: I think it would be a very difficult question to answer, because you have to decide what is a sustainable diet. You could ask: have you changed your eating habits as a result of—

Q67 Chairman: Hang on. You have just said to me that was a question you have got to ask: what is a sustainable diet? This is what you are supposed to be doing. If you do not know what it is, how do you know what you are going to be doing?

Hilary Benn: I was just going to come on and say that one of the reasons the Council was set up was, indeed, to try and address this, and they themselves have recognised that it is quite a complex business to define that. If you are taking sustainability in its broader sense—I focus, first of all, in answering your question, Chairman, on food, water, carbon, inputs and other things—the first thing that is going to have to be done, and people are working on it and we have made a contribution as government through, for example, PAS 2050, because industry came to us and said—

Q68 Chairman: Just for the record, most people who read this will not know what PAS 2050 is.

Hilary Benn: I apologise. Publicly Available Specification 2050. Quite why it has that title I do not know, but industry came to us and said, "Look, looking at the carbon aspects of sustainability, we are in a world where we are all having to learn to count in new ways", as I know the Committee recognises, "and it is not always straightforward, and it is quite helpful if you have common ways of counting." We said, "That is a very good point", and we went away with the Carbon Trust and the British Standards Institute and ourselves and produced a specification to help businesses that are trying to count the carbon impact, and we launched it about a year and three-quarters ago. Very big companies are taking it up and using it. One example I remember is Walkers Crisps had applied it and had looked at the amount of water they were using in making the crisps that they sell, and it had an impact upon them. We are trying to put the building blocks in place. There are retailers and suppliers thinking about water content that goes into food. I will give you

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another example: potatoes. One of the reasons that a lot of water is used for potatoes is to get rid of the scab that is on them, because it was held that consumers want to buy potatoes that look nice and smooth and do not have scab on them. I am advised that actually scab makes no difference at all to the taste or quality of the potatoes. If education changed public attitude, you could produce potatoes with less water because you would not have to be worrying about the scab. There is another practical example.

Q69 Chairman: Before we get too much down the road of initiatives, all of them jolly good, let us bring ourselves back to the question that I asked which you responded to by saying, “We have got to define what the sustainable diet is and, therefore, we need to benchmark where we are, like now, to know if we are making any progress towards achieving it.” Apart from these various initiatives, is this all going to be pulled together into something which somebody will produce—a report, a document, a statement—that says, “This is what one of these things looks like?”

Hilary Benn: The truth is I think we have to think about that. I think what you are going to end up saying to people is, “Look, in the end, you choose what it is that you eat.” We are responsible for what we eat, but there is a range of factors that consumers in the future, and some currently, will want to take into account in deciding what they eat in relation to the impact on their health, carbon, water consumption and biodiversity. Our job, it seems collectively, not just Government—because in the end we do not produce food, it is producers and retailers who do so, and the FSA is coming to the end of its process of reaching a decision about what decision ought to be reached on nutritional labelling—is to make sure that consumers have a range of information that will enable them to take a decision in deciding what it is that they want to buy and to eat. I do not envisage the Government saying, “You should eat this much of that on a Monday and this much of that on a Tuesday”, if that is what one is defining as a sustainable diet.

Q70 Chairman: Sustainability, together with the observations that Ms McIntosh was making earlier about food waste, says you have to make people much more aware of the consequences of their consumption decisions and what kind of things they subsequently wish to consume. The reason I query that is that in the document you say, “UK farming should produce as much food as possible”, and you made that very clear in your remarks to the Oxford Farming Conference. That is slightly at odds with sustainability issues. On the one hand you are putting your foot flat down on the accelerator and on the other you are gently keeping the brakes on.

Hilary Benn: Not so, Chairman.

Q71 Chairman: You do not see any incompatibility.

Hilary Benn: Because when I first said that at the Oxford Farming Conference last year, I said that was subject only to two things. One is that that production is sustainable and, secondly, that it is

things that people want to buy, and those are two very important riders to wanting to have a stronger and successful agricultural industry.

Q72 Chairman: Coming back to my question, you have indicated that at the moment we really do not have much of an idea about how many of the public understand what is a sustainable diet, and we have even less idea how many might have already adopted something that would look like one of these things. Is that something that is going to be part of a continuing piece of monitoring so that you can measure if we are making any progress on this? Are you going to tell us how you are going to do it, Ms Jones?

Ms Jones: Not exactly, because it is going to be very complicated. As you have noted, we do not have a definition of sustainable diet, and that is going to be a very complicated piece of work. The Council of Food Policy Advisers are interested in helping us with this, but what we have undertaken to do in our sustainability indicators is to try and develop a way of tracking whether consumers are informed and engaged on this; and you will see on page 74 of *Food 2030* that it says “under development”. That is not one with one of the little arrows where we have assessed whether it is getting better or worse; that is an indicator that is going to be under development to try and understand consumer attitudes and whether they are shifting over time.

Q73 Chairman: The reason I mention this is that I had a fascinating conversation with a representative of Unilever, and I cannot remember exactly the figure, but they are very conscious of sustainability issues, both domestically and internationally, and I think that they have come up with a figure which they wish to see in terms of an increase in the production of their brands but, effectively, without using any more resources. In other words, they have got a very clear commitment within their business for sustainability because (a) it makes good environmental sense and (b) it makes very good business sense. Are you going to be working with people like Unilever and other farsighted organisations who really have got the message about sustainability, and will that become an integral part of the work you are going to do?

Ms Jones: We currently talk to a number of trade associations and businesses who are very switched on to this and are doing some very good things, but what we are interested in tracking, I think, is progress across the population as a whole. Yes, we will look out what particular companies do and, if they are prepared to share their data with us, which they are not always, to be fair, we would be very interested in it, but I think we are interested in what is happening as a whole. If that can help us, then we would be very interested.

Hilary Benn: What that conversation you have just referred to indicates, Chairman, of course, is that companies, farmers and others are thinking about these things, and why would you not, because if you want to continue to be financially sustainable in the years ahead you are going to have to take these things on board, and it shows that it is not just down

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to what, obviously, government does, it is what each part of the chain and the production system does to play its part in trying to deal with this problem, and, as we have touched on already, water is a really practical example. The question a company ought to be asking itself is, “If we are importing stuff from other countries, what is the availability of water there?”

Q74 Mr Drew: I want to pick up on a point that Hilary made—I paraphrase what he said—that we do not control production of food, but we could to a greater extent. Let me give you an analogy. I am a Co-operative MP, as you know. The Co-operative model is an interesting one because it is a vertical model. The Co-operative farms its own estates, it sells in its own shops, it has pioneered “fair trade”. People said ten years ago they were bonkers and it would be the end of the Co-op, but they persevered and they changed people’s dietary habits on the basis of that and certainly their perceptions towards what we deem to be fair trade in the wider world. As you know, I am a great fan of the County Farms Estate, which is continually under attack because local authorities are always wanting to find a source of instant revenue and selling them on is a great threat therefore. Why do we not actually do more—it does not change the market—and you are looking quizzical, but this is my dream—to influence the food chain, through the means we already have, working with local government? I always wanted to mutualise all the individual estates into a national estate, because otherwise we are going to be faced by this problem of continual reduction in the size of that estate. Is not that a model that could run alongside the normal market model and do some quite interesting things to influence the food chain supply side rather than just look at how we can influence people’s habits through the demand side?

Hilary Benn: I was looking slightly quizzical because—

Q75 Mr Drew: You know I am a dreamer, but that is what I would like to see.

Hilary Benn: I would never ever say that. I am just not persuaded that that is government’s role. The role which those farms play in some cases is to give people a start. Don Curry expressed some concern about the disposal of them. As you know, for those who want to start in the industry, one of the practical things we are doing is supporting the Fresh Start academies that have proved very successful for those already in the farming business who want to diversify and those who are thinking of coming, but I think the fair trade example you have given is a very powerful one: because for me that is all about sustainability, and what started out as a very niche product—I think it was three products to start with and you would have to search the Co-op to find it, and the Co-op has given fantastic leadership—now its mainstream, I think, is 4,500 fair trade products, and it is a market that has grown enormously because people are concerned about that aspect of sustainability, in particular farmers in developing countries getting a decent price for what they

produce. It is a really powerful example of how consumers can change things, but I do not think the Government should, in that sense, be in the food production business.

Q76 Mr Drew: No, it does not have to be in the food production business, but it can provide leadership to those both within other sectors to the purely commercial one. There is a lot of interest, as you are aware, in the idea of self-help, community agriculture. This in a sense is seen to be piffing. It is seen to be so marginal as to be not even worth considering, but this is sustainability, Secretary of State. Professor Watson looks quite interested in this. If we are really going to walk the walk as well as talk the talk, this is sustainability.

Hilary Benn: I agree with that completely. If you are talking about community gardening and growing projects, there has been this explosion. Practical things that we are doing to assist—because, once again, that is the job that I see I have got—one that is mentioned in the Strategy is the development of these “meanwhile leases”, because for allotments there is a big waiting list. They are bits of land that somebody does not want now; that they will want in the future for something else. The aim of a “meanwhile lease” is to give them confidence, and if they give it to a community growing project for two or three years, they can get it back, questions of liability are dealt with.

Q77 Mr Drew: I have given part of my garden up to such a scheme? The poor things do not know what they are taking on yet!

Hilary Benn: People who have got land that they cannot manage, or do not want to manage, to share that with people who have not got land but would like to grow things. We have got C&LG and Defra working together to support the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens to look at the feasibility of a community land bank, which is doing that on a slightly bigger scale. I think the other organisation is Land Share that is trying to link people who want to grow with people who have got land, and the benefits of that are enormous. People get the chance to grow fruit and veg, it is good exercise and, frankly, if people pull up tarmac and paving to grow stuff, it helps to deal with flooding. What a wonderful example of the benefits.

Q78 Chairman: Given your enthusiasm, Secretary of State (and I speak now as the President of the Shepherd Road Allotment Society), you are very welcome to come and have a dig with me any time you like.

Hilary Benn: Who could resist such an offer!

Q79 Chairman: And Professor Watson too. You are always welcome. All hands to the pump on that.

Hilary Benn: Have you got any vacancies?

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Q80 Chairman: No, there is a waiting list.

Hilary Benn: How big is your waiting list?

Q81 Chairman: Fifty?

Hilary Benn: There you are; that makes the point.

Q82 Chairman: Yes; there we are. I would like to move on, as we come towards the conclusion of our inquiry, and talk a bit about your approach and the European Union and CAP. Can I touch on one piece of information which intrigues me, which appears on page 13 of the document, where you talk about, “CAP results in higher prices for farmers. In the UK this meant that consumers paid an extra 3.2 billion, or £52 each, for food in 2007.” Where can you buy the basket of food that informed that comment for £52 less than you paid here?

Hilary Benn: A straight answer, Chairman. I need to go back to the people who produced the figures and send you a note.

Q83 Chairman: Is it not the case that somebody has taken the number of average families and divided into 3.2 billion and the answer comes out at 52? This figure is always being put around and I am intrigued to know where it comes from, because if you take, for example, fruit, vegetables, which we have just discussed, poultry and pigs, none of those are part of what one would describe as the subsidised sector of the Common Agricultural Policy, and in recent times, when grain prices have gone above intervention levels, there is, effectively, no degree of subsidy being put in there. It is true that somewhere around three billion pounds is paid for the inputs the CAP that farmers take out, particularly now with environmental payments, but there is a disconnect between what it costs to buy the food (i.e. what the market place delivers) and dividing out over each person in the United Kingdom buying the CAP what it costs us. Ms Jones, have you got an answer?

Ms Jones: I am not an expert on these figures, but I think they are derived from both the cost you would pay as a consumer in the shops and the cost you would pay as a UK taxpayer through our contribution to the EU budget, a big chunk of which—

Q84 Chairman: The point I am getting at is that we are in a highly competitive food market and, as somebody who occasionally shops outwith of the United Kingdom, I have got some idea of where I think things are expensive and where I think things are cheap and because, particularly at the moment, of the situation with the euro, for example, UK production is very competitive. We were talking earlier about the demand for the UK agricultural product for mainland Europe because it represents good value for money. So there is a European market for food which is highly competitive and this kind of thing, giving the impression that if you just did away with the CAP tomorrow prices of food would magically drop by £52 per, I presume, family, I just do not think stacks up.

Hilary Benn: I think the only way to get to the bottom of this is to ask those who produced the figures to do a note, which I will send to the Committee. As you of course point out, it relates to 2007 and factors in 2008 were rather different.

Q85 Chairman: Let us move on. One of the things I do think is very important—and, Secretary of State, you are involved in the early discussions as we move towards a revised CAP in 2013—is the role of your strategic approach in influencing other European Member States: because, as you will know from long experience on the Council, other Member States have a rather different view of what the CAP’s purpose is from, shall we say, the rather more hardnosed and practical point of view which the United Kingdom has, and this Committee has solidly supported the Government’s stance in terms of the various negotiations that have taken place, but if we take the securing of food and the appropriate sustainable production of food as very serious issues, my first point is, is that recognised by the Commission and, secondly, by other leading Member States, and if Europe, recognising climate change and possibly the need for Europe to produce more food than is necessary for its own consumption simply because production becomes more difficult elsewhere, how much is the 2013 renegotiation going to take into account some of these long-term and genuinely strategic issues if Europe is to maximise its own agricultural potential in a sustainable way?

Hilary Benn: It is a really big and important question. A number of factors are going to be at play here. One will be that debate about further reform of the CAP will, of course, be influenced by the debate about the overall size of the EU budget given the financial circumstances that all countries face at the moment. That is the first thing. As you will know, Chairman, we have made progress in the process of reform, but, let us be honest, there are some Member States that are saying at the moment, in effect, “I told you the CAP was a good idea because this is a way of upping production.” What that does not take account of is, first, the environmental cost of what went on and, after all, the money that we are now spending to repair the damage of the CAP in the seventies and eighties—damage to hedgerows, biodiversity and lots of other things, water pollution and so on—is great. The third issue is, of course, the impact which the CAP has on a really important group of farmers in the developing world, and if we do not help them to get their production up we are all in really big trouble, which is why getting rid of those remaining export subsidies is important and not going back to a system where you have all this surplus stuff and when we had decided what we wanted we would then dump it elsewhere and completely undermine the markets of people who are trying to get a foot on the ladder. Farmers, above all, need markets and, as the 2008 wheat harvest in Britain showed, if you have got a good incentive and a good market, you can produce quite a lot. So I think it is going to be a very, very important negotiation. The honest answer is, yes, to some extent these questions of sustainability and climate

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change will be taken into account, because it will be advanced by some, as it already is, as an argument they would not say for going back to where we were, but saying that Europe putting money into encouraging food production is a good thing. Our position remains we want to move away from Pillar 1 to Pillar 2, for the reasons we discussed earlier, supporting the things which the market itself does not do, and I think it is going to be a pretty lively debate, to tell you the truth.

Q86 Mr Drew: The problem with the CAP at the moment (and you know I am a long-term critic of it) is that actually it becomes less and less a common policy. The pressures on different parts of Europe mean that, for all sort of reasons, we want more independence of action because markets are likely to become more local, they are certainly going to have to recognise the issue, which is what this is about, of security of supply. What we might want to do could be completely different to Poland, for example. So how do you square that?

Hilary Benn: I think that is right, but it reflects the different interests. You raised the question of milk and our 13 and a bit billion litres. We have argued very strongly for phasing out of the quota. You talk to other countries which are very anxious about this because they look at where milk production is currently and think, "If that happens, then milk production in our country will be concentrated on just one bit geographically. What is going to happen to the landscape and the livelihoods of people who live in other parts of the country who are currently supported by the system?" So they worry a great deal about that and, from their point of view, understandably. We have a pretty efficient sector which has got more efficient because, if you go back 20 years, milk production was a little bit higher, 14 and a bit billion, but we have got less than half the producers now because it has become a more productive sector, and those changes bring with us an opportunity for the UK industry—and, of course, we export a great deal. I do not know how it is going to work out, that potentially which you have identified, because we have seen most recently in relation to the dairy sector a cry, "Come in and help us." There has been, frankly, less pressure in relation to that and less of a problem in the UK than in other European countries, which does reflect in part the productivity of our industry, despite the challenging times that they face. Fundamentally, it will be about how much money is going to be spent and what is the most effective way of spending it. That is what will determine the outcome.

Professor Watson: Just adding something to what Hilary has said, if we want global food security, it is absolutely critical that we work with developing countries to increase their production. It is not going to be solved by exporting from Europe or the US. Therefore, in the international assessment I directed, it is absolutely critical to get trade reform, not just CAP at the Doha round of trade, so we do not dump food that is produced in industrialised countries with production subsidies. It is also critical we work on rural development. There is no reason why an

average farmer in sub-Saharan Africa should get one tonne per acre of mixed maize and beans. Even with today's technology, you can get it to three and four. It is a classical issue of rural development. Our report argued you needed trade reform globally, you needed rural development, micro-financing, roads and infrastructure, education of women, coupled with advances in science and technology. You need a complete package, and the education of women plays a very critical role. So if we want global food security, which we do because it affects the UK, a lot has to be done by increasing production sustainably in developing countries.

Q87 Chairman: Bearing in mind our considerable experience with post-harvest handling in this country, is part of the strategic approach designed to draw on our practical experience and disseminate that where it is appropriate? In other words, as the Secretary of State will know from his time in DFID, he knows more about the disbursement of funds, I think, than most people, but the technology and the understanding, if you could get Britain's technology of 20 years ago into the countries you have just described, what a quantum leap there would be.

Hilary Benn: I agree, if that knowledge could be spread. The truth is that, if you go back a few years, both donors in the international aid community had taken their eye off the agricultural ball—that is the truth—and some developing country governments have done so. We took it all for granted, and that was a mistake, and 2008 has demonstrated that. Douglas Alexander is doubling the investment that we are putting into investment in agriculture research in the developing countries in which we work over the next few years. That is really important. We put a lot of money when I was at DFID into CGIAR.

Q88 Chairman: Can you remind everybody what that is?

Hilary Benn: Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research.

Professor Watson: Correct. Well done.

Hilary Benn: Precisely for the reasons that Bob himself has set out, and it is also about governance. Do farmers feel secure on the land? Because if you do not feel secure, you are not going to invest. Good roads, bring down the price of fertilizer, help you to get the goods to market—it is all of those very practical steps, and having a market, in the end, is what is going to drive that change, and since we know that in 1940 a hectare of land in the world was able to feed two and a half people, by 2020 it is going to have to feed six and a half people, boy have we got a job on our hands.

Chairman: The mention of science takes us neatly into Lynne Jones' area of questioning.

Q89 Lynne Jones: Before I go on to my main questions, can I raise the issue of soil. In the report it does mention the soil quality but not total resource. Of course some of the best agricultural

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land is in the East Anglia area, which is potentially going to be affected by rises in sea level. Has any thought been given to that issue?

Hilary Benn: Yes, but East Anglia, of course, faces the biggest problem of coastal erosion. We have a system for prioritising flood defences, as the Committee will be very well aware. You can organise the formula in any way that you like, but the way the formula works at the moment, not surprisingly, is it protects particularly residential homes and businesses, the economic impact if areas were to flood. The Environment Agency is talking to farmers because in some cases if the EA says, “We cannot maintain this wall any more”, then farmers may pick it up, and I know from the past of East Anglia that that conversation is itself taking place. In some part it is going to be very difficult, even if you had unlimited amounts of money and concrete, depending on the level of sea level rise, to say the coastline, which has changed over the centuries, is going to change no more because we are going to be able to stop it happening, because the truth is that we are not going to be able to stop it happening.

Q90 Lynne Jones: But it is disappointing that it was not touched on in this strategy and whether the priorities ought to be changed in the light of the pressures in relation to food security?

Hilary Benn: That would be a very interesting debate, to say we are going to provide less protection to houses and more protection to agricultural land.

Q91 Lynne Jones: Would it not need to be raised as an issue in a report like this?

Hilary Benn: It has been raised already, as I have indicated, in the discussions that are taking place down the east coast as the EA and others are looking at the plans for combating flooding.

Q92 Lynne Jones: This is your report on your food strategy and it is not even mentioned. I am not saying that it should be protected, I just think it ought to be flagged up as an issue.

Hilary Benn: It will also be looked at as part of the Foresight process, which does plug into this in the way that Bob indicated earlier.

Q93 Lynne Jones: I think for the rest of my questions I would be getting myself rather less muddled if I had that chart that I was requesting earlier, because it is very complex, all these different organisations and strategies, and so on, but I will do my best. In our own report on food security we did highlight the reduction over a number of years in agricultural research and we did make recommendations, and I think the response to our recommendations on the need for an increase in the budget was that the UK Strategy for Food Research and Innovation was going to be published later on in the year. I think it was actually published this month and, I apologise, I have not actually read it, but could I ask what part Defra played in drawing up that strategy and how does it relate to your strategy?

Hilary Benn: Bob will respond, if that is all right. Can I just say on the financing, in 2008–09 Defra and BBSRC together spent £253 million on food sustainability, food and farming related research. In 2003–04 it was £204 million. So, just to put on the record, the balance has altered between Defra and BBSRC—in Defra it has gone down; in BBSRC it has gone up—but it does not really matter which envelope the funding comes in, the question is what is the Government overall putting in?

Q94 Lynne Jones: We did mention that in our report, but we said, although it had gone up again, that reflected the overall increase in the science budget. I do not know what is going to happen in the future; I certainly hope that budget pressures will not reduce our spending on research and development, because I think it is crucial for our future. So we did acknowledge that, but we still felt that there was a need for more investment in research.

Hilary Benn: That is exactly why we responded with the 50 million over five years from the Technology Strategy Board—you are looking quizzically at me—which is subsequent to the committee producing its report.

Q95 Lynne Jones: Yes, that is one of the questions. The 90 million over five years. Of that, which is the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Innovation programme, 50 million is new money.

Hilary Benn: Yes.

Q96 Lynne Jones: It is over five years. So that is 10 million a year, which does not really, make up for the concerns that we were expressing. Is that new money, or where has it come from?

Hilary Benn: It has come from the money that has been allocated to the Technology Strategy Board, which is looking across a whole range of things but has identified that food and farming research is one important strategic priority and has put that in, which I warmly welcome having argued for it, and it will be supported by money principally from Defra and a bit from BBSRC to go with what they are doing to fund the range of research programmes, but Bob was going to respond.

Professor Watson: There is new money through the Technology Strategy Board, indeed. Defra worked very, very hard with Ian Gray to get this money, and so did John Beddington and BBSRC. It was a concerted effort to try and get an innovation strategy in the agri-food business. This is a very different type of innovation platform from what TSB is normally used to. They are doing low carbon vehicles, they are doing low carbon houses, they are much more used to what I call very hard infrastructure. In addition, however, DFID is literally going to be doubling, as Hilary has said already, its budget related to agriculture R&D for the goals of development. This year 2008–09 the spend is 50; within about three years from now it will be up to 80 million. So there is an upward trajectory both in DFID R&D and in the consortia now with the Technology Strategy Board. The document, effectively, that did come out the day after *Food 2030* is, indeed, this document,

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UK Cross Government Food Research and Innovation Strategy, and, as you can almost see from all the logos on the bottom, it was a truly integrated effort across government and the research councils, and so on. The lead from the research councils was BBSRC. The lead government department was Defra but with strong support from DFID. It shows the money from the Scottish Governments as well. If you look at all of the programmes that we currently have, including that of the Scottish Government, there is actually about £415 million spent in 2008–09, the big number being that by BBSRC, followed by ourselves, then the Scottish Government, and then DFID and then a significant amount of money also, or not insignificant, in the Medical Research Council, the Food Standards Agency, et cetera. So when this document was put together it truly was, in my opinion, an excellent example of government working together, and we are going beyond this now because this was government spend. So, again under John Beddington and GO-Science, we are now looking effectively at what is happening in the private sector, so we have a consortia, including a wide range of actors in the private sector, asking themselves also about research, but there are two subcommittees, one just finished as well, *What is the skill mix needed in agriculture and the Food Sector*, and that piece of work was headed up by Celia from BBSRC. They have concluded their work on the skill gaps. The other one that is currently working is with Chris Gaskell, who is from Cirencester—he heads up the Royal Agricultural College—and he is looking at whether there are there gaps in translational research. So all of the players that effectively helped John to put this together are now working on an additional thing of asking effectively, with the private sector, are there skills gaps and are there gaps in translational research.

Q97 Lynne Jones: I asked where the 10 million a year came from?

Professor Watson: The TSB has its own budget. It comes out of BIS. There is a Technology Strategy Board budget out of BIS.

Q98 Lynne Jones: So there was a reserve which had not been allocated for anything else.

Professor Watson: There was a budget given to the TSB and they have a strategy board, and the question was how to spend that money that could help the private sector be economically viable. As I said, much of the money has gone into low carbon vehicles, low carbon buildings, there is some into stem cell research, there is some in the indigenous economy, and one of the newest of the platforms is, indeed, this one on the agri-food industry.

Q99 Lynne Jones: If you recall, the Chief Executive of the BBSRC was quoted as calling for the need for an extra 100 million a year in agricultural research. Are there any plans to increase public spending in this area?

Professor Watson: That request for more money did not actually come direct from Douglas Kell of BBSRC, it was an outgrowth of the Royal Society

report *Reaping the Benefits*, and that was the whole issue of science assisting agriculture. *Reaping the Benefits* was the one that did call for a significant increase in funding. Obviously, as we look forward to the next Comprehensive Spending Review, there is going to be a lot of pressure on all budgets. So what we are collectively doing, with BBSRC taking the lead, is asking ourselves what would a true integrated agricultural R&D programme look like, all the way from looking at agricultural productivity but looking at the social and behavioural issues, looking at the trade issues, et cetera. So we are all working together at what would a really integrated cross-government programme look like but, obviously, the issue of where funding would come from will have to be a political decision and we realise budgets are going to become very tight in the future.

Q100 Lynne Jones: What action are you taking to actually argue the case for increased spending on agricultural research?

Professor Watson: What we are doing, and it is an interesting combination: John Beddington, as the Government's Chief Science Adviser, and Adrian Smith, who heads up all the research councils, we meet regularly now. It is a really excellent example of joined up government. All of the Chief Scientific Advisers, and there are about ten of us now, meet and once every three months we meet with the heads of every Research Council, so we have a meeting of the heads of all of the Research Councils and all the government departments, and we have covered four or five very crucial areas where, effectively, we believe government should be investing in evidence. One of them is in this whole issue of agricultural productivity and the food industry, another one is, broadly, on living with environmental change, and there are two or three other areas. What we are trying to do is have a joined-up government. So between Research Councils and government departments we are assessing what are the priorities, how would we work together and then the case would be made to government as to what are the different ways to spend money on evidence and what are the potential returns.

Lynne Jones: At the Oxford Farming Conference I gather there was a survey carried out amongst farmers who put forward investment in plant breeding as a top priority. One of the issues is that so much research in this area is carried out by agri-business, which does not help public confidence in some of the results of that research. Is this issue, the need for public investment in this area, something that is being argued for?

Q101 Chairman: Can I follow that up, because I spoke at the Potato Growers Research Conference in Cambridge just before Christmas and I coined a new currency called a Tevez. When Manchester City bought Carlos Tevez it cost about £40 million, but when Manchester United first bought him it was 25, and that roughly equated to the public funding of SGYNIS and Rothamsted. I thought was quite an

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interesting commentary on where our priorities are. On the basis of the 415 million, that is roughly nine Tevez's you are spending.

Hilary Benn: That is a reflection on the broader society that we are and different people's sense of priorities, I think, Chairman.

Q102 Lynne Jones: As part of our food inquiry we went to Brazil and, I think, some of us were very struck by the collaboration between the research organisations and the agricultural industry. We highlighted the fact that for our programmes the link funding, for example, often has to be match funded and, therefore, it is only the larger organisations that can participate. We recommended something like the equivalent of an agricultural business link, and you said it was an interesting idea that you would look at. What has been the outcome of that—it is not mentioned in this report—and, generally, what more are you doing to ensure that the results of research are actually translated into practice on the ground?

Hilary Benn: As I indicated earlier, I think it is about making sure that you can give publicity—that is the first thing, and I think the journal that you were just referring to, along with one or two others, is read pretty well by farmers—secondly, agronomists, people who go round and talk to farmers all of the time about what they should be doing, are an important source of information about new approaches, different things that you can do, and, thirdly, by trying to make sure that we build into the research programmes that we undertake consideration of how you are going to get those results out. I think it is a combination of those three things. The industry itself, of course, raises some money through the levy and it puts a bit into research through the AHDB. I think there is a fair amount of work going on the fact that we are putting in more resource is a recognition of the powerful case that the committee made, but in the end what is going to happen in the future, as Bob said, will depend absolutely on the budgets that we have all got. Will Defra argue the case for agriculture, for food production, for sustainability, for science? You bet we will.

Professor Watson: The interesting thing also is defining what we meant by agricultural research. For example, Defra is about to issue its new Evidence and Investment Strategy, and what we have argued in here is that there are three major priorities for Defra: climate change, viable and sustainable ecosystems and food security. They are all highly interrelated in so far as climate change affects agriculture, agriculture affects climate change, climate affects ecosystems, ecosystems affect food security, and vice versa. So when one says, "What are we spending on agricultural research?", in much of the work we are also looking at climate change—what are your projections of climate change, how would you mitigate it, how would you adapt to it, how do we sustainably manage our ecosystems? Much of this is very relevant to agriculture. So, in some respects, when one says, "Let us advocate for more research on food security on agricultural R&D", that can also be the same as, "Let us make

sure we understand the climate system, let us make sure we understand our natural ecosystems", because it is the soils, the water, as we have said many times before, that is the basis of a good agricultural system. So, that is why in our new strategy here we show these issues as very, very joined up, which is also why through Living with Environmental Change, which now has 20 organisations—research councils, government departments, Scottish Government, Welsh Government, et cetera—we are trying to look at how you integrate all of these issues of climate change, biodiversity, food security, animal health altogether.

Q103 Lynne Jones: I do not disagree with any of that, but my question was about getting the results of research to the smaller players in the industry. I do not think that you have told me that you are doing anything different now from when we produced our report. Would that be correct or not?

Hilary Benn: I think the three means that I outlined are the most effective ones that we have got, frankly.

Professor Watson: We make sure that the levy boards are involved in our work, we make sure the National Farmers' Union are involved in our work. Clearly, I agree with you, there are two crucial issues. First, to make sure that we understand what the needs of the farmers are, so it is not the scientific community going off and doing its own thing thinking it knows what the farmers need. The question is have we done that well, are we doing it well, are there better ways, effectively, to make sure there is a close correlation between farming needs and the scientific programmes, and the second half of that is, indeed, knowledge exchange, knowledge transfer. Within the LWEC programme we have three major elements: one is public engagement, one is knowledge exchange and one is broad communication, and, as I say, food and agricultural issues are a very central part. Through this large LWEC programme we are looking very carefully to see how all of these things can be improved. Whether it gets out to all the small farms, I honestly cannot answer your question. I will certainly go back and ask people.

Lynne Jones: It is certainly something that constantly the NFU are constantly raising as an issue. We have got LWEC now, so I am even more confused.

Q104 Chairman: What does LWEC stand for?

Professor Watson: Living with Environmental Change, 20 organisations, all the Research Councils, all of the key government departments, here, in Scotland, et cetera.

Q105 Lynne Jones: Okay. What are the differences between the Food Security Research programme and the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Innovation programme?

Professor Watson: I am not sure. To me they have to be one and the same. Food security, of course, by definition, is not just production; it is how do you trade. So you have to look at a lot of the social marketing trade issues. Production, of course, is one

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part of it. Sustainable farming, of course, by definition is effectively how do we produce our food that it is economically viable, socially sustainable and environmentally sustainable? These issues are all linked together basically.

Q106 Lynne Jones: So that programme would have a role of translating research into practice.

Professor Watson: Absolutely.

Q107 Lynne Jones: But there is some confusion about the difference?

Professor Watson: I would say that sustainable farming is an element of food security, but food security does bring in the whole issue of market forces, trade, subsidies, et cetera.

Q108 Lynne Jones: Finally, Professor Beddington's Foresight project: you have mentioned it, but how is that fitting into your strategy?

Professor Watson: We actually interlink with it. In fact, through the small amount of the programme I have, I have been working with John [Beddington] and Charles Godfrey, who is the Chair, to fund a couple of workshops looking at what is our capability of modelling to actually simulate demand over the next 50 years, to understand what the environmental implications might be—how could climate change affect our ability here and abroad to produce food—and, indeed, that particular report is being co-sponsored by Defra, the Minister, and by DFID. In fact, when John's programmes are put together, GO-Science programmes and Foresight studies, they now will not do a study. At least one government department, if not two, are the sponsors of it. So they actually know there is a customer. For example, a few months ago we had an expert meeting with Defra, co-chaired by Jim [Fitzpatrick MP], looking to see where were they in a Foresight study. Were they providing the type of information that government would want? It is a very active, viable, lively programme and an exchange of ideas. Obviously the actual assessment is being done by experts throughout the UK co-ordinated by GO-Science.

Q109 Lynne Jones: One other quick question. The Arthur Little Capability Review: how has that fed into all this in terms of the developing of science programmes?

Professor Watson: To be honest with you, I would say it was a step in the right direction to understand capability. I think it could have been a bit more substantive, to be quite honest. So I would say it is a first step to look at capability that Defra needs. NERC are doing something similar. BBSRC actually joined us on that, and with John Beddington we are trying to look at what scientific capabilities are needed right across government, especially as there will be some hard budget decisions to be made in the future. What are those absolutely essential capabilities of national labs, university capability, things like the Hadley Centre down at the Met Office? I viewed that as a first step towards critically evaluating what are our needs

right across Defra, but at the same time we have to also say what are the needs of DECC, DFID, et cetera, because some of them are going to be common.

Q110 Lynne Jones: Can you send us a note on how you are taking that forward because we are having another session next Monday on Defra science, so that might be helpful?

Professor Watson: Okay.⁶

Q111 Chairman: How much did that Little report cost?

Hilary Benn: Perhaps we can put that in the note.

Professor Watson: I honestly do not know either.

Q112 Mr Drew: One of the things, reading the report, I did not necessarily pick up on, and it is a very touchy subject, is the importation of seasonal labour. To what extent is this something that will inevitably have to be thought through very differently? The very people, no doubt, who call for seasonal labour are the same people who would be having some strong opinions on immigration. Is this a sustainable pond? We are talking about strategy here. Should we be looking much more carefully at systems which do not involve trying to bring great numbers of migrants in for periods of time?

Hilary Benn: The question is who is picking the fruit and veg? If you go back 50 years, it was people from Britain who picked the fruit and veg, and now it is not. The industry has obviously talked to us, we have talked to the Home Office, you have got the SAWS scheme, it is working okay at the moment, but I would say those who are running the industry are arguing that a source of labour should continue to be available because it is fundamental, and, going back to Mr Hall's question about the future of the fruit and veg industry, it is a very important consideration, because having people to pick is important to how much you can plant and, therefore, how much you can hope to sell. I think it is working okay at the moment. Obviously they are mainly minimum wage jobs, but that is what they are. If you paid more, it would have an impact on the price, would it not?

Q113 Chairman: Secretary of State, I think we have had a very useful session this afternoon looking in some detail at what lies behind the words in the *Food 2030* document, and for that we thank you. I was just reflecting that this might possibly be the last time, in this Parliament at least, that you come before this Committee.

Hilary Benn: Crumbs.

Q114 Chairman: If that was the case, I felt that I must put on record our sincere appreciation, both to you and, indeed, to all your officials for all the help that you have given us. You have always made yourself very readily available and you have risen to the challenge when we have asked the difficult

⁶ The session on DEFRA science took place on Wednesday 17 March 2010. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmenvfro/us493-;uc49302>

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questions in what I might call a very nice way so that we can have a proper conversation about many of the difficult issues which have crossed your desk. As I say, on behalf of the Committee, I would like to just record our appreciation for you, your officials' and your Department's help for the work that we do. There will be a chance for others in your Department to come before us, I am sure. We have got a brief inquiry, hopefully starting next week, into the national forest and we hope that we will be able to revisit bovine and Defra science before the plug is pulled on this Parliament. So Defra will still be able to help us, but may we thank you specifically for your assistance.

Hilary Benn: Chairman, that is extremely generous of you. I notice—I do not know whether it was deliberately—that you scheduled this evidence session for the feast day of St Hilary. I am reliably informed that St Hilary (a man, by the way) was a

scourge of error and heresy, and it sounds to me like an early form of select committee, but that is not the spirit in which my appearances before you have been conducted. Could I reciprocate by saying that I have felt on many occasions that it has been more like a conversation. In my view, that is how it ought to work, because I do not know all the answers and you do not know all the answers but together we have got a better chance of finding them, and I particularly welcome today's session because, if one just goes back two years and thinks of the different place we are in, in terms of our understanding of debate, the document that we have published, which was kind of inconceivable two years ago, we have made progress but we have got a lot yet to make, and I have enjoyed this afternoon's session, as I have always enjoyed appearing before the Committee. Thank you for much for your courtesy.

Chairman: Good. Thank you very much indeed.

Follow-up letter from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

I enjoyed our discussion last week on "Food 2030" and I said I would come back to you on a number of points.

You said that you would welcome a diagram showing how the key committees and other bodies mentioned in Food 2030 fit together. I attach one which I hope is helpful. There are of course many other bodies taking forward aspects of food policy across government, but these are the key ones for delivery of our food strategy.

You took a particular interest in the role of DA(F) and asked whether you could have a list of agenda items that it has discussed in the past year. I'm afraid that isn't possible as it would be a breach of the rules which apply to Cabinet discussions, although I'm sure you can have a pretty good guess!

You questioned the figure of £52 which is cited on page 13 of the strategy as being the additional annual cost to UK consumers of the CAP. The figure of £52 per person (£207 per family of four) is based on Defra calculations of the cost of the CAP (specifically EU market price support and agricultural tariffs) to consumers. Tariffs and market price support maintain British prices above world prices, making food more expensive than it would otherwise be. The calculations are made using the same methodology as the OECD's "Consumer Support Estimate" (CSE). The final figure indicates the additional expenditure that consumers make because of the UK's higher prices. This can then be divided by the UK population to give a cost per person, which can be used to calculate the cost per family.

The approach is simple but largely robust. On the one hand it ignores the fact that world prices might rise slightly if the EU were to eliminate market price support and reduce tariffs, which would reduce the size of the final figure. On the other hand, the calculation could be said to be an underestimate, since it doesn't include the welfare cost to consumers who would have purchased *more* food if the price had been lower. On balance therefore the calculation gives a reasonably good indication of the extent to which British consumers are disadvantaged by the EU's market price support and agricultural tariffs. However, there are two important caveats regarding interpretation of the figure. Firstly, it is important to note that "consumer" in this case refers to the post farm gate consumer, which includes retailers and processors as well as the "man in the street". Furthermore, the gap between UK and world prices is in part driven by the EU's high tariffs, which are unlikely to be reduced to the extent necessary to equate British prices with world prices in the near future. The difficulties of negotiating significant tariff reductions are clearly illustrated by the slow progress of the current Doha Round of trade talks.

You also suggested that we should look at food waste in the catering sector; fair point! Whilst our focus to date has been on households, from where the majority of food waste arises (8.3 million tonnes annually), food waste from the hospitality sector (restaurants, hotels, etc.) is estimated at around three million tonnes annually (2008 *estimate*). WRAP are currently undertaking research to build up a clearer picture of not only how much, but where and why this waste is occurring, and how food waste collection from this sector (in particular SMEs) can be made most economically viable. This, alongside current initiatives such as development of anaerobic digestion, will enable us to move forward in tackling food waste in this sector most effectively.

In the public sector: research commissioned by WRAP suggests around 100,000t of food waste arises annually in schools, around 80% of which is estimated to be avoidable. WRAP are now piloting food waste reduction initiatives at the schools that participated in the research. The outcomes of these pilots will inform the development of guidance for schools more widely.

The banning/restriction of biodegradable wastes, and changes to the definition of municipal waste—which we are consulting on this year—could also have profound effects on managing food waste across these areas.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

January 2010

