OFFICIAL REPORT
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Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 3 September 2025

Session 6

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RURAL AFFAIRS AND ISLANDS COMMITTEE
23rd Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
*Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)
*Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
*Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Adam Forrest (Nature Friendly Farming Network)
Lisa Hislop-Smith (National Farmers Union Scotland)
Dennis Overton (Scottish Food Commission)
Dr Gillian Purdon (Food Standards Scotland)
Jason Rose (OneKind)
Vicki Swales (Scottish Food Coalition)
David Thomson (Food and Drink Federation Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Emma Johnston

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 3 September 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:19]

Interests

The Convener (Finlay Carson): Good morning, and welcome to the 23rd meeting in 2025 of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. I ask everyone to ensure that all electronic devices are switched to silent. We have received apologies from Rhoda Grant and Beatrice Wishart. Tim Eagle joins us remotely.

Under agenda item 1, I invite Ariane Burgess to declare any relevant interests. Ariane returns to the committee after Mark Ruskell's brief stint as a member. I thank Mark for his work and input during the recent consideration of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): It is good to be back. I have no relevant interests to declare.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

10:20

The Convener: Our second item is consideration of whether to take item 4 in private. Are we agreed to do so?

Members *indicated agreement.*

National Good Food Nation Plan

10:20

The Convener: Our third item is consideration of the proposed national good food nation plan. Members will note that we had thought that we would not have time to consider the proposed national plan after it was laid; however, as the subordinate legislation that we were expecting today was delayed, we have the opportunity to hold a round table, at which we will take evidence from a range of stakeholders. I welcome Adam Forrest, from the Nature Friendly Farming Network; Lisa Hislop-Smith, from NFU Scotland; Dennis Overton, from the Scottish Food Commission; Dr Gillian Purdon, from Food Standards Scotland; Jason Rose, from OneKind; Vicki Swales, from the Scottish Food Coalition; and David Thomson, from the Food and Drink Federation Scotland.

We have allocated around 90 minutes for discussion, and we have a few questions to get through, so I ask everyone to be succinct in their questions and answers. Please indicate to me or one of the clerks if you wish to participate in the conversation at any point. There is no expectation that you will speak on every point or question. You do not need to operate your microphones, as we have a gentleman who will do that for you.

I will kick off with a very broad question. What are your views on the proposed outcomes, whether the proposed plan demonstrates how those outcomes can be achieved over the five-year period and beyond, and—just as important—whether there are any conflicts between the outcomes and how those should be resolved?

Lisa Hislop-Smith (National Farmers Union Scotland): The outcomes are broad and ambitious. They cover a huge range of ambition for the plan, which is to be welcomed, as is the new way of working. Cutting across all the different directorates is a positive for which we have called for a long time. That said, we generally feel that the plan probably misses the key element of how we turn those outcomes into action—the support that will be available for farmers, crofters and the food and drink businesses, to turn it into something tangible and meaningful. We had hoped that the plan would provide that detail, but, currently, it is still quite ambiguous.

Vicki Swales (Scottish Food Coalition): The Scottish Food Coalition campaigned long and hard for the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 and a national plan, so we are really pleased to see that plan come forward. In broad terms, we are supportive of the outcomes that are set out in it; however, we have similar concerns to those of Lisa Hislop-Smith about whether it sufficiently states what some of the problems are and the state of the food sector and food system in Scotland. Having that understanding is important as a starting point. Although the plan lists at length relevant policies across the different portfolios and directorates that will help to deliver the plan, it is not clear what the tangible actions will be.

We accept that it is a big beast, that it is difficult, that it is the very first plan and that things will evolve over time. However, more connection would be helpful between some of those policies and outcomes, more explicitly setting out what will be different—what will change—and to what timelines over the next five-year period.

The Convener: Could the expectation be that most of the heavy lifting will be done by the public bodies—the national health service and local authorities, in the first instance—whose plans will be formed on the back of the national plan? Is it not more likely that the plans of the local authorities and the NHS—the public bodies—will be clearer on how they will achieve some of the outcomes?

Vicki Swales: Delivery will certainly have to be done by local authorities and health boards, but the plan is for all of us, so all of parts of society and all businesses should be thinking about how we can deliver the outcomes. The task is not entirely for public bodies, but they can provide leadership, direction, resources and strategy around what will happen.

There is a question about whether there is enough in the national plan at the moment to give clarity to local authorities and health boards about what they need to do next. For example, it is for each local authority to determine what it sees as the appropriate outcomes and then to set the indicators and actions required to deliver those. Things do not feel fully joined up. The guidance is all there, but there may be roles in that space for other bodies, such as the Scottish food commission.

The Convener: That is a good moment to bring in Dennis Overton

Dennis Overton (Scottish Food Commission): We have arrived at a really important stage. The question about the availability of resources to move things forward is an important and interesting one, as we can see in the responses to the consultations by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee and the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

You raised the question of possible conflict between outcomes, which ties in with resourcing. The conflict between farming, food production and nature recovery has been a long-standing feature

of the debate in Scotland. Over the past nine months or so, since I came into this post, it has been really interesting to watch the way in which NatureScot has stepped up and has developed a cross-group round table that involves people who would not normally sit down together. We are beginning to see the squaring of the circle between outcomes 2 and 4 and the question of how to have a prosperous industry while also seeing both nature recovery and carbon reduction. Those two things need not be in eternal conflict. I have seen a resource that was not obvious to me nine months ago now becoming evident as that agency has taken the lead. We should expect to see more of Scotland's fixed infrastructure—particularly, but not only, in the public sector—working towards delivery of the ambition, and that could help in places where there might at first seem to be conflicts.

I have one final point to make about the outcomes themselves. It was interesting to look at the results of the 2024 consultation on the first draft of the plan. There was a large number of responses, including from about 700 or 800 schoolchildren, but there was no serious challenge to the plan. There was no suggested objective 7 and no big missing part became apparent, which was helpful in confirming what we now have today. There will be some revisions, but the six outcomes stood the test of that consultation.

The Convener: You touched on the issue of budget. There is no dedicated budget to support the plan, the cost of which instead falls on other sectors. For example, we will be considering the rural support plan over the coming months and the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill will include an element of costs to deliver some of the plan's outcomes. Is that a failing? Does it suggest that there is no real commitment to, or understanding of, what will be required to deliver the vision for a good food nation?

Dennis Overton: My understanding is that we have had some commitment from the Government about support for the relevant authorities to undertake their responsibilities under the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022. That is not yet defined, and the sooner we have that definition, the better. There is some initial commitment to resourcing, but we need to see that being crystallised.

The Convener: Is there a feeling that it is right that there is no budget line for the good food nation as long as there is an expectation that budget would be allocated from within other portfolios to deliver the outcomes of the good food nation plan?

10:30

Dennis Overton: I would say yes to that. Again, we are seeing evidence of that at the moment. If you think about the rural and environment science and analytical services—RESAS—research priorities in the agricultural and natural sciences space, the Scottish, Environment, Food and Agriculture Research Institutes are coming to the Scottish Food Commission and asking, "How best can we engage and what do you see as priorities?" as they think about their next five years of research priorities beyond 2027.

That is about harnessing resources that are already committed in the direction of food system transformation in Scotland. I would expect to see more of that across the public sector.

Vicki Swales: Within the remit of the committee specifics, you mentioned the rural support plan, for example. If we look in that space, it will be incumbent on the £650 million of public money that is spent on supporting agriculture, the food industry and the supply chains, because that is leveraged to deliver against those outcomes.

Dennis Overton has helpfully mentioned one of the biggest challenges. Without looking after nature and without a stable climate, we do not have food production—full stop. We have some major challenges to address in that space.

There is a lot of reference in the good food nation plan document to the various policies that are being brought forward and that will, in theory, form part of that rural support plan, but the reality is that very little of that money is being applied directly to deliver nature and climate-friendly farming or to support shorter supply chains, organic agriculture and the delivery of the organic action plan. When you start to delve away and you know about a sector or an area, you see a disconnect between what is happening in the sectoral policy and what is being stated in terms of delivering the outcomes in the plan. I am sure that others who are much more knowledgeable than I am in areas such as health, education and food poverty would probably say the same. We are not leveraging public money in those spaces to deliver the outcomes that we are all saying that we back and are behind. Dennis is right that there is not much contention around those outcomes. There is a lot of support for them and for the ambitions and visions of the plan. It is really about how we do joined-up policy better to deliver that.

The Convener: I am conscious that we have jumped on to a question that Alasdair Allan was going to ask about future climate change plans and agricultural policy. Before I jump to Alasdair, I will bring in Jason Rose and Emma Roddick, who has a supplementary question on where we are just now.

Jason Rose (OneKind): On your question about the timescale for this work, from an animal welfare point of view, sub-outcome 2C talks about animal health and welfare standards being "maintained, enforced and improved". I am thinking about the tens of thousands of OneKind supporters who will see that word "maintained", which will raise a few eyebrows. The 2022 act talks about improving welfare, and the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 uses the same language. It is a small point, but "maintaining" suggests that things are fine—I just wanted to flag that.

With regard to timescale, a lot of the improvement work is now being put on to the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission, and the language used is that the commission will "explore the feasibility" of that. Again, that will raise a few eyebrows about whether this stuff is important or not. Clearly, the public care about animal welfare—they expect it to be a priority and expect the Government to move on it—but the plan does not give off strong vibes that the Government is going to move on it any time soon.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I want to pick up on some of the comments and tease out whether people believe that there is an inherent conflict between food production and looking after nature and climate. Or is the nuance missing from how we discuss these things and take them forward? Loads of farmers in the Highlands and Islands are doing incredible things and taking an active role in what is happening in the environment around them, as well as on their farms specifically.

Lisa Hislop-Smith: You used the word "nuance", which is incredibly accurate. There is no contradiction between food production, climate adaptation mitigation and nature restoration. It is on the face of the 2024 act and it is mentioned in the plan.

That discussion has definitely evolved, as Dennis Overton mentioned. Our members, who include farmers and crofters from across Scotland, care deeply about their role as stewards of the land. The narrative has changed, and the good food nation plan refers to the need for a holistic way of working. We are keen to see further detail in relation to the specified functions, how that policy will be developed and how the outcomes will be achieved in those areas in working practice.

I want to follow up on Jason Rose's point about animal health and welfare. The reference to animal health and welfare standards being "maintained" is made in the context that we are already incredibly highly regulated when it comes to animal health and welfare. Our standards of production have been championed. I see where Jason Rose was coming from with his point about the use of the word "maintained", but our members are committed to high standards of animal health and welfare. It is fundamental to any changes in that area that there is engagement and collaboration and that the Animal Welfare Committee, which recently changed its name to the Animal Welfare Commission, is committed to that. We must ensure that farmers and crofters are central to the engagement process, not only on animal health and welfare but on the national plan and how the indicators are developed.

That leads me on to another point about the indicators. There is a bit of ambiguity about what the indicators say. How do we measure what good looks like? Mention was made of one of the indicators on animal health and welfare inspections. What does that number mean? Is it good if that number goes up or is it good if it goes down? It would be beneficial to have some of that fundamental detail so that we can make sure that the national plan is progressing. We do not want to set targets that do not mean anything or that are not measurable—targets that do not enable us to tell whether we are making progress.

The Convener: Some members want to ask questions, but I will allow the witnesses who have not spoken yet to come in.

Adam Forrest (Nature Friendly Farming Network): I would like to respond to Emma Roddick's helpful comments. Thriving nature and healthy soils are foundational to our food security and to the idea of a good food nation, and I think that outcome 2 would benefit from a little bit of reframing. It talks about Scotland's food system contributing to that, rather than saying that Scotland's food system is based on thriving nature and healthy soils.

I would also like to respond to the points that were made about implementation and funding. It is important to say that, in the way in which agricultural support is changing, we do not see the structural change that is needed to deliver on outcome 2. As well as the other pieces of policy that need to be funded and resourced to deliver on the good food nation plan, additional funding will need to be provided to local authorities. Facilitation is required for supply chain development. We have incredible entrepreneurs, producers and farmers who are changing supply chains and creating resilient, diverse supply chains that will deliver on the vision of a good food nation. However, if we want more of that, we need more support to be provided in that area, and that will involve Scotland Food & Drink, the Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society and local authorities providing new jobs in facilitating the development of such supply chains.

David Thomson (Food and Drink Federation Scotland): We welcome the good food nation plan

and outcomes, especially outcome 4, which talks about businesses and their role in communities across Scotland.

It will be interesting to see how all the outcomes work together. We must not view them as being in silos. As has been said, farming businesses are critical to the sustainability of Scotland from the point of view of the environment and net zero, they are critical in producing the food that we all want people to eat and they are critical to having prosperous local economies. All of that needs to be addressed in the round. If the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 and the plan do one thing, they allow people—for the first time—to talk the same language in a useful way. It is really important that the act is seen as an act of collaboration rather than an act of bureaucracy and that people do not fulfil their obligation to produce plans simply in order to meet their legal requirements.

On the question of budgets, we recognise—as I am sure everyone does—the difficult state of public finances at the moment. It is very difficult to see how we can do anything other than work through existing policies and budgets and meld them into meeting the outcomes of the good food nation plan. I see it as a strength that so much work and so many policies are accumulated in that area, because that gives us lots of different areas in which action can take place that will improve things. There is a question, though, of whether they all face in the same strategic direction—an issue that others have raised.

One thing that could be done is committing for a longer-term period, though that is a bigger, all-Government problem. The good food nation plan is for five years, and local authorities will have to come up with their plans during that time. However, the budgets are annualised. That creates incoherence, inconsistency and a lack of strategic ability to deliver over a longer time period. Something that we consider is needed across all the public sector to deliver the plans is a budget that can be relied on for a five-year period, even if the same amount of money is allocated. If it can be relied on for that five-year period, that will reduce uncertainty and means that we can keep people who are good, everyone gets where we are going and the work does not have to be revised every year.

Dr Gillian Purdon (Food Standards Scotland): I will pick up on a few things. I echo some of the points that have been made, particularly by David Thomson, about the good food nation plan being the umbrella that has brought food to the fore across ministerial portfolios. That has never been done before, and that is a big strength of it.

Having policy coherence that brings existing policy together and ensures that synergies are sought is what we hope for, and that is what the good food nation plan can bring. All those things are welcome, but I am concerned about the long-term vision of the population health framework, which is another 10-year vision. We need the budget to support long-term visions such as those.

There has been a lot of discussion about outcomes. I do not think that there are any gaping holes, but it is important that there are some underpinning indicators that run through multiple outcomes. To pick up on David Thomson's point, we need to ensure that synergies run through the policies. The Scottish dietary goals are the vision that we want to get to. They describe how the population would reduce diet-related disease, and they contribute to multiple outcomes. That is what we would like to see. If we can all work towards that, and if that is part of the indicators, that should ultimately improve health and the outcomes for Scotland.

A systemic approach that looks at the food environment is important. There is a lot of potential in the plan, but we need to ensure that the connections are made, that the policy coherence is there and that the funding and resources are sufficient.

Vicki Swales: I want to go back to Emma Roddick's point about whether there is a contradiction between food production and delivering for nature and the climate. I do not think that anybody in the Scottish Food Coalition would say that there should be. As I said, having healthy nature and a healthy climate is foundational to producing our food.

Many farmers out there are working in that way already, and we certainly acknowledge that. Having said that, we need an honest appraisal of what the current reality is. The situation is that nature is declining, and, in many cases, that is linked to agricultural practice—some of that is historic and some is on-going. Agriculture is the third-largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Scotland, and land use more widely is also very significant. We have to address those issues.

I mentioned that one of the failures of the plan is not setting out the state of Scotland's food system at the minute. I appreciate that doing so would be quite a big task, and we do not necessarily have all the data, but it would have been great to see that in the very first plan.

Under the heading "The Vision", the document says:

> "The preceding section outlines the current state of Scotland's food system, and offers an honest appraisal of the weaknesses in that system."

However, it is three paragraphs long. That is not an honest appraisal of Scotland's food system. When I say that we need an honest appraisal, I mean one that sets out the strengths of the system, the weaknesses, the opportunities and the threats. There is loads of great stuff happening already—none of us would deny that—but there are some really big issues to address. I do not think that we have had an honest start to the process that allows us to say where we want to get to, what better looks like and where we go from here.

10:45

The Convener: Three members—Ariane Burgess, Emma Roddick and Alasdair Allan—want to ask supplementary questions.

Ariane Burgess: I will pick up on something that was said when Dennis Overton and Vicki Swales were speaking. I see an opportunity in the good food nation plan for local authorities to become anchor organisations for community wealth building in our rural communities and to work with peri-urban or urban food producers.

My question is for Dennis first. Is there enough in the mix for that to happen? Our rural communities are struggling and are losing population, but local authorities have money to spend and I heard yesterday, at the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee that some local authorities are already doing that. Is there an opportunity there? Vicki piqued my interest by saying that there are really big issues to address, so it would be great if those could be brought to the fore in our conversation.

Dennis Overton: Your question points to a really interesting topic. Local authorities form a heterogeneous group because they range from very urban to very rural, so we will see quite distinct plans.

There is a tremendous opportunity to see partnerships developing in the more rural local authorities because those are quite underdeveloped at the moment. For example, NFUS is engaging with councils, but I know from speaking with the NFUS team that that has been quite modest in the past and that the opportunity for engagement has not really been taken up. That will change because of the project for food system transformation and because the long-term idea that sits within the act is valuable and rare.

Resources are tight. Government is often criticised for its lack of long-term thinking, but this is not a three-year project or even one for the life of a Parliament. It is long term, with a cycle of five years that repeats and repeats. I expect that, as we work through the first two, three or four of those cycles, we will see far more interaction between local authorities and food producers, including farmers and market gardeners, as they seek to build local food economies in a way that we have not seen to date. There is that potential.

As those discussions develop, one by-product of that process will be that we will see progress on some of the assumed tensions that we spoke about earlier. We will find out how real those are and how we can begin dissipating them. There is a real opportunity for new ways of working, particularly between rural local authorities and food producers.

The Convener: It is appropriate to bring in Lisa Hislop-Smith, following that answer.

Lisa Hislop-Smith: Dennis Overton introduced me well. NFUS has been engaging with the good food nation concept since it began, and we are now getting to the point where we have dedicated resources to it and are looking at how to engage.

That said, the task of engaging with every relevant authority, local authority or health board is a huge one, and we know that there is also a huge task for the commission in overseeing that. The national plan, as it is currently proposed, could offer more clarity to ensure that all the local plans are pulling in the right direction. We talk about local food plans, but, to us, "local" means Scotland. We must be realistic about Scotland's topography. There is a limit to the food that can be grown in places such as Orkney, Shetland or Argyll because of the fragile resources there.

Local needs to be Scotland; we do not need to tie ourselves in knots ensuring that everything comes from a confined area. That said, we have a regional team that is keen to engage at a local level, although that is difficult when we have great pockets of work. For example, Dumfries and Galloway has motored ahead and has a great sustainable food partnership that has created a lot of work in the absence of the national plan being developed. However, now that we are at that point, how do we ensure that there is consistency across Scotland? Other areas of the country do not have such local groups up and running and functioning well.

The Convener: Vicki Swales, I know that you could probably take two hours to respond to Ariane Burgess's question, but could you respond briefly?

Vicki Swales: I will respond briefly. I have talked about some of the challenges in relation to the environment, nature and climate, but there are many other issues, certainly across the Scottish Food Coalition's interests.

The sense is that many of those issues are picked up in the plan. There is a clear alignment with the right to food in anticipation of legal

incorporation, and many of the population-related health outcomes that we are looking for, along with other targets and indicators, are picked up. However, we know that there are issues such as diet-related ill health and food inequalities.

The plan starts to tease out some outcomes and indicators in relation to those. It talks about things such as greenhouse gas emissions, food insecurity and diet-related illnesses, but there are quite big gaps around some of the big issues that need to be addressed—for example, members feel that there is insufficient content on the food environment. There are no indicators related to food deserts, the concentration of takeaways per head of population or fast food advertisements in physical and digital spaces. It is more silent, shall we say, on those issues. There is no mention of trying to track workers' safety at sea and on land, for example, which would be a good thing, because we know that those industries have particular issues.

There is a vast array of challenges to be addressed across the food system. The plan starts to talk about some of them, but it is silent on setting indicators around some of them. Those gaps need to be looked at again.

Dr Purdon: The point about the indicators around the food environment is good. It is important that we look at the food environment in the broadest sense. You have highlighted where the plan has gaps, and the population health framework will incorporate some of that. There is a commitment in Government to publish a two-year implementation plan, which should address some of those areas—for example, restricting the promotion of high-fat, high-salt and high-sugar foods in retail food environments.

I agree that it is not explicit in the plan, but it is important that we address that issue. Some of the upstream actions that the UK Government might take, such as setting healthy food targets, could help to improve that further down the line. That is another thing.

The inequalities point is really important. Diet-related ill health is very different across the lower and higher socioeconomic groups. We need to be mindful of all our actions.

The final point in relation to diet and health is about bringing it back to the environment and greenhouse gas emissions. We know that having a healthier diet would reduce our carbon emissions by around a third. There are many synergies. Achieving some of those goals will also achieve other goals across the environment and health. We need to look for those synergies and where we can bring those important points together. I hope that the cross-Government nature of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 allows us to do that.

The Convener: With apologies to Emma Harper, I will bring in Alasdair Allan, because we are at an appropriate point where the discussion is about indicators and so on, so we will delve into that a little more.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Thank you, convener. I will do that, but I will first make an observation on something that Vicki Swales and others have said. It is interesting that people talk about the contradictions that are probably not there and about the tensions that are there in some of those questions. It occurred to me, when people were talking about that issue, that there is a lot of consensus, too. It is interesting, for instance, that Scotland is the only country in the UK that still recognises production through basic payments. It is interesting that there is a recognition by all parties that agriculture is a biological process and that there will be some emissions from it. It is also interesting to have a conversation like this, which can build on some of the areas where there is consensus.

My question is about indicators, and my interest is in less favoured areas, given how much of Scotland is less favoured areas. People will not be surprised to hear that I am specifically interested in the issues that have been raised by crofters. For instance, are the indicators that we have flexible enough to cope with the different land types in Scotland? I am talking about those people who work in less favoured areas who might be crofters and certainly those who are working in the production of store animals.

The Convener: I think it is appropriate that Lisa Hislop-Smith answers, as she was previously an expert—well, she is a current expert on LFAs.

Lisa Hislop-Smith: I was in a previous life, yes. That is a fantastic question. Building on your question about direct support, the plan references farm income as one of those indicators, which is really interesting. However, to go back to my previous point, how will the plan support the improvement of, and stabilise, farm business income? How does the national plan support a crofter to access public procurement or with the supply chain challenges that a crofter faces in accessing abattoir resources, for example? Adam Forrest has done a lot of work on that, and it is a real challenge.

It is a downside of the plan that it does not recognise the current challenges. We do not have the supply chain infrastructure that would allow a crofter to get meat processed and perhaps sell it in a local farmers market. Where such infrastructure does exist, that is still incredibly challenging. There needs to be more of a holistic look at how the

supply chain works in remote areas, and the plan does not pick up on that.

There is scope for the indicators to be fleshed out and developed, and I hope that we will see that before we get to the final plan, because there is a heavy reference to the fact that we are missing quite a bit of data. We are more than keen to engage on that front, to make sure that the indicators are flexible for farmers and crofters across Scotland.

Vicki Swales: In the context of less-favoured areas and crofters, the indicators are relevant in the sense that it is about gathering the data and understanding what is going on. We need to look across the piece at all farms, big and small, wherever they are in the geography of Scotland, to understand the missions. For example, we need to look at what is happening with land that is managed under organic farming practices. Climate adaptation is also as relevant to crofters in the less favoured areas as it is to any others. I do not think that there is a problem with that per se.

I could speak for ever about the agricultural subsidy system. Basic payments were mentioned. Many of us acknowledge that some of the decisions that the Government has made to retain those payments and keep most of the agricultural support budget in those payments mean that very little is left for anything else, unless the Government is going to find additional money to invest in shorter supply chains and to create opportunities for farmers and crofters in the less favoured areas. There are opportunities for them to sell produce more directly into local markets, but they cannot do it without the investment in infrastructure and support to do that.

We now have a tiny amount of public money going into those things that matter while the majority of the money is locked up in direct payments. If we were being critical, we would ask whether those direct payments are always necessarily delivering. In fact, 60 per cent of that money goes to just 20 per cent of claimants, which is not necessarily helping the farmers in the less favoured areas and the crofters in the more challenging geographies of Scotland, who could make a big contribution to delivering the outcomes in the plan if we get it right.

Dennis Overton: I have a general point on the whole question of indicators. The Government seems to have been quite open in saying that what we see in the draft plan and even in the final plan that will come later in the year is not the final word by any stretch of the imagination. It is a process of evolution. A dashboard is being created, and I think that we will look back in five years and see it as quite basic compared to what we will have then. It is an opportunity to measure a whole set of criteria—health and safety on land and at sea was mentioned, for example—and, as they are built into that dashboard, we will get better at measuring progress.

11:00

The point about LFAs and the opportunity for producers in those areas brings us back to the question of councils getting involved—in some cases, for the first time—in thinking about the development of a food plan and what that might mean in their locality or their area, and starting to think about infrastructure in a different way. I expect that some of the gaps—abattoir access is often cited—will begin to be thought about. In fact, they will be more than thought about, because I also expect some practical action to be taken at a local level as a consequence of the requirement to build local food plans. We could expect to see some evolution from where we have been with the LFAs, to the benefit of producers in those areas.

Adam Forrest: We have talked a lot about indicators and how we measure the change that we want to drive through the good food nation plan. However, I want to make the general point that it will be people who drive the change. We need to keep coming back to the question of how we support the people who are already doing this on the ground—the farmers who are driving that change and the people who are developing new resilient supply chains and producing good foods in Scotland.

We have all seen stories recently of people who are doing a fantastic job of that. There is a lady on Orkney who has recently developed a mobile abattoir, despite many reports that it was too expensive and that it would not happen. One lady made that happen on Orkney and has, through a co-operative model, offered to continue that in her community. We also saw the story of Bryce Cunningham in East Ayrshire losing his contract to supply the schools.

We need to keep coming back to the question of how we support the people who are already doing this and who make up what we would think of as a good food nation. Indicators are important, but support is so much more important.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I have a wee supplementary question on data, and I also have a question for Gillian Purdon.

Yesterday, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee took evidence on the good food nation plan from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands. We are having a discussion about it in this committee today, and the good food nation plan is about local government as well.

I was interested in what the cabinet secretary said about data evolving. We might not know what data we need to collect, and it is complex, so we need to reach out to the people who are part of analysing what information we will need.

Lisa Hislop-Smith, what needs to happen on the ground to engage with food producers—who are our farmers, and even the small market gardeners—to acknowledge their contribution to the good food nation plan? Does there need to be more direct on-the-ground engagement? That goes back to what Adam Forrest said about the people on the ground being the food producers.

Lisa Hislop-Smith: It was great that the cabinet secretary yesterday referenced the important role that farmers and crofters will play in delivering the good food nation. From our point of view, there is an opportunity for the Scottish Government to show leadership and champion Scottish produce through the national plan. That is perhaps not quite at the centre in the way that we had hoped, with public procurement being one of the areas in which Scottish produce would be championed and hailed.

There is a raft of public procurement in local government, and the health committee got into the nitty-gritty of public procurement yesterday. Notwithstanding that, there is an opportunity to champion Scottish produce where we can and to put it on the plates of Scottish children in schools, as well as in hospitals and all those places. Doing so would encourage members, give them a confidence boost and show that we are investing in our food system. It would show food producers in Scotland that leadership is being taken by the Scottish Government in using our produce in our places.

That is definitely something that is wanted. One of our members, Lauren Houstoun, is currently running a parliamentary petition on processed foods. That will probably come up later on, but the conversation about fresh, local produce being available in our public settings is so important. Our members would love to see that and take that forward, because it would give them a confidence boost and increase resilience in our supply chain.

Vicki Swales: I will add something on the participation of people. Outcome 5 of the proposed national good food nation plan is:

> "People and communities are empowered to participate in, and shape, their food system. Scotland has a thriving food culture with a population who are educated about good and sustainable food."

However, that is one of the less developed outcomes and indicator sets. There has been consultation on the plan, but, going forward, it is unclear how the Government, local authorities and others will engage people, producers, suppliers and consumers—all of us—in the process of looking at the proposed outcome. How will we help with data or bring issues to the table to work out where we go next? That is another gap, as there is nothing in the plan, and the next steps have not been set out very clearly.

Is the Scottish Food Commission expected to scrutinise the plan? I do not think so. I think that the Government, public bodies and local authorities have a job to work out how best to do that.

Dr Purdon: The data and indicators that are outlined in the plan all pertain to existing surveys or metrics that the Government has access to. I understand the rationale behind that. I suppose that it provides the baseline, but I think that it is useful to highlight where the gaps are and work towards filling them in future iterations of the plan. The plan is honest in saying that it is existing data and that, to begin with, that is what things will have to be based on. However, Dennis Overton is right: the vision is for that to be a baseline, but there will be development and the dataset will start to improve as future iterations are published.

David Thomson: I agree with the points that have been made about data. It is fundamental that we have better data. On net zero, we have worked with the SEFARI partners and the Scotland Food & Drink partnership to provide the first-ever estimation of the industry's contribution to carbon dioxide in a way that is academically backed. We have been able to track that over a couple of years and have published the information on the Scotland Food & Drink website. The interesting point about that, though, is that we do not have the granular data that we need in order to be wholly confident. A lot more work can be done to pull the information out.

There are two caveats on data. First, where does the burden of collecting the data fall, and will it be an additional issue for farmers, businesses or public authorities? Secondly, you need to be careful about what you count. It is critical that you choose the right things to count and do not get driven down the wrong path. In my view, the first years of the good food nation plan will help us to work out what it is important to count and how to do that in a way that is impactful for the strategy but provides the minimum burden for businesses.

Adam Forrest: Some local authorities have already done work to develop food strategies and local plans, and they have taken different approaches. It is important that the national plan and the Scottish Food Commission enable local authorities to have a forum in which they can share information on what works, any innovations and how they engage with local producers. Lisa Hislop-Smith spoke about "local" and "regional" meaning Scotland. Lots of learnings need to be

shared between different local authorities about the approaches that they have taken, and there is a role for the national plan and the commission to enable a forum to discuss that.

Ariane Burgess: The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 sets out that Scottish ministers will need to have regard to the national good food nation plan only when exercising a specified function, and the specified functions will be set out in regulations to be considered under the affirmative process. What are those specified functions? Which functions and authorities will need to be specified in regulations in order for the plan to be effective?

Dennis Overton: The topic of specified functions and the innovation that it represents in terms of legislation is intriguing—all the more so in so far as we have not yet seen the Government's proposals in that regard.

To answer your question in part, at least, I go back to one of our earlier discussions. Thinking about the agricultural support policies and their impact on food system transformation, I would expect that, as ministers consider the evolution of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, the agricultural support policies may well be an example of a specified function, so thought will have to be given to the weighting that is given to nature recovery, for example, compared with food production. That might be a pointer to the areas that we could expect to be included, and that would certainly be an important one. There are a range of population health factors that I think would also be relevant.

It will be interesting to see how that tool evolves. The point of it is to be specific and focused and to allow other parts of Government to get on with their responsibilities where the food system is not involved, but to be sharply focused where it is involved. There will be a higher level of responsibility to do that rather than just have "due regard to" issues, which has been the historical way of working. I am quite expectant about developments.

Ariane Burgess: I would like to clarify something. You imagine that specified functions might come through regulations that will be laid at some point soon. Do you think that other specified functions will come from different directorates?

Dennis Overton: No. I think that that will be done by the directorate that has the responsibility for drawing up the list of topics in relation to which specified functions click in. I imagine that there is a lot of consultation going on at the moment across Government. The project of food system transformation allows us to get joined-up action across the whole policy scope, which is really difficult to do. The food system is so broad that, as you were saying, three paragraphs definitely does not cover it. It is probably as wide a range of topic areas as any piece of legislation that Scotland is attempting to bring into place.

I think that action will be led by the agriculture and rural economy directorate, and I believe that the relevant consultation is active at the moment.

The Convener: I will attempt to simplify all of this. We have lots of threads that run through lots of different pieces of legislation and lots of directorates, involving things such as climate change, biodiversity, rural proofing and other things that are pertinent to this committee. Are we saying that, by setting out the areas where the good food nation plan kicks in, we focus the attention of those parts of the Government that need to pay due regard—or more than that—to certain issues?

Is it the case that, rather than every directorate across the Government thinking that it might have some focus at some point within the good food nation that it has to be aware of, the approach will make it clearer and simpler for everybody to understand that they have a specific remit?

Dennis Overton: We do not have any case studies at the moment, but a couple of examples are given, one of which concerns imagining the evolution of policy around breastfeeding. There will be elements of the development of that policy that are germane to a couple of the outcomes, and there will be other aspects that are probably less related to the food system. The minister and officials who are involved in that process will have to be focused on certain issues in a way that they have not previously had to be. Having done that, they can move on to the wider application of that policy. That is the way that it is likely to work.

11:15

The Convener: We might have the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee or the associated Government department saying that it has a specified function in relation to the recycling of glass, but that would have an implication for the good food nation because it ties in with product delivery. The specified functions should, in effect, ensure that everyone is aware of their obligations within the legislation.

Dennis Overton: That should be narrow and focused, so that the team can move on to the wider objectives of the policy.

Lisa Hislop-Smith: Dennis Overton called that a "revolution", which is a good way to put it. We think that the word "regard" feels quite vague in relation to the specified functions, so it will be great to see the detail of how that will work in practice. That will be the key nugget. Dennis

summarised the issue really well. How will we ensure that the specified functions are being used? Will there be metrics? How will the functions have “regard” to the national plan, so that a red thread runs between the two?

For us, the most important thing about the specified functions, or about any policy development from any directorate, is that it must enable and enhance food production. We want to see food production increase and achieve the outcomes. We talk about having a diverse and prosperous food sector, so how will food production be enabled to help that happen? That will cut across many different areas. It is a really positive development, but the devil will probably be in the detail.

The Convener: We have just heard the suggestion that it might be easier and far clearer if the legislation just set out what the specified functions should not specify.

Vicki Swales: Another way of reading it would be to see the specified functions as slightly generic guidance for ministers from across portfolios when they are setting policy, making funding decisions or producing the relevant strategies and plans that intersect with the outcomes.

The plan gives us a start with all those intersectional areas. When a minister is producing a climate change plan, a biodiversity or land use strategy, a vision for agriculture or any of the things that, in themselves, have their own review cycles, that minister and their department should be responsible for looking at how those will deliver against the outcomes in the good food nation plan.

I know that it is easy to say that and difficult to do it in practice, and that you may have to point to some specifics within that. However, at least we would then be able to see in the rural support plan the concrete things that the Government’s agriculture and rural economy department is doing to deliver against any or all of the outcomes in the good food nation plan, but particularly outcomes 2 and 4.

That is what may be missing or not happening. It is possible to list all the policies but, at the moment, they do not necessarily speak to the good food nation outcomes.

The Convener: In a month’s time, when we see what the specified functions are, will the discussion be about what is not on the list of specified functions rather than about what is on it?

Vicki Swales: Potentially, yes. Unless the list is as encompassing as possible, it will not be right and we will miss a trick. I accept that that might have to be done over time and piece by piece and that not everything can be thrown into the mix at the start.

Dr Purdon: That is absolutely right. My reading is that all policy areas would have to have regard to the specified functions and to look for synergies and cohesion across the piece, working in a way that they have not done before. Previously, there have been things such as impact assessments to see whether health inequalities are impacted, but this is much broader. It is about looking across the piece and ensuring that the outcomes are supported by actions from different areas of Government.

The Convener: We are making good progress. I suggest that we take a five-minute comfort break before coming back to the last few questions.

11:19

Meeting suspended.

11:26

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. We will go straight back to questions.

Alasdair Allan: My question continues the discussion that we had when I kicked off about less favoured areas. Clearly, change will come to the agriculture sector over the coming years, and everywhere will be part of that. Do people have a view about whether the options that exist for change in agriculture are more limited in some of our less favoured areas than in other places? Do we have to talk about change in a different way in those parts of the country?

Lisa Hislop-Smith: As you said, change is coming. The Scottish Government’s commitments to retain direct support and the less favoured area support scheme are definitely welcome. We cannot overstate how important LFASS is to those areas. I touched on farm business income, which is crucially important in enabling farms in those areas to remain viable.

The change that comes to those less favoured areas might have to be considered slightly differently, and that comes back to Scotland’s topography. As part of that change, the role of livestock grazing is incredibly important and needs to continue to be recognised for its role in maintaining habitats and carbon sequestration as well as maintaining high-quality red meat production.

The options in the less favoured areas are not drastically different, but they are slightly different. We, at NFUS, are engaged with the Scottish Government on LFASS’s replacement and on

what comes down the line as part of the new four-tier support framework.

Vicki Swales: It is an interesting question. We should remember that 85 per cent of Scotland is designated as less favoured areas—at least, it was under European Union rules—so it seems like we are talking about most of agriculture. However, we are not, because, by dint of that very complicated scheme, most of the money goes to the less agriculturally disadvantaged areas and not to many of the smaller producers, such as crofters in the Western Isles, northern isles and other places.

You asked whether options are limited for those in the LFAs in the face of agricultural change. As I said, those Highland and island communities actually have lots of opportunities, but they do not have the necessary support and funding behind them to take advantage of them.

We were just having a chat before about having shorter supply chains, and there is scope for many smaller producers to be selling more into local markets and thinking about visitors who come to Scotland, who go to those places as tourists and who want to buy and eat local food. Many of them might be able to access some amazing shellfish and seafood, but a lot of that is going to the continent. A lot of our agricultural produce comes either in the form of whisky or beef—we are not necessarily producing a wider diversity of produce.

11:30

I think that the opportunity is there, but it is really difficult for many smaller producers and crofters in those places to take advantage of it at the minute. What we are looking for in reform of agriculture policy and the funding system—and what we will look to in the rural support plan—is much more investment in and support for those sorts of things. After all, those people have an opportunity to play a fundamental role in delivering for nature and the climate. We often talk about those areas as our high nature value farming areas, but again they are not getting the support that is required to help sustain and maintain farming and crofting communities in those places.

Dennis Overton: I want to respond very quickly from the perspective of a mid-sized—not small—farmer in north Argyll on the question of how the policy environment is helping us to change, as we are changing, our system of sheep and beef production. We are looking to maintain our headcount—that is, the three people employed—and to find a way through. However, it is all about linking our food production with nature recovery, too, with planting trees and repairing peatland as part of that.

As for the overall mix of income—I am not talking purely about public sector income; we are seeing people in the private sector who are prepared to pay for, say, carbon capture in a way that was impossible to imagine even five years ago—I think that, in the round, we can see a route forward under the current frameworks. It involves our doing more. We are very fortunate in having Mull abattoir close by, so we can kill and process locally, and we can sell those products to people who come on holiday.

I would say that the approach is working. We can, as a mid-sized operation, see a future for farming in that respect.

Adam Forrest: When we talk about change and transformation in these areas, we also need to think about knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning. Policy change is happening, and farmers are being asked to do different things, but it is in that knowledge exchange piece where we in the Nature Friendly Farming Network are seeing change happening on the ground. Farmers are talking to other farmers, and more money needs to go into programmes that support farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange so that learning can be shared and they can develop their businesses in this time of change.

The Convener: Thank you. At the very start of the meeting, we touched on conflict between different outcomes. Do you think that, when it comes to scrutiny of other legislation, such as that for the climate change plan and future agriculture policy, we will find some sort of hierarchy? Where will the good food nation plan sit in that?

Dr Purdon: It is a very good question. I do not know where the plan would sit in any hierarchy.

That brings us back to the need to think about synergies. It is interesting that we are having this discussion about Scotland's larder and everything that Scotland produces, because I think that we need to be cognisant of the point that was just made about the scope being relatively limited. We are not producing lots of different things that support a healthy, balanced diet, and we need to think longer term about how we transition in farming to things that will be more supportive. We have seen a reduction in red meat production and consumption over time. We do not know the reasons for that—they may be partly financial, because of the costs involved.

It is also important that we consider not just what is produced, but the need for equity. Quite a lot of these products are quite high value and are exported, but we need to think about outcomes 1 and 3 and how we support the population in Scotland. We also need to think about how the agricultural side can support a healthy, balanced diet and a healthy population, because, ultimately,

that will give us a healthy workforce and a healthy future.

We need to recognise that the majority of the food that the majority of consumers eat comes from a supermarket and is not necessarily Scottish. Those aspects make a big difference, so we need to think about the food system not just at UK level but in a global sense. We need to broaden our considerations when we think about how to transition. I do not know what should take priority, but we need to look across the piece as best we can.

The Convener: Part of my thinking is that we have arable production in Scotland that is incredibly important not only to specific parts of the country but for exports of Scotch whisky, for example, given our significant grain production. As you touched on, there will be a difficulty in that regard. Some of that land could be used for producing vegetables or whatever, but if we do not have the tax take from that, there will be a significant impact on the budget to deliver on other priorities. It is quite difficult.

Lisa Hislop-Smith, do you want to come in?

Lisa Hislop-Smith: Yes. It goes back to your original question on the hierarchy of policy. The specified functions may play a role in ensuring that we do not end up with a hierarchy and that we take a holistic approach across all the different directorates. In addition, it is important to note the nuances of our stratified farming system. We cannot just tease out strands by saying, for example, “There’s livestock over here and there’s arable production over there.” They are co-dependent on one another—that is the beauty of Scotland, and it is often not recognised as it ought to be.

To build on Gillian Purdon’s point about the decline of red meat production in Scotland, the sector has historically been unprofitable, and that is part of the reason that we have a decline. I also signpost the committee to the FSS research that looked at the role of red meat and dairy in our diet. As a population, our diet is so poor that, if we were to reduce the consumption of red meat or dairy any further, there would be unintended consequences. That research is important, and we would like it to continue as the food policy discussion develops through consideration of the national plan.

That notwithstanding, we need to think about how we grow more vegetables and fruit and foster the growth of horticulture. To go back to my previous point on looking at domestic production, that involves pulling in strands from England and Wales.

We should also consider how, if we are importing products, we ensure that they match our standards, particularly in areas such as environment stewardship and animal health and welfare standards, because we cannot have a two-tier system for imported products.

Dr Purdon: It goes back to some of the research that FSS published on the impact of meat and dairy in the diet and what would happen if we adhered to the UK Climate Change Committee targets for a reduction in that regard. The reality is that our diets are so poor that meat has an elevated status, if you like. If we ate a healthy, balanced diet, we would not really need to have any meat within that—we could still eat healthily. Currently, however, looking at our diets in Scotland, a reduction in the consumption of meat and dairy would potentially have a negative impact, particularly for children.

When we consider the totality of our diet, we have to ensure that we look across the inequalities. There are stark inequalities in relation to diet-related ill health and to overweight and obesity statistics; the differences are much starker in the lower socioeconomic groups, as our data showed.

Food Standards Scotland has a monitoring role, so we monitor against the Scottish dietary goals and publish that data routinely. However, I highlight that, although meat is an important part of the diet, the piece of research that we did actually highlights how poor our diets are and how we need to eat more fruit and vegetables, whole grains and fibre and much less saturated fat and added sugar. There are a lot of problems with our diet, and the contribution that meat—and dairy, to some extent—can make highlights the difficulties that we see in transitioning to meet the aims of the “Eatwell Guide” and to a healthy, balanced diet.

Vicki Swales: The question about where the good food nation plan sits is an interesting one. I am not sure that the Food Coalition necessarily has a formal position on that, but the plan is right up there—it probably sits close to the overarching national performance framework and the sustainable development goals. If we think about it, we realise that food is such a cross-cutting issue that there is so much gain to be made—whether in relation to people’s health, our environment, tackling climate change and nature loss or educational outcomes—by getting this right and ensuring that people have good diets and can afford to eat healthy food.

I think that we should put the good food nation plan up there and give it some primacy in how we look at the issue. We should ensure that, over time, all the other strategies, plans, policies and everything else are much better aligned with the delivery of the outcomes in the plan. After all, it is the “good food nation” plan. As the title suggests, it is a plan for a good nation, so it should be good

for people, good for the planet and good for everything. There is so much to get right. Therefore, I would elevate the status of the plan and give it some primacy.

Jason Rose: I will build on what Vicki Swales said. We cannot have good food on the back of animal suffering. If we are to be a good food nation, we need to ensure that animal welfare is a priority in the plan.

We have talked about diet and how reducing the consumption of meat and dairy is an increasing trend. People are looking for more plant-based diets, and it is now dead easy to get plant-based options in supermarkets, cafes and restaurants. Some people are simply not convinced by the assurances and the signals that they are given by quality assurance labels, so they decide that the safest option is to not eat any animal products. We get that.

However, we must be realistic. We use lots of animals in our food system, and as long as we continue to do that—that will not change overnight—those animals deserve a good quality of life, because they are sentient beings. They are different from us, but they are not less than us. As long as they are part of our food system, we need to make sure that they have a good quality of life. I am not talking about having a low bar, whereby there must be no abuse or neglect. We need to have quite a high bar, whereby the animals in our food system have space, good mental and physical health and a stimulating environment, and that, when it is time for them to be slaughtered, the process is as stress free as possible, and quick and painless.

That is where most people are now. They expect animal welfare to be a priority. It is great that that is mentioned in the plan, but we need to elevate the plan and make sure that it takes primacy, as Vicki said.

Dennis Overton: I want to build on Gillian Purdon's point. The national plan and the 47 or so plans that will be produced by the relevant authorities create an opportunity to do something that I do not think that we have had the opportunity to do before in Scotland, which is to think about the food environment that we live in. I am talking about people's exposure to advertising and the lack of options for good food in some parts of Scotland, especially in urban areas, although there are also rural food deserts. I hope that, as local food plans are developed, local authorities and health boards will think about improving that environment and improving the influences that people experience in their everyday lives. Tremendous pressure is exerted by some parts of the sector, which offer products that we know are not best for human health. Many such products are consumed in Scotland today.

The opportunity to proceed with that whole process of change is another of the opportunities that the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 provides us with.

11:45

Dr Purdon: You are absolutely right in that the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 focuses mainly on the public sector and the public sector needs to lead the way in that regard. However, that cannot be the only answer.

Dennis Overton touched on some commercial determinants of health, which can include advertising, promotion and marketing tactics. We might not realise that those things are happening a lot of the time, but they do influence our choices, particularly in food. Businesses have a big influence there. Although the good food nation legislation can do a lot and we really need to move in the right direction, that work needs to expand and include the private sector. The plan is a great starting point, but we have to be cognisant of the fact that the world that we live in is influenced by so much more than the public sector.

I just wanted to make that point, and I hope that, down the line, we might be able to include some of the private sector in order that it shares the same ethos around health and health improvement in our society.

David Thomson: I will pick up on another point that Gillian Purdon articulated earlier. Production in Scotland does not equal consumption in Scotland. It is important to hold that thought, because we could tie ourselves in knots about production without necessarily having any impact on consumption, and that would be detrimental to farming, fishing and processing in some of the scenarios that we could outline. It is important to remember that, even if we were to engineer a food production system in Scotland that met Scotland's dietary needs and directly fulfilled the needs of the population, it would not necessarily change consumption.

Having said that, and to answer Gillian Purdon's challenge, the industry is up for change, particularly around health. The Scottish Government support for reformulation has taken billions of calories out of Scottish products in the past five or six years, and lots of work on reformulation is also being done independently by larger businesses. All of that is part of a change in the narrative on the role of business in the health agenda and its contribution to the Scottish Government's population health framework in the coming years.

The Convener: Emma Harper has a question on health.

Emma Harper: I have loads of questions, some of which are based on what the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee discussed yesterday.

I will direct my first question to Dr Gillian Purdon. The population health framework talks about health-harming products, and we know that the framework is supposed to align with the good food nation plan. Health-harming products include tobacco, vapes, alcohol and gambling, but health-harming foods are not mentioned. Many people will know that I have been following the work of Henry Dimbleby, Chris van Tulleken, Tim Spector and now Dr Stuart Gillespie on ultra-processed foods and ultra-high-processed foods. I am curious to know why ultra-high-processed foods are not included in the population health framework.

Dr Purdon: That is a good question. The difficulty in answering it is the fact that everybody has to eat food to survive. There is a broad spectrum of ultra-processed foods, and 50 per cent of everybody's food basket tends to be made up of that type of food. We need to take care to say that they are not all under the same umbrella.

Processing does not actually refer to the composition of the food. It can use things such as emulsifiers to make foods more palatable and easier to digest, as well as things that make people eat more quickly, but processing itself does not reflect the composition of the food. For example, wholemeal bread that you can buy in the supermarket would be classed as ultra-processed. There is a wide array of multiple ultra-processed foods, and, if we think of issues such as inequality, we need to be careful about how we divvy them up.

However, we have a very strong evidence base on how products that are high in fats, salt and sugar impact our health. That evidence is long standing and it forms the basis of the dietary goals. We are reviewing the dietary goals at the moment. We have an additional lens on sustainability, and things such as ultra-processed foods have been considered in the review group's debates as it considers whether the goals are fit for purpose, whether we need to change them and what the evidence base is saying.

At the moment, the evidence base around ultra-processed foods per se is not strong enough. Although I understand your concerns, the fact is that the dietary goals will capture foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar. It might not be that explicit, but that is the underpinning vision within the population health framework, and that is our means of assessing how healthy or otherwise food is. I accept that that is not necessarily helpful to you.

We talk about healthy diets, not healthy foods. That is why the delineation of the issue of what is classed as health harming can be more challenging in relation to food than in relation to other commodities such as tobacco or alcohol, which are easier to define. You can eat the odd treat as part of a healthy diet, but it is the overall balance that is important.

I reassure members that we are keeping our eye on the evidence base—the totality of it and the consensus. Some interesting new publications are looking at diets that are matched exactly—one ultra-processed and one not—to see what impacts each has, and we can see that the ultra-processed diet has less favourable outcomes. It is interesting that a lot of people dropped out of the diet that was not ultra-processed because they did not like it.

There are challenges on both sides, but we are across the evidence base and we will keep ourselves up to date as things progress.

Emma Harper: David Thomson just mentioned that there has been a calorie reduction due to the reformulation of products, which is welcome. That makes me think about how the good food nation plan can be implemented if there are challenges with advertising. Some policies are reserved to Westminster and cannot be delivered in Scotland, and I am not sure whether that has been considered. There are things that we can control in Scotland, such as advertisements on bus stops, but we cannae control advertising on television, for example. Does the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 impede or enable the delivery of the good food nation plan?

Dr Purdon: On the UK food system, I reassure the committee that we liaise closely with colleagues not just in Food Standards Scotland—we have a certain remit—but within the Scottish Government to look for cohesion and to avoid some of the discrepancies that could come about due to the 2020 act. We have a UK food system, so food that is produced in the UK tends to be sold across the UK. At the moment, there have not been any difficulties with that.

On David Thomson's point, there has been a reformulation for health programmes that Food Standards Scotland supports, which has created a lot of improvements. Again, all the products that are relevant in that regard would be ultra-processed, because they are manufactured in that way—that is, I assume that most of them would be. However, we would like to see more changes in some of those products where they intersect with foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar. We know that about 80 per cent of products that are high in fat, salt and sugar are ultra-processed, so there is quite an important distinction to make

there, and it is important that we continue to conduct research on that.

We look to work together on a UK basis. The Scottish Government's announcement on the restriction of promotions aligns with the UK position, which means that there are no difficulties with things such as the 2020 act or the policy being applied differently. We look to influence the detail in such legislation as it is being developed. We are encouraged by the fact that the UK Government has already brought us into discussions about a healthy food standard that England is proposing, and we are looking to see whether we can get agreement to introduce that on a four-nations basis. Obviously, that would depend on ministerial agreement, but it is great to be in there at the start of the discussions. As others have mentioned, the detail of that will be important, and we will make sure that we get that right.

I hope that that reassures you that we are trying to work together on issues where we can.

The Convener: The hot topic today is the ban on selling energy drinks to under-16-year-olds—that led the news today.

Lisa Hislop-Smith: On your point about what is devolved and what is not, NFUS is keen to work on a UK basis on clear labelling for consumers. The good food nation plan touches on consumer culture and how we build in more education around our food system. Clear labelling is an easy way to do that, so that consumers understand origin and the nutritional element.

We have started that conversation with the Scottish Government, which we welcome, but taking a UK-wide approach is the only way to do that successfully. It is reassuring, therefore, to hear that we are getting somewhere on the four-nations approach, and it would be great if that were to be extended much further than the good food nation aspect, to cover the general labelling of all products.

Dennis Overton: On the UK theme, I highlight for the committee's information that part of the Scottish Food Commission's remit is to ensure that we keep up to speed and connect with food system transformation that is happening elsewhere in the UK. That involves building links with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in particular. The work of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, in Cardiff, would be the closest parallel for the good food nation work that is happening in Scotland, in addition to the work that is happening in Belfast.

There is the Food Standards Scotland work, to which Gillian Purdon referred, but we also need to engage with food system transformation more widely and ensure that we are not becoming disconnected, to our disadvantage, and that is part of the commission's role.

Adam Forrest: We have talked about the food environment. I defer to Gillian Purdon on how we regulate that so that we do not see some of the bad things, but I note that the good food nation plan talks about taking "pride and pleasure" in food, which is important. It is important to stress that we need to celebrate the good food that this nation produces, as well as what good food is. Programmes such as food for life are important in creating a good food environment in schools and connecting young people to what is happening on farms and where their food comes from.

There is a fantastic project called "Give Peas a Chance!" through which Scottish organic peas are going into thousands of children's school dinners. Again, we need to be celebrating and supporting those projects and growing them, as that is where we can make the biggest impact with the limited resources that we have. Celebration is important—as Dennis Overton alluded to, the good food nation work is a generational project, so we need to think about the environments over which we have control, despite the private sector being important, too.

We spend at least £150 million a year on food through public procurement, so leadership can be shown in that space. It may not move the dial completely, but we need to show leadership in how we spend that money.

The Convener: Before we move on, we will have a supplementary question from Emma Roddick.

Emma Roddick: It is on the topic of who is responsible for what and where responsibilities lie. I am curious about where there are clear assigned responsibilities for who is supposed to oversee certain aspects of food supply—for example, there is the groceries code adjudicator. I am thinking about how much power lies with the supermarkets in the sense of what is actually going through processing down to abattoir level. I have certainly heard a lot of anecdotal evidence that supermarkets, rather than UK or Scottish regulations, are driving much of what ends up on our shelves. Does anybody have anything to add on that?

David Thomson: Yes. Supermarkets are where we buy at least half of our food, if not more, so they dictate what happens. I am not here to represent supermarkets at all, but they would say that they offer a wide range of products, and they are really important in ensuring that food from my members—manufacturers and those in farming and fishing—gets to the consumer.

The point about the groceries code adjudicator is interesting. That body has been up and running

for more than 10 years—there was a huge amount of campaigning to get it set up—and, in general, it has, I think, been pretty successful with regard to the behaviour of supermarkets, particularly around purchasing. There are always issues and things that need to be done, but, when the adjudicator got the power to create fines, that spoke clearly to supermarkets.

12:00

There has been a recent expansion in the groceries code adjudicator's remit as the grocery market has changed, towards Amazon and others being part of the remit in some cases. It is actually a really powerful body, its work is interesting, and it is probably right to say that it is focused on the supermarkets and those who sell the most food in the UK.

Emma Roddick: Does it have enough teeth?

David Thomson: You would need to ask the adjudicator that. From our perspective, it has been pretty successful—although within supply chains and individual companies, and for individual buyers in those companies, there can be issues.

The Convener: I am conscious of the time—I have let the discussion run on a bit. Alasdair Allan has a supplementary. I will then ask Lisa Hislop-Smith and Adam Forrest to come in, and then we will move on to the next question.

Alasdair Allan: I have a brief observation on what David Thomson said. The committee has discussed it before. You mentioned that supermarkets offer people a wide choice—but it is a range of items that the supermarkets have chosen and it is a choice that, compared to supermarkets in other European countries, in some cases does not involve very much Scottish or local produce.

David Thomson: I am not here to defend the supermarkets.

Alasdair Allan: I know that you are not, but it is worth putting that on the record. It is something that this committee has had concerns about in the past.

Lisa Hislop-Smith: There is a lot to get into in Emma Roddick's question—maybe we can follow up on it separately. We are at an interesting juncture where the agricultural supply chain adjudicator and the fair dealings regulations are coming in. We are following those really closely. The aim is to extend the GCA beyond the retailer and the direct supplier.

On Alasdair Allan's point about Scottish produce, we have almost finished the second year of our shelfwatch project, which looks at which of the big eight supermarkets in Scotland are supporting Scottish and British produce. In the interests of keeping my answer brief, maybe we can follow up on that after the meeting.

Adam Forrest: We see organic agriculture and organic production as a whole-systems approach to farming that delivers all the things that we are looking for from agricultural reform. We can look at how Denmark works with the supermarkets to see how an impact can be made on supermarket shelves. The sector needs capacity in order to do that work, but that work can be done with supermarkets to grow the market share of those types of product. That can make a huge impact, but the sector needs capacity to be able to do that work. That is where things such as a well-funded organic action plan, which looks at market and supply chain development, can do some great work.

Dr Purdon: Those are very good points about the supermarkets and the role that they play. There is a data gap around how much Scottish produce is consumed by consumers actually living in Scotland—we have noticed that for a while. Looking forward into future iterations, it would be good if we could report on that.

I also highlight some examples of where there have been positive influences in relation to the restriction of promotions. Because restrictions on foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar have been in place in England for some time, supermarkets have shifted to promoting healthier produce and there has been an upturn in the purchasing of those products. It is not only about restricting; it is about promoting Scottish produce and healthier produce as well. Those things can work through.

The Convener: Thank you. I am conscious of the time, so we will move on. I call Evelyn Tweed.

Evelyn Tweed: Thank you, convener—I know that these sessions are always pretty fluid.

We have managed to stay wholly away from this topic, which is amazing. I am interested in the witnesses' views on leadership, scrutiny, accountability and the oversight of plans. Obviously, there is a new role for the Scottish Food Commission, so I will ask Dennis Overton what his view is on that. I am also interested in other witnesses' views and expectations—sometimes it is nice to tease out the differences in those views.

Dennis Overton: That is a good question. Those things will be a big part of the commission's work. There is a role for scrutiny. There is also a role in providing support and quickly sharing best practice, particularly across the relevant authorities. On the scrutiny aspect, the commission has the power to formally report, which kicks off the required response, either from

the relevant authority or from the Government. I hope that there will be less of that, particularly in the early years, and that it will be more about support and the sharing of best practice.

I think that we will see the development of a group of people who do not exist in Scotland today—people who are capable of and competent in building food plans, which are complicated documents. That will be interesting, because, as that group emerges, there will be new expertise in Scotland that will be capable of driving change. We are interested in pace and impact, but we also recognise the long-termism that we talked about earlier. This is absolutely a marathon rather than a sprint and we will be approaching it in those terms.

I see there being a lot of interaction between the commission and local authorities and health boards. Those will not always be kept in two separate groups—somebody mentioned Dumfries and Galloway earlier, where there has been positive action—with local authorities and health boards working together. That could make a lot of sense in certain parts of Scotland. That aspect will be a key part of our function.

Vicki Swales: When the Scottish Food Coalition campaigned for a good food nation act, we had five asks. One of those was that there be an independent statutory body, so we were delighted when the commitment was made to establish the Scottish Food Commission. At the time, we said that its role should be about realising the right to food, scrutinising relevant policies, reporting on the state of the food system and helping to ensure coherence across the Government. That is what we have got, and that is our hope and expectation for the body going forward.

We also said that we would like one of the commission's roles to be to facilitate public participation in food policy and to be charged with overseeing that process. In the plan, there is an outcome that is about engaging with people and communities. People with lived experience provide some of the best scrutiny and are best at holding the Government and people to account. We want to see what the processes will be going forward in relation to engagement by the commission and also by local authorities, the Government and others with regard to the plan.

There is engagement now, but we also want to see the processes for the local plans that the local authorities, health boards and others will put in place. We need to set out some clear processes and ways in which that can happen, so that people at the local level and in communities can be engaged. All of us eat food and have the right to have a say in what happens. We can help to bring accountability and scrutiny to all this.

Dr Purdon: I want to make a distinction, because Food Standards Scotland has a role in regard to food, being Scotland's national food body. It ensures that food is safe and that consumers have healthier diets. Our chair, Heather Kelman, has already met Dennis Overton. There will be a will to work together, and there are areas in which we can potentially work closely together to support similar outcomes—we have an agreement that that will be taken forward. We have a role in monitoring the Scottish dietary goals, which underpin the policy, including many of the outcomes in the good food nation plan.

David Thomson: I am thinking about this from a business perspective. We were keen to see a business outcome in the plan, and it includes one. How that works, though, will be interesting. There is no way that national organisations such as ourselves will have the resources to engage with 32 plus 14 plans, so the local engagement will be really important. In particular, making it worth while for the vast range of small and medium-sized enterprises across Scotland in the food and drink sector to interact and see the benefit for themselves will be the real trick for councils, and probably even more so for health boards. That is the bit that we will be looking at with great interest as it develops.

The Convener: Thank you. We will move on to our final question, which is from Emma Roddick.

Emma Roddick: I want to ask for the witnesses' views on the overall consultation process, particularly on whether it met the requirement to be inclusive of children and young people.

The Convener: Who would like to have a go at that? We will also take general comments about the way in which the consultation has been carried out.

Dennis Overton: Emma, are you asking about the consultation on the draft plan or about the wider process of consultation over the past couple of years?

Emma Roddick: I was thinking about the draft plans, but you can comment on the wider consultation process, too.

Dennis Overton: First of all, on the draft plan, the commission contributed to the consultation not on the content of the plan itself but on the question of scrutiny. We felt that it was all quite rushed, that time was limited and that you, as the lead committee on the legislation, would be unable to look at or lead the consultation. Our comment was, I guess, that that felt a bit odd. I should say that an opportunity to carry out scrutiny has been created this morning, and it has been really valuable from my perspective.

We have been talking a lot about the cross-cutting nature of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, starting with the primary indicators and finishing up with public health outcomes that involve everybody in Scotland. There is a nice graphic in the plan—a big wheel—that shows the number of Government responsibilities and Government departments that the plan involves or touches on. In an ideal world, we would have looked for much broader scrutiny, and we recommend that, in five years' time, the process be much less rushed. After all, there will be benefit in having the various committees of the Parliament looking at the next national plan in a much more rounded way than this piece of consultation has allowed. That said, we must get going on this, and I am not arguing for the timetable to be changed in any shape or form.

Moreover, I do not think there was much involvement of young people in the scrutiny of this draft plan. By contrast, as part of last year's consultation, there was some terrific engagement from more than 800 primary and secondary school pupils, who got involved and shared their thoughts about the bigger picture of the 2022 act. That was really interesting material, and it certainly made me think that we should be doing more of that generally and listening to what our next generation is thinking. Clearly, something like food is a fundamental issue to them, given the environment that they are living in and the pressures that they are under with food advertising, which we have been talking about this morning.

I would say that that was a good approach. The process has been a bit of a curate's egg, actually.

Emma Roddick: Were there obvious missed opportunities to involve young people in the plan?

Dennis Overton: I am not close to how parliamentary time is managed—I am sure that it is a very complicated job—but on the timescale that was available, there was no opportunity for public scrutiny of this version of the final draft. However, the public had their say last autumn, so one could call that a compromise position.

The Convener: I certainly think that we need to put all this into context: it has taken two decades from this being first mentioned to our getting the first local public body plan, so it has been a long time in the making. As you have said, though, the last stages might have been slightly rushed. Certainly from the committee's point of view, it is unfortunate that the plan's parliamentary scrutiny was not set out in legislation, because it means that the committee has no official role in dealing with it. In fact, there is no legislative necessity for the Parliament to oversee the plan at all.

I will bring in Lisa Hislop-Smith and then Vicki Swales.

Lisa Hislop-Smith: I echo what Dennis Overton said. It is great that we have had this opportunity today, particularly in front of this committee. My comment is not specific to Emma Roddick's question but is broadly around the consultation process. Our members struggled to find something tangible in the previous draft plan. It did not conceptualise what the plan means for them, and that echoes my previous comment about how the plan turns into action. What does it mean for them, as a farmer or crofter in Scotland, and how can they get the most out of the plan?

The ministerial working group on food is referenced in the plan, and it would be great to get a little more detail on how that functions, how the discussion around food policy development works and whether there is an opportunity for engagement through that working group to ensure continuity across the different portfolios.

Vicki Swales: The Scottish Food Coalition and its members had a lot of engagement with the team that was responsible for producing the first draft plan and the process that came thereafter. Through engagement with lots of people, Nourish Scotland undertook an extensive, wider consultation process for the Scottish Government, and the test of the consultation is whether the points that were made and the views that were expressed have fed back into the plan that is now before us.

To use Dennis Overton's term, it is a bit of a curate's egg. There have been some improvements from the first draft to this draft with regard to indicators and the addition of sub-outcomes. Some of the things that we and others said at the time about the lack of an overview and statement of what our food system looks like at the minute have not been taken on board. Some of our requests for setting out the on-going processes and engagement as we look ahead are not yet clear and are not included in the plan. Some of that has been taken on board, but there are still gaps. If we are being generous, we would say that it is a work in progress. We look to the two-year reporting to see where we get to, but, as has been said, there has been a very short period for the draft plan in relation to the parliamentary process. There is an on-going question about that. The Scottish Food Commission can provide scrutiny, but, as we look ahead, there is no further scope for scrutiny by the Scottish Parliament on some of this.

The Convener: On the back of that response, the process does not appear to have addressed the fact that previous attempts at integrating food policy have failed. Do you have confidence that the 2022 act will change that? Has it resulted in any new approaches to the integration of food policy?

Vicki Swales: I suggest that the fact that we have an act and that we have moved to set out in law what the Government must now do—such as the establishment of a food commission, having to produce this plan and duties on local authorities—must feel like progress. It is difficult stuff to do, and, as we look ahead, there is still a lot to do, but it would be churlish of us to say that we have not come some way in Scotland. We are one of the few countries to try such an overarching, ambitious, cross-cutting plan and approach and say, "We do want to do things better," so maybe we should give the act a fair wind and see how it goes.

Jason Rose: I remember that the consultation documents gave perspectives from different people—they were like case studies—in order to make the abstract more concrete. There were examples such as, "I'm a child in the good food nation and this is what I expect—I shouldn't go hungry." There is a long list of those examples, but we pointed out in our feedback that the perspective of animals had not been included. "I'm a dairy cow in a good food nation—my calves won't be taken away from me," or, "I'm a pig in a good food nation—I'm not going to be kept in a farrowing crate." Those are the sorts of examples that could be included.

The draft plan that we now have has a lovely diagram of 16 actors in the food system, which include adults, children, communities, educators and healthcare providers, but there are no animals. Animals are sentient beings. They are not less than us; they are different. We use a lot of them in our food system, and they are clearly actors in the food system. I know that this whole good food nation agenda is about trying to change the system, but I wonder whether there is a bigger job here, which is about changing the mindset. Animals are sentient beings, and we should recognise them as actors in our food system.

Emma Roddick: How would you consult the pigs?

Jason Rose: There is pretty good research on when animals are stressed or in pain, so you can put yourself in their shoes.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of the session. I appreciate that we have probably run a bit over time. You are all very busy people, and, Dennis Overton, I am sure that you have a massive workload ahead of you as the 2022 act comes into force.

Thank you all very much for your evidence and your contributions this morning. That has been hugely helpful in the short time that we have had, as a committee, to review the plan.

12:20

Meeting continued in private until 12:40.

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