

Cross Party Group on Rural Policy

8th October 2025 18.00- 19.30 (Hybrid)

Minutes (Unapproved)

Present

MSPs

Emma Harper MSP

Ariane Burgess MSP

Speakers

Professor Alex Johnston University of Aberdeen

David Thompson Scotland Food & Drink Federation

Ben Nunn Knoydart Farm

Non -MSP attendees

<i>Last Name</i>	<i>First Name</i>	<i>Organisation (if relevant)</i>
Atterton	Jane	SRUC
Arai	Kanako	
Armour	John	
Beaton	Christine	
Beingessner	Naomi	
Bell	Julian	
Blasberg	Sara	
Bradley	Sara	
Burgess MSP	Ariane	
Burney	Harrie	
Calder	James	DCC Energy
Cameron	Mhairi	Chirrup Ltd
Campbell	Jennifer	DM Hall
Clark	Patricia	MSP office
Cooper	Gemma	NFU Scotland

<i>Last Name</i>	<i>First Name</i>	<i>Organisation (if relevant)</i>
de la figura	Marta	Vml
Dimitrova	Martina	The University of Edinburgh
Doyle	Carey	SRUC
Dykes	Hannah	
Eory	Vera	SRUC
Erber	Claudia	
		Environment and Development, University of Edinburgh
Faungfoung	Ekthip	
Fawcett	Fiona	
Findlay	Graeme	
Foster	Gail	
Glendinning	James	SRUC
Halhead	Vanessa	Scottish Rural Action
Hastie	Anne	Tyne & Esk (CLLD)/East Lothian Rural Economy Group
Heald	Andrew	
Hislop	Lisa	NFU Scotland
Hutchison	Grace	North Ayrshire Council
Jabir	Samurath	InspirAlba
Jepson	Anne	Scottish Parliament
Jepson	Anne	Scottish Parliament
Johnstone	Alexandra	University of Aberdeen
Kelly	Barbara	
Kelly	Barbara	
Kennedy	Jillian	SAYFC
Knottenbelt	Miesbeth	Nourish Scotland
Krayem	Mixar	
Luken	Lisa	University of Southern Maine
MacLeod		
Rivett	Mary	HES
MacPhail	Eilidh	UHI
Marks	Andrew	Scottish Environment LINK
Marshall	David	
Martin	Irina	Nourish Scotland
McKay	David	Soil Association Scotland
McWilliams	Michelle	The Rowett Institute, University of Aberdeen
McWilliams	Michelle	
Morrice	Beatrice	NFU Scotland
Morrison	Theona	CoDeL/SRA/Scottosh Food Coalition/Crofter
Ng	Jasmine	
Nunn	Ben	
Okoth	Judith	

<i>Last Name</i>	<i>First Name</i>	<i>Organisation (if relevant)</i>
Paterson	Elena	
Reynolds	Alex	Borders College
Rice-Jones	Sharon	
Roan	Tracey	Owen Farm Services
Scott	Douglas	individual
Scott	Karen	Rowett Institute
Sinaga	Martha	University of Edinburgh
Skene	David	UHI
Smith	Alison	
Stuart	Ninian	Falkland Estate
Tennant	Rachel	Scotland's Landscape Alliance
Thompson	Louise	Quality Meat Scotland
Thomson	David	Food and Drink Federation Scotland
van Gaalen	Augustijn	SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum
Vester	Sterre	
Walker	Alexander	NFU Scotland
Walton	Denise	Nature Friendly Farming Network & Peelham Farm
Watts	David	Rowett Institute, University of Aberdeen
Wright	Rowan	
Wylie	Anna	

Apologies

Edward Mountain MSP, Julie Steele, Wendy Barrie & Bo Dahlgren, David Glass, Davy McCracken

Agenda item 1

Welcome, introduction and apologies

Emma Harper welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that there were 85 people who signed up for the meeting. This meeting's focus was on the food system and how it can be improved for people and planet.

Agenda item 2

Approval of minutes and recap of action items

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As agreed at the June meeting of the Group on the circular economy, three letters have been drafted on the issues raised in that meeting. These will be sent to Mairi Gougeon MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands), Gillian Martin MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy) and Jim Fairlie MSP (Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity).

Minutes for the June meeting were not approved on the night but have since been approved by email by Edward Mountain MSP and Jim Hume at the AGM in December.

Agenda item 3

Presentations and discussion

Emma introduced the three speakers and explained that they were all going to focus on different parts of the food system:

- **Professor Alex Johnston** (University of Aberdeen) talking about the consumer (“fork”) end.
- **David Thompson** (Scotland Food & Drink Federation) talking about the manufacturing (“middle”) sector.
- **Ben Nunn** (Knoydart Farm) speaking online about farming (“farm”) end.

Presentation 1: Prof Alex Johnstone

Alex began by defining the food system as a complex network extending beyond the farm-to-fork chain, incorporating food security, nutrition, livelihoods, health, and environmental sustainability. She highlights the global “triple challenge”:

1. Providing nutritious food for a growing population,
2. Supporting livelihoods along the supply chain,
3. Ensuring environmental sustainability.

She explained that the UK adherence to healthy eating guidance, including the Eatwell guide is low and in some cases this is due to affordability. Data from the Food Foundation shows that poorer households would need to spend a significant proportion of their income to follow a healthy diet.

Johnston highlighted her research funded by UKRI on improving healthy and sustainable food choices, particularly through working with retailers. She presented findings from evaluating England’s High Fat, Sugar and Salt (HFSS) placement legislation, showing:

- Significant reductions in HFSS purchases (around 2 million fewer items per day).
- The policy had equitable effects across regions with varying levels of deprivation.
- Retailers and consumers were generally supportive.

These findings are relevant as Scotland plans to introduce similar legislation next year.

She also highlighted Scotland’s Population Health Framework and the Good Food Nation Plan, which aim to improve public health, reduce inequalities, and steer the country toward a fairer, more sustainable food system.

Johnston concluded by noting her involvement with the Scottish Government’s ENRA research programme, which informs rural, environmental, and agricultural policy, and emphasises that the work is a collaborative effort.

Presentation 2: David Thomson, CEO, Food and Drink Federation Scotland

David started by acknowledging that his role is to represent food manufacturers and help both industry and government understand one another's needs.

He highlighted the sector's economic importance:

- £5.2bn in gross value added
- £15bn turnover
- £8bn in exports (a third of the UK's total food and drink exports)
- 47,000 jobs across 1,220 businesses, most of them small or medium-sized
- Strong links with Scotland's agricultural and fishing industries

Despite its strengths, the sector is under significant pressure, mainly due to:

1. High inflation – UK food and drink inflation (5.8%) is much higher than in comparable countries like Spain and Germany.
2. Global instability – Brexit, COVID, the war in Ukraine, trade volatility, labour shortages, rising energy and packaging costs, and increased commodity prices.
3. Regulatory costs – New UK rules, such as extended producer responsibility (£1.1bn cost) and increased employer National Insurance (£400m cost), add further financial strain.

He discussed the expanding legislative landscape, including HFSS (high fat, sugar, salt) regulations, bans on multibuy promotions, advertising restrictions, plastics taxes, and the upcoming deposit return scheme. These changes reshape product development, marketing, and consumer expectations, creating heavy burdens—especially for small businesses.

David emphasised the need to improve resilience in the supply chain, especially in rural areas where small producers are more vulnerable to climate events, supply chain disruptions, and global shocks. Local sourcing and shorter supply chains can help but require investment.

He also identified significant opportunities:

- Scotland is well-positioned to lead on sustainability, through responsible sourcing, long-term farmer partnerships, and innovations such as climate-focused investment networks.
- Major companies like Nestlé and PepsiCo already demonstrate strong rural engagement.
- There is potential to expand exports, especially if small businesses re-enter exporting after Brexit-related challenges.
- Net-zero targets cannot be achieved without food, drink, and agriculture working together.

He stated that the Good Food Nation plan will only succeed if local authorities meaningfully involve small businesses and integrate them into economic planning.

David concluded that aligning health, environmental sustainability, and economic viability is possible—but requires investment in rural infrastructure, better collaboration across the food system, and strong implementation of the Good Food Nation Act.

Presentation 3: Ben Nunn, Farm Manager at Knoydart

Ben Nunn, farm manager at Knoydart Farm, shared his perspective on “small-scale” farm production. He explained his background in biofuels research and small-farm agriculture before describing the community farm he now manages in Knoydart: a remote community of around 100–120 residents that receives 30,000 tourists annually.

Knoydart Farm was established two years ago and is now operating at full productivity. It employs five local people—many moving from low-skill tourism jobs into skilled agricultural roles. The farm has secured £250,000 in capital and revenue funding, none of which was specific to food production but instead came from social enterprise funders.

The farm supplies local community-owned businesses, exports vegetables to nearby areas, runs school and nursery visits, hosts workshops and events, offers volunteer placements, and is developing a community composting scheme. Future plans include value-added food products and mushroom cultivation.

Ben emphasised the strong social benefits of the farm: community engagement across generations, volunteer involvement, and educational opportunities. He argued that small, high-productivity community farms are an important solution to rural food, economic, and social challenges.

However, he outlined several barriers:

1. Lack of agricultural subsidies – Small community farms do not benefit from the kinds of support available to large farms.
2. Small population base – Community-supported agriculture models are hard to sustain.
3. Lack of horticultural training – Local workers often need skill development.
4. Administrative burden – Complex funding applications require skills many rural communities do not have.
5. Unequal support structures – Despite providing jobs, education, environmental benefits, and food security, small farms face disproportionately high barriers.

Ben called for:

- Parity of support for community farms within subsidy frameworks.
- Simpler, more accessible funding channels tailored to small rural agriculture.
- Targeted infrastructure investment rather than competing with unrelated social projects for the same funds.
- Greater recognition of the social, economic, and environmental value of community market gardens in national food policy.

Ben welcomed people to get in touch with him.

Agenda item 4

Discussion

Question: What recommendations should be taken from England's HFSS (high fat, sugar, salt) legislation when introducing similar regulations in Scotland?

Summary of Answer:

- England's rules reduced HFSS purchases but left grey areas about what *could* replace HFSS items in promotional spaces.
- Sometimes these spaces were filled with alcohol, baby food or food imagery, which still acted as advertising.
- Scotland should:
 - Give clear guidance on what *can* go in key locations (e.g. aisle ends).
 - Reduce loopholes and ambiguity.
 - Provide strong support and guidance for enforcement officers.
 - Improve data sharing from retailers so the policy's impact can be evaluated fairly and consistently.

Question: Why do many farms focus on cereals like barley and wheat instead of vegetables, despite the need for more local fresh food?

Summary of Answers:

- Farms must sell to where there is a reliable market. When local authorities shifted from fresh to cheaper frozen vegetables, farms lost that fresh veg market.
- Growing cereals is often less risky and less labour-intensive than vegetables, especially given machinery costs and contract risks.
- Domestic production of fruit and veg is low (only a minority is home-grown), and climate and profitability are major constraints.
- There is a tension between:
 - Farmers needing economic viability, and
 - Households needing affordable fresh produce.

Question: How might local authorities practically respond to the Good Food Nation duties and work more closely with businesses?

Summary of Answer:

- Local authorities and health boards must prepare Good Food Nation plans.
- These plans should:

- Recognise the economic importance of food businesses.
- Create more local procurement opportunities (e.g. schools, hospitals using local suppliers).
- Support economic development of local food businesses.
- Help shape stronger local supply chains by matching public-sector demand with local production.
- Collaboration between councils and health boards could significantly improve local food systems.

Question: Why is prime agricultural land being used for housing when there are food security concerns?

Summary of Answers:

- There are two conflicting pressures:
 - The need for more housing.
 - The need to protect good farmland for food production.
- This creates a policy tension: planning decisions must balance housing needs with long-term food security.
- There is also ongoing work on making better use of vacant and derelict land and existing buildings, to ease the pressure on prime farmland.

Question: Why is prime land in some regions being developed for housing while other rural areas face depopulation and housing shortages? What should be done?

Summary of Answers:

- Some remote rural areas have very high building costs (materials, transport, tradespeople) and limited professional capacity, which restricts housebuilding.
- Land quality varies; poorer land can still be highly productive with small-scale, intensive methods (market gardens, polytunnels, etc.).
- Small, highly productive farms can work well in such areas, but they need better structural and policy support.

Question: Other countries with little farmland (like some Nordic countries) manage to be largely self-sufficient using small farms. Why can't this be replicated, and how do we compare internationally?

Summary of Answers:

- In some countries, small farms are strongly supported by the state to maintain population and production across the territory.

- In the UK, policy and culture often favour large-scale farming and traditional models, and tend to underestimate high-productivity small farms.
- Small farms can:
 - Produce large volumes per acre.
 - Employ many people locally.
- However, they often lack parity of support and recognition.
- Some countries (e.g. Finland) show that local control over procurement and food policy can support healthier diets and better local systems.

Question: Should there be a term or recognition similar to “crofting” for mainland small-scale rural enterprises facing similar challenges?

Summary of Answers:

- The existing term is legally and historically specific and not easily repurposed.
- However, there is a clear need to:
 - Recognise fragile rural mainland areas.
 - Create policy tools or designations that support small rural enterprises outside traditional crofting zones.
- Discussions have taken place about having a rural plan equivalent to existing island-focused strategies.

Question: What is the long-term cost of people not eating healthily, and what are the consequences of poor diet?

Summary of Answers:

- The economic impact of obesity and poor diet runs into tens of billions annually, with huge costs to individuals, families, and the health service.
- Poor diet is linked to:
 - Obesity
 - Type 2 diabetes
 - Cardiovascular disease
 - Other non-communicable diseases
- Food affordability, availability and accessibility are key.
- There is a strong case for shifting from treatment to prevention, including:
 - Reformulating food to reduce fat, sugar and salt.

- Supporting healthier products and choices.
- Small community farms can directly improve access to fresh, affordable produce, particularly in remote areas.

Question: Even if healthy food becomes available and affordable, how can we change people's attitudes and habits so they actually choose and cook healthier food?

Summary of Answers:

- Changing eating habits is very difficult and often only happens at key life events (illness, parenthood, bereavement).
- New weight-loss drugs are starting to change behaviour and product development, but they raise ethical and cost questions.
- Practical approaches that help include:
 - Providing recipes and simple instructions with veg boxes.
 - Running workshops on cooking and preserving (e.g. kimchi, sauerkraut, salsas).
 - **Using social media and community events to build confidence with unfamiliar foods.**
- It's important not to blame individuals, but to:
 - Tackle poverty.
 - Redesign the food environment so the healthier choice is the easier, cheaper, and more visible choice (e.g. subsidies for fruit and veg, less promotion of HFSS foods).

Agenda Item 5

AOB

Emma Harper asked the secretariat to provide a 2-page briefing on the key points raised at the meeting.

Agenda item 6

Next meeting: Wednesday 21st January (This date has since been changed to Wednesday 28th January)

Emma thanked everyone for coming along.

