OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 2 September 2025

Session 6

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
21st Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)
*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jane Beasley (Zero Waste Scotland)
Hugh Carr (Scotland Excel)
Anna Chworow (Nourish Scotland)
Professor Emilie Combet (Scottish Food Commission)
Nicola Joiner (ASSIST FM)
Andrew Kennedy (East Ayrshire Council)
Phil Mackie (Aberdeen City Council)
Laura Muir (Scotland Excel)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jenny Mouncer

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 2 September 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:03]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning, and welcome to the 21st meeting in 2025 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. I hope that everyone had a great recess. I remind all members and witnesses to ensure that their devices are on silent. We have received apologies for this meeting from Fulton MacGregor.

The first item on our agenda is a decision on whether to take items 3, 4 and 5 in private. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

National Good Food Nation Plan

10:03

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is to take evidence from two panels of witnesses as part of our scrutiny of the proposed national good food nation plan. For our first panel, we are joined in the room by Hugh Carr, director of strategic procurement and commissioning, and Laura Muir, strategic procurement manager, who are both from Scotland Excel; Nicola Joiner, the national chair of Assist FM; and Andrew Kennedy, the head of facilities and property management at East Ayrshire Council. We are joined online by Phil Mackie, a consultant in public health and prevention lead at Aberdeen city health and social care partnership, who is representing Aberdeen City Council. I warmly welcome everyone to the meeting.

We have about 60 minutes for discussion. I will open the questions. I have told the witnesses in the room that members will let them know if their question is initially directed to them. If members could do that, that would be great.

I have a general question for everybody, but I will come to Nicky Joiner first. I am interested in how your organisation will be impacted by the proposed good food nation plan and how it will fit with existing plans and strategies that are already in place.

Nicola Joiner (ASSIST FM): ASSIST FM represents all local authorities' soft facilities management across Scotland, and the association helps to shape and share good practice. Realistically, every authority works for itself, but it will also be working in partnership. When we learn of new and innovative ideas across Scotland, we share them and see whether we can adapt the strategies for individual authorities.

I hope that the implementation of the good food nation plan will have a positive impact across Scotland, particularly when national health service services cover multiple authorities. For example, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde covers eight authorities, so working together is essential to enable the plan to be delivered across Scotland.

Andrew Kennedy (East Ayrshire Council): Thank you for inviting us. From East Ayrshire Council's point of view and from the perspective of collaboration at local, regional and national levels, there are opportunities in Ayrshire. We have community planning partnerships for each local authority, and there is already good engagement on a number of themes that are linked to the good food nation plan. The Ayrshire economic partnership and the Ayrshire growth deal very much involve linking things up and driving forward

the food and drink agenda in Ayrshire. Across the three local authorities, we collaborate significantly with public health, environmental health and food services, as well as with the NHS.

There are huge opportunities for community engagement. East Ayrshire Council, in particular, has done significant work in that regard over the past 10 years or so. We have opportunities through our leisure trusts and the community organisations that are forming in the area, such as 9CC—nine community councils that have come together on the back of community benefit funding from wind farms. There are real opportunities for all such organisations to link into what the good food nation plan aspires to be.

On the point about strategic plans, there are significant links in the good food nation plan to the themes in our strategic plan of poverty and inequality, jobs and skills, wellbeing, climate change and vibrant communities. In the area that I have been working in for a number of years, the plan brings together a lot of those themes and links to the strategic aims of local government and the Scottish Government.

The Convener: Thank you for that very positive response. The committee has heard about the good collaborative work that is happening in the Ayrshires as a group. It sounds to me as though you have a good basis for taking forward the plan, which might not be the case for other local authorities. It is great to hear about that work.

I do not know who from Scotland Excel wants to come in on my question.

Hugh Carr (Scotland Excel): I will come in first. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to talk to you today. I echo much of what has been said by our colleagues.

Given the role that we play as the centre of procurement expertise for the local government sector, we focus heavily on working with our members. We are a centre of procurement expertise, rather than a centre of technical expertise, so we rely heavily on our member councils—all 32 local authorities are members—to provide technical support.

The planned good food nation agenda aligns well with our strategic priorities. We focus heavily on inclusion from a contract point of view, we encourage as much participation by small and medium-sized enterprises as we can, we are absolutely invested in growing local where we can, and we work hard with member councils on community wealth building.

However, at the same time, we are realists. Ultimately, we have to serve 32 councils with difficult geographies and different priorities, so we have to lever economies of scale where possible. The right approach is a hybrid between SME engagement and development, and we help to develop local suppliers through some of our primary suppliers where it is appropriate to do so. We try to provide as much efficiency as we can to councils and, at the same time, balance that with local economic development.

We are well aware of the correlation between healthy eating and healthy learning within our schools. Much of the spend across our food portfolio is by councils on school meals. We are heavily invested in that and we welcome the opportunities that the good food nation agenda could bring.

The Convener: Laura Muir, do you want to add anything?

Laura Muir (Scotland Excel): No.

The Convener: I will go to Phil Mackie, who is online.

Phil Mackie (Aberdeen City Council): First, can I check that you can hear me?

The Convener: We can hear you very well.

Phil Mackie: I suspect that a lot of what I will say will echo points that have already been made by other panel members. Aberdeen City Council recognises the centrality of good food and the support that is necessary to ensure that good food is available, not just for the health and wellbeing of individuals, but for organisations, the community as a whole and the region. Much of our welcome for the legislation stems from our recognition that it provides us with the basis for genuinely integrating good food into a much broader range of our activities.

I will highlight a few of those quickly. As you have already noted, I am involved with the Aberdeen City health and social care partnership and we do on-going work to promote good health through food, through healthy weight management and support of obesity reduction. We are looking closely at food insecurity and how we reduce that geographically across a range of local settings and within vulnerable communities. We are looking clearly at supporting public procurement as a means of improving access to locally sourced, nutritious food at an affordable price. We are using a food system approach in our schools through education programmes, as well as looking at the links with sustainability, particularly in reducing the carbon footprints that are associated with food and managing food waste.

Within the context of public health services and social care, we believe that strong support and integration is possible. Clearly, it goes beyond that. We have links to the development of our social and economic wellbeing, and food is at the heart of our regional economic strategy, which

was noted by my colleague from Ayrshire. That goes beyond our existing work within the city. For example, we have a joint procurement strategy with colleagues in Aberdeenshire Council and Highland Council that is being used to create dividends in a broad range of economic and social wellbeing areas.

I could go on for a long time about the linkages, but I suspect that the real challenge will be to ensure that the potential of the legislation is fully realised and that the Government supports councils in being able to maximise those opportunities and to ensure that the vision that underpins the legislation becomes a reality.

The Convener: I have already noted the time, and we have asked only one question. I invite members—including myself—and the panel to be as succinct as possible, although all that was important for us to hear.

My next two-part question is around timescales. I also want to add to and pick up on what Phil Mackie has just said. The Scottish Government published guidance in March that aimed to help relevant authorities to write their own good food nation plans. I would be interested to hear your views on the timescales, which is to have those plans approved by late 2027, given that we will have local government elections.

In our call for views, a number of organisations pointed out that, although there are resources to write the good food nation plans, there is nothing specific about implementation. I would be interested to hear how concerned you are that the good food nation plans could just become a desk-based exercise, with little real-world impact. I heard great things from Phil Mackie and Andrew Kennedy, who said that things are already happening on the ground, so hopefully, that is not going to be the case, but possibly it will be.

10:15

Phil Mackie: Clarity on timescales—realistic clarity—is always very helpful. I highlight that it depends a little bit on what is expected. A timescale of that length—to 2027—given that we are about to go into an election cycle, might not necessarily be as helpful as it might be during other periods. Also, if we are going to involve our communities and ensure that the plan is co-produced, not only in the city but more broadly across the range of potential regional partners, as I alluded to earlier, a 2027 deadline might militate in favour of a slightly more desk-based creation than might be otherwise supported. We want to be much more able to be inclusive of stakeholders when creating good food nation plans and when thinking through who is appropriate for implementation and for supporting that implementation. Therefore, time might militate against good integration.

There is always a resource issue for any implementation. There seems to be a presumption that the work can be done within our existing resource, which may well be true, provided that we are not double-counting the resources and that things which are already required of local government do not end up being presumed to be in place, in order for us to deliver this alongside other work.

Andrew Kennedy: I echo Phil Mackie's comments. The level of consultation and co-production that is required is key to that timescale, as is the ambition of the local plans. As was said, Ayrshire has made significant progress on some of the areas in the good food nation plan. Therefore, in our plan, we might be only setting out what we are going to continue to do, although we might have ambition in other areas to go beyond what we are already doing. Are we action planning or is it a strategy? Are we setting out the action plan for the next five years and being very detailed, or are we setting the strategic objectives? If we are action planning, that would obviously take longer.

The Convener: That is a good point.

Hugh Carr: My point is very brief, convener. I think that there is a real opportunity for Scotland Excel to support councils. We are an integral part of the sector and we are funded by all 32 councils. Therefore, this is a prime example of where we can help to develop guidance at a national level and support member councils as they develop their own local plans. Work and strategic development activity such as this is exactly in line with the objectives that were outlined when Scotland Excel was formed. So, I think that we can support member councils to develop their local plans.

The Convener: That is very positive.

Nicola Joiner: It is important to note that a lot of authorities have, as we know, started work—as Andrew Kennedy said about East Ayrshire. Shetland is probably quite far ahead of the curve too, but some local authorities have not even started considering the plans. Everybody is starting from a different point, and that timescale will vary across Scotland, depending on the starting point of each individual authority. That should be considered when considering timescales.

The Convener: You mentioned a couple of councils, such as Shetland. Do we know where they are all at?

Nicola Joiner: No, it has not been measured. I know that Glasgow City Council has its food plan in place. ASSIST FM wrote the report, "Scotland's

school meals in a Good Food Nation", and to do that we pulled together good practice across Scotland. Therefore, we have an idea of where good practice is and where some projects are, but with the broader scale of things, there is not a national idea of where everyone is sitting.

The Convener: Not yet, but maybe that is something that will come to the fore, based on what we are doing today.

We will move on to questions from Willie Coffey.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning, witnesses, and thank you for coming to the committee.

I want to ask Andrew Kennedy and Phil Mackie about how the councils collaborate with, for example, local health boards to share the vision in their good food nation plans. Andrew, will you open up the discussion and let us know a wee bit about how they collaborate with the local health boards to take this agenda forward?

Andrew Kennedy: As I mentioned, in my experience in Ayrshire, the community planning partnership board has the co-ordinating role in the strategic plans for each of the organisations. Significant work is being done. The good food nation plan has not necessarily been a high-level strategic discussion point at those committees yet, but they are very much thinking about food and how food links with each of the other areas—poverty and inequality, wellbeing, different bits of health and social care, hospitals and so on—including on an operational level.

As Nicky Joiner alluded to, we have been working over the past year to develop and co-ordinate pulling together a lot of the work that is already happening that would support the good food nation plan. There is a group in the council that picks that up with officers from each of the main service areas that are affected, including health and social care. We have also had meetings with the other Ayrshire councils and with the NHS.

There are those administrative organisation and governance arrangements, and a lot of work is being done on the ground, with services, community groups, public health and our leisure trust all trying to build food into their activities. In East Ayrshire, we have 17 community larders, which link to a number of supports, including health support, food provision by us and financial support that people are being provided with. All those mechanisms on the ground, as well as the wider governance, are trying to link in and make sure that food continues to be one of the key points in all of those discussions.

Willie Coffey: I put the same question to Phil Mackie. How does it work in Aberdeen? Do you have good co-operation with the other councils around you and the local health board? In your opening remarks, you talked about those relationships. Could you offer the committee more of a glimpse into how they work for you in Aberdeen?

Phil Mackie: The first thing to note is that I am an NHS-employed consultant in public health and I am here representing Aberdeen City Council and presenting its evidence to the committee. That suggests a degree of comfort and integration, which we find incredibly helpful and useful. As colleagues in East Ayrshire have noted, we make really strong use of community planning, and Community Planning Aberdeen has been a major vehicle. As things stand, we are renewing our local outcomes improvement plan for 2026-36. *[Interruption.]*

I apologise to the committee—I thought that I had switched my telephone off. If you can hear a noise in the background, it is coming from my phone.

The LOIP clearly inherits work that is already going on, which has a direct relationship here. There are things around it that I have already mentioned: social and economic wellbeing; work around climate, health and sustainability; and, particularly, work about food waste. As part of the overall response in our community plan, I lead many of the local initiatives on food waste and food waste management.

Fundamentally, the challenge is not about whether we can integrate; it is about ensuring that we have the opportunity to integrate to the best of the legislative vision—if I can put it that way. It is key that having time to deliver on this agenda is seen to be as important as other demands that are placed on the NHS and on local government.

At this point, I will plug the overarching population health framework that the Government has recently released, which affects local government as well as the NHS. That shift towards a preventative approach is required, and I hope that it is made meaningfully on this occasion.

Willie Coffey: I have a question about the role that planning and licensing might play here. I spent many years as a local councillor, and we used to have issues about fast-food outlets at or near schools and about the number of schoolkids who went into the town centre to eat instead of eating at school. I know that we have made great progress on that, but is there still work to be done in that whole area? Is there work that we could do to improve the situation further?

Andrew Kennedy: As Phil Mackie highlighted, there are still areas of the public sector where food is much higher on the agenda than it is in other areas. In planning, in its widest sense, there is still

some opportunity to further strengthen some of the links. As we have seen with the national planning frameworks, climate change is starting to drive some things around land use and opportunities for growing.

Community place plans are becoming more important for development in local communities. Those mechanisms could provide an opportunity for food to play a stronger part in some of the considerations around the planning decision-making process.

It is still a difficult balance to achieve. With everything that we are dealing with, it is a matter of weighing up different aspects to see what is important. Is job creation through investment important, or are environmental or food considerations important? There are a couple of areas where, from a planning point of view, there is the opportunity for things to be strengthened.

Willie Coffey: What about the experience in Aberdeen, Phil? Do you have anything to add to the story about how we can pay more attention to the planning and licensing powers that we have in order to improve the whole agenda?

Phil Mackie: Indeed: I will make a couple of observations. One is that we have recently adopted policy that requires a health impact assessment to be an integral part of all local development planning applications. I was involved in that work alongside the council's planning directorate, which involved including greater health inputs under NPF4. Over time, that will offer a powerful way through.

On the licensing front, colleagues have already noted the challenge of balancing economic development with health and social outcomes. I suspect that we need to learn to be a little more balanced in favour of good food and good food availability rather than economic demands. I am conscious of how many applications there are in our area for drive-through fast-food restaurants that seem to be within a 10-minute walking distance of many secondary schools. That often falls into the legal domain, ultimately, rather than the licensing domain.

Willie Coffey: Are there any comments on that particular issue from our other colleagues around the table?

Nicola Joiner: I know for a fact that we do not have food vans around schools in my local authority. It is a matter of young people's safety. Other authorities have tried to stop food vans and have been challenged on it. There is a mix across Scotland: the policy does not align everywhere. The problem is that everybody is starting at a different point.

Willie Coffey: Thank you very much, everybody.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Do you think that that is to do with the quality of the food options that are available in schools at present? Does that need to be looked into, to prevent young people from utilising premises outwith the school? Are you actively trying to find ways and measures to influence children and young people not to use those outside premises?

10:30

Nicola Joiner: Young people leave school for multiple reasons, and ASSIST FM did some research beyond the school gate into why young people leave. Quite often, it is about the environment in the school. If they do not have a nice seating environment in the school, they have no reason to stay. If they do not have enough seating to sit with their friends, they do not stay. Some young people just want to get away from that environment.

All schools across Scotland can deliver quality food that is in line with school food standards, and most do—I know that they do. It is about getting the food that is delivered to align with what young people are looking for. Research shows that young people are going out to different outlets. Those can be mirrored in schools but made a healthier choice that is a better option for young people to take.

The Convener: I will bring in Alexander Stewart on procurement and the good food nation plan.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning. Procurement is a vital part of the process. In the past, we have touched on the need to ensure that local suppliers and the farming community have opportunities. What do local authorities and other bodies currently do to ensure that local food producers and suppliers can benefit from council procurement? Will the plan improve access to procurement opportunities for local food producers?

East Ayrshire Council has done a lot of work on that in the past and is seen as a pioneer. However, some changes are afoot. It would be useful for Andrew Kennedy to give us a flavour of how you see that. The local producer and the farming community have a massive role in ensuring that they can tap into that.

Andrew Kennedy: For the best part of 20 years, East Ayrshire Council has been trying to deliver that agenda, and not just from a local supply aspect. It was very much driven by the three-pronged approach of looking at what we buy, at how we put food on the table in schools and at health, environment and the economy. That

is very much the agenda that we have tried to deliver on. We have been food for life gold accredited since 2008 and, even with the current changes in our supplier base, we will maintain that standard.

One of our approaches is to recognise that Ayrshire has that opportunity. We have a significant food and drink sector, with more than 1,200 small and medium-sized enterprises in the food and drink sector. That market, that competition and those opportunities were very much a focus in what we were aiming to do.

Over the past 20 years, we have tendered every three to four years. We have a range of suppliers that have been consistent and have worked with us for extended periods. Some suppliers have left and others have taken on those roles, but the standards, contract requirements and process that we have gone through have been fairly consistent. We have adapted the process each time, recognising the opportunities and challenges in the market, to maintain the outcomes from the process.

As you allude to, the first thing is to create opportunity. We have taken a different approach—a local approach. Colleagues will be able to talk about how there is much closer alignment between the national framework contract and what we are doing now with the national contracts than there was when we started, in 2008. The challenges that we have now, which we have had over the past couple of rounds of tendering, are the result of the market shifting. There are probably more challenges from the contractors and the producers.

We have, and we have always had, a range of local producers, distributors and businesses that have not necessarily sourced everything from East Ayrshire. We previously had fish contracts and, clearly, the fish did not come from East Ayrshire—we do not have a port. There are aspects to consider in relation to what we need to do to get higher-quality produce that has an impact on the local environment by looking at the supply chain and the standards that we set.

From a health perspective, we have tried to drive and maintain the high quality of food and to ensure that we are cooking fresh produce in schools every day. Over the past 20 years, though, things such as meat of Quality Meat Scotland standard, free-range eggs and red tractor certified chicken have become more and more difficult to source from Scotland, never mind from Ayrshire. Each of the lots in the areas that we have had has adapted and changed over that period of time.

There has been a shift in the past couple of years. Again, this is just my opinion on the issue, but I think that there are two main challenges. First, food inflation and the cost of business have been significant. The amount of investment or grant support that the public sector has put into local businesses through Covid and the cost of living crisis has been significant. Even keeping your business afloat is a real challenge just now, never mind considering complex procurement processes to look at future business. For example, local suppliers and butchers have consistently provided our meat contracts, but, in this round of tenders, not a single one of them bid for them. That is even a step beyond whether they are successful and taking the opportunities that are still there.

The second thing is that a lot of the bigger suppliers have market shares in hospitality, supermarkets and retail, and those markets have been significantly squeezed over the past few years. A number of suppliers—and bigger suppliers—have taken the tender opportunity that they have not taken before. The level of competition in the market for our tenders, in particular, has shifted, which means that we will need to look at the objectives that we have set. We need to flex and move as we go forward with future options. I could go from an East Ayrshire point of view to Scotland Excel contracts and buy exactly the same produce that we are tendering for separately, but we have kept the aims of tendering separate to maintain that opportunity.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you. Does anyone else want to add anything?

Hugh Carr: Yes, if I may. It is a really interesting question. I have been with Scotland Excel for 15 years, and we face the same challenge every year. Every time that we open up a tender opportunity, we work hard across the country to get as much visibility as possible to local suppliers of the opportunity that is coming up. We have run roadshows across different council areas. Some feedback that we took said that local butchers and grocers in the retail sector are in their shops during the day and it does not suit them if we hold an event during the day, so we have held events that have run from 4 o'clock to 8 o'clock, in order that they could call in on their way home.

However, there has been a real reluctance on the part of some small providers, particularly in the food sector, to apply for a place on the national framework. We have done a number of things to make that process more attractive. We have been very clear that they do not score any extra points if they can bid for 32 councils rather than only one, and we have split council areas that have a large geography, such as Highland Council, Aberdeenshire Council and Argyll and Bute Council, into different sub-lots in an attempt to

make the process more attractive to SMEs in particular, but that remains a challenge. We have also worked closely with other centres of expertise, including the Scottish Government. Everyone faces the same challenge with the reluctance to engage, particularly on the part of SMEs.

The final part of your question was about whether the plan will improve access. Anything that we can do collectively to raise the visibility and profile of the national framework should improve access, but we need to continue to work with the sector to bust the myth that you need to be able to supply nationally in order to be successful in a national framework agreement. We work closely with member councils and, as I mentioned at the start, we are driven by their needs and demands. We can learn from each other on that front; certainly, the team will work closely with Andrew Kennedy and his colleagues. We believe that there is a big opportunity. We could never say, "We've done a good job on that. We've ticked that box and we can move on." Every time a tender opportunity comes out, we have to work hard.

Even if we work with national suppliers, it is incumbent on them to source locally, and it is incumbent on us, in our work with them, to encourage them to do so. For example, 77 per cent of the products that are available in our framework for fresh and cooked meats and fish are sourced in Scotland. For some product lines in our other contracts, it would be impossible to maintain the same percentage coverage, because there are not the supply opportunities. However, we should not give up because it is a national challenge; we have to keep being innovative and working with our suppliers to grow their supply chains accordingly.

Alexander Stewart: Highland Council has asked for

"clearer, practical guidance from the Scottish Government on how to embed Good Food Nation principles into procurement without breaching existing regulations."

Does, or will, the plan provide clarity on what councils can and cannot do for procurement?

Hugh Carr: I believe so. Fundamentally, if we start from a position of clarity, the rest will become a bit more straightforward. Often, public procurement is seen as a barrier, and we have to try to bust that myth and see it as an enabler. Collectively, we are very good at having a bit of joined-up thinking. Having national guidance would be a positive step forward. As I said earlier, I think that we can work with councils to help them with implementation.

If you do not mind, I will invite Laura Muir to speak specifically on guidance.

Laura Muir: Any additional guidance would be welcomed. We have guidance in place, such as "Hungry for Success" and "Catering for Change", which have helped to provide a clear pathway for local sourcing in the past. Within the current regulations, we have been able to push boundaries by writing our specifications in certain ways. For example, with fresh meats, we ask for protected geographical indication products to ensure that we get Scottish beef and lamb. It is about us working together with our communities to ensure that they realise what opportunities they have under the regulations.

Andrew Kennedy: "Catering for Change" was produced in 2011, and I was involved in the development of "Hungry for Success" and "Better Eating, Better Learning". We are in a different place with procurement legislation as well as with some of the wider policy, which the good food nation plan talks about. Some of the guidance in "Catering for Change" could be absorbed into the plan as an approach, or the document could be updated to reflect further best practice that is available and has developed over the period.

Willie Coffey: On the wider procurement issue, are any further changes needed to procurement legislation to enable there to be a level playing field for local or smaller producers when they are bidding for work? We often hear that the bigger bidders and companies can always undercut local suppliers. Is procurement legislation appropriate and fit for purpose, or do we need to revisit it?

10:45

Hugh Carr: That is a good question. There is enough flexibility within the regulations as they are. We should not start with the regulations—in some cases, the regulations here are more advanced than they are in other parts of Europe—but with how we market opportunities and how we can make some of the procurement processes simpler.

We take feedback from suppliers. Due to the nature of what we do, suppliers can look at a tender document and find it very onerous and difficult to complete. We have tried to simplify it, and we take as much feedback as we can to simplify the process that we use.

Work needs to be done on the process, but I think that we can operate effectively within the regulations as they stand. They are certainly fit for purpose, and they have been progressive enough, based on the work that has been done in Scotland over the past 10 years. We need to start with how we simplify the process rather than with the regulations themselves.

Willie Coffey: Are there any comments on that from council colleagues? Does Andrew Kennedy want to comment?

The Convener: I will bring in Andrew Kennedy first, to be followed by Phil Mackie, who indicated that he wanted to come in on a previous question.

Andrew Kennedy: There are two elements to that. From a council perspective, and from my experience, there is significant work around that first element of economic growth and business support services within councils, and there are significant opportunities for local businesses to be supported for any business growth opportunity. That is not just for public contracts, but for, say, developing opportunities around marketing and production to support work that businesses want to do at a farmers market or looking at how to tender for a contract such as access to supermarkets and so on. A number of the suppliers that we have worked with over the years have taken those other opportunities as opposed to going down the public procurement route. The context there is the wider economic growth of those businesses and their business strategies around that.

The other element is whether our tenders and our supply requirements are aligned with those business strategies. From Nicky Joiner's and my perspective, it is mainly school food that we are buying in significant volumes. We have seen a huge increase in fruit and vegetable purchases as a result of the changes in nutritional regulations. We have gone from spending around £100,000 a year to spending £300,000 a year on that. In terms of the development of that business, businesses are keen to take that on. Unfortunately, it is not the same with other produce—for example, we are not making as many cakes, so egg purchases have reduced.

The question is whether the scale of those purchases fits within the business plan of those organisations. Also, we do not provide meals in the summer, when there is a lot of local produce, so, again, the question is whether that fits within the strategy. You have to look at both sides of that procurement. It is a competitive market, and the bigger companies will adapt to whatever you put out in your tenders and will work within your frameworks. When you have a procurement process and a level of competition, there will always be challenges.

Willie Coffey: Phil Mackie, in Aberdeen, do local and smaller suppliers still compete?

Phil Mackie: I agree to an extent, but it really depends on the overall balance that we are seeking in the nature of the guidance.

The point that I wanted to make is that we cannot underestimate the way in which national frameworks affect procurement. How we change that will depend on whether we see economic requirement or the core benefits of being an anchor institution—for example, whether we are seeing health, community integration and development, and small business rather than large-scale business—as being the driving force behind the framework.

We are often being expected to reconcile differing requirements where core benefits are accepted and being sought, but there is a degree to which the balance is in favour of one area of our power and influence rather than others. As a public health consultant, I will always look at how, for example, community empowerment is supporting local food growing strategies. If those are geared only towards people who can make use of them for their own consumption, that will be much more limited than using them as a vehicle to lift into provision for local schools, which would help and support young people to see the source of their food and therefore want to stay in schools for school meals. That food would be procured as part of what might be necessary local flexibilities in the context of national guidance.

Willie Coffey: Thank you.

The Convener: I have to remind us again about time—it is 10 minutes before we are planning to end this evidence session, but we have five more questions to ask. Colleagues, please direct your questions to specific witnesses. If there is something that the other witnesses feel has not been said and they want to get on the record, I ask them to please indicate that and come in.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): My first question is for Hugh Carr or Laura Muir. Scotland Excel has said that

"Delivering on the ambitions of the Good Food Nation Plan will require investment in procurement skills, tools, and market engagement across all levels of local government."

At the same time, other submissions mentioned the lack of funding and capacity in local government. Are you seeing any evidence of the investment that you say is required, or is there a risk that the ambitions of the plan will not be realised?

Laura Muir: From our procurement perspective, we rely on local authorities to help us develop the technical aspects of our tenders. However, there is not the resource in local authorities to enable the sharing of the information that we need to develop our tenders. One of our concerns about the good food nation plan is that we will not be able to tap into the knowledge of local authorities to develop what we need to support its ambitions.

Hugh, do you have anything that you want to add?

Hugh Carr: That is a valid point. We see that pretty much across the board, not necessarily only in this area—and that probably ties into some of the feedback that you have received about funding in other submissions. There is a correlation between the resources that are available in local authorities and the funding that comes with that.

Through our academy, we have tried to develop a number of innovative ways in which we can deliver procurement and vocational training. We have worked with the registered bodies as well as with the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Scottish Government to develop those programmes. We are looking to enhance the skills in the sector, but, in some cases, there are gaps in individual authorities that impact us.

Mark Griffin: Thanks. Andrew Kennedy, Phil Mackie or Nicola Joiner, do you have any comments on whether local authorities have the funding or capacity to deliver on the good food nation plan?

Andrew Kennedy: There are probably two aspects to that—one is more positive and the other is more negative. Clearly, all local authorities and the whole of the public sector are struggling with the extent of the budget pressures and the range of priorities. It is about how far up the issue can be on the priority list. However, there are opportunities in relation to collaboration between organisations. As Hugh Carr indicated, Scotland Excel can play that role at a national level and provide some advice and support.

From a local level, we still have significant experience of procurement with food, but, as the people with that experience leave the organisation, other procurement people might come in who have a slightly different background. That could change those aspects on which we are able to develop things on our own or whether we would be looking for more collaboration. The leading opportunity is probably more about finding ways of collaborating better.

Nicola Joiner: I will answer from the perspective of ASSIST FM and other authorities. I have been on many technical panels with Laura Muir, but I am now picking and choosing which ones I have time to contribute to. Other authorities are finding that a struggle as well, so that is probably not helping the whole procurement process.

From a local authority perspective, the resource that is required to deliver the good food nation plan will be a challenge, because pulling together different areas in authorities and pulling people out of silos so that we can all start working together will be a piece of work that authorities need to somehow find the time to be able to deliver on.

I think that the consultation element will be time consuming, too. We do not want the plan to be a paper exercise; we want it to be of value and beneficial to every authority across Scotland. I think that sharing good practice across different authorities and learning from each other are always helpful, and it is something that we are doing and which we have started to do well.

Mark Griffin: My second question is on community growing. In 2022, the committee investigated that issue and produced a report that concluded that one of the biggest difficulties with, and an enormous barrier to, community growing was access to land. Do you think that any of the aspirations in the good food nation plan will overcome that barrier of access to land?

Andrew Kennedy: That is not necessarily my specific area of expertise, but from an East Ayrshire Council point of view, there has probably been a shift as a result of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which has been referred to in the committee's considerations. I would just highlight the number of community organisations with a particular focus on areas such as climate change and health and wellbeing, and on the wider benefits of community growing in that respect. Those local organisations have developed around the idea of community growing being able to support wellbeing, skills and the environment; they have been able to access more grants, which in turn have allowed them to develop those opportunities. Indeed, we have in East Ayrshire two or three really good examples of groups in which community growing did not originally focus on food, but that is what they are doing now.

That brings me back to some of the points that Phil Mackie has already made about the link with wider policies and ensuring that people see food growing in communities as a multiple benefit in other areas of wider strategies with regard to health and wellbeing. That is where we are seeing some of that success.

This is a skill; after all, it is hard to grow food. It is really important that we build that up, recognise it as a learning experience in itself and ensure that people look at it in that way instead of looking just at how the food is used. It is very difficult for us to do something in a school that will feed the whole school, but the pupils can begin to understand that they are growing food that they might well eat one day, as well as understand the links to where they get their food from—in other words, the wider supply chain. It is about understanding the nuances in communities and how you can build food in.

Mark Griffin: Thank you.

The Convener: That is a really good point. Some of the work that we are talking about relates to a cultural shift around food. Learning how to grow food and, indeed, what it takes to grow something that is not riddled with caterpillar holes is important, as it allows you to understand that it is actually very challenging.

Meghan Gallacher has questions on measuring impact.

Meghan Gallacher: I will try to condense my two questions into one, given the time.

The plan accepts that there are issues with procurement data, and it also includes various high-level indicators for each outcome. I want to condense those two issues into one question, which is this: to what extent is data available for those indicators to help track progress at a local level? Perhaps Hugh Carr or Laura Muir can pick up on that.

Hugh Carr: We have lots of data; however, although we might be data rich, we are potentially information poor. We collect from our suppliers and align with our councils what has been spent across our frameworks.

We also measure things at a national level, because the Scottish Government co-ordinates the collection of data nationally in a procurement hub. That allows us to measure the leakage between what councils are spending across our frameworks and what they are spending elsewhere. Sometimes it is much more difficult to drill down into the next level—that is, whether there is a choice between product A or product B. That might be much more difficult to define, but we do have lots of data, and the issue, to be quite honest, is how we convert that data into usable information that will help inform decisions on what the next generation of our contracts will be like.

11:00

Meghan Gallacher: That is helpful. Laura, do you have anything to add?

Laura Muir: As part of all our food tenders, we collect information on country of origin, which helps us to support local authorities by providing them with data on where the food that comes through their core spend is sourced from. We have been tracking that for about eight years, and the amount that is spent locally has gone up from around 28 per cent when we started tracking to 34 per cent last year, so we are seeing year-on-year increases in the amount that local authorities are spending on local sourcing.

Meghan Gallacher: From a local authority perspective, and on the back of what Hugh Carr advised on getting that information, how can we better help local authorities to use that data appropriately and get the information to make sure that the indicators are being achieved?

Phil Mackie: I was going to raise the point about the interpretation of indicators, so your question is helpful. We need to be thoughtful about what monitoring and evaluation frameworks we need. We need to recognise that, for some of the areas that we have discussed today, the frameworks are not currently available. I do not know how we would monitor the impact of community food growth on land use or the output from that into schools, even if it is just a day a week, as Andrew Kennedy said. I do not know what a just transition towards using food as a way of improving ethical food procurement looks like, because we do not have the data at the moment.

There is therefore work to be done, not in the short-term perhaps but over the lifetime of the good food nation aspiration, to get into the core benefit of that and start monitoring and evaluating the impact of those core benefits.

That brings me to my second point. Time is not our friend here. If I want to see benefits to the health of our population, I might have to wait 25 years to see some improvement in something like reducing type 2 diabetes rates among a large population when diet has been used as a major focus for that improvement. We not only need the monitoring and evaluation frameworks to be thought through but also to know when we might expect to see impacts that are meaningful rather than simply a logic that suggests that the situation has changed.

Meghan Gallacher: Those are important points.

Nicola Joiner: Local authorities tend to analyse their purchases anyway. Most local authorities in Scotland do an Association for Public Service Excellence return, which is when questions are asked about what is procured locally. We pull that data annually from the management information that we get, so we have a baseline of information from which we can work.

Andrew Kennedy: I have a short point on the wider issue of data. Food spend could be one of the measures. Obviously, in the past three years, we have seen a 35 per cent increase in inflation. We have also introduced half-price school meals in secondary schools and they have seen a 30 per cent increase in uptake. Further, nutritional standards have changed the product ranges that we are buying. Those three things have made a massive change to our food spend.

Looking at individual measures and trying to track things over a period of time can miss the bigger decisions and the bigger impacts that we are seeing. It is a wee bit difficult to balance some of those outcomes with the direct measures that we are trying to take, but we need to recognise

that we have to understand the context of any benchmarking or any consideration of those indicators.

The Convener: There is clearly work to be done on how we broaden out what we are measuring. What Phil Mackie said was illuminating; I had not thought that it would be 25 years before we see an impact from what we are doing here.

Evelyn Tweed has questions on the Scottish Food Commission.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Good morning to the witnesses and thanks for all your answers so far, which have been really helpful. My question is about the Scottish Food Commission, which took on new powers in June. Given those powers, what do you expect from the commission when it comes to local authorities, community growing, local plans and procurement?

Andrew Kennedy: As has been the case with most of our responses, it is about trying to find best practice and opportunities for collaboration across sectors and organisations. My main hope and ask is for an opportunity for co-ordination, so that people genuinely recognise that they are being presented with a balanced best practice.

Nicola Joiner: I hope that the Food Commission will be able to guide us, in a similar way to an inspector from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in a school: it is there for answers and support, but also to keep us following the core principles of the act and making sure that we are doing what we are supposed to do—a double-edged sword of keeping us right and guiding us in the right way.

Laura Muir: From a procurement perspective, we hope that the Food Commission will work with us and ensure that some of the best practice that is already happening is recognised and carried forward. We also hope that any new practices that it introduces are realistic, can be carried out under the relevant regulations and can work within the environments in which our local authorities work.

The Convener: I have one brief question, even though we are over time. I was thinking in my head that we would go until 10 past 11, so I have a few minutes. It comes back to procurement and is for Hugh Carr. Our papers flag up that the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and agreements under the World Trade Organization could be a block when it comes to local food resilience. However, it seems to me that that is not a problem; East Ayrshire Council is doing a lot of work on local procurement. Should we be concerned about the 2020 act and those global agreements?

Hugh Carr: We should not be so concerned as to perceive that as a blocker at this stage. We need to remind ourselves about the good practice that we have developed in Scotland over the past 10 years. However, naturally, we need to keep one eye on it.

It might potentially become more of an issue in some other areas. Where appropriate, we partner with colleagues from the UK Government and the Crown Commercial Service. Doing so is particularly effective in areas such as vehicles and technology contracts. However, when it comes to impacts on our work on food procurement in particular, I do not see that what you described is a short-to-medium-term blocker. Further, if we continue to build on what we have and what we have done, we will be able to mitigate any long-term risks from that. For the purposes of this discussion, therefore, we should not be too concerned about the issue at this stage.

The Convener: Thanks very much.

That concludes our questions. Many thanks for joining us. I can see that we could have done with a bit more time to get into more detail, but it has been helpful to get a sense of the issue. I am glad that the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee has looked at the good food nation plan this morning, and that we have a session next week with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, because the plan will affect local government. It is great to have heard from you this morning.

I suspend the meeting briefly to allow for a changeover of witnesses.

11:09

Meeting suspended.

11:15

On resuming—

The Convener: I warmly welcome our second panel. We are joined by Anna Chworow, who is deputy director at Nourish Scotland, and Emilie Combet, who is a commissioner at the new Scottish Food Commission. We are also joined online by Jane Beasley, who is the director of circular economy delivery at Zero Waste Scotland.

We have around 60 minutes for this discussion. I say to our witnesses that there is no need to operate the microphones. Jane, if you would like to comment, please indicate that online and I will bring you in. I will start with a couple of questions on plans, working together and collaboration. As we are a bit pressed for time, please do not feel that you have to answer every question, unless you have an additional point to add to the discussion.

The Highland Good Food Partnership stated that the good food nation plan

"does not propose any new actions and targets, neither does it commit to new indicators or areas of policy development."

I will direct this first question at Anna Chworow, initially, as I am interested in understanding Nourish's perspective. Would you agree with that assessment?

Anna Chworow (Nourish Scotland): Yes, we would. The plan is a very comprehensive summary or audit of existing policies that relate, in different ways, to the food system, but it does not propose anything new.

The Convener: Thank you. Do our other witnesses agree?

Professor Emilie Combet (Scottish Food Commission): We recognise that the plan provides a comprehensive audit and a vision of the future, which is really commendable. Our position is that time is not in our favour, so it is important to get started. We welcome this important moment, which will get the ball rolling.

Jane Beasley (Zero Waste Scotland): There is a need for speed in this space, so we should not chase perfection in what is a very complex area. We need to get moving. We need to get the local plans up and do as much as we can to review and reflect as we go, as we get more data and information, and more insights and knowledge, so that we can build.

As we come from different sectors and have different priorities, we will always be in a position in which we are looking for more, but in an area as complicated as food and food systems, we need to get things off the ground. We should then reflect on which indicators are working, which indicators are held up and where we can do better.

The Convener: My next question is for Anna Chworow. It relates to the point that Nourish Scotland made in its response to the call for views about the Government's approach being "confusing" and appearing "contradictory". Nourish Scotland noted:

"the Plan currently states that the National Plan ... must serve as a guide for local authorities and health boards, but it is for those bodies themselves to determine the outcomes of the plans."

I want to understand why you concluded that that approach

"is confusing and appears contradictory."

Anna Chworow: We think that it would be helpful if, in preparing plans, all the bodies—the Scottish Government, local authorities and health boards—were working towards a coherent set of outcomes, so that we are not pushing and pulling in different directions when it comes to food policy. A coherent set of indicators that could be used, at least at some level, across local authorities and with the Scottish Government would also be helpful—again, that would avoid having plans potentially working against one another.

There needs to be much more co-ordination and coherence in this space, and much more collaboration with local authorities. That has not happened so far—the process thus far has involved the Scottish Government developing the plan with a presumption that local authorities need to have regard to it, and yet also offering flexibility. In that regard, the wording of the plan is confusing. A better approach would have involved closer collaboration from the start, learning from some of the local authorities, such as Glasgow and Fife, that have already developed food plans and making the plan a much more collaborative effort, based on more dialogue than we have seen to date.

The Convener: Nonetheless, we are here now, and this plan is what we have to work with.

I bring in Alexander Stewart with a couple of questions.

Alexander Stewart: How will the Scottish Food Commission work with local authorities to ensure that good food nation plans "have regard to" the national plan? What role will it play in assessing the effectiveness of the plans? How effective will that be when we have it in place?

Professor Combet: That is a good question. The "have regard to" function has potentially created some uncertainties for local authorities, because how far one plan can go is not well defined. With regard to the scrutiny process, the Scottish Food Commission will support the relevant authorities, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of those plans will be based on the areas that local plans decide to target and focus on.

At the Scottish Food Commission, we see our role as a critical friend, supporting and enabling the exchange of best practice between relevant authorities and encouraging co-operation. As Anna Chworow mentioned, certain areas already have food plans; that showcases existing good practice and will help to ensure that those local authorities that may be further behind benefit from what is already in place.

Alexander Stewart: My second question is for Zero Waste Scotland. Is Zero Waste Scotland satisfied that food waste and associated indicators are included in the plan? What would you like to be included in local good food plans?

Jane Beasley: The indicator question is interesting, and it is one that we wrangle with

regularly. We are currently involved in developing an intervention plan for household waste reduction, on which we are guiding the Scottish Government. The timescale for that runs to March 2027, so it will run alongside what will be required in the local plans.

Our focus and remit for any interventions that are put through concern waste reduction and the prevention of food waste, for all the economic and environmental reasons that come with that. That is a challenging space, however. It is slightly easier in the household, where we have compositional data and kitchen diaries, and we can bring in other sources of information to support that. We have a suite of research that is due to be published on 29 September, which includes some fresh data in that space.

The more challenging area is the public sector data. We have noticed that there are uncertainties in what is classified as the “other” group within that, and more work is definitely needed if we are going to baseline from any data that we have. We talk regularly with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the Scottish Government about how we can overcome that, because it is a multi-agency task. It is a very expensive and challenging area in which to try to capture and update information and data. Having said all that, we need indicators because we need to monitor progress and say where we are at.

The positive slant to put on this is that there is definitely work in progress on our side of the fence. We are looking at a data strategy that sits alongside looking primarily at the household proportion of food loss, which is obviously significant—we will run that exercise as we go through, and plans will come into place. It may be that future iterations will have a much more concrete foundation on which to build those interventions, because we will have more surety in the data.

Having learned from experience, we would advise against using poor or limited data, because that poses a challenge from the outset. We need to ensure that everything is proportionate and that the data is not being captured elsewhere. The data should be doing the right thing for you. There could be other avenues, and we do not know what the intervention plan will look like. It is live—it is something that we are undertaking. We will be piggybacking on lots of engagement, tying in to all the stakeholders who are involved in developing the local plans. We need to be mindful of what is going on in that work so that we do not duplicate it—rather, we should enhance it. We might take on some of the burden through that route, but that work will have its own delivery plan sitting behind it.

The Convener: We will now move on to capacity and funding.

Meghan Gallacher: Scotland Excel has argued that there needs to be investment in capacity and innovation, particularly for market development, supplier engagement and training for public sector buyers. How do the aspirations of the plan sit with local authorities that are struggling financially and are being forced to make savings in various sectors under their remit?

Professor Combet: From reading the papers and discussing the situation with stakeholders, we recognise that there is a big constraint on resources—whether those are financial or related to time, reskilling, skills development and capacity within teams. We see the Scottish Food Commission as being in a position to hear such concerns and potentially to advocate for resource to be fairly allocated, as well as discussing with all parties how to leverage what are fairly broad and common resources in commissioning work and working with each other. That means thinking creatively about what we can do to deliver the ambitions of the plan in a fairly constrained timeline, as time is not on our side. We can add value by thinking creatively, asking, “How can we make this happen?” and recognising that the work cannot be funded only out of good will.

Anna Chworow: The financial memorandum outlines resourcing for writing the plans in the first place—in five years’ time—and for the associated consultation that needs to happen. However, there is no clarity on resourcing for implementation, which is what I think you are alluding to.

For a long time, civil society organisations have been advocating for the reallocation of a small percentage of the agricultural budget towards local authorities to enable more local procurement and to strengthen the good food nation agenda at the local level. In addition to thinking creatively about resourcing, it would be beneficial to have some reallocation of the budget and some reinvestment.

Meghan Gallacher: Do you have anything to add from your end, Jane?

Jane Beasley: Yes. From a resourcing point of view, while our role is only one element of the plan, focused on food waste reduction and prevention, the behavioural change insights that we are gathering by running pilots and trials allow us to pull together best practice and share cases with local government, telling them what we expect the outcome to be if they take a given approach. That is where we see our value.

We have also done a lot of work to support businesses. We have tools and toolkits that are accessible to businesses in reviewing their waste practices. There is an economic slant there, given the benefits of taking such approaches and

making the associated savings. We are trying to fill the gap, increasing the pace and scale of change by sharing our knowledge and insights. We have a couple of pilots that are about to launch, and we have behavioural change insights into the reasons for certain responses.

Food waste is a very moral issue—it is not necessarily linked to environmental factors—and that changes how we address such issues. Local authorities can make cost savings on their waste management through better food management, food waste reduction and increasing food recycling. We are amassing evidence and insight all the time, sharing it and pushing it out. That is our main priority. We are doing the legwork, getting insights and helping authorities to make decisions.

Meghan Gallacher: I have a supplementary question on the point that you have just raised in relation to food recycling. A number of councils have had to introduce charges for food recycling bins. Is that an incentive, and is that the best way to encourage people to recycle properly, noting that the cost that is incurred by councils for having to undertake and manage that task is being passed on to individual home owners and renters?

11:30

Jane Beasley: One piece of research that we did last year was an options appraisal that looked specifically at the organics component. We found that the model that came through with regard to getting the best performance was a separate food collection and a charge for garden waste collection; that was the route through which a local authority could be the most effective and run a service.

There is always a balance between optimising that service and local authorities having to make decisions about where they can, and why they should, impose a charge. Those things must be managed very well to get the behaviour change that we are looking for. Often, the cost and charge aspect will not generate that change, but it is about what sits behind and alongside it to make it the most effective route.

Evelyn Tweed: Good morning, panel—it is still the morning, isn't it? Thanks for your answers so far.

South Lanarkshire Council has raised concerns about the timescales for having local plans completed and approved by late 2027; we know that council elections will take place in 2027 as well. What are the witnesses' thoughts on those concerns? How do you think that that will go?

Professor Combet: I do not want to make assumptions on where those concerns come from but, depending on the capacity on the ground to deliver the plan, they are potentially valid, especially if the local authorities are starting very early, from ground zero, and if the staff, the resources and the collaboration with neighbouring authorities are not in place. We have heard that some local authorities are fortunate to have a very strong relationship with their neighbours and their health board, but that is not necessarily the case for all local authorities—it is a very heterogeneous landscape.

To some extent, at the moment, the Scottish Food Commission is mapping those key stakeholders and trying to understand the needs level and where people are starting from in order to best advise and guide. You are describing a complex landscape in which an election will take place; there are a lot of other priorities, and that might make it quite challenging for some relevant authorities.

Anna Chworow: There has been some uncertainty about resourcing, which has meant that some of the local authorities have not felt able to even begin to think about this new area of work, given all the other pressures that they are facing. Having said that, I echo Emilie Combet's earlier point around needing to get on with it and make some progress, even if the plans are imperfect. We need to start making some progress, and the living good food nation lab, which is based at the University of Edinburgh, is ready and eager to support local authorities with the development of the plans.

Evelyn Tweed: Thank you.

The Convener: Willie Coffey will ask questions about planning and licensing.

Willie Coffey: Good morning to everyone. I will ask the same questions that I asked the previous panel. The first question is on whether we need to improve planning and licensing powers to take this whole agenda forward. We heard the story from—I think—Phil Mackie, who said that there is a plethora of applications around schools for fast-food outlets and so on and so forth. In your experience, do you think that we need to do a bit more either to discourage that or to, say, make the offer much better in schools in order to avoid that problem?

Anna Chworow: Yes, definitely, some licensing, better planning and clear guidance in relation to schools through the national planning framework would be helpful. We also need to look at the concentration of out-of-home provision in different parts of our cities across the areas of multiple deprivation. We know that more affluent parts of the city tend to have healthier options and the less affluent parts tend to have more

takeaways and more unhealthy options, so that is another area to consider.

Moreover, when it comes to planning, what is important is that, when planning decisions are challenged—that is, a local authority refuses permission for a new fast food outlet and its decision is challenged—the authority has some backing from the Scottish Government to pursue and see through the legal actions that often follow. At the moment, local authorities do not have the resources to fight lengthy legal battles, and they often acquiesce in the face of quite relentless corporate influence. Again, some joined-up and partnership working across those two levels will be important.

Professor Combet: It is an important point and it speaks very much to the public health-critical point in the agenda about improving the health of the nation in a fairly short time. A focus on planning, especially around food, is going to be very important in that respect. The beauty of the local plan is that it can respond to the real priorities in the area. The Scottish Food Commission is keen to support the local authorities that see that as a key target that they want to include in their plans and to support any ambitious plans relating to, in this case, planning.

Jane Beasley: When it comes to planning, we are always mindful of the consequences, particularly with regard to your example of the increase in fast food outlets and so on. In that case, there will be increase in packaging and food waste, and that is counter to where we are trying to get to.

There is also a wider issue with planning, which goes a little bit beyond good food nation. If this work is to succeed in reducing food waste and optimising food recycling services, whether from business or at home, we need to think about infrastructure issue and ensuring that Scotland is fully equipped to manage that material. For example, there are now much more circular solutions involving materials going back, digestates and so on. We take a wider view on planning, but we are always mindful of the resource position.

Willie Coffey: Thank you for that. My other question is on the collaboration between councils and health boards on taking forward the good food nation principles. Have you seen any examples of that in practice, or can you suggest ways in which we could improve that relationship so that we can take those principles forward?

Anna Chworow: We are seeing some early examples of collaboration across Glasgow and the Tayside region. A particular issue arises where health board areas do not map exactly on to local authority areas, and there has been some early thinking about how to manage that.

I think that the Scottish Government or, potentially, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has an important convening role to play in bringing more collaboration into that space. The living good food nation lab is another part of this, but it is only a project with an end date, and we need longer-term structural mechanisms for on-going co-operation and collaboration.

Professor Combet: This is a good opportunity not only to think about those fairly natural collaborations involving people who already know each other and work together but to think a little bit more broadly about collaborations between the local authority and the health board. The commission has a role to play in brokering those perhaps less natural discussions between people who might not work together routinely and identifying how we can accelerate the pace of designing and implementing the plans by getting the right people together in the same space to exchange best practice and think creatively about what can be done. It is all about moving away from what we are already doing towards something that is creative, innovative and transformative.

Jane Beasley: Partnerships are key to everything. For us, it is about ensuring that we introduce things to the partnerships that they might not have considered before. A lot of our research on behaviour change in the food space shows the importance of portioning and meal planning, and they have a direct impact on the health side of things as well as what we deal with. The latest data shows that over three quarters of what is thrown out as food waste is actually edible, with a significant portion the fresh fruit and vegetables that we know are a challenge for people to get back into their diets. There is a planning issue in that respect—it is just not used quickly enough.

Therefore, we need to think about how we can go into those kinds of partnerships to share our insights and show our evidence in an effort to tackle behaviours. What is required is a joined-up approach that covers what local authorities and the health sector want, and people might well not think of Zero Waste Scotland as having insights to offer in that respect. We are driving through the intelligence that we are gathering, tapping into those partnerships and optimising them. As I said, it is definitely a collaborative effort.

Mark Griffin: The committee has a close interest in community food growing that stems from previous inquiries, work on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and allotments. We found that one of the biggest barriers to community food growing is access to land to grow that food. What, if anything, do you think is in the proposed good food nation plan that

will overcome those barriers that community organisations face in getting access to land to grow food?

Professor Combet: The commission chose not to explore too much the specific point of the good food nation plan, so I might veer a little bit from our written response and speak more from professional and general experience. In certain local authorities, that will potentially be a big challenge depending on the space that is available. The general framework pays attention to points that are relevant to the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. That is where there is scope to enrich how we do things and to give more power to the people to ask for what they deserve and are entitled to ask for but do not yet know that they can, if that makes sense. From the commission's perspective, we see members of the public as one of the stakeholder groups. They do not need to be represented by an organisation. They, as individuals, are stakeholders and we hope that the work that we are going to do will enable those specific individual stakeholders to recognise that the 2015 act is for them and the plans are for them, and that it enables them to ask for what they deserve.

Mark Griffin: Anna or Jane, do you have any comments on access to land?

Anna Chworow: I can come in briefly and give credit to the plan for attempting to measure the amount of space that is used for community food growing. That will obviously look very different in different local authorities. Urban local authorities will grapple with different challenges from rural local authorities.

I agree with Emilie Combet that better awareness of the 2015 act and use of the ability to claim land that is not otherwise being used is important. A little bit of cultural change is also needed. I am aware of one community group that has been trying for the past three years to reclaim some land from the NHS with great difficulty because the land is being farmed very neatly in conventional ways so the health board is a bit reluctant to have messy community groups coming in and having a go with orchards and other agricultural activity when having a farmer farm it commercially gives it peace of mind. There needs to be a bit more recognition of the cultural importance of communities growing their own food.

There also needs to be progression towards horticulture on a more commercial basis for people who are making a living out of farming and not just using it as a hobby activity.

Jane Beasley: The land use issue is definitely outside our area of expertise, but we support the principle of providing communities with access to growing areas. We know that growing our own food supports the raising of awareness of the value of food.

It is also about recognising skills development in this space and more resilience. The only caveat to that is that, if we are pushing this out and having novices in this space, which is, I guess, what everyone is hoping for, we need to be mindful that what is grown does not become a food waste issue because people are not sure how to plan, use and store food, and so on. We would therefore be looking for some kind of skills support in this space if it takes off.

The Convener: Thank you.

I have a few follow-up questions. The witnesses might not be the people to answer this question given that it is more about local food plans and community growing spaces, but the 2015 act includes a requirement for local authorities to create local food plans. Have they been wrapped up into the good food nation plan? What has happened with them? Does anybody have any awareness of that?

Anna Chworow: Are you talking about the food-growing strategies?

The Convener: Yes.

11:45

Anna Chworow: I am aware that some local authorities may be waiting in order to deal with both plans at the same time in a joined-up way, but that is only anecdotal.

The Convener: Local authorities have a lot of plans to produce as part of the "planscape"—to use a term that was coined by the committee's researcher, Greig Liddell—so it would make sense to try to combine them.

In the committee's call for views, a lot of responses brought up the market garden sector. I would be interested in hearing your thoughts on how market gardens could contribute more. As a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, I was doing a lot of work on supporting market gardens to contribute more to local food production and bringing them into the system to a greater extent.

There is an incredible opportunity, pulling in the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill that is going through Parliament, for local authorities to be anchor organisations for our food system, given that they spend £83 million a year and that—as we heard earlier—Scottish products make up more than a third of the food that they source. There are a couple of points with regard to local authorities being able to move into a place where they can be anchor organisations for community wealth

building and how they can support producers such as market gardeners. You can pick that question up in whatever way you want. Anna, I saw you nodding a lot when I brought that up.

Anna Chworow: Yes—you could see my mind going through different parts of it.

Market gardens are not sufficiently recognised in the good food nation plan as it stands, and they are not sufficiently supported through the current farm subsidy regime. That is due to a combination of factors, some of which are possibly more relevant to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

There definitely needs to be a more concerted effort to support smaller-scale production, which is often highly productive in terms of the type of food that we want to be eating more of but is not sufficiently supported through the subsidy system because it uses relatively little land. There is a challenge to be resolved there. In general, when we think about our dietary goals and the type of food that we need to eat more of, that is exactly the type of agriculture that deserves more support. It can act as a driver, both in rural settings and in urban and peri-urban settings, to bring people closer to their food sources and build a better food culture. All that plays an important role.

You talked about the role of local authorities in facilitating that through planning and supporting more co-ordination in that space and increasing skills exchange with the community growing sector. There are obvious overlaps with people seeing a path from hobbyist growing and excitement around food. It is often a massive leap for people to think, “I’m going to become a farmer,” but the transition to thinking, “I’m going to become a market gardener and have a real go at this on a semi-commercial or commercial basis,” is important for many.

More support from the Scottish Government to develop vocational training in that space, and to support existing providers to develop vocational training, is also important.

There are a lot of thoughts around that, but the market garden sector definitely needs to be developed more strongly in thinking about Scotland as a good food nation and the ambition that we want to achieve in that regard.

The Convener: If we have more market gardeners, local authorities could potentially source produce from them and become anchor organisations that support a network of small producers in each county.

Anna Chworow: Absolutely, but there we run into issues with dynamic procurement, which the committee may have covered in the previous session. It is important to resource procurement officers in local authorities to support people to be tender ready and run those early pilots, so that, by the time the local authority puts out a tender, those producers are ready and able to tender and can win some of those commercial contracts. It is quite a complex area, but what you describe is absolutely the case.

Professor Combet: Mostly, it is a case of bringing produce from market gardens to the consumer, and making sure that there are opportunities for local markets and that that way of selling food is emphasised.

In some city food plans, people have started to think, “Well, how can we do that? How can we ensure that residents see what is being produced by those market gardens in the local market, on their local streets or elsewhere in their areas?” It is all about looking at what is happening at the moment and ensuring that, if someone is not necessarily ready to enter the complexities of procurement—which, as we have heard, is not simple—they know that they have another avenue, and a regular slot, where their produce can be displayed, bought and enjoyed, and where people are able to see that there are such skills in their area and that that sort of food is being produced in specific parts of Scotland.

The Convener: Jane, do you have any perspective on the food waste aspect of market gardens or anything else in that respect?

Jane Beasley: Just to say that the more connection we have with our food, the better our relationship will be with it, which will have consequences for what we see as having value and, ultimately, what we see as being waste. Anything that brings that sort of visibility and that local connection will be positive. It will help us to build awareness and allow us to tap into deep belief systems and all sorts of different areas to get behaviour change. It is definitely a positive aspect.

The Convener: My final question is about these wonderful forums and action groups that we have called community planning partnerships. Have you given any thought to what we should be expecting of them and how they might deploy their activities in the good food nation space? Is there any opportunity in that respect?

I see that there might not have been any thinking about using them as venues.

Anna Chworow: They have not been specifically mentioned in the work that we have been doing, but clearly the more collaboration we can have in that space, the better. After all, we need things to be much better joined up than they are at the moment. My answer, then, is yes, I can completely see those partnerships as being natural partners in that work at a local level.

The Convener: That is great.

Professor Combet: It comes back to my point about brokering what are perhaps non-natural interactions that might not exist at present, introducing key actors such as community planning partnerships to teams, local authorities and health boards and flagging the potential of such interactions.

The Convener: Thanks. That brings us to the end of our questions. It has been very helpful to hear from you, so thank you very much for your contributions this morning.

That was the last public item on today's agenda, so, as previously agreed, we will take the next item in private. I close the public part of the meeting.

11:52

Meeting continued in private until 12:22.

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