



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Tuesday 2 September 2025

Session 6



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Tuesday 2 September 2025

CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS BILL	2
NATIONAL GOOD FOOD NATION PLAN	4

HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND SPORT COMMITTEE
21st Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP)
*Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con)
*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)
*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)
*Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)
*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Tom Arthur (Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing)
Mhairi Brown (Food, Farming and Countryside Commission Scotland)
Anna Chworow (Nourish Scotland)
Jules Goodlet-Rowley (Scottish Government)
Mairi Gougeon (Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands)
Claire Hislop (Public Health Scotland)
Professor Lindsay Jaacks (University of Edinburgh)
Tracy McCollin (Scottish Government)
Jo Mitchell (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Alex Bruce

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Tuesday 2 September 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 08:45]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Haughey): Good morning, and welcome to the 21st meeting in 2025 of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. I have received no apologies.

Agenda item 1 is to ask the committee to agree to take items 4 and 5 in private. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Employment Rights Bill

08:45

The Convener: The next item is to take oral evidence on a further supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Employment Rights Bill. The bill's purpose is to deliver the key legislative reforms that are set out in the United Kingdom Government's plan to make work pay.

The bill's explanatory note states that its purpose is to

"update and enhance existing employment rights and make provision for new rights; make provision regarding pay and conditions in particular sectors; ... make reforms in relation to trade union matters and industrial action",

and to create

"a new regime for the enforcement of employment law."

The committee previously took evidence on an earlier supplementary LCM on the Employment Rights Bill in May this year, and it published a report on that previous supplementary LCM on 10 June. The further supplementary LCM—LCM-S6-53b, which is currently under consideration—was lodged in the Scottish Parliament on 14 August. It recommends legislative consent with respect to amendments to clauses 44 to 46 and 49 of the bill, which were tabled on 7 July.

I welcome Tom Arthur, Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing, along with Anne Cairns, solicitor; Danny Duffy, who deals with fair work and social care; David Holmes, who deals with fair work and the economy; and Rachael Thomas, who deals with fair work and social care, all from the Scottish Government. I invite the minister to make an opening statement.

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): Thank you, convener. Good morning to you and to the rest of the committee. This supplementary LCM should be read in conjunction with the Scottish Government's previous memoranda on the Employment Rights Bill, dated 11 December 2024 and 3 April 2025.

The Scottish Government has been working closely with care providers, trade unions, local government and regulators for a number of years to deliver fair work in the social care sector, but, as you are aware, the Scottish Government's ability to act in this area is constrained by the devolution settlement. Nevertheless, we have continued to deliver what we can by using the powers that are available to us, including enabling payment of a real living wage to all social care workers, delivering direct care and commissioned services, developing an effective voice framework for the sector, which is nearing the conclusion of a pilot phase, and working with the sector to identify

priority areas for enhanced terms and conditions in due course. However, the Employment Rights Bill and subsequent amendments now confer some limited powers on the Scottish ministers, and it is for those reasons that a supplementary LCM is required for those provisions.

It is important to note that a lot of work has also been carried out to develop and design a process for delivering a voluntary sectoral bargaining model for Scotland. When the Employment Rights Bill was introduced, it included provisions relating to the social care sector in England, most notably for the establishment through regulations of a negotiating body to consider pay and terms and conditions for the adult social care sector.

The outcome of those negotiations, once accepted by the secretary of state, was to be enacted through regulations to deliver fair pay agreements for workers who were in scope. The Scottish Government recognised the opportunity to potentially underpin much of the work already undertaken in Scotland on sectoral bargaining by seeking to extend the scope of the bill to Scotland. That will provide the Scottish Government with the option to regulate for negotiated fair pay agreements for the sector as an alternative to the aforementioned voluntary process.

We have also succeeded in securing broader applications of those bill provisions to children's services, not just services for adults, and we look forward to continuing to work closely with the UK Government to build on our fair work principles and help to maximise the bill's positive impact across Scotland.

The amendments to which the LCM pertains clarify that negotiating bodies can set only minimum terms and conditions of employment for social care workers and cannot adversely affect those workers' existing terms and conditions or prevent employers from offering better terms and conditions than those agreed by the negotiating body. They also establish the parliamentary procedure for approving codes and guidance. Together, these measures protect social care workers from being forced on to worse contracts, safeguard fair pay and conditions, and help to maintain a competitive and sustainable workforce across the sector.

The Convener: Thank you, minister, for that comprehensive statement. I have had no indication from members that they have any questions. I think that the committee has already scrutinised several LCMs on the bill.

08:50

Meeting continued in private.

09:03

Meeting continued in public.

National Good Food Nation Plan

The Convener: Under the next agenda item, we will take oral evidence on the proposed national good food nation plan that the Scottish Government published on 27 June. I welcome to the committee Mhairi Brown, who is head of food futures at the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission Scotland; Anna Chworow, who is deputy director of Nourish Scotland and is representing the Scottish Food Coalition; Claire Hislop, who is the organisational lead for food and physical activity at Public Health Scotland; and Professor Lindsay Jaacks, who is the deputy director and personal chair of global health and nutrition at the University of Edinburgh. We move straight to questions.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the panel members for coming along. We look forward to your evidence. I will start quite generally and talk a wee bit about the plan overall. It is fair to say that it is ambitious but also that discussions have been on-going for many years. We need to move into the action stage; we have talked about it enough.

Can we achieve the outcomes and the vision that we have talked about over the past 10 years? I am particularly keen to know how we can get over the hurdle of cross-portfolio working—we have to do that with this plan. Do you have a view on how we can move it forward? With the size of the Scottish Government, what are the things that we need to do to ensure that it happens? Lindsay Jaacks seems to be nodding.

Professor Lindsay Jaacks (University of Edinburgh): I will let my colleagues—Claire Hislop, in particular—speak a bit more about cross-sector working. On whether we can achieve it, I think that we can achieve anything. It is an ambitious plan but we can absolutely do it. There is global precedent for doing so. We see big shifts in what people are eating—it often goes in the less healthy direction, but there is no reason to believe that it cannot go in a healthy and sustainable direction. Therefore, we can absolutely do it.

Can we achieve it with the policies that are outlined in the existing plan? I would say probably not. What we are currently doing, which is what the current plan outlines, is not sufficient. However, this is the first plan of many to come, and it is worth while to get going and get started, to monitor and evaluate what is working and to share the lessons. It can be achieved. We need to do more to achieve it, but that does not mean that we should not get started.

Claire Hislop (Public Health Scotland): Thank you for inviting us here today. Improving diet and weight is a core part of what Public Health Scotland does, and collaboration is a key part of that. We welcome the good food nation plan and the opportunity that it brings to work collaboratively across the sector. It really sets out how we will work on this, with cross-government support, looking at different policies. It needs to engage more on how we will get other stakeholders involved. This is going to take a whole-system approach, so we need other actors in the system to work together, and we need to outline better how we will do that.

Work on improving health has never been more important. Such work not only improves health and wellbeing across the sector but helps to build our economy; if we have a healthier workforce, we will reduce our input to the national health service. We really need to move away from the idea of individual behaviour change. The plan gives us an opportunity to work much more collaboratively across the system.

The population health framework was recently published, setting out a 10-year plan for what we need to do. It was a momentous occasion for public health. Working collectively, we have an opportunity to make change. We have not had the change in the past that we need. I cannot sit comfortably and say that primary 1 children in our poorest communities are twice as likely to be at risk of being overweight and of obesity than those in our wealthiest communities. We need to take action.

With the good food nation plan, the population health framework and other policies in Scotland, this is our opportunity to work together—not just in Government but across stakeholders in our NHS, our local authorities, our third sector and our businesses—and take action. We can do it. It will not happen overnight, but we are all here around this table to make it happen.

Mhairi Brown (Food, Farming and Countryside Commission Scotland): Good morning. Thank you very much for the invite to speak to the committee. The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission really welcomes this food-systems approach. There is a lot in the proposed plan that is positive.

There is an imbalance of power in the food system, and there is a concentration of power with corporate influence. Multinational corporations have the resource and the access to policy to strongly influence what we eat, what is on supermarket shelves and how that is produced and distributed. They also have access into policy, which can lead to dilution of policies, confusion about evidence and a tendency to go to voluntary measures as opposed to mandatory. Although

there is a lot of great language in the plan about changing the food environment, which we very much support, without addressing corporate power explicitly and having clear indicators that could help to address that, I feel that the leadership that has been shown by the Scottish Government could be undermined, along with the impact of delivering the plan.

Anna Chworow (Nourish Scotland): I absolutely agree with you. The longer-term outcomes that the plan talks about are very ambitious in scope. The direction of travel is absolutely right but, to echo Lindsay Jaacks's point, it is at the moment mostly a summary of existing policies, and those existing policies will not allow us to move in the direction that we are outlining at the pace that we need.

I agree with Claire Hislop that collaboration is absolutely key. We need not just a whole-Government effort but a whole-society or national endeavour. Therefore, it is key to outline clear mechanisms for collaboration between local authorities, health boards, civil society, community groups and businesses as well as the new independent food commission. However, it has not been evident in how we have developed the proposed plan thus far that such collaboration is at the forefront of people's minds.

It is interesting to look at the most recent guidance from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations about implementing food system approaches. We talk a lot about food system approaches as being something that we need to do more of, but the actual implementation is quite difficult. The FAO talks about the importance of distributed leadership and allowing people to work beyond their mandates to look at opportunities for collaboration where there is intersection of different aspects of the plan or policies.

The plan as it stands is still quite siloed in its approach. There has not yet been enough collaboration across Government and across domains, so there are definitely opportunities to do more.

Carol Mochan: My colleagues will go on to discuss some of this, so I will not focus too much on it, but if there was one message to give to Government on cross-portfolio working, what would it be? Do people in the Government just need to talk more, or do we need an action plan? What advice would you give us? We talk about cross-portfolio working so much, but just getting it in place seems quite difficult at times.

Anna Chworow: If it was an easy question, we would have solved it by now. It is always good to extend a little bit of grace to people who are trying

really hard to try new ways of working in Government, which is not easy.

More use of the ministerial working group on food is right. We also need to bring in more stakeholders through round tables and steering groups to allow a wider perspective on the food system, which is not only vast and complex but very dynamic in nature, so things change all the time. We need to continue to bring people round the table to offer different perspectives so that Government can weigh up the views and evidence that it is hearing. The Government then needs to be really clear on the direction of travel.

Carol Mochan: I have one more question, which is for Lindsay Jaacks and is about leadership. Should the leadership come from Government, which then has to pass that to other stakeholders to do the working-beyond-scope activity?

Professor Jaacks: Yes—that makes a lot of sense. However, there also needs to be distributed leadership, as Anna Chworow mentioned. Champions are really effective for getting movements going in food system transformation, but the issue is the legacy and what happens once those champions move away. You see that happen, whether at local authority level or national level, or at institutional level, when it comes to institutional food.

Leadership and champions are important, but we also need systems in place to ensure that there is continuity should those champions move on to something else. That is where networks in which local authorities, health boards and others can learn from each other around what is working are really valuable. We have had asks to the living lab for those types of platforms and sharing spaces where people who are responsible for developing the plans can come together and share what has worked, what has not worked, and how they are going about things so that there is no duplication of effort across the authorities that are responsible for making plans.

There needs to be leadership at multiple levels, and it needs to go iteratively, not only with leadership from the national Government but with reciprocal leadership from local authorities and health boards.

09:15

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Loads of questions are going through my head, but I will just stick with what you said about local authorities and health boards. Each local authority and health board has to come up with a plan, which should reflect the Government's proposals in its good food nation plan. Might there be conflict between a local authority's land use strategy—we have been

looking at issues such as building houses on greenfield sites—and a health board's plan, which might be focused more on health than on land use? We are trying to support changes to our food system locally, but how will we avoid such conflict? I will stick with local instead of global.

Anna Chworow: That is a really important question, which emphasises the importance of not only collaboration but dealing with power dynamics in the system. The FAO is increasingly pointing to conflict management as a skill that is needed in order to advance food systems change. We have been pleased about guidance from the Scottish Government that says that health boards and local authorities are able to collaborate on the plans, because the last thing that we want is the clash of outcomes that you referred to.

What would also have been helpful is more collaboration at an earlier stage with local authorities, some of which—for example, those in Glasgow and Fife—already have food plans in place. We could have learned from those examples, so that instead of national policies cascading down to local authorities, there would have been more of a dialogue to understand the potential pressure points.

Emma Harper: Does the food commission need to help by providing a template for each local authority and health board to follow, which would provide guidance?

Anna Chworow: What is quite confusing in the national plan is that although it says that local authorities need to have regard to the outcomes that are specified in the plan, they can also come up with their own outcomes and priorities. That is the kind of contradictory guidance that is not helpful. There needs to be more collaboration, whether it is with the food commission, or whether it is a dialogue between the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities or, more widely, with local authorities and health boards.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning to our witnesses. Can you explain how the population health framework and the proposed good food nation plan will ensure an improvement in the food environment? Anyone, ladies?

Claire Hislop: We have the good food nation plan and the new population health framework. The latter clearly sets out the ambition of improving diet and healthy weight as a key priority for the next few years. The Scottish Government, working alongside us, Food Standards Scotland and others, will be producing a diet and healthy weight implementation plan to take forward some of the actions that are required. The importance of those actions is that they are evidence based and can be implemented across Scotland. We are

working on how we can achieve both plans. We will consider the actions that are outlined in the good food nation plan, because, ultimately, our health boards, local authorities and stakeholders will be delivering both of those policies, and, for that to happen, we need to ensure that those policies marry up.

We need significant change in our food environment. We talked earlier about individual responsibility. I think that there is still a societal belief in the old rhetoric that we just need to eat less and move more. That is not the case. You cannot do that when you go out into an environment in which you are surrounded by sweets piled high at checkouts or are offered a bar of chocolate when you buy a newspaper. We need to change that dynamic.

The good food nation plan gives us an opportunity to work collaboratively across policy sectors such as the economic policy and climate change sectors and bring them all together through the population health framework and our new implementation plan to make that difference. We hope that working in that way will enable us to make the difference that we need to see, so that we are not having to support some of the figures that I mentioned earlier. The projections from our future burden of disease study show that the situation is going to get worse: rates of obesity are going to rise, and we will potentially see a 36 per cent increase in type 2 diabetes by 2044 if we do not prevent that. We need to act now. We have the legislative tools that we need in order to do that, so we hope that we will be able to work together to make that happen.

David Torrance: To what extent do the plan and the population health framework properly and explicitly consider obesity and poor diet in relation to a range of demographics, such as elderly people who are malnourished, ethnic minorities and those with disordered eating?

Claire Hislop: The population health framework takes a “health in all policies” approach, which means that we would want to consider the impact of all policies that have an implication for health. In our consultation response to the good food nation plan, we suggested that that approach is taken and that health inequalities impact assessments are used when policies are being developed. Those assessments take into consideration the wider building blocks of health as well as the different population groups, so using them as a tool would ensure that policy development takes into account the broad spectrum of ranges including, for example, elderly populations and different cultural aspects.

Anna Chworow: In all of the policies, there is a focus on healthy weight, which recognises the questions of malnutrition and eating disorders,

which you mentioned. However, in practice, when we hear that term, we still think about overweight and obesity, so we are not considering those other ends of the spectrum sufficiently. That is particularly the case with malnutrition in older age groups, where we are actually probably more concerned with people eating enough rather than eating too much.

You mentioned demographics and different income brackets. People’s incomes definitely have an impact on health inequalities issues and dietary health inequalities issues. At the same time, the fact that 20 per cent of people living in the most affluent areas struggle with obesity means that the issue is a really wide societal problem. Yes, there are some discrepancies, but, to echo Claire Hislop’s point, it is actually a much broader issue that needs bold action.

David Torrance: Submissions to our call for views highlighted the importance of food procurement in the public sector—for school meals, meals that are provided in the hospital and care sector and so on—but procurement is discussed in the framework only in relation to community wealth building. To what extent are public procurement practices for food for children, patients and vulnerable people in care important to public health, and why is that not addressed in the population health framework?

Professor Jaacks: I will comment on the first part and leave the second part to Claire Hislop. In terms of the impacts of procurement, I will speak specifically to the situation regarding school meals. At the university, we have been running a national dietary assessment of children and young people in Scotland on behalf of Food Standards Scotland. Recently, we have been focusing on children who consume school meals, and we have found that they are much more likely to achieve the Scottish dietary goals than children who do not.

One of the other interesting things that we see in that data is that it is at the age of between seven and 10 that children’s diets start to deteriorate and head towards more unhealthy foods in terms of the intake of fibre and micronutrients such as iron and in terms of the consumption of ultra-processed food. That suggests that some of the benefits of providing universal school meals early in primary school are being realised. Two to four-year-olds in Scotland have the healthiest diets of any population group that we have looked at in all of the national dietary survey data. That suggests that public procurement can play a significant role in improving the diets of children and young people. One can hope that we will reap the long-term benefits of those children having healthy diets at an early age.

There is a lot of work to be done for secondary school students, because that is the area where we see the least healthy diets and where, particularly in adolescent girls, we see the highest risk of micronutrient insufficiency.

There is lots that can be done. We were very supportive of the other responses that said that an extension of universal free school meals to all primary and secondary school students should be explored, because that could have a significant impact on long-term trajectories towards healthy diets.

Claire Hislop: Public sector procurement has a key role in setting an example to the wider sector and in delivering healthy, locally sourced and sustainable meals to the public sector. There is also an opportunity to develop local economies and community wealth building. There is a key opportunity to provide thousands of healthier, more sustainable, locally sourced meals to people within the public sector, including in our nurseries, hospitals and care homes.

There is an opportunity for local working, through procurement, and I know that there are now examples of that across Scotland. Fife is looking at how to make that part of community wealth building by using anchor institutions as a way to procure public meals.

We must recognise one really important factor. As Lindsay Jaacks said, people go from public sector buildings into a food environment that does not necessarily support the education that happens there. There is still work to do there, but there is certainly a role for public sector procurement in providing healthier and more sustainable meals.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I have a long-standing interest in the topic and I have been listening to what has been said about public procurement. I have been talking for years about the fact that there are big hospitals in Glasgow and Edinburgh that do not have kitchens and do not have the ability to cook any food that is procured locally. We currently drive packaged food up the M6 from Wales, and most of it ends up being thrown out.

When we speak in glowing terms about the wide-ranging good food nation plan from the Scottish Government, we do so in that environment. How do we square the circle if a hospital has no ability to cook food? We are buying it from Wales already packaged, bringing it up here, reheating it and then throwing it out. Can anyone explain how we square that circle?

Anna Chworow: I am happy to begin. In Britain in general, and in Scotland, we have the industrialised food system that you point to, and more so than in other cultures. You have given

just one example of that. When we think about the good food nation ambition, we have to think about what sort of food culture we are striving to have in Scotland, what values we want to cultivate around food and how the investments that we make can follow those values.

We still underestimate the importance of food system transformation in general. You pointed to a particular food experience, but there are wider questions about how important food system transformation is and about the investment in that transformation. The United Nations says that that particular area is one of six key entry points for achieving wider sustainable development goals, because any changes that are made to food systems cascade across a wide range of social and environmental policies.

If the Government is to follow through on the bold outcomes that are in the plan, there must be real investment in bringing back kitchens, training staff to cook with raw ingredients and procuring and working with organic produce. That is all really important in modelling, from the Government side, the kind of food system that we want.

Mhairi Brown: I definitely agree with Anna Chworow. We need to acknowledge that we are part of a global food system, and a real positive of the plan is that it talks about the need for place-based approaches and much more local leadership. Along with that, however, we have to recognise what is needed to support local food systems, including investment in infrastructure, to ensure that local producers have a route to market.

09:30

The plan talks a lot about food accessibility. For many people in remote and rural areas across Scotland, the reality is that they have to travel for miles to get to even a supermarket. We need to invest in things such as food hubs to ensure that people can access the food that is grown near them—perhaps even in the fields right next door—which they cannot currently access.

That raises a big barrier to public procurement. There are many barriers for local producers in getting into procurement, and contracts tend to go to large producers—it is about volume over quality and where the food is produced. I truly believe in the power of public procurement, and public food can be a real good for the country, but we need to be honest about what is needed to get to that point.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): My question leads on quite well from that. I will talk about food education—a lot of that is about schools, but not exclusively so. At the highest level, is there enough ambition for food education

in the plan? That may include cooking skills, but I am thinking about education around our relationship with food in a broader sense, whether that is in the curriculum or through education more widely.

Professor Jaacks: I think that the plan emphasises education and cooking too much—

Patrick Harvie: Too much?

Professor Jaacks: Yes. Educating people, including kids, about food puts the onus for change on individuals. The food environment needs to change, and eating a healthy and sustainable diet needs to be convenient and the default option. It should not be up to consumers to know what is healthy and sustainable and to choose, and be able to afford, that food. It needs to be the default.

We can take France as an example. People in France actually spend fewer hours on cooking per week than people in the UK do—it is 5.5 hours in France and 5.9 hours in the UK. I do not think that cooking is necessary for a healthy and sustainable diet. In fact, if you are cooking with gas, it may be less sustainable to cook at home—that is certainly the case if you bake a loaf of bread rather than purchase it from a local bakery.

The plan needs to de-emphasise educating individuals and really crank up the emphasis on making a healthy, sustainable diet affordable and convenient for everyone in Scotland. That is my view—Anna Chworow may want to add to that.

Anna Chworow: I will happily do so. I absolutely agree—we sometimes focus on the conversation about educating children in particular and on education more broadly as a way of avoiding other, more difficult conversations. Education is a bit of a red herring when, as Lindsay Jaacks mentioned, we need to talk about the power dynamics in the system and the trade-offs and so on in the wider food environment.

There is interesting research that shows that people's food literacy and confidence in being able to cook at home is really high—it is more than 90 per cent—so we do not need to focus on education.

I had an interesting experience when talking to young kids in an Edinburgh primary school in preparation for the good food nation conversation. We went in and said, "What do you know about food?" and they told us, "My mum gets a lot of coupons through the door for takeaway meals and pizzas, and that's not very healthy." They said, "Of course those fast-food workers don't care how much salt they put on your food. They're not paid very much and the job isn't very secure, so why would they care?" They also said, "Free-range chickens aren't really free range."

The level of awareness among the younger population and the population at large is really high. I absolutely agree that we need to focus on the environment that we live in, as opposed to individual behaviour.

Patrick Harvie: I find this really interesting. Perhaps, in framing my question, I did not quite express the sense that food education is broader than cooking skills—it is not as simple as that. I was thinking back to one of the earliest bills that I had to scrutinise in the Parliament, nearly 20 years ago. We are aware that the attempt to develop the good food nation ethos is 10 years old. Nearly 20 years ago, a piece of draft legislation on public health and nutrition in schools was going through the Parliament—it was the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Bill. At the time, I took the view that its approach to nutritional standards was reductive, albeit that it might have represented progress at the time in many senses.

Even then, some of the best schools were pursuing that approach and going way beyond it. They were creating a food environment such that, when children were eating, it felt as if a group of human beings were sitting together around a table sharing food, whereas other schools were creating a food environment that looked like a fast-food outlet. That in itself is part of food education. In a lot of schools, food is still consumed in an environment that looks like a fast-food outlet, with disposable packaging on everything and so on. Twenty years ago, some of the best local authorities were doing something completely different—they were thinking about food culture as part of their educational role.

When I talk about food education, I am not just talking about teaching people how to cook. What is our education system really teaching about how we consume and how we eat together?

Anna Chworow: Food culture is profoundly important here, and it is underestimated. You can see how it plays out in schools in different ways. Beyond the school environment, some community settings are doing incredible work in fostering vibrant food cultures through community growing, celebration of food, food festivals, harvest festivals and so on. Those efforts deserve credit and support for growing a better food culture.

We tend to focus education on general nutrition, but vocational skills—training chefs and cooks to produce more plant-forward diets—as well as the celebration of food and local sourcing are all really important.

Patrick Harvie: I will reframe the original question. Is the plan ambitious enough to achieve the transformation in how we educate ourselves and create a culture around food that captures the spirit of what you are talking about? As I have

said, that was being done in some places 20 years ago, and it is still being done in some places, but it is far from being the norm. Will the plan deliver that kind of change? Perhaps someone who has not spoken wants to respond.

Mhairi Brown: Thank you for reframing the question. The current situation—where we are now—could be more explicit in the plan. The culture of convenience that we have now has been created over many years of an industrialised food system. It is a matter of painting a picture—not just a vision but a version—of where we could get to, and all the necessary legislative work and robust policies will play a great part in getting there.

That change in the food culture is like “Field of Dreams”—“If you build it, they will come.” If the healthier food and the local food is there, and if people can access that food wherever they go, the culture will naturally change as a result.

Patrick Harvie: Are there any other comments on what I asked about?

Claire Hislop: We have mentioned the third sector. We have a thriving third sector that is working on food—not just on growing but on community skills, in community cafes and so on. The organisations that are working in those areas have a key role in helping to deliver the food culture, and they tackle so many other issues that we need to address through the good food nation plan.

Through food, such organisations allow us access to communities that we might not get in other ways. We can use that as a medium to discuss things such as income maximisation or to offer training. We have a real asset in our third communities. In our plan, we may need to strengthen the role of the third sector and the community food work across that sector to help strengthen the raft of opportunities that those communities bring to improving health.

Patrick Harvie: My last question on food education in the broader sense is about staff—whether they are in schools, hospitals, care settings or other parts of the public sector. Food education is not just about basic skills but about the approach towards the different food culture that we are trying to create among the staff in those organisations. How does the plan engage with an empowering and respectful approach to changing what we expect from people who are working in food and in those environments?

Claire Hislop: I am happy to come in on that. Over the years, I have worked on a lot of public sector guidance around food. I have worked on school food, nursery food and hospital food. A key component is always the staff and how the food is delivered.

In a previous role, I was a school inspector. When I went into a school dining room and the staff were engaged in talking to the children about food, there was a real buzz. When we deliver a lot of these policies, training is built in for staff—it is not always going to be perfect, but it has a key role in enabling the change that we need to happen. Striving for training on and the delivery of the plan’s various ambitions will be really important.

Patrick Harvie: Thank you very much.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising national health service general practitioner. From what has been said so far, I am hearing that the solution is not down to individuals but to the way that food looks in a store and that we do not need people to cook. The answer that you gave to Patrick Harvie was that it is not about educating people on how to cook but, from the sounds of it, getting ready meals to be better.

We have talked a lot about the cost of food. Let us look at Aldi, where you can buy carrots for 42p and a baking potato for 24p and where lettuce and swedes are available for 60-odd pence. We can also look at Lidl, where you can buy 10 pork loin portions for £6.49. Those are affordable prices that allow people to cook for their families on a budget and in a very healthy way. Am I actually hearing that that is not what we need to promote?

Professor Jaacks: If it is all right, I will chime in. I am not saying that people should not cook but that people learning how to cook, or more cooking lessons, is not the answer. That is not just because of the anecdotal thing that I said about France; there have been trials where cooking lessons have been given and where they have had very little impact on dietary intake in children or their families.

As Anna Chworow pointed out, people know how to cook sufficiently and, as you say, the ingredients are affordable. However, you cannot look just at the ingredients—there is also the cost of energy to cook and the time cost that is associated with cooking. If you are coming home and trying to cook a meal in 15 minutes, that is actually quite difficult. It is hard to roast carrots in 15 minutes. When we talk about the costs of a cooked meal versus those of a ready meal in our research, we always include people’s time costs in terms of planning, procurement, cooking and clean-up.

Unfortunately—although I do not personally feel that it is unfortunate—I think that convenience is here to stay. In all the surveys that are done on the drivers of food choice in the UK context, convenience is a major driver and often comes second after affordability. Therefore, I do not think

that convenient food is going away. Whether convenient food is a ready meal or it is popping into a local community diner and having food with your neighbours, those things could both be considered convenient, but they have very different food cultures underlying them, and they could have different health and sustainability implications.

Convenience needs to stay in the food system—that is what consumers want. However, what is convenient is open to interpretation—it does not have to be an ultra-processed ready meal.

09:45

Sandesh Gulhane: BBC Good Food has 37 15-minute recipes for people to use. There are slow cookers that use very little energy and can create healthy meals when you are not even there. Surely that is the type of thing that we need to be promoting.

Professor Jaacks: I would not want to not promote those things, certainly.

Anna Chworow: What those 15-minute recipes assume is that somebody in the family or in the household has had the time to plan, shop for and prepare the meal. That is all of the work that happens before you get to the cooking stage, which takes 15 minutes. That burden falls on somebody in the household, and it often falls on women. Increasingly, both parents in households work, and they are juggling shift work with care work. These things are just difficult. If the strategy of encouraging people to cook more were to be successful, we would have seen some results of it by now, but we are just not seeing results in the food system.

I do not think that simply trying the same strategy over and over again will help us. Some of the food systems thinkers describe this as “imaginative gridlock”. We are trying the same strategy over and over again, hoping that it will give us a different result, when it will not.

On Lindsay Jaacks’s point about community diners, that is how some other countries are dealing with the problem—or how they are dealing with the simple question of people seeking convenience in busy and complicated lives. They are rolling out chains of state-supported restaurants, public diners and public restaurants. We see examples in Turkey, Poland, China, Brazil and Mexico, where Governments are taking a more imaginative and bolder approach. They are trying to reshape the food culture and the food environment but not work against the fact that people are seeking convenience or are trying to manage competing demands. Within those competing demands, cooking is often the thing

that falls off the agenda—that is just what happens.

Sandesh Gulhane: Okay. Indian chickpeas with poached eggs: prep time five minutes; cook time 10 minutes.

I will ask Claire Hislop about hospitals. A BBC survey in 2017 said that there was a cost of 94p per meal per patient. How are we getting good, healthy meals for that cost?

Claire Hislop: We currently have guidance for nutritional standards for food in hospitals. We recently updated them and they will go out to hospitals soon.

I do not work with hospital boards, so I cannot give an understanding of how they operate, but there is a set of standards that hospitals in Scotland are meeting. Those require that nutritional standards are met and that there is an offer for a range of different conditions, and they are met within budget. I suppose that it will be the same as school food and other public sector food, in that it is all based on cost. I cannot comment on how hospitals are achieving that within their budgets.

Sandesh Gulhane: Have you eaten a hospital meal?

Claire Hislop: Yes.

Sandesh Gulhane: Was it tasty, good and something that you would happily have again?

Claire Hislop: I have not had a problem with any public sector meal that I have had recently, so yes, I would eat such meals again.

Sandesh Gulhane: A lot of people would disagree with that. When I worked in the hospital sector, we used to joke that, if you smell the food and you are hungry, something is really wrong.

On the nutritional intake, when Army people go into hospitals, they are on double portions to try to pull up the calorific intake. People in hospital need a huge amount of calories, because they are burning through calories to recover. Will the plan address that?

Claire Hislop: There is clear guidance for hospitals, called the food in hospitals guidance, which outlines standards for different ailments. Depending on what a person is in hospital for, they might or might not need to eat specific diets. That would be decided through working with the clinician and the patient, depending on what was required. The set of standards allows for that. You would work with an individual clinician on that in hospitals.

I am confident that what we deliver in hospitals in Scotland, which fulfils the guidance, meets the current nutrition evidence.

Sandesh Gulhane: You spoke about locally sourced ingredients. Will the plan support healthy ways of eating, such as eating venison? Will it support abattoirs to be able to provide Scottish meat to Scottish people?

Claire Hislop: I cannot answer that question. Maybe someone else on the panel can.

Anna Chworow: I am happy to speak to it. The Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, which is currently being considered, supports work on providing venison.

As to the question of abattoirs and local processing infrastructure generally, we have been talking about that as one of the issues that needs to be solved. No, a sufficient amount of attention is not being paid to that in the plan, but that is partly because the plan is a summary of current policies. That is precisely what we are saying: we need new areas of policy development, commitment and investment, which this plan is not providing.

The Convener: I have five committee members who want to come in on supplementaries on this topic. I ask that those questions be short and sharp, and perhaps the panel could similarly answer them quickly.

Emma Harper: I have a supplementary on ultra-high-processed food. I am thinking about the work of Henry Dimbleby, in which he talks about reformulation of the foods that we are buying—that is, reducing the salt, the fat and the sugar. I am thinking also about Pekka Puska's work in Finland to add mushrooms to sausages as a population health strategy, which was done by working with the processors.

The whole system is complicated, and there are things that can be done. Is reformulation part of the plan to support there being less fat, sugar and salt in food?

Professor Jaacks: I think that we need to throw everything that we can at it. Certainly in the short term, reformulation should definitely be part of the plan.

There is a lot of emerging evidence on ultra-processed foods, but it is only emerging—the area is still very new. For example, for the national surveys that we are running, we are trying to quantify ultra-processed food consumption. We spend hours each day deciding things such as whether, if I make a stew at home where I chop up my 40p carrots and put in a lot fresh veg from the supermarket and then I throw in a bouillon cube, that would actually be an ultra-processed food. By the strict definition that is used in a lot of the work that is being done, the whole soup and everything in it would count as an ultra-processed food. I think that most of us here would agree that that is not fair. There is a lot of work to be done just on

defining ultra-processed food, and a thing has to be defined in order for its impacts on health to be studied.

There is something there, but it is a bit too soon to regulate and make policy on that. That is the view of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and, I believe, Food Standards Scotland. I would say that it is definitely something to consider, but in the next plan, because in five years' time we will know a lot more about ultra-processed foods—how to define them and then how to effectively regulate them to promote population health.

Carol Mochan: I want to understand the power imbalance that some people live through in their life. People often live in poor housing, have precarious work or have caring responsibilities, and we know that there is a high level of health problems in our population. As a politician, I really need to understand my responsibility, and not just the individual's responsibility, in changing this food environment.

Is there more work to be done to move away from it being the individual's responsibility to fix the problem and towards politicians and Government taking responsibility? Do we need a wee bit more of that in the plan and perhaps education for some of us as politicians about how we do that?

Anna Chworow: Yes. To give you a brief example, as you were speaking, Castlemilk in Glasgow came to mind. For the past decade, people there have been asking for a supermarket to come to the area. They are not able to access fresh fruit and veg where they live. It is a food system issue, a dietary health issue and a human rights issue. Policy makers and politicians have more work to do to shape the food environment, and work to do with businesses to make sure that that food environment is healthier and that it serves us all. Where there are gaps in provision, they need to step up proactively through things such as public diners and other methods to bolster provision.

Brian Whittle: I was not going to come in on this, but I must admit I am dismayed at some of the responses to Patrick Harvie and Sandesh Gulhane about the education system. Do you not agree that, in the past few decades, we have lost a lot of knowledge about cooking and the understanding of what healthy food is?

There is the idea that we need to make our fast food healthier, but the problem is the rise in fast food and the leaving behind of batch cooking, for example. We do not do enough of that. It is about promoting health and educating people to make better decisions, which then helps to drive the food environment. We never talk about that.

There are so many good examples of that. I am thinking of the model that is used in Copenhagen, where the kids take places on a rota to cook and serve the meals in schools. They sit around a table in a community, and all the food is sourced within 10km of the school. Surely to goodness, that is where we need to get to. If people do not know how to cook and do not have the basics of cooking, we are never going to solve the problem. I do not understand the idea of not educating people, because we have lost that in the past few decades.

Professor Jaacks: I would not be surprised if young people today know more about cooking than their parents or grandparents did. We teach a class called healthy eating for people and planet to 100 undergraduates at the University of Edinburgh. You would be shocked by the things that they bring in from Instagram and TikTok. They are interacting with so much nutritional and cooking information. They can pan fry tofu way better than I can; I do not think that their grandparents know what tofu is. The younger generation is very knowledgeable about cooking.

To go back to what Anna Chworow said, we cannot keep trying the same thing. It is not working. I definitely agree that what you described as going on in the school in Copenhagen is fantastic. It would be great and it would help, but I do not think that it is the only solution.

I definitely agree with what you said about the deluge of fast food, but the solution to that and takeaways on the high street is not in educating people that takeaways are not healthy. People know that going to get fish and chips is not healthy for them. I do not think that the solution to those things is education.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): It is refreshing to hear the wide range of views. I appreciate people speaking frankly, because it is important that we do not have pillars of what we assume to be fact and that we are prepared to change our thinking on the basis of what we see in real life.

Lindsay Jaacks mentioned community diners, which are an amazing opportunity, because they provide not only potentially healthy, affordable food but a sense of community. There is also an important wellbeing aspect to that, which I think is really good. I had never thought of them in the sense that they are just really convenient, which I think is an extra reason to push for them.

There are a number of models across Scotland, but one that I like best is where the community has come together and has a little piece of land, so people are growing, cooking and eating together and bringing down the cost. There is ultra-localism in terms of where the produce comes from, and

the produce is affordable. For me, one of the most important aspects is the wellbeing, including the mental wellbeing, of the folk who are involved and the huge boost that they get. How do we encourage more of that in different places? Mhairi, do you want to go first?

10:00

Mhairi Brown: That is a really great point—if we are to move away from a culture of convenience, we really need to have something to replace that aspect.

At the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission Scotland, we have been running a project with citizens for two years, which is called the food conversation. We have been asking citizens what they want from food, to address the toxic narratives that people just do not care about food, that they want only cheap food, or that they do not want Government intervention. We have engaged with 300 citizens across the country, including in Scotland, and we have heard consistently that what they really want is much more connection to food, including to where it comes from, and opportunities to grow food and to get involved in their local community and connect with one another. I completely agree that having public diners as a way for people to get healthy, affordable food that is prepared and that is convenient for them will also benefit wider aspects of health.

Anna Chworow: It is important to create a distinction between the community social projects that you have described, which are instrumental in creating a better food culture, bringing connection around food and celebrating food, and public restaurants, which are really a robust part of public infrastructure. Those public restaurants function as third spaces, which we need more of in a world that is moving increasingly online, but they are less about socialising and more about the provision of good food.

I think back to my home country, where I used public restaurants all the time. I was from a single-parent household, and going to those places supplemented cooking at home. If my mum did not have time to prepare a meal, or shop for it, or even think about what we were eating that night, we would just go to our local diner and we would each get a meal. It is important to say that your ability to access a good, healthy and affordable meal should not be conditional on having to socialise. Those two aspects need to be separate, although both are valid and have a place.

Joe FitzPatrick: How do we make sure that that type of public diner does not become stigmatised and make it clear that it is for everyone? There is a concern about that.

Anna Chworow: The way that we think about it is that nobody feels stigmatised getting on a bus or going to a library. We have a slightly unusual way of thinking about low-cost food that somehow automatically ties it to food insecurity, but it need not be so. People who access public parks go there not because they do not have gardens but because they enjoy green spaces. People who have cars also access buses and trains. It is about creating provision that is for everybody on equal terms and at a low cost for everyone. That removes the stigma automatically.

The Convener: Professor Jaacks, very briefly, please.

Professor Jaacks: Oh, no—I do not want to comment.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I wonder about the design of public procurement in all of this. The opportunity cost of public procurement, food behaviour and system design were mentioned earlier. By my rough calculations, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde spent around £24 million on food in 2018. What is the opportunity cost of that? How could we better utilise such expenditure?

Community catering organisations, social enterprises, food pantries and so on are already on a shoestring and are struggling to get grant funding, so surely the social enterprise model would be well served if such vast expenditure were channelled more into the local economy. Do you have any insights into public procurement design and how that could change?

Claire Hislop: That is not my area of expertise, so it would be best to speak to local authorities about how that could work. We have to consider things such as supply chains, and we have to meet lots of different standards.

However, there are opportunities. The work on the good food nation plan by the actors involved in it will allow us to start to look for different opportunities. It should be welcomed, certainly in light of the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill, because the NHS in Scotland is a significant anchor institution and it has lots of buildings. We have lots of opportunities to procure more locally and bring in more healthy, sustainable food. The plan also provides a market for new products, so people can develop new things.

You would probably get a better response from a local authority about how that might be done, but there are opportunities to look at.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I will focus a little bit on school meals and early years nutrition. My colleagues have already ventured into those areas, as usually happens in such discussions, but I am interested

in the issue of breastfeeding, which the plan mentions briefly and only in relation to policies that we already have in place. Could the plan be a little bit more ambitious in that area by promoting the clear benefits of breastfeeding, where it is possible for mother and baby, as it helps prevent obesity, control infection and promote healthy gut bacteria?

I also wonder whether explicitly mentioning breastfeeding more in the plan might help local authorities and health and social care partnerships when they are developing their own plans, because they might have to fund breastfeeding co-ordinators and provide support on the ground for mothers at a time when it can be really difficult to do so.

Claire Hislop: We would actively promote breastfeeding. The plan makes some mention of it, but we are also thinking about linked plans, such as the population health framework and the new diet and healthy weight delivery plan, which will focus on early years nutrition and child health, too. We must ensure that we link the plan to the active policies that we will support.

One thing that we are keen to have, which we mentioned in our consultation response, is a set of indicators that can be used across different policies. For example, if we have indicators to support the population health framework, it would be good to see them reflected in the good food nation plan, too. When we are monitoring those indicators, we are actually looking at making a system-wide change happen across Scotland. Having such indicators would be beneficial because it would reduce the burden of reporting on different things for local authorities and health boards, as well as following the Government plan.

The points on breastfeeding could be strengthened in the population health framework and in the good food nation plan, because it is really important and something that we want to advocate for.

Elena Whitham: Sticking with the issue of good nutrition in early years, Lindsay Jaacks spoke about the studies showing that two to four-year-olds are among the healthiest population groups at the moment. I want to think a little bit about the stage before that. We know that those who are eligible will get the best start grant, so they will be able to get nutritious food in their very early years.

Consider the food environment in those very early years, which takes parents away from thinking about what they could do in their household to give their youngest children nutrition from what they regularly eat. The food environment out there is all about pre-prepared, pre-packaged food that is sometimes not as nutritious as it is made out to be. How do we ensure that we are focused on early years

nutrition—before the point when children access early years education—so that we are giving kids and the families who are supporting them the best opportunity?

Anna Chworow: That goes back to regulating the food environment. Lindsay Jaacks's point about looking at ultra-processed food as an area of priority in the next plan feels really important. The evidence base that comes from the monitoring and evaluation of best start grants is also important, because it shows really clearly that those grants support parents to try new foods with kids. Even if they are not sure whether the child will like the foods, the grant allows them to take a little bit of a risk because they have that extra bit of income.

Another important aspect in that regard is the emerging evidence that came out of a long-term study last year, which looks at the effect of food insecurity in the early years and throughout childhood on persistent levels of obesity. The study shows that young kids who experience food insecurity or notice food insecurity in the household are four times more likely to develop persistent obesity than those who do not experience that. If we are concerned about obesity, that is one area in which bolstering incomes is important. It is really important that policies such as the Scottish child payment continue and that the rates continue to increase.

Elena Whitham: That is an important point. I have spoken previously about experiencing severe food insecurity as a child for more than a year and developing lifelong issues related to that. The effect of that cannot be overstated. We must consider the effect that that has on young people. Thank you very much for bringing the issue to our attention.

We have spoken a lot about school meals already, but I wonder whether free or discounted school meals should feature as an outcome in the plan or whether it should include indicators on such meals.

Over the summer, East Ayrshire Council, which is my local authority, gave us a report in which it mentioned that it has trialled a half-price meal deal for secondary school children. I used to chair the Association for Public Service Excellence soft facilities management group, which was devoted to, among other things, catering in schools, and I know that the secondary school market has always been difficult. The council has created a school meal deal. That will sound like convenience food to some individuals, but the approach fits the food environment in which those young people live. If they can get a school meal deal for £1.25 versus what is being offered on the local high street, the uptake will increase—and the food is

healthy. Are there indicators covering such things in the plan?

I see that Lindsay Jaacks is nodding. Do you want to comment?

Professor Jaacks: Sure. It looks like that programme will continue, which is fantastic—I was really excited to see it. It is great to see those results.

There are indicators in the plan on school meal uptake, which are a great starting point. In general, there are few process indicators that enable us to report on how we are achieving certain outcomes over time. Those are intermediate elements that you can monitor that are on the pathway to some of the more outcome-driven things such as levels of obesity in primary 1, for example. Therefore, there is definitely scope to do that.

It is hard from the existing data to determine the type of meal that is provided—that is, whether it is a school meal or a free school meal. Additional work would be needed to add that in, but that could be looked at. In our living lab, we are very interested in disentangling school meal uptake and looking at aspects such as how that might shift throughout the school year.

Elena Whitham: Does anybody else want to come in?

Mhairi Brown: I will add to that briefly. There is also a case for having clear indicators on the prevalence of fast food outlets and how close those are to schools, and what foods are available around schools.

Elena Whitham: It is a very difficult issue. Even if you explore how you can leverage in planning, it is really difficult to control the environment outside the school.

Brian Whittle: The education environment is a key battleground in this area. We are trying to tackle poor physical and mental health and behaviour, as well as hunger and malnutrition. However, it is not beyond the ability of man and woman to come up with a solution to those.

I am interested to hear your opinion on how the plan could and should address those issues. If kids are coming to school hungry, should we not be considering breakfast provision? Should we not be looking at how we drive pupils' behaviour when it comes to eating breakfast? I would link an activity to that—the driver could be to get pupils to come to school to partake in an activity and then to point out to them that breakfast has been provided. That approach would take away the stigma that is associated with a free school meal.

We are talking about food, but I find it difficult to separate that from the need to be physically

active, given that a lot of health indicators in later life will be around muscle mass and VO_2 max and the like. Basically, I am asking whether the good food nation plan is taking maximum advantage of opportunities in the education environment.

10:15

Claire Hislop: We should be utilising to the best of our ability all the opportunities that we have to educate our children and give them good food. In our nurseries, we have children who are at nursery for longer and they get a meal as part of their education. We have just updated the “Setting the Table” nutritional standards. The children have access to play et cetera within those establishments.

Children then move on to schools, where we also have opportunities to give them healthy food and educate them about where the food comes from.

Breakfast provision at school can certainly be beneficial. It provides opportunities for children to get a good meal and potentially be physically active. It can also allow parents to go to work and it can be a good soft start to the day for children whose houses are more chaotic in the morning. There is an opportunity for schools to deliver that provision, but we appreciate that these things come at a cost.

Within our school and education environment, we have lots of opportunities to improve health and wellbeing, so we need to take them up as best we can.

To pick up on the earlier point about education, it is great that we have a food culture and are educating our children about school meals, but we need to enable that to happen in an environment where there is the resource and the ability to access good, nutritious food. It all comes as a package, but our education establishments have a role in providing healthy food and the learning around that.

Anna Chworow: I will come in briefly on the point about food insecurity and kids coming to school hungry. It is important that we see breakfast clubs as a part of support for parents in relation to chaotic mornings, which Claire Hislop mentioned. However, food insecurity needs to be addressed through cash-first approaches and bolstering incomes. Even if we try to address food insecurity through the provision of breakfast in the morning, kids who are experiencing that are often smarter than we give them credit for. They know that they live in a household where parents are skipping meals, whether that is overt or covert. They understand that and experience the stress that comes through it. The issue needs to be addressed in a different way—not through the

provision of meals, but by bolstering incomes and taking much more dignified approaches.

Sandesh Gulhane: I would like to go back quickly to schools, because I did not get an opportunity to ask about this. We spoke about the food environment outside a school. When I walk down the street, I see an awful lot of secondary school children leaving to go to the chip shop to get the special meal deal or chips for £1. How are we going to incorporate tackling that issue into the plan so that we will allow children to have a healthy meal in the school environment?

Professor Jaacks: As far as I am aware, takeaway management zones have been implemented only in England to date. However, the national planning framework will enable similar things to happen in Scotland. The evidence from England shows that the zones are very effective in preventing takeaways from popping up around schools, or mitigating the effect of that.

However, if your school is already in what we call a food swamp, which is the opposite of a food desert—it is a place with loads of really unhealthy, cheap food—you cannot really address that, because policies such as the management zones do not address existing takeaways in the area, just the development of new ones.

There is not very much there. The frameworks from Public Health Scotland and Food Standards Scotland about eating out and about working with takeaways to make food healthier are one solution. The other solution is to make staying at school a more feasible option because of the time that pupils have and to make it more desirable to consume meals at school. We know that school meals are healthy, because they meet the standards that have been outlined.

Different approaches can be used. As I said, we should not be looking for a silver bullet or for one solution. Instead, we should be throwing everything that we can at the problem and monitoring that to see what works.

One final point is that there is a lot of evidence that weight gain in kids happens not during school time but when they are outside school, for example during the summer holidays. That suggests two things. One is that what we are doing in schools is working and the other is that there is a gap in support for kids to have healthy diets and achieve a healthy weight when they are not in school. We really need innovations to address the food environment.

Sandesh Gulhane: I am really glad that you said that.

The Convener: We must move on, because we are running hugely behind time and still have

seven themes to cover. We might be able to get back to some of what you were going to ask.

Brian Whittle: I am interested in the one health approach and I will start with a general question about that. My concern is that, in all of this, there is no real definition of what we mean by “health”. Is that missing from the document?

I will expand that question a little further. We are talking about what healthy food is, and one idea is to move towards a more plant-based diet. I have no problem with that in general terms because I can understand what that means, but my worry is that we are pushing people away from some of the nutrition that we need. For example, the nutrition that we get from meat is hugely important, especially for youngsters and for teenage girls. Is there a danger here? Eating too much red meat is really bad for you, but I would say that eating too little red meat is also bad for you. If we start talking about reducing meat consumption, we will push people who are not eating enough red meat to eat even less, rather than getting a balance whereby those who are eating too much of it can reduce that. Does that make sense?

Anna Chworow: The whole area of meat reduction is really complicated. Some really interesting research from the Rowett institute found that when people are simply asked to reduce their meat intake their vegetable intake goes down too, because they swap what would be a meat and two veg meal for a starchy carbohydrate meal such as a pizza or a baked potato. You are absolutely right to say that we need a considered approach to that. At the same time, we know that we do not necessarily need an exclusively plant-based diet but that we do need a far more plant-forward diet. We need the nutrients and minerals that come from more fruit and vegetables, whole grains and pulses in our diet for our fibre intake. There is a real question about how to enable people to eat more of those whole, minimally processed, foods.

This is a nuanced area. You mentioned the one health approach, which includes looking at the health of the planet and the transition that we need to make towards eating more plant-based diets. There is a general consensus on that and some countries are moving at a much faster pace than we are. The plan has not paid any attention to that really crucial question, but we should be doing that.

Brian Whittle: Does anyone want to add anything?

Claire Hislop: I am happy to come in on that. Our dietary advice follows that of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, which is that we move towards the “Eatwell Guide”—which most of you will know. The sustainability of that has been

checked. We and Food Standards Scotland are working on updating the Scottish dietary goals. However, dietary advice in the plan would remain the same, which is to move to a diet that includes more plants, because we need to eat more whole grains and so on. Current dietary advice is still around moving towards the “Eatwell Guide”.

Brian Whittle: I digress here, but this almost links back to eating local. The way in which meat is produced abroad—certainly in the far east or the US—is far worse for the planet than the way in which we produce meat in this country. There is a lot more nuance to the matter. It goes back to the question of what we mean by health, and I am concerned that the plan needs to be a wee bit more explanatory about what we mean by increasingly having plant-based diets.

Anna Chworow: We need to address that matter. Health is socially constructed. Our understanding of health is quite nuanced and there are different frameworks that look at and define it. To go back to the point on eating local, we do not produce nearly enough fruit, veg and whole grains, compared with what we currently eat and what we want to be eating more of, to eat fully local.

It would serve us well to look at production and link that a bit more to the dietary guidelines. That would mean producing more pulses, fruit and vegetables and allowing the farm subsidy scheme to really bolster the production of those types of food, which we need to be eating more of, when at the moment a lot of our subsidy goes to the production of red meat and crops for alcohol. That is one of the areas in the plan in which there is not yet enough of a joined-up approach between different outcomes and Government departments.

Brian Whittle: We are very good at producing root vegetables in this country, but we import most of them.

Anna Chworow: Yes, absolutely—it is similar with seafood.

Patrick Harvie: I have a supplementary question on the connection between human health, climate and environmental health and animal health and wellbeing. If we accept what you say, achieving what you described as a more plant-forward diet—and perhaps a less meat-intensive agriculture system and diet—will need a considered, nuanced approach. In making the case that that can be done in a way that is beneficial to the rural economy and is in keeping with the direction towards which many people’s diets are gradually changing anyway, do you agree that public attitudes are more receptive than some political attitudes at the moment? We have seen, for example, the right-wing press and some politicians react in an opportunistic way—with a

“We can’t do this; there would be a mass cull of all the animals and it would destroy the rural economy” kind of approach.

Anna Chworow: Mhairi Brown can speak to public attitudes, given the work that she has done at the commission. The final point to make on the issue is that, although parts of Scotland are suitable only to be used as pasture and should be used as that, the issue is how we use all the other land.

Mhairi Brown: When we speak to citizens, they raise the issue of a plant-based or plant-forward diet and the worry that that could be co-opted by the food industry, or that the industry could promote foods as being healthy, with marketing claims and heavy advertising that conceal their poor nutritional profile. What we heard really strongly is that there needs to be a clear definition of such a diet, with clear regulation around it, so that it is not turned into something that is not beneficial for people.

Patrick Harvie: Sure—thank you.

10:30

Emma Harper: I said that I would come back to ultra-processed foods. We are here today to look at the good food nation plan and you have also mentioned the national population health framework. The population health framework says that health-harming products are tobacco, vapes, alcohol and gambling, but it does not mention ultra-processed foods, and the good food nation plan does not mention them either.

Lindsay Jaacks said that investigations are still happening around ultra-processed foods and the health-harming additives that they contain. I am thinking about stabilisers, emulsifiers, flavourings and colourings—chemicals, really. Does the plan need to take ultra-processed foods into account more, or do we need to wait another five years for the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition to do more robust research on that?

Professor Jaacks: Before I answer your question, I thank you for mentioning the health-harming products that are referred to in the population health framework. Alcohol is mentioned there, yet the good food nation plan continues to mention “drink” multiple times, particularly in outcome 4.

To go back to ultra-processed foods, the plan does enough for now. The Scottish dietary goals are excellent in providing a holistic perspective of what a healthy diet is. The goals are being revised, and the revised goals will no doubt be reflected in future plans. The plan as it stands is sufficient.

My major concern around ultra-processed foods comes back to the issue that was mentioned earlier about power in the food system, which is something that is not often explored. The issue with UPFs is about not just their health impacts or, for that matter, environmental impacts but the power dynamics and how approaches to reformulation and so on keep the power with multinational companies.

That is something to explore, but I do not think that the plan is lacking in this regard—yet. I will probably not be saying the same thing in five years’ time but, for now, because I do not know how to define UPFs appropriately to give advice to people, I do not feel comfortable with having regulations and policies in place. It is very hard to define what ultra-processed food is from a scientific standpoint.

Emma Harper: I know that Carlos Monteiro in Brazil has come up with the Nova classification, although it has had criticism and is not quite right. We talked earlier about sausages and heard that even putting a stock cube in soup makes it processed but might reduce the salt intake, for instance. I know that we need to work on the definitions.

I want to ask about the links to poverty and to imposed austerity, which has led to poverty. How is that covered in the plan to support better consumption and maybe reduction of foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt and ultra-processed foods?

Professor Jaacks: I am not sure that I entirely understand that second point so, if others want to come in, please do so.

I will just note that Scotland’s Rural College has done some really interesting research on the impact on purchases of the HFSS promotions legislation, particularly for low-income households. The research found that, because of the anticipated shift in other things that shops promote instead of HFSS products, there is actually a multiplier impact in terms of improving the healthfulness of diets for those households. Because stores could not promote the HFSS products, they promoted other things that met the guidelines. That led to lower expenditure on healthy food—people did not have to spend as much to purchase healthy food. Promotions legislation could have unintended positive consequences, and it will be really interesting to see that play out first in England, as evaluations are going on, and hopefully in Scotland as well.

Perhaps someone else can comment a bit more.

Anna Chworow: I am happy to address the point about how people’s incomes relate to their diet. We know that, when people think about what

food will keep them full for longer in terms of pounds per calorie, they are incentivised to buy more ultra-processed, calorie-dense foods, simply because of budgetary constraints. The cost of a healthy food basket is more than the level of income that some people have, whether they are in receipt of social security benefits or otherwise, so there is a need for a more joined-up approach there.

To give credit where credit is due, the Scottish Government is doing good work. Measures such as income maximisation, the Scottish child payment and the minimum income guarantee are important in terms of not just dignity and the right to food but health outcomes across a range of issues.

Emma Harper: The supermarkets and the massive global food companies determine how the system works, which makes things complicated. Does the national plan help to encourage good collaboration with supermarkets, for instance, in order to support healthy consumption?

Anna Chworow: The population health framework, which involves some joined-up working with retailers, supports that, but the plan itself does not. I also think that it would be helpful if outcome 4 specifically talked about the role of the food sector in relation to delivering health and sustainability outcomes and not merely in relation to growing the economy. There needs to be more joined-up thinking there as well.

Paul Sweeney: I want to turn to the plan's implications for mental health aspects. We have spoken about the potential social benefits of communal dining, but I also want to consider time poverty. Professor Jaacks mentioned that the time that is generally spent in the UK preparing and cooking food is broadly similar to the situation in France, for example. However, certainly in my experience, there are significant disparities in pressure, stress and childcare that might create variations with regard to class or gender-based roles in the community. Do you have any insights into whether, from a public health perspective, having communal dining or developing spaces such as local pantries and co-operatives might improve mental health in the community? The issue is not about individual behaviour as much as it is about creating more localised settings, even at a multiple family level, that could potentially improve social wellbeing and confidence. Does anyone want to give us their take on that?

Anna Chworow: We know, anecdotally, that that can have a positive effect. For instance, when we look at some of the places that offer whole-family support or community support, we see that one of the things that people value most is the ability to harvest some food from the community garden, use some of the other produce, batch

cook and take some food home, because, as you said, the burden of cooking is unevenly distributed across class and gender in particular. Those types of initiatives are already starting, and I think that supplementing them with more robust provision is part of it.

There is also really interesting research under way in Dundee looking into those aspects—not just incomes but the bandwidth and the amount of time that people have to plan, shop for and prepare a meal and so on. There will be some interesting evidence to share from that work in the next two or three years.

Paul Sweeney: That is really helpful. Building on what we have heard about the role of the third sector in promoting that sort of activity and how precarious the current financing is for many organisations in the third sector, could there be better and more robust reference in the plan to the interdependencies with the third sector and how an acknowledgment of them could drive delivery within community settings? Does anyone have any insights in addition to what has been said already?

Claire Hislop: In our consultation response, we advocated for fair funding models to be built into the plan. A lot of our third sector partners are on very short-term funding models, which makes it difficult for them to hire staff or make long-term plans or sustainable change. Building in fair funding models would enable them to be much more proactive.

Those are long-term plans and we will not see a difference overnight, so we must think about the infrastructure to make that work. Our third sector will, inevitably, be able to get to people that we will not reach, so it is critical for public bodies to ensure that we give it the necessary support to enable that to happen.

Paul Sweeney: Do you think that the mental health impacts should be referred to more clearly in the plan?

Claire Hislop: Mental health is one of the outcomes, but we would like to see that filter throughout the plan. Food has an impact on our wellbeing, and food insecurity has an impact and affects people with poorly paid jobs. We would like to see that covered in the plan and are looking for indicators that would show changes to those aspects.

Mental health is important to our wellbeing, and there are many opportunities in the food environment to boost our mental wellbeing.

Paul Sweeney: Professor Jaacks, when you look at mental health and food insecurity from a public health perspective, do you think that those should be more robustly referred to in the plan?

Professor Jaacks: I absolutely agree. It is fair for the plan to say that there are no great indicators for capturing that at the moment. We study a lot of indicators in our living lab and I agree that there is a lot of work to do to monitor that, but I absolutely acknowledge it.

Paul Sweeney: Ms Brown, we know that farmers and those in rural communities grow food. How could Scotland's farm to fork journey be more robustly developed by the third sector, particularly with reference to mental health, wellbeing and a sense of connection to the wider community? Could or should that be more robustly referred to in the plan?

Mhairi Brown: Any reference to mental health should be not only for the people who are accessing food but for those in community food settings who are working many unpaid hours and facing burnout and should ensure that there is more support for the third sector in general within the plan. That is crucial and would have benefits across the sector.

There is no doubt that people across the country care very much about farmers, about how they are paid and about whether they are being paid fairly and getting a fair return. A few questions have touched on the idea of cheap food. It is cheap on the shelves for a reason, which is because value has been extracted at some point. We need to look at where that is happening and who is not being paid fairly. That ultimately links back to physical and mental health and could be made far more explicit.

The Convener: Finally, we will move to some of the proposals for monitoring the plan. If we put a plan in place, we need to know that it is working and what impact it is having. What is your understanding of who will be responsible for collating data and for tracking the outcomes, sub-outcomes and indicators in the plan?

Professor Jaacks: It would be useful to have clarity about the role of the new Scottish food commission in monitoring, particularly with regard to data. That is true at both national and local authority level. We are doing a lot of work at the living lab on supporting monitoring at local authority and health board level and on compiling that data.

There is also something to be said about the scope of indicators. We are all tempted to measure everything that we can and to be really comprehensive, but there is a lot of value in measuring fewer things really well instead of trying to measure everything, which is impossible. You can lose the quality and interpretation of data if people are overwhelmed by and inundated with numbers. At the moment, the monitoring plan is very quantitative, but all numbers have stories

behind them and the qualitative information about what is happening in communities is also really important. We must ensure that there is also scope to look at that.

The Convener: Politicians are always guilty of demanding more and more data without necessarily thinking about what we will use it for. Should there be more reference in the plan to the Scottish food commission and to its purpose and role in monitoring data?

Professor Jaacks: Yes, absolutely. I have no comment to make on that, other than to say that, in general, we need much more information about what the commission will do and about its interaction with other public bodies and local authorities.

10:45

The Convener: Does anyone else want to add something?

Mhairi Brown: I defer to others on the panel, but it is not clear to me what capacity the commission will have. There will be a chair and three commissioners, but what capacity and resources will they have and what will their scrutiny role be? Will they have the ability to convene investigations or to commission research, as required? That is not clear to me from reading the plan.

Claire Hislop: We really welcome the food commission. Accountability is key to driving things forward and we are keen to understand how the commission will work with others to make recommendations and to know where the evidence base will be. Public Health Scotland is committed to supporting that, but it would be good to outline how the commission will work with us and with other stakeholders to enable that to happen.

The Convener: Thank you all for your evidence. I appreciate that we have kept you much longer than was originally planned, but you will know from the range of questions how much interest the committee is taking in the issue. Thank you for your time.

10:46

Meeting suspended.

10:59

On resuming—

The Convener: We will continue our previous agenda item by taking further evidence on the proposed national good food nation plan. I welcome to the committee Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and

Islands. She is accompanied by James Hamilton, lawyer; Tracy McCollin, head of the good food nation team; Jo Mitchell, procurement policy manager; and James Wilson, population health strategy and improvement, all from the Scottish Government.

I understand that the cabinet secretary wishes to make an opening statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I appreciate that the earlier session ran over so, in the interests of time, I am happy to go straight to questions, if the committee would prefer that.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary, that is much appreciated. We will move straight to questions from Carol Mochan.

Carol Mochan: Thank you convener, and thanks to the panel for being here. We had a robust session, so it is great to have you here to build on that.

It has taken us a while to get here, and you probably would acknowledge that, so my question is: what is the next stage? Do we have a plan so that action can happen? I am particularly interested—as I often am in the Parliament—in how we get cross-Government working, which can then feed down right across all the different sectors.

Mairi Gougeon: I am grateful to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee for undertaking the evidence session and some of the scrutiny of the good food nation plan, which touches on so many different areas of policy. That is evident in the evidence that the committee has received and the number of contributions that have been made to the committee. We also saw that during the parliamentary scrutiny of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022. The number of organisations that were involved in that process shows how many areas food policy touches. I am keen that we continue on that good food nation journey now.

On the time that it has taken us to get here, I note that we passed the act in 2022. We are talking about a fundamental shift in how we work across Government, so it has taken time to make sure that we get the proposed plan, as it has been presented, in as strong a shape as possible to enable us to build on that shift.

We have ambitious outcomes that I hope we will achieve, and the proposed plan sets us on a strong footing going forward. Does it address all the issues that we know we have right now? No, it does not; we know that there is more work to do. We identify that in the proposed plan, because we know that we have data gaps and that more work needs to be done in certain areas. Again, it is the first plan, and we will build on it for the future.

We also undertook extensive consultation on the plan. Nourish Scotland undertook workshops across Scotland to find out what people wanted to see in the plan. We wanted to engage with children and young people, which was a theme that came out strongly through the scrutiny of the bill when it was being discussed at stage 2. We had more than 1,000 responses from children and young people.

Of course, all that takes time to analyse and get right. We published the consultation results in September last year. Since then, it has been about drafting the proposed plan.

This period of scrutiny is important, because we want to make sure that we hear people's views on the proposed plan and whether there are any improvements that we can look to make before we introduce the final plan. I am certainly ambitious for the future. It will take a lot of work across Government to deliver on it, but it is a strong step in the right direction.

Carol Mochan: Thank you; it is helpful to know those things.

We have been advised that a small Government team is working on the plan. Is that enough, or will the team be built up? I am also interested to know whether there are good working relationships on this across the UK? The way in which food moves about is important and some of the legislation will also be cross-border, so I would like a wee bit of information about that if possible.

Mairi Gougeon: Absolutely. There are five people in the good food nation team. Because the plan is so broad and it covers so many other policy areas, it could never be up to the good food nation team alone to deliver on it. As you can see, I have colleagues from across Government here with me today. That is in recognition that it will also be up to other portfolio areas and ministers to deliver on the outcomes that we have set out in the plan. There are official-level working groups looking at that and, as I mentioned, the team itself has five members. We also have the ministerial working group on food to ensure that we engage in those discussions across Government.

We embarked on our work on the good food nation quite a number of years ago, so it is quite well advanced. There was not much collaboration with the UK Government, but, of course, it has been developing its own strategies. It is important that the devolved responsibilities are respected within that, but there are areas that are reserved to the UK Government that impact on the policies and the outcomes that we are looking to deliver here, and, of course, we engage in discussions with our UK counterparts in that regard.

David Torrance: Good morning, cabinet secretary. Can you explain how the population

health framework and the proposed good food nation plan will ensure an improvement in the food environment?

Mairi Gougeon: I certainly hope that they will improve the food environment, because, as I have touched on already, many different areas of policy are relevant to the work that we are taking forward here, and I think that the population health framework builds on and complements the work that we are looking to take forward through the good food nation plan.

Of course, there are close links between policy officials in health and the good food nation team to make sure that we are delivering on the ambitions, because, ultimately, it is only by delivering on the ambitions that are set out in the population health framework that we will achieve the good food nation outcomes that are set out in the proposed plan.

Jules Goodlet-Rowley might want to add something, particularly in relation to the population health framework.

Jules Goodlet-Rowley (Scottish Government): No, I think that that covers it.

David Torrance: What is your view of the narrative around obesity in the plan? Do you agree with criticisms that it places responsibility on individuals and, therefore, shifts the focus to them and away from a whole-system approach to healthier food?

Mairi Gougeon: I would say that we focus on the food system and the wider food environment. Changes were made to the plan on the back of specific references to that in the consultation responses.

Of course, as individuals, we all make choices, but the Government needs to make it easier for people to make the right choices. We need to make sure that, as it says in the plan, healthy and nutritious food is easily accessible. We also need to improve the food environment through, for example, restrictions that can be placed on advertising. All of the different policies that are being worked on across the piece contribute to improvements in the food system.

We want to make it as easy as possible for people to make the right choices. We have a good food environment in Scotland and a good food culture here as well.

David Torrance: Why does the population health framework not address the issue of procurement in relation to food for children and vulnerable adults in schools, hospitals and the care sector?

Mairi Gougeon: Procurement is hugely important, and we touch on that in the good food

nation plan. I believe that we have the potential through public procurement to make an impact in the wider food system and food environment that we have just talked about.

Ultimately, the population health framework will have to deliver on the outcomes that we want to see. Even if there are no specific references to procurement in the population health framework, the overall health system will no doubt have to deliver on that as well, because that is what we have set out in the good food nation plan, if that makes sense.

Patrick Harvie: Good morning. We had quite an interesting exchange in the previous session this morning, when I was asking about the role of schools and food education. There was a little bit of a tension between the idea of food education as involving a reductive approach to cooking skills and knowledge about what is healthy and unhealthy food, as opposed to the wider role that education settings play. I think that there was some pushback against the idea that the focus should be on cooking skills and some criticism that the plan places too much emphasis on that, but I think that, at the same time, there was a clear understanding that education settings have an important role to play in shaping attitudes to food and attitudes to how people consume. Could you reflect on that balance between the slightly narrower—or reductive, if I can use that word—approach to food education and the wider responsibility of education settings in relation to food culture?

Mairi Gougeon: Those are really interesting issues to get into, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I discussed them in a round-table meeting on diet and nutrition earlier this year.

I do not think that it is a case of one or the other. If people think that the focus is not quite right in the way that the plan is framed, that is where the committee's scrutiny is really important. We are more than happy to listen and to see whether any changes need to be made. Having basic skills is important, but we also have a wider opportunity to educate, and we do so much work on that. In my portfolio, we support the work of the Royal Highland Education Trust, which does incredible work in getting kids out on the farm and understanding where their food comes from.

There are huge opportunities in relation to wider skills, and we could be doing more on that. There are many opportunities and careers in our wider food and drink sector. We need to consider whether there are opportunities that we can build into education settings to expose young people to those areas, so that they think of those as realistic careers going forward. There are areas where we

know that we have skills shortages and where we could be doing more.

I am keen to hear the committee's views on some of the evidence that you have heard. However, I think that we have the balance right. It is not one or the other. I do not think that doing one will fix all the issues that we have. As with most of the issues that the committee has been discussing this morning, it is about how we tackle that in the round.

Patrick Harvie: Part of my concern is whether the stated ambition will genuinely be delivered. We have already acknowledged that it is just over 10 years since the first good food nation strategy or document was produced—I forget its title. In the previous evidence session, I was reflecting that it is nearly 20 years since legislation was passed on public health and nutrition in schools. Already at that point, some of the schools that we visited were going way beyond better nutritional standards—it was not instead of, but as well as. They were building a relationship with local farmers, so that the farmers got a sense of the schools that they were supplying to and the children got a sense of where their food came from.

The schools were going beyond nutritional standards in relation to the environment of the school canteen. They were considering whether it felt like a burger joint or like something a bit more down to earth that related to how people eat together. What are young people learning from that environment? It is almost about seeing the canteen as an extension of a classroom, not because it is teaching a curriculum about food, but because it is exposing young people to a food system and to a set of cultural expectations.

Already at that point, some schools were doing great stuff, but a lot of schools were not engaging with that at all, and that is still the case 20 years later. How can you reassure us that MSPs will not be sat around this table in another 10 years saying, “Remember that good food nation plan? It set a lot of ambition, but not much has changed”?

Mairi Gougeon: I certainly hope that that will not be the case. For the measures that were passed as part of that legislation, I think that it will not be the case. As I have said, we have set out ambitious outcomes, and I will not sit here and pretend that reaching them will be easy. No doubt members can see from the committee's workload the number of initiatives and strategies that are in place to try to improve our nation's health overall. A lot of work is under way, and there is a lot of work to be done.

This plan is the first iteration, but I think that it sets the building blocks. It is a fundamental change in how we work across Government. That

takes time to embed, and I think that that is where we have put the focus in the proposed plan. We need to make sure that we get that initial cross-Government working right, and we need to do that well. That will be an important foundation from which to move forward.

The reporting and review requirements in the legislation are that we have to review the plan every couple of years. We need to look at whether the policies are working. If they are not, we need to consider what action we will take.

We must remember the role of the food commission in all this. We have appointed some members and a chair to the commission, which will have a scrutiny role and will monitor the work that is undertaken. With the measures that we have in the legislation, the role that the food commission will undertake, and the foundations that we are building just now with cross-Government working, I believe that we will be in a better position at a point further in the future.

Patrick Harvie: You mentioned training, skills and career opportunities, whether they are in food preparation, cooking, growing at a community level or in our agriculture system. We need to do a lot to make those opportunities and careers attractive, interesting and exciting, but we must also think about the current workforce, particularly within the public sector. Getting a culture change and a change of attitude is not always easy. We do not want people to feel that they are just being berated and told that they are doing it all wrong, but we do need to achieve significant change. How will the Government work with the workforce, particularly in the public sector where there is a far more direct employer responsibility, to create a sense that the existing staff feel part of any change agenda in the food culture and have a sense of ownership?

11:15

Mairi Gougeon: That is hugely important because you are absolutely right that culture does not change overnight. We must bring people with us on the journey. We have undertaken extensive engagement and I like to think that it is helping.

Patrick Harvie: Can you give an example of how catering staff have shaped the plan or of how responses from unions or others have meant that those voices have been heard in that shaping?

Mairi Gougeon: I heard some of that directly myself in the engagement that I undertook during preparation for the plan. I spoke to catering teams to outline our vision for a good food nation in Scotland and the critical role that they will play in that and officials have undertaken that work, too. I hope that speaking to people directly and involving them in the conversation will show them how that

has helped to shape what we have brought forward and will mean that we have outcomes that everyone feels they can be part of and can be serious about delivering.

The Convener: I call Sandesh Gulhane.

Sandesh Gulhane: I declare an interest as a practising NHS GP.

We have the good food nation plan before us. Is it incumbent on Government-funded organisations, such as the NHS, to provide good-quality locally sourced meals?

Mairi Gougeon: We all have a duty and a role to play in that. We have set out our proposed plan, but health boards and local authorities, as relevant authorities named in the legislation, will have to develop their own plans, set out the outcomes that they want to achieve and show how they are delivering on those. We all have a role and have the responsibility of leading by example to deliver on the overarching outcomes to get the change that we want.

Sandesh Gulhane: What help will be given in relation to venison, which is a healthy way of eating meat, or to supply chains and abattoirs? How will we ensure that Scottish people get to eat Scottish meat?

Mairi Gougeon: You raise two really important points, particularly the one about venison. I will touch on one scheme. We have worked with the Soil Association, which provides the food for life served here scheme, which 16 Scottish local authorities have signed up to. The Soil Association is working closely with Argyll and Bute Council and Wild Jura to get a supply of venison into the school estate. That is really positive and I hope that other areas can learn from it. The scheme is not only about schools and local authorities. It has been looking at the care sector and universities and is branching out to support local supply chains, because we know the benefits that come from doing so.

It is important to highlight measures that will be taken forward through the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill. Parliament has had extensive discussion of and questions about community larders for venison. We have that healthy source of protein right on our doorstep and must ensure that more people in Scotland have access to it.

You asked about support for the wider supply chain, which is absolutely critical. If we want to have strong local supply chains we must ensure that the infrastructure for those is there. We have a small producers pilot scheme at the moment. Farmers and crofters in some of our most rural areas are particularly dependent on smaller abattoirs. We have provided funding for Dingwall, Mull, the mart in Orkney and Shetland to try to

better co-ordinate those services so that they are fully utilised and well supported, because we know that supporting the work of the wider supply chain is hugely important, as you have rightly highlighted.

Sandesh Gulhane: The next topic is about children. If we look at our kids, we can see that 30 per cent are going to be overweight and 17 per cent will be obese. In previous evidence sessions, we have heard about how someone from a deprived area is twice as likely to be obese as those who are the most well-off. Will the good food nation plan achieve the target of halving obesity by 2030, which is the Government's ambition?

Mairi Gougeon: I certainly hope that the policies that are being implemented through the wider population health framework and the diet and healthy weight implementation plan that is also coming through will set us on the trajectory to meet that target. Again, that will be clear in a couple of years when we have to report on the policies and how they are delivering the outcomes that we want.

If the policies are not working, we will have to look at what else we need to do and consider to meet that ambitious target. I hope that the policies will send us in the right direction. We have ambitious outcomes and targets to achieve and the initial indicator monitoring framework will help us monitor that so that we can set ourselves on the trajectory to achieve it.

Elena Whitham: I want to spend a bit of time focusing on school meals and early years nutrition. By early years nutrition, I am talking about those who are in early years settings, but I also want to go right back to the beginning and start with breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding is mentioned in the plan but really only in terms of existing policies. I wonder whether the plan could be a little more ambitious in promoting the clear benefits of breastfeeding, where it is possible for the mother and baby, for the prevention of obesity and infection control. We also know that it promotes healthy gut bacteria. When the local plans are created, could they be a driver for ensuring that there is a support network for mothers who are going to be breastfeeding in order to give that really early years intervention?

Mairi Gougeon: You are absolutely right: that is critical. If there is a sense that there is not enough in relation to that, we are more than happy to consider it. That is why the views on that are so important, especially if it is felt that they could be better reflected.

One thing that that highlights to me is the role of the specified functions and descriptions that we have set out in the legislation. The fact that ministers have to have regard to the plan when we

are exercising specific functions and following policy is really important. The policy is still to be brought forward by regulation, so the detail is not there just yet. Taking breastfeeding as an example, when we are developing plans or strategies, we have to consider the good food nation plan and delivery of the outcomes in relation to that, as it is how we will deliver on what we have set out in the plan and the legislation. I am more than happy to consider whether that needs to be more clearly drawn out.

Elena Whitham: We heard from the earlier panel that best start food vouchers have clearly benefited young people in their earliest years, and that families are trying new things that they might not have tried before using those vouchers. Is there any way that the plan could have due regard to that when focusing on early years nutrition? We know that parents have a complicated landscape to negotiate. The big companies play a role in what the food environment looks like in relation to things such as pouches and jars for kids' food, and a lot of people might not have an understanding of what they could cook at home themselves. How could the plan effect change early in young people's lives?

Mairi Gougeon: It is about how the plan is considered in the development of policy in those areas and how it will help us to reach the outcomes. I do not know whether you think that there is a specific indicator that could be helpful in that regard. In the plan, we recognise that there are data gaps and that we do not have some information that would allow us to build a clear enough picture of how we can improve. We hope to fill some of those gaps, certainly in time for the next iteration of the plan.

I can take that away and consider it, if there is a particular point that you would like to see in relation to that.

Elena Whitham: On outcomes or indicators, if we think about school meals, should universal school meals or discounted school meals be a feature as an indicator or an outcome that is desirable in the plan? We know that that is a tricky environment for families.

When I was speaking to the previous panel, I mentioned that East Ayrshire Council has trialled half-price school meals for secondary school children. That £1.25 meal deal resulted in an increase, for the first time, in the uptake of school meals in the secondary setting, which is one of the trickiest things that we have been trying to grapple with. Should some of those aspects feature as an outcome or an indicator in the plan?

Mairi Gougeon: They could also feature as part of the outcomes for the local authority plans when those are being developed. We want to roll out

free school meal provision, but we do not have the finances to be able to roll that out fully at the moment, which is why it is being rolled out in the phases that have been proposed. Currently, the indicators that we have in the plan consider free school meal uptake, but we must consider how that would work in relation to the local authority plans that will be developed and think about the potential outcomes in that regard. Any extra data that we could gather from that that would then inform the overall national outcomes and indicators would be helpful.

Brian Whittle: Good morning. I am going to meander a bit. I will start with the idea of the one health approach. Obviously, health is partly to do with good nutrition. If we are going for this one health approach, how do we define health?

Mairi Gougeon: Do you mean how do we define it in relation to the one health approach? I know that, in some of the evidence, people felt that there was not a focus on the one health approach in the plan, but I think that what we have set out in the plan aims to ultimately deliver on what that is, which involves animal health and welfare, a healthy environment and our overall health and wellbeing.

I feel that what we have articulated in the plan is probably in the right area but, again, if you have any particular recommendations or suggestions for things that we should be looking at, I am happy to hear them.

Brian Whittle: When speaking to the previous panel, I mentioned my concerns around the narrative that is pushing towards a more plant-based diet. I have no problem with that at all, but I think that our previous witnesses almost pushed back on the need for education in that regard. My worry is that, although eating too much red meat is not good for you, not eating enough red meat is also not good for you. My concern is that, if there is a narrative that is pushing towards a plant-based diet, people who really need that kind of nutrition—especially teenage girls or youngsters—might eat less food in total, so the nutritional value of their meals will go down. Do you think that that issue is properly articulated in the plan?

Mairi Gougeon: Again, if you feel that that is not properly articulated, I am happy to hear suggestions from the committee. I completely appreciate the points that you have raised about the importance of having a healthy balanced diet and, with regard to what that looks like, we point to the "Eatwell Guide".

FSS has also done a lot of work in this area, which highlights that some people are consuming more than the recommended red meat intake while younger people in particular are not getting enough of the nutrients that they need. Again, we

need to promote the healthy balanced diet that we all want people to have.

Brian Whittle: That brings me to my main problem in this regard. My feeling is that the battleground for this issue is in the educational environment. What are we trying to tackle there? There are various issues, including physical and mental health, behaviour, attainment, hunger and malnutrition. If we are talking about school meals, it strikes me that, if kids are coming to school hungry, we should take action around the provision of breakfast. However, again, there is a stigma attached to that.

I find it difficult to divorce nutrition from physical activity, because I think that one drives the other. You talked about the idea of working across portfolios. Should we be looking at drawing kids in before school by providing some sort of activity and then saying, “By the way, there’s some breakfast over there”? That would be a subtle change in the way in which we deliver that provision.

11:30

Mairi Gurgeon: Yes; that is a good point. That is why we have supported what I think is called extra time—I stand to be corrected if that is wrong—which is exactly about what you have said about drawing people into an activity and providing food while they are there. We have provided around £5.5 million to the breakfast clubs to support exactly that. We have also extended that and provided a further £3 million funding to extend the reach of breakfast clubs to about 20,000 more young people.

Of course, as we were saying when we were talking about free school meals, rolling that out universally comes at a huge financial cost, so targeting it and rolling it out in the way that we have, through free school meals, breakfast clubs, and activity-related food provision, is really important. What you have said is absolutely right.

Brian Whittle: I would say that the cost of all that is significant, but so are the costs of physical and mental ill-health.

Mairi Gurgeon: Absolutely.

Brian Whittle: As you will appreciate, I have looked at this quite a lot over the years. It is apparent that significant Government intervention can have a huge impact, if the Government is brave enough to do it. For example, Japan changed what people are allowed to eat in school and what food parents are allowed to send to school with their kids in their packed lunches, and it now has an obesity level of 4 per cent. We are not Japan or Denmark—I gave the example of Copenhagen earlier—but that indicates that, if

there is a will, the Government can create an environment that will allow the goals and objectives that we all want to achieve. Do you believe that the good food nation plan as it stands will create an environment that will give access to that type of healthy lifestyle?

Mairi Gurgeon: I think that it will help us to get there. To go back to the comments that I made at the beginning, will it fix the problems that exist at the moment? In and of itself, it will not do that, but it sets the foundations for us to be able to do that. The work that is being done in policy areas is all about us pushing in the same direction to achieve the better health outcomes that we have set out.

You talked about what happens in other countries. We are looking at other places that have a completely different food culture to our own, but it is particularly difficult to change a food culture. When we look at the time that people have, we can see how that severely constrains how we eat together, for example. There are many shifts that need to happen, but we are in a strong position with the legislation that we have and the plan that we are proposing, which lay the right foundations for us to build on so that we can improve in the future and will help us to reach the ambitious outcomes that we all want.

I go back to the example that Elena Whitham used of what is happening in secondary schools, where we know that we have specific issues. Some of the work that FSS has done shows that the health of children who are at primary school is better than that of those who are at secondary school. How do we take those good examples that we have, build on them, share good practice and ensure that it is more widespread than just a one-off example? That is what this is all about.

Brian Whittle: As I said in my earlier point, the environment in which we sit, especially in the public sector, is not conducive to health. We are building hospitals without kitchens and dragging food up the M6 from Wales to those hospitals, then throwing most of it out. How will the good food nation plan address that? We must address that issue.

Mairi Gurgeon: You are absolutely right about food waste, which is an important issue—the levels of food waste are huge. The issue was raised during the passage of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024. Again, that highlights the importance of the work that is being done across the Government on the circular economy. I know that, in some areas, hospitals have centralised their units and removed kitchens but, in other areas, they are doing the complete opposite. It is about building on that good practice.

Ultimately, it will be up to health boards and local authorities to set out how they will implement,

monitor and achieve the outcomes to match the principles that have been set out clearly in the legislation. They will have a strong role in implementing that, consulting on it and ensuring that there is that wider buy-in to the approach that we have taken.

What you have outlined is, ideally, not what we want to see. We would prefer to see kitchens on site, whether in hospitals or in schools, and fresh produce using short, local supply chains. We probably have a shared vision of where we would like to be in that regard and, for me, it is about how we can deliver on those ambitions. I believe that the proposed plan and future iterations of it, as well as the plans of health boards and local authorities, will help us to deliver that.

Patrick Harvie: I will go back a wee bit, as I have a supplementary question on the one health issue that was raised a few minutes ago—broadly speaking, the idea that we can achieve coherence among human health, climate and sustainability, and animal health and wellbeing, and that a less meat-intensive agriculture system, as well as a less meat-intensive diet, is a positive route to achieving all three of those things.

From the last panel, we heard a call for a balanced and nuanced understanding of those issues, and a rejection of the idea that there is some kind of extreme demand for mass culls of animals that would destroy the rural economy, or the idea that there is no such thing as a healthy vegetarian or plant-based diet, because, of course, there is.

How can you convince us that the Government is embracing that balanced and considered approach to uniting those agendas, when it has explicitly rejected the advice of the UK Climate Change Committee on agriculture and land use, basically because the Government does not want to start talking about less meat production?

Mairi Gougeon: First, I will touch on the recommendations and where we were with the carbon budgets. What was recommended by the Climate Change Committee would have had a drastic and very negative impact on rural and island communities across Scotland. I believe that we can still lower our emissions in a way that involves working with our farmers and crofters, and in a way that supports our rural communities, the wider supply chain and the industries and people who depend on them. That is what we set out.

Every sector in society must lower its emissions, and we believe that we can do that in a different way. Our livestock industry and our red meat sector are important, not just for our health but for our wider economy, particularly in our rural and

island areas. It is important that we continue to support those sectors and livelihoods.

I do not see any conflict there, and the dietary advice pretty much says that we need to consume more fruit and veg—we know that we need to do that. It comes back to the point that I made to Brian Whittle about how we get the balance. We have the “Eatwell Guide” and the recommendations in there. That sets out what a healthy, balanced diet should look like, and that is what we hope to achieve.

If anything, I want to see us eating more of what we produce in Scotland. The work that we are doing through the agricultural reform programme and the good food nation is about that.

It is important to mention—we should not forget it—seafood. Look at what we produce—we export much of it. Seafood Scotland does good work, which we are supporting them with, on getting fish into schools and on helping people to understand more about what we produce in our waters, so that they will then make that choice, because they have been exposed to it from an early age. That is important. I just want to make sure that we do not forget that element.

Patrick Harvie: So that I understand the Government’s position, is the Government saying that it wants a less meat-intensive diet, a balanced approach to achieving, not a wholly plant-based diet, but, as was described in the previous session, a more plant-forward diet, and emissions reductions, but that that can be achieved without any reduction in meat production in Scotland?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, I believe that we have an alternative way to do it, and that is what we have set out in relation to the carbon budgets.

Patrick Harvie: Okay.

Emma Harper: Good morning, cabinet secretary, to you and your officials.

Before I ask my questions about ultra-processed food, I am interested in the language in the foreword of the national plan. At the very bottom of page 2, it says:

“without the full powers of independence we do not have the complete control of all the levers of food policy.”

I am interested to hear about the powers that we do not have. Is it related to the impact of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and our ability to lever supermarkets or cross-border trading? What do we need in order to have all the levers to deliver a plan?

Mairi Gougeon: A number of different areas touch on that issue both directly and indirectly. You touched on the internal market act. Initial concerns with that act were about the potential for it to constrain how we could develop policy, given

the different nature of our landscape and our farming systems in Scotland and the potential impacts, which we could well see, of the direction of travel that was being taken in England.

Obviously, we do not have responsibility for trade, which impacts the flow of food in and out. Some of the trade deals that we have been signed up to could have an adverse impact on our agricultural sector and our producers. However, the plan touches on so many different areas of policy where the matter is also relevant, such as the cost of living crisis and the amount of money that people have, and we know about the links between deprivation and poor health outcomes—we do not have all the levers in relation to that. Obviously, we bring forward initiatives to try to act within the powers and the budgets that we do have but, of course, without all those levers, we will not be able to say absolutely that we can fix all those problems. It is important to set that out.

Emma Harper: Thanks for that clarification.

I am interested in ultra-processed foods and the emerging research that says that they are not good for you. In the national population health framework, health-harming products are listed as tobacco, vapes, alcohol and gambling, but ultra-processed foods are not listed. Is that because we are too early in the research to pin UPFs as a problem and as a health-harming product?

Mairi Gougeon: I completely understand the concerns around the matter, which has been raised directly with us and has come through the evidence that the committee has received as well. However, as I understand it, there are issues with evidence gaps—I believe that the Scientific Advisory Council on Nutrition will undertake another review next year. I think that the issue is that some of the definitions and classifications of ultra-processed foods do not differentiate between white bread and wholemeal bread or account for how you cater for people with allergens who are looking for other alternative food products, which are then more processed. As far as I understand it, there are issues with classifications in the evidence. However, the fact that UPFs might not be in this iteration of the plan does not mean that they would not feature in future iterations of it once that evidence becomes available.

Emma Harper: I am also interested in the tension between localised food availability, food processing and the role of major supermarket chains, and in what role the national plan plays in addressing some of the tension between the big, global producers and the whole supply chain. How will the national food plan help to address some of the tensions that we see?

Mairi Gougeon: I hope that we are doing that with the outcomes that we have seen, the policies

that are outlined and the actions that we are taking on that. It is also important—I think that we have referenced it in the plan—to look at all the different types of initiatives that are happening across Scotland. It comes back to the point about how we embed, develop and encourage wider good practice. We want to encourage and enable community-supported agriculture—allotments, community growing and some of the local initiatives that are happening in communities—as much as possible, so that we are getting those small local supply chains.

In my job, I see examples of such projects all the time, particularly in relation to the community right to buy. In city centres, I have visited groups that have taken on ownership of areas of ground, the food from which supplies the local community. Those projects are not only about food supply but about wider community engagement. Things that come off the back of that, such as cookery classes, lead to wider community cohesion.

11:45

However, the big suppliers and producers are also important. For me, it is not a case of big versus small. It is a question of ensuring that we encourage small producers. A lot of that comes back to what we are doing in relation to agricultural reform and how, through the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, we can create more opportunities for people to own and access land and help new entrants to join the next generation of farmers. Through the work that is being done on public procurement, which is being driven through local authority plans and health board plans, we are helping to build and sustain strong local supply chains.

Emma Harper: Tomorrow, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee will hold a round-table session on the good food nation plan, and the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee is holding one today. I am keen to hear about how we reassure Scotland's farmers. Without farmers, we will have no food. How do we reassure the small farmers and big producers that you have mentioned that they will be considered when we look at the current plan and future iterations of it?

Mairi Gougeon: I think that that is fundamental to the whole plan. We are talking about food, and we need people to produce it. Everything hinges on our farmers and our fishermen. Ultimately, we want to support our primary producers to ensure that we maintain the food supply. That will help to sustain the local supply chains, which are the linchpin of what we are doing in policy development.

Brian Whittle: We have touched on the issue of equity of access. There is the idea that a bunch of

bananas costs the same as a Mars bar, but that argument is valid only if people have access to that choice. How will the good food nation plan create an environment in which people have choice? In my view, the work of Government is about creating an environment in which choice can be made. How will you do that?

Mairi Gougeon: It is a case of improving the overall food environment. The initiatives that are under way through the plan feed into those outcomes. Through our go local programme, which is about supporting smaller convenience stores, we want to provide access to local products, including healthier products, and to support people to make the right choices in that respect. Work will be taken forward through the population health strategy, the diet and healthy weight implementation plan and some of the other initiatives that we have talked about, which will all contribute to creating the better food environment that we want to see.

Brian Whittle: You mentioned smaller food producers. The access that they have to the market through the procurement chain has been the subject of criticism for some time. How does the good food nation plan feed into the need to give our food producers access to the market, including our local stores?

Mairi Gougeon: The issue of how we can better support local producers through public procurement is one that we have discussed in the chamber a number of times, and the theme of procurement came through strongly in the evidence that we heard when the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill was being considered. We highlight that aspect in the plan, and a number of pieces of work are under way. We must ensure that we are working within international regulations and our own domestic regulations, but we must do so with a view to ensuring that we help SMEs and smaller producers to access some of the opportunities that are available.

We are trying to do that through a number of initiatives, and there is a positive trajectory in the number of small and medium enterprises that are getting contracts and the amount that is being spent on those. There is also the supplier development programme. Through those initiatives, we are working with such businesses to ensure that they are in a position in which they feel that they can bid for some of the opportunities that are available, as well as highlighting what can be done in procurement to break things down into smaller lots and smaller geographic areas to make it easier for smaller producers to access the process.

I do not know whether Jo Mitchell has anything to add.

Jo Mitchell (Scottish Government): I can talk about engagement. Scotland has quite a set governance structure for procurement. We speak to everyone who is involved in public procurement in Scotland and have involved both Scotland Food & Drink and the Soil Association so that providers and suppliers can give their views on what we can do more of, which is quite important.

Brian Whittle: Patrick Harvie made a point about how the plan will develop and support diversity in farming. Scotland is currently a dairy and meat-producing country. We are also good at things such as root vegetable production, but we import so much rather than producing our own. There must be a way for the plan to engage with the farming community to encourage diversity and to make it worth their while to develop those products.

Mairi Gougeon: That goes back to some of Emma Harper's points. As we work through our agricultural reform programme, we are considering what the future support system will look like and what support we will provide. The outcomes that are set out in the good food nation plan will all be part of that. You will see that agriculture is heavily referred to in the plan as it stands, because we all want people to have access to high-quality, healthy, nutritious food and we also talked about the importance of that during the passage of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, because it all ties together.

Elena Whitham: I am going to spend some time thinking about the food industry itself and will also come back to the issue of procurement.

The food and drink industry responded to our call for views and is clearly engaged in the creation of a good food nation. How can the plan ensure that industry involvement in the development of a good food nation is suitably balanced with public health policy objectives and with ensuring the prevention of ill health, malnutrition, alcohol-based harm and obesity? We talk a lot about the food and drink industry, so where in the good food nation plan is there space for the drink industry when we are thinking about harm prevention? How do we balance the strong and powerful voices of some of the big actors in this space with a public health approach?

Mairi Gougeon: That is an interesting question. The act says that we must consider the views of the food industry and I think it is important to hear all the voices. A wide variety of stakeholders have shared their views with the consultation or submitted evidence to the committee and they are all equally important to me. We must ensure that none of those voices feels that they have been drowned out and that everyone feels that they can get behind the plan.

I understand that there is criticism and that some people feel that there could be more in the plan or that we have not quite got it right first time. This is the first plan, but it is important to me that we have a balance and I would be interested to hear whether the committee thinks that it is not quite right or that there is more to consider.

Elena Whitham: We are hearing stakeholder concerns that some of the tactics used by big tobacco have been used by the food industry to shape the plan as it is set out. I am concerned to know whether you feel that you have the balance right and how you are going to treat the competing demands from different parts of the sector.

Mairi Gougeon: I certainly feel that we have it right, but I am happy to reflect on the plan if others feel that the balance is not quite right. It is important that I do not engage with just one or two actors but ensure that I am hearing as representative a spectrum of views as possible.

I do not know whether Jules Goodlet-Rowley has anything to add from a health perspective, but I think that we are taking forward some important work in the population health framework and there is also the work that will be done through the diet and healthy weight delivery plan as well as the strong action that we are taking on alcohol. Therefore, I do not see any particularly overt influence affecting the plan as it stands, but I do not know whether Jules has anything to add on engagement.

Jules Goodlet-Rowley: We have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders on the population health framework, and we will also be engaging with public health stakeholders and, obviously, the food industry on the diet and healthy weight delivery plan. That is to ensure that we have balance, but I should also note that the primary goal of the population health framework is a healthier Scotland. That will be the prime driver of our work in that respect. Furthermore, with regard to tobacco, engagement on implementation takes account of what is stated in article 5.3 of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Elena Whitham: Thank you. Those comments from both of you were helpful.

I also want to raise the issue of public procurement, which I know some of my colleagues have already touched on, and which we know is an important matter, if we think about our local suppliers and local food producers. As the plan points out, the legislation in question has been in place for more than 10 years now; indeed, it has been quite successful, and we have seen where those successes have been. There has been a lot of breaking up of the traditional procurement rules and regulations that we thought that we could

never change. I have seen that happen in East Ayrshire, where I was previously deputy leader of the council and worked with the Soil Association on the food for life served here campaign.

My concern is about ensuring that we do not start to undo that good work. I worry that, when procurement rules are applied stringently, we might see contracts that were previously awarded to local suppliers suddenly not being awarded to them any more. I am not seeking to influence any procurement decisions that have been taken, but I wonder whether the Government is alive to the fact that the good work that has been in train and which has been used to change procurement approaches might be on a bit of shaky ground.

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, we are very much alive to that and, indeed, concerns about certain issues that have recently come up in that respect. In those cases of people losing contracts that they had, I would just point out that they were able to be awarded those contracts in the first place. Through our work on public procurement, there is the ability at the moment to help local suppliers and producers, and I hope that, when we have finalised our national plan, local authorities and health boards will, in the work that they take forward, have a strong focus on these things to ensure that they continue in the direction that we all want with the establishment of strong, local, resilient supply chains.

Elena Whitham: I agree. We have anchor institutions such as local authorities doing all of that good work, and we would hope that, in the future, we would have, say, the health and social care partnership as an anchor institution in a particular area starting to look at how local food could be used in care home settings, or the NHS starting to do the same thing locally. When we see that sort of thing receding, it raises a slight concern. Is it your view that this plan, and then the local plans, should help drive all of that forward?

Mairi Gougeon: Absolutely. That would be my hope. We have so many strong examples of good work happening across Scotland, and we really want to build on them and not see them recede or go in the opposite direction. I am really keen for this to head in that direction.

Elena Whitham: Thank you.

Paul Sweeney: I want to ask about the mental health implications of the plan, particularly the idea of time poverty as well as financial poverty. We know that there are significant class and gender-based variations in food and nutrition and in the role in food preparation in the community, and there has been a proposal for public diners and more communal dining spaces. What is your view on the potential for that to be rolled out in a more systemic way across Scotland?

Mairi Gougeon: I think that some of the plans that are being talked about in relation to public diners and their wider impact are really exciting; they seek to deliver on the outcomes that we have set out in the plan, and I am really interested to see where they go. I hope that we can build on and support the roll-out of some of those initiatives.

You talked about mental health, which is a really important element of the plan. It is one of the areas in the plan where we have identified that we do not have enough data and need to collect more. That will enable us to consider whether to develop indicators and how we can monitor those. We have picked up on areas in the plan in which we need to do more work.

12:00

Paul Sweeney: How do you envisage that playing out? We talked about procurement, the opportunity cost of using public expenditure and the demand signal from public expenditure to sustain projects in the community. There is currently a kind of absurdity in the system in which third sector organisations are chasing ever-diminishing grant funding, leading to stress in those organisations. At the same time, vast contractual value is flowing through the system that is perhaps bypassing our communities. If that pound was working harder in a local setting, it could achieve multiple effects, including stability of local community projects, while supplying services. The development of more of a co-operative or social enterprise model could be a virtuous cycle.

That is the kind of discussion that has emerged during today's evidence sessions. Does the minister have any reflections on that, and on providing underpinning for a community to remove the stress in organisations and the burnout that is often experienced? We often hear about communities and charities that are chasing grant funding and are stressed out about it, while service users are worried about the future of organisations to which they have a connection. There is a disparity between health boards, local authorities and health and social care partnerships, where the turning off and on of projects seems to militate against national objectives. Do you think that the whole process could be more coherent, which could provide better security all round?

Mairi Gougeon: I certainly hope so. I hope that the development of the proposed national plan and the local plans will help to deliver that. If we consider the overall value of public procurement, food and catering services are worth about £220 million. When we think about how that is targeted, the potential impact on local communities and

supply chains could be really powerful. We would hope that that would emerge from some of the other plans that are being developed.

There is an element of flexibility for health boards and local authorities to develop outcomes. It is important that there is some flexibility across Scotland so that each area can develop outcomes that reflect its specific needs. However, the legislation will underpin those plans and sets out the overall approach that will need to be taken. My officials will work closely with health boards and local authorities in the development of those plans.

Paul Sweeney: Could the plan refer more explicitly to the idea of communal dining as a social good? Colleagues touched on procurement. Traditionally, procurement has been preoccupied with cost and quality. Perhaps we could better define social value and how we measure social value. There are ideas about social value being about reducing loneliness or the time wasted in applying for myriad funds, but there are other ways in which we could measure social value so that it demonstrates better value for communities as a whole.

Mairi Gougeon: On your first point about whether the plan should capture more of the community dining element, we are more than happy to look at that and see if it can be drawn out.

The only problem with the plan is that it has been out to consultation and gone through various iterations. Things are ever evolving and there are new initiatives. We always run the risk that the plan will miss something—it might not capture everything. However, again, we have that important reporting to do every two years, and a review of the plan after five years, too. That will hopefully give us a chance to capture anything that is missing.

I think that your second point was on how we could capture social value in relation to public procurement—

Paul Sweeney: So that social value demonstrates beneficial mental health outcomes and a public health benefit. How do you capture the opportunity of social value creation in procurement so that it drives behaviour in commissioning and procuring services?

Mairi Gougeon: There have been various iterations since the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, and further regulations and guidance have flowed from the act that are about embedding some of those values.

I do not know whether Jo Mitchell wants to add to that.

Jo Mitchell: As you probably appreciate, we take a slightly different approach from other parts

of the UK. The procurement format from 2014 includes the sustainable procurement duty. We are really keen to give people local ownership and for people to use their judgment in that area.

On one hand, we provide a lot of guidance and training and support to the procurement and supply communities, so that they understand the flexibility and opportunities in procurement. Measures in the 2014 act direct that our public bodies will have to set out in their local strategies how they will comply with the sustainable procurement duty. They will have to report annually on how they are doing that, which we will then analyse. That is the approach that we have taken. We appreciate that other parts of the UK are looking at set social value metrics, but we think that we should give people flexibility and appreciate that they have their own judgments and understand their local environments better.

You can approach that in a number of ways. You can specify particular food provenance schemes; you can demand that providers pay at least the real living wage, and they do not have to be scored; or you can allocate a score depending on what is appropriate in a particular case.

Paul Sweeney: By taking that approach and having different judgments on what constitutes value, do you not risk introducing inequality? In local authorities, I have often seen massive risk aversion, particularly around budgets. I imagine that there is very little appetite to be experimental.

Jo Mitchell: We have taken a very consistent approach: we have set out the sustainable procurement duty, we have underpinning statutory guidance, we have very extensive practical guidance and we provide on-going training to public bodies across Scotland. Although the local authorities have local discretion, we have driven a consistent approach by setting out what they might do in the procurement process and ensuring that they understand the strategic nature of procurement. We follow up on that through the monitoring and reporting process.

Paul Sweeney: Thanks.

Joe FitzPatrick: The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 requires health boards and local authorities to prepare their own good food nation plans, which is a requirement that you have mentioned a few times, cabinet secretary. That section of the act has not yet commenced, so it would be good to hear your thoughts on when that will happen and how health boards and local authorities' preparation of those local plans is going.

Mairi Gougeon: At the moment, the team's focus is largely on producing the national good food nation plan. However, that work has been really helpful and informative because it has

shown the amount of work that needs to be done to develop a plan, how long it might take and the resources that local authorities and health boards might need.

From the point when we commence section 10 of the 2022 act, local authorities and health boards will have 12 months to develop and produce their plans. We want to commence the act in a timeframe that we know local authorities and health boards are comfortable with. Discussions are very much on-going between officials and local authorities as to when would be the most appropriate time to commence that section, because we want to ensure that they have the time and resources in place to be able to deliver on it.

Regarding the plans themselves, guidance has been produced that sets out the legislative expectations that local authorities and health boards will have to meet, but dialogue is very much on-going.

Joe FitzPatrick: Are you confident that local authorities and health boards are taking steps to prepare for the point that you say, "Right, that's it started—you've got 12 months"? Is there work going on? I see that Tracy McCollin is nodding.

Mairi Gougeon: Tracy is leading on that work, so she might want to say more.

Tracy McCollin (Scottish Government): It is true to say that local authorities and health boards are probably all at different stages, but we have worked as a good food nation team to identify a lead contact in each of those organisations, and we have had good success with that. That has been really helpful, because, at key points in our process, we send information to those contacts, who then disseminate it in their organisations, which creates questions.

From doing that, we realised that some guidance was needed, so that has been published. We held a workshop in which we went through the legislative requirements, set out what might need to happen when preparing a plan and provided an opportunity for questions. There is a difference, because some local authorities already have food plans, which they can use as a basis for a good food nation plan; others are starting right at the very beginning.

As the cabinet secretary said, we have been focusing on getting the national plan ready. Looking ahead, we are thinking of ways that we could provide further support to local authorities and health boards and thinking about what would be of most use to them, because we do not want to impose something that would not be helpful. We have started those conversations. We have identified the people that we need to keep in touch

with in order to ensure that the information is getting to the correct people.

I imagine that health boards and local authorities, particularly if they are at a more advanced stage with that work, are probably getting a little impatient about when section 10 will be commenced, but we are getting advice from them on how long they think that they will need to undertake their plans and on what support they might need around timing and resource. The work is in the initial stages, but it has certainly begun and we are getting good engagement from those lead contacts.

Joe FitzPatrick: Regarding that engagement, there is no point having local plans if they are only carbon copies of the national plan—there has to be a difference—but it is clearly important that the local plans do not go counter to the national plan and can work together with it. From the initial discussions, does it feel as if that is happening and will be possible?

Jo Mitchell: Writing a good financial plan—which is the stage that most people in those organisations are at—is a daunting task, and I think that those people are feeling that at the moment. The 2022 act is actually quite prescriptive about what the plans must have regard to. That is a very good starting point, and they will also have to have regard for the national plan when that is published, so that will provide some steer. The national plan is the thread that will run through all the plans. I think that the local plans will look quite different, although they will have common themes. However, as I said, the task for the first ones will be daunting.

Joe FitzPatrick: Okay. Thank you.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, I assume that you listened to at least part of the previous evidence session. At the very end, I raised a question about data collection. You will want to monitor how effective the national plan is and its impact.

You will have heard some witnesses' concerns about the SFC's capacity to scrutinise the plan and about the scope of the indicators, which are very focused on quantitative monitoring, and there was concern that a lot of the narrative could potentially be lost. What is your response to that and how could you address those concerns?

Mairi Gougeon: I recognise that there are concerns around that. We are waiting for further publication from our analytical colleagues, which will provide more information around the indicators and the framework, so I am happy to send that to the committee when that is available. We will be monitoring closely—we will have the indicators set out in the plan, which will help form the baseline of the monitoring framework that we establish.

Regarding the food commission's capacity, it is not fully up and running yet. The commission has three members and a chair, but we are still in the midst of appointing a chief executive, and there will be a wider team to support the commission's work, so it is not necessarily fair to write off the capacity that it will have just yet. As set out in the legislation, it will have an absolutely critical role and be able to offer advice to ministers. The review periods that we have set out and the scrutiny role that the commission will have mean that we will be very strongly held to account on the policies that we have set out in order to reach the outcomes. As part of that, if the policies are not working and not reaching those outcomes, we also have to set out what needs to change and which other pieces of work we will do.

We have been quite transparent that the monitoring framework is not perfect. We know that we have data gaps and areas that are missing, but we have highlighted those as areas that we will continue to work on. For example, we have asked the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission to do some work in relation to animal health and welfare, so that we know what the targets or indicators for those areas might look like. With any new information, we need to collect the data that enables us to monitor those areas. That is very much a work in progress, but we have been quite transparent about the work that needs to be done. We will be held to account and the monitoring will all be transparent.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, I thank you and your officials for your attendance today.

At next week's meeting, we will commence taking oral evidence as part of the committee's pre-budget scrutiny for 2026-27. That concludes the public part of today's meeting.

12:14

Meeting continued in private until 12:25.

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