



Briefing: Food security, Agricultural Transition Plan and Food Strategy

March 2022

Summary: The war in Ukraine is posing global challenges to food security and the cost of food and farm inputs. The UK Government needs to guard against short-term and harmful policy responses and stand firm on the Agricultural Transition Plan.

The Government needs to support farmers to deliver public goods and produce healthy food in an ecologically positive way by rolling out an ambitious set of Environmental Land Management schemes that go further and faster. Government also needs to rethink a narrow approach to food security to one that integrates environmental, social and economic elements of the food system.

Recommendations:

1. Defra should not pause or slowdown the current timeframe for the Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes and the Agricultural Transition Plan (ATP).
2. Defra could consider a separate short-term emergency fund to help farmers and growers withstand the increasing costs of production such as labour and helping farmers off the input treadmill.
3. That Government should publish its overdue response to the National Food Strategy.

Rationale: The war in Ukraine is devastating for all Ukrainians and poses many challenges, including a risk to global food security, rising food prices, and the mass movement of people. The window to plant spring crops in Ukraine (the breadbasket of Europe) is quickly closing.

In the UK, rising energy and commodity costs, along with labour shortages and concerns about future trade deals, are creating huge pressures in the UK farming sector. The current situation highlights the fragility of our centralised and environmentally unsustainable food system that is too dependent on artificial nitrogen, pesticide and fossil fuel use that greatly impacts on soil health, climate change, water quality and biodiversity.

Food security should not just be a question of securing world food supplies, but also of changing our approach to farming so that it is nature-based, provides nutritional security and is resilient against future economic and environmental shocks. We need a long-term vision that addresses demand side action on waste and crops used for animal feed and bioenergy.

In recent days, there have been calls to pause the Agricultural Transition Plan (ATP) and the phase out of direct payments. We believe this would be the wrong action to take and urge Defra to remain committed to an ambitious ATP.

Tackling climate change and biodiversity loss is essential and both present their own significant risks to food security. Pausing the ATP could set back progress on environmental commitments at a time when we need to take this forward with ambition. The current timeframe to roll out ELM schemes should not change, and the Government should be ambitious in supporting farmers to deliver public goods and produce healthy food in an ecologically positive way that relies less on high use of synthetic fertiliser, pesticide, fossil fuels and animal feed inputs.

The Government could consider a short-term, one-off emergency fund to help farmers and growers withstand the rising costs of production. This should not affect the roll out of ELM and ATP, nor be used for subsidising synthetic inputs, and should not be used to ramp up production to the detriment of the environment. It could, for example, go towards alleviating rising labour and logistics costs, or critical inputs where this will not lead to unsustainable practices.

Over 25% of food grown in the UK is wasted each year. A third is on-farm (due to specification requirements and market fluctuations) but most is at households. We also farm in a nutritionally inefficient and environmentally damaging way. Half of UK arable crops go to intensive animal feeds and 120,000 hectares of farmland is dedicated to bioenergy cropping. This land should be used to produce food for human consumption. The UK needs to be more strategic about how it uses land through a Land Use Framework.

We understand that the Government's response to the National Food Strategy has been delayed while the situation in Ukraine dominates. However, rising costs to consumers, anticipated autumn shortages and warnings of hunger as families choose between food and heat, demonstrate the need for a cross Government plan for the food system. Businesses need a clear policy pathway and citizens need support to access healthy, sustainable diets. We also need to rethink the drive for large scale energy crops.

In the short term, as millions in the UK face a bleak prospect of increased household food insecurity, even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered the current crisis, we need action. Government should promote the Real Living Wage, ensure pensions and Universal Credit cover the cost of living, and introduce universal free school meals - a position which is supported by a majority of the public.

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