

Liberal Democrats

FOOD SECURITY

Spokesperson's Paper



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Challenge

Britain is not secure unless its food supply is secure. We rightly speak of military security and of energy security, but too rarely do governments think of food security.

Food security is Britain's supply of food being reliable over the long term, and in the face of potential shocks and interruptions to supply. Food security will include Britain being far more self sufficient than it is currently. Through the measures outlined in this paper, we would aim to increase self-sufficiency to at least 75%, 10% more than the UK's current level. Russia's invasion of Ukraine gave us a glimpse of how fragile our food supplies can be and how quickly scarcity can come upon us.

To act, we have to answer how we value our land for what it can produce. We will not achieve food security while we have an agricultural policy - designed by the last Conservative government and continued by this Labour government - which actively disincentivises the production of food. To add insult to this injury, for the first time since the 1940s, there is not a universal offer for farmers in England to take part in.

The Solution

Achieving food security means ensuring that we produce a significant majority of the food that we eat within the borders of our own country. But the solution is not just about increasing food production - it is also about quality and reducing waste. We know that to provide Britain with a secure and nutritious food supply, we have to invest in our farmers and their industry; listen to and work with the experts at every stage of the supply chain.

As strong believers in international free trade, we also want to ensure that the food we import is food that is sourced reliably and produced with animal welfare, human health and environmental standards that are equivalent to our own and which under no circumstances undermine our own.

The Future

The aim of this paper is to provide a practical answer to the challenge of making Britain food secure, based on the input and expertise of those who know best: those producing the food we eat and those who get it to our tables.

It is right that the Liberal Democrats should critique the failures of our opponents to take this issue seriously, but it is not sufficient for us to do that. We must have a serious plan for how we would move Britain towards being food secure.

Liberal Democrats instinctively care about food security, it comes from our values, history and our culture as a party.

Our concern for the poorest and most marginalised means that we see food poverty as a great evil; our passion to protect and provide for future generations means that we want to do all in our power to counter the threat of climate change; our record of representing Britain's most rural constituencies means that we understand and love the communities that produce our food better than any other party; our internationalism and our centuries old commitment to free trade and high quality food people can afford leads us to a keen awareness of the fragility of supply chains and of the need to develop deep, lasting and secure international relationships across our neighbouring markets in Europe and beyond.

In other words, you would expect the Liberal Democrats to take the lead on ensuring food security and we are humbly determined to do just that.

Caring about our country must include caring about how we feed our country. This won't happen by accident, but only by design. That is why we submit our plan as a step towards establishing Britain's food security.

Tim Farron

Tim Farron MP

Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs



2. FUTURE FOOD SECURITY

A National Food Strategy

The UK simply cannot afford to do without a plan for how to guarantee future food security. Whilst the government has acknowledged that food security and national security are inextricably linked, and are due to publish a new National Food Strategy next year, they have not acted with the seriousness or urgency needed to get an action plan in place.

We have to **implement a comprehensive National Food Strategy** - something the Conservatives in government failed to deliver. This needs to be bold - taking action on food supply from production to consumption - and joined up with other strategies, including the upcoming Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), Land Use Framework, Farm Profitability Roadmap, Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) and Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme updates, the Government's 'growth strategy' and Child Poverty Strategy. By enshrining a National Food Strategy in legislation, the government can improve accountability and ensure standards and targets are met.

The Strategy must improve how the government engages with the sector - not just in times of crisis but steadfastly and in lock step with key stakeholders. Solutions to guarantee future food security should be designed with farmers and key sector stakeholders who have for too long been undervalued, underconsulted, and undermined by the Conservatives and Labour in government.

Protecting the UK's food supply, ensuring generous investment in farm payments and reducing the cost of trade with Europe will be significant contributors in the affordability of food and tackling the cost of living crisis.

A comprehensive National Food Strategy must also embed robust public procurement standards that prioritise sustainably produced British food, ensuring stable demand and fair prices across the supply chain. It should invest in regional processing and distribution infrastructure to shorten supply chains, strengthen rural economies, and reduce vulnerability to global shocks. The Strategy must include a long-term plan for skills, innovation, and workforce development so that farming and food careers are valued, attractive, and equipped for the challenges of climate change and technological transformation. Critically, it must strengthen the UK's food safety and food fraud surveillance systems to protect consumers, uphold trust, and safeguard the integrity of our domestic food markets.

The government is required under the Agriculture Act to publish food security reports every three years. Instead, these should be published annually, with proper consultation with the farming, nutrition, manufacturing and environment sectors. This is one of the

many recommendations from Henry Dimbleby's National Food Strategy (2021) which the former Conservative government never acted on.

The Future of Farming

Ministers are fond of saying that British farming is the best in the world and they are right but too many of them don't know why. British farming is the best in the world because of our tradition of family farming and the standards by which we operate in the UK. The family farm model is in contrast to larger scale corporate farming models. They are family run small-to-medium sized businesses. Family farming has tethered agricultural practices in the UK to the skills which have long guaranteed British quality food, produced to high standards. Family farms lead to higher standards of animal husbandry and of forensic care for nature as well as ensuring higher quality food. If supported by the right schemes, farmers are the most capable and cost effective at delivering quality food in harmony with improvements in biodiversity and climate change action. But Brexit, combined with Conservative and Labour policies - whether by accident or design - are pushing family farms into crisis and closure and are transforming agriculture and our countryside for the worse. If we do not act now, this damage could be irreparable.

Without these family farms, the wider rural community cannot prosper; our food security, our countryside, our natural environment and our cultural heritage are all supported by family farming. And, often ignored in Whitehall, where rural communities are too often misunderstood, family farms must also be a critical part of our clean energy future and give us a fighting chance against climate change.

The current pressure on farmers is immense. Many farmers are facing the possibility that their businesses will close - through no fault of their own. The fear of losing a farm that their families may have run for generations or even centuries is, in too many cases, a burden too great to bear. The rate of suicides among farmers is already twice that among men in England and Wales as a result of low financial returns, the crippling lack of certainty due to the botched transition to the new farm payments scheme and a general sense that they have been forgotten by the country that they work so hard to feed. This is a heartbreaking reflection of what happens when a government does not listen, and a sector of our community is ignored and marginalised.

Family farms are in desperate need of a government that cares. Under the Conservatives, farmers endured significant cuts to their incomes while the cost of energy, fertiliser and feed soared. The Conservative government sold farmers out in bungled trade deals with the EU, Australia and New Zealand and the CPTPP. All the while, farmers were left to battle with the devastating impacts of storms and flooding - including livestock fatalities, crop and equipment damage - without adequate support. Kemi Badenoch, when she was

International Trade Secretary, described these deals as “fantastic”. Both as a member of the former Conservative government and as Trade Secretary, she either supported or negotiated these deals which sold farmers down the river.

On the basis of what we have seen so far, it is clear Labour doesn't care about farmers. Just like the Conservatives, they have failed to deliver a functioning post Brexit payment scheme. The average size of farm continues to grow as the number of farm holdings decreases. The government's reckless and sudden changes to inheritance tax will also incentivise farms to amalgamate and be less productive. This trend is likely to continue, given the current supply chain incentives and the flawed delivery of ELM. Many farmers now earn significantly below the national minimum wage after the Conservatives' post-Brexit policies effectively slashed farmers' incomes; phasing out direct payments under the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) before any suitable replacement could be introduced. Labour then accelerated the phase out of BPS whilst stop-starting new schemes like the SFI. Their approach has been hugely disruptive to business planning. Farmers face the prospect of no payments until next year and, for the first time since 1945, have no universal payment offer to take part in.

Hill farm incomes remain vulnerable; while livestock prices are at a record high, hill farmers' agricultural activity still makes a loss. With the phase out of BPS they are increasingly becoming totally dependent on ELM income which will comprise 80% of average income by 2027. Professor Julia Aglionby of the University of Cumbria's analysis shows farmers are, most years, not even scraping a profit that equates to a minimum wage. Any reductions in ELM income will impact significantly. The Government's failure to deliver an effective payment scheme for farmers has undermined their profitability and hence our ability to produce food, recover nature and be climate resilient. Put simply, you can't be green if you are in the red. Farmers need time to adapt and a clarity about what to aim for, for profitable and nature-friendly farming in future.

Since ELM was first drawn up, Donald Trump has returned to the White House and unleashed tariffs and trade wars, and Putin has launched his barbaric full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In light of these developments and the growing uncertainty over crop yields internationally due to climate change, it now makes sense for the UK to use the financial and regulatory levers it possesses to underpin minimum levels of acceptable self sufficiency in our food production.

As the government prepares its new Farming Road Map, we urge them to be practical - not theoretical. Liberal Democrats would work with farmers and other stakeholders in the sector to agree on the optimal size of the national herd, the national flock, various crop yields and so on. We would then use ELM, the planning system and other mechanisms to ensure that we met those optimal targets each year. We wish to be aligned with our

partners in the EU and given that the EU is maintaining direct payments to farmers in the common agricultural policy until at least 2034, we would ensure that English agriculture is not out of step - especially given that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are also retaining an element of direct support.

Liberal Democrats recognise the importance of upland and small-to-medium sized farms in lowland areas who are farming in a way which is sustainable and contributes to nature's restoration. The Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs' (DEFRA) evidence shows that schemes delivered by farmers will be critical to meeting their legally binding target to halt and reverse nature's decline. These farms have a vanishingly small chance of making profits despite their critical role in tending to the rich tapestry of the British landscape, creating employment in rural areas and producing food to the highest standards. That's why we call on the government to **establish an Upland Reward Scheme** in recognition of the value of these farmers who care for and cultivate the toughest and most remote places. The fund would reward upland farmers for sustainable farming and bring their income up to a level at least beyond the national minimum wage.

We have confidence that Britain's farmers have the skills, ingenuity and tenacity to meet the challenge of producing the food that will keep our country nourished and secure. The problem is that the success of our farmers may be despite government policy, not because of it. We are committed to working alongside our farmers to help them to achieve this mission. Like all industries farming will need to progress, develop and change in a challenging world. We believe that we should support them to do this by investing in agricultural education, training and government sponsored apprenticeship and succession schemes, research and development, and then back a nationwide programme to ensure that innovation is spread farm after farm and delivered by the experts that farmers trust. Funding such a programme must be seen as a public good. And with much more funding for ELM schemes, and better data about soil health, emissions per farm, tree coverage etc., farms can be held accountable with targets and incentives to ensure food is produced to the highest standards and with the agricultural sector working positively towards climate and nature goals.

For future food security, we have to move from an incentive model towards a more professionalised model which promotes farming as a career of choice - but this transition should not mean the loss of the skills and experience which have been passed down generations over centuries or the creation of mass corporate farms.

The government has created new innovation grants to help farmers share new skills. However, like every other part of the rapidly reducing farming budget, it is too small and relies on farmers being able to successfully bid during a very narrow window thus excluding the majority of farms, particularly smaller ones.

Our plan for **a new FIELD (Farming, Innovation, Exchange, Learning and Development) fund** would create an easily accessible fund to reward farmers for sharing new skills, building farming networks and mentoring each other. Funding farmer networks would also help to train up the next generation and tackle the isolation too often reported by farmers working alone for long periods and during unsociable hours.

Our fishers and farmers have struggled to recruit the workforce they need, especially after the botched Brexit deal. Whilst the government has extended the seasonal workers' visa scheme for parts of our food system, this extension alone is not enough to bridge the gap in skilled and semi-skilled labour. Liberal Democrats would fix the broken visa system by scrapping arbitrary salary thresholds to let farmers, fishers and the food processing sector recruit the workers they need to boost our food supply.

To incentivise a homegrown, skilled workforce, working with the Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (TIAH), the government should establish **a farming equivalent to Teach First, 'Farm First', to attract young people into the sector**, providing them with a clear career path and a salaried year of sustainable farming experience, training and skills. Jobs in the agricultural sector should be much better connected with the careers system.

The Future of Food Manufacturing

The food manufacturing sector is the largest manufacturing sector in the UK, employing approximately 500,000 people, and is consistently overlooked. To support food manufacturing, the government has got to invest in skills and training to address the labour shortages and to modernise the workforce. The government should also look to provide grants and tax incentives to encourage innovation, automation and sustainability within the sector. Finally, to better protect UK producers from fraud and unfair competition, the government must strengthen our border controls and improve the constituency of border regulation.

Investment in Technology

The UK's potential to be a world leader in new technology for sustainable and resilient food production is immense. Britain is proudly home to some of the best research institutions in the world and produces food to the highest standards. The government puts these unique achievements at risk, along with our future food security, if they fail to fund and incentivise innovation.

The government has got to invest more in research and new technologies to build food resilience with **a new Farming and Land Use Catapult innovation centre and a**

Food and Farming Research and Innovation fund to help develop the UK into a world leader in emerging technologies which have the potential to create new jobs, reduce our dependence on imports and improve diets. The government must improve the current framework for innovation to address the barriers to getting new technologies off the ground, from farm-scale pilots to wider roll out.

We would ensure farmers have access to independent advice about how to make the most of new technology and environmental farm payment schemes, including promoting opportunities to be involved in pilots and innovate, with proper funding for advice services.

Education and public engagement

The National Food Strategy should connect food education with public health and environmental stewardship. Education about food and sustainable farming can encourage healthier living, climate action and the regeneration of rural communities.

School curricula should foster an understanding of food production, nutrition and the relationship between environmental land management in tackling the climate and nature crises.

Every child at school should be taught the skills to prepare a nutritious meal from scratch, reducing the reliance on ultra-processed food, ensuring that farmers, not processed food manufacturers, see more of the profit from their produce and people learn healthy eating skills and habits to set them up for life.

Alongside food education, we would **promote outdoor education, with the aim of ensuring every child is offered at least one outdoor education experience during primary school years and at least one such experience during secondary school years so that residential outdoor learning is part of the school curriculum.**

People who develop a love of the outdoors and the countryside in their youth will usually retain and develop that love throughout their lives and can also then become advocates for agriculture, nature and rural communities wherever they live.

Liberal Democrats believe that DEFRA should be the department for rural England. In many ways, the department has as much in common with the Scottish Office and the Welsh Office as it does with thematic government departments. Alongside its wider duties to every part of the country, part of DEFRA's role is to be an area-based department concerned with the 70% of England's land mass that is agricultural land. It would seem odd, for example, if a majority of officials and ministers in the Welsh or Scottish Offices were not from Wales or Scotland. **We would similarly ensure that a substantial**

proportion of ministers and officials in DEFRA are from rural communities, food manufacturing, environmental and agricultural backgrounds. Poor decisions about food security by this and previous governments often owe much to a lack of institutional awareness of or concern for the wellbeing and productivity of those working in the countryside.



3. THE FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN

The global food supply chain is fragile, more so day by day. Food security is a vital part of our ability to feed ourselves - ever more so in an increasingly volatile world.

Globalisation is a net good. It provides opportunities for economic prosperity, lifts people out of poverty and improves the life expectancy and health of the world's poorest. But globalisation also presents challenges; economic specialisation means crops are more geographically concentrated than ever before, and vulnerable to shocks of war, climate change and political instability.

The pandemic caused world hunger to spike, Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine increased global food insecurity and recent heatwaves, which led to some of the worst harvests on record, have pushed up food prices. Flooding of farmland during recent years has also damaged crop yields in the UK and pushed up costs within the industry. Shortages and price hikes have all been exacerbated by the botched Brexit deal.

Unfettered free markets have often resulted in pollution of water, soils and the air and have led to the control of our food supplies being concentrated in the hands of too few multi-national corporations. That is why Liberal Democrats believe passionately in national and international regulation and in protecting smaller family farms for both moral and practical reasons.

Growing Food Resilience

Against this backdrop and with food supply chains being long and more complex, Britain must be food secure to protect against potential shocks. For a start, **food resilience should be recognised as a public good** and a critical part of the climate transition. This will not only help to establish food within transition planning and funding - it will also help to recognise the value of food and farming to the UK's future prosperity.

To build food resilience, Liberal Democrats back a strategic increase in domestic food production and reaffirm our commitment to **an extra £1bn a year for the farming budget to ensure the incentives are in place to support future sustainable food security**. Government funding schemes need to align with priority areas for growth in sustainable food production and the government must set out clearly what these areas are.

The resilience of our food system also depends on securing critical supply chains end-to-end, ensuring that key inputs such as energy, fertiliser, raw ingredients and packaging remain stable, traceable and protected from disruption. This requires governments and industry to work together on strategic stockpiling, diversified sourcing, real-time intelligence, and rapid response capabilities when shocks occur.

Ending Food Poverty and Food Waste

Over 14 million people in the UK faced hunger last year, according to The Trussell Trust. Food poverty is a national tragedy and disgrace and it takes many forms. It can mean people being hungry and malnourished and it can also mean people eating nutritionally poor quality food which contributes to declining health outcomes. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has found that “one of the strongest relationships is between deprivation and both adult and childhood obesity”¹. In the end, food poverty is simply poverty. We mustn't tolerate it and we must plan to defeat it, especially given the scale of the challenge.

To do this, we have got to grow our economy and invest in skills and employment opportunities so that more people have the income they need to feed themselves well. We must also ensure that changes to the food supply chain are coordinated nationwide; changes which should aim to make much better use of domestically produced, nutritious food to improve health and reduce waste. More support for Britain's horticulture sector is vital if we are to create a healthier and more sustainable food system in future. One of the biggest barriers for domestic food producers, especially for horticulture under glass, is the cost of energy and fertiliser. While the government has recognised that the steel, glass and ceramics industry require specific energy subsidies, they have not recognised the horticulture sector as an energy intensive industry. To realise the potential of this sector and of produce grown in Britain, the government has got to address rocketing input costs. To advance domestic food supply, the government must **implement targets to ensure that at least 50% of food supplied to the public sector is produced by British food producers** - backed up with suitable and sufficient funding. At present, the government does not even measure the proportion of public sector food procurement that comes from the UK. We would ensure that it does.

In the UK, about a quarter of food grown is wasted, amounting to between 4 - 5 million tonnes worth of edible waste, yet 11% of households are in food poverty - including 18% of children.

Squeezed school budgets have a direct impact on food. Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for the government to expand free school meals to all children on universal credit and we are glad they have finally listened but they must now properly fund this expansion. This can only be a first step. We are pushing the government to **make a commitment to ensuring school meals are locally sourced, auto-enrolling eligible children for free school meals and capping uniform costs to truly change the lives of children in poverty**. The government should also strengthen the Healthy Start Scheme and review, in particular, the eligibility criteria and value of payments which

¹ <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg189#:~:text=People%20in%20deprived%20areas%20often,groups%20most%20impacted%20by%20obesity>

have fallen below the rising cost of food. Our action on school food will be developed further by Liberal Democrats in upcoming policy and in response to the government's ongoing review of school food standards.

To reduce food waste, we suggest the government work to increase the amount of surplus food redistributed. We support FareShare's proposal to **ensure surplus food redistribution is worked into a comprehensive national food strategy** - a strategy which must also address the underlying causes of food poverty and the generation of food waste.

We welcome that the UK government has agreed to recognise food systems as part climate action plans and to halve food waste by 2030 but their vision for the food supply chain is unclear and actions have not been taken with the speed or ambition required to significantly reduce food waste or tackle hunger. Complex and disjointed food supply chains are also more susceptible to fraud. An obligation for public sector procurement to prioritise domestic and especially local produce would aid transparency and boost confidence in the standards, sourcing and quality of food.



4. TRADE AND MARKET FAIRNESS

Fair Trade Deals

Liberal Democrats have led the campaign to fix our broken relationship with the EU - our closest ally and largest trading partner. Nothing has done more to increase the cost of living, the cost of farming and the reduction of farm incomes than the Conservatives' botched EU deal which made it more expensive and burdensome for British farmers and fishers to export to their main markets in the EU, beleaguering their workforce and undermining their protections for animal welfare and the environment.

A dangerous precedent was set by the Conservatives in government for future trade agreements in what they negotiated and how they went about it. They stripped away parliamentary scrutiny and rammed bad deals through which gave unfair advantage to imports from countries with poorer standards over the higher quality standards of British farmers. The Liberal Democrats are committed to making sure that the government does not undermine UK standards in trade deals. Every new trade deal should be subject to proper scrutiny. We would guarantee that **Parliament is given a vote for any trade deal the UK government negotiates**. The government's refusal to do so for their latest trade agreement with President Trump is a reminder that Parliament still hasn't taken back control.

We know that President Trump is - at best - an unreliable ally! We know he won't give British farmers a fair deal. There is no point licking President Trump's boots as the Conservatives and Reform do. Liberal Democrats know that we will only ever be able to deal with Trump from a position of strength if we can show we are not so reliant on the United States and will not be bullied into taking whatever President Trump offers us.

Tinkering around the botched trade deals negotiated by the Conservatives will not improve supply chain fairness, tear down trade barriers quickly enough or help to reduce costs. Retailers have already used these deals to undermine their historic sourcing support for British food. Some UK supermarkets have extended their beef imports from Australia and New Zealand, at the expense of British farmers. The UK must be far more positive and much more ambitious. In our manifesto, we committed to renegotiate the Australia and New Zealand trade agreements in line with our objectives for free trade, health, environmental and animal welfare standards - withdrawing from them if those objectives cannot be achieved.

We also pledged to fight for a fair deal for farmers. When it comes to fairness in trade, market access and regulatory alignment is key as a minimum. We regret that the Government failed to show real ambition to renew the UK's relations with the EU - and continues to refuse to entertain the prospect of membership of the single market or the Customs Union. Post-Brexit licences for exporting food to the EU cost UK businesses up

to £65 million last year. A veterinary agreement and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement with the EU is vital to farmers, fishers and the food industry. Negotiating such an agreement should be an urgent priority but the government has no clear plan for quickly moving towards negotiating, agreeing and implementing a SPS deal, despite the benefits this would deliver for British businesses. Liberal Democrats believe that the UK should aim for a more **comprehensive SPS agreement which guarantees enhanced access for UK food and animal products to the single market, with minimal need for checks or documentation.** This model already exists with the EU–Swiss veterinary agreement, and was even offered to the UK by the EU back in 2021.

We also want a UK-EU Customs Union to rebuild our economy and support British producers with tariff-free movement of goods between EU member states. A far more ambitious, free and fair trade deal with Europe is an absolute necessity, with a new bespoke UK-EU Customs Union at its heart. But vitally, it can also give the government some of the financial scope to keep at least a few more of its promises on improving public services - which have been left acutely stretched in rural areas after brutal cuts under the Conservatives.

The hard-won Liberal belief that free trade is good for business, good for producers, good for consumers and good for individual liberty is why we champion a much closer trading relationship with Europe and choose to stand up to President Trump's destructive trade war. It's why we, as the party of trade, will continue to push the government to go much further than their timid reset with Europe and much faster in tearing down the Conservatives' trade barriers. We will continue to defend the free trade so hard-won by nineteenth century Liberals and so desperately needed now to bring growth, free our food producers and businesses from costly red tape and bring down prices in our shops.

Standards, Biosecurity and Food Safety

One of the effects of the Conservatives' botched deal with Europe has been the weakening of border protections thereby undermining British farmers and heightening biosecurity and food safety risks.

The introduction of import checks has been plagued by delay; the UK's implementation of an SPS agreement is now not expected until 2027 - that is far too slow. The devastation and horror of the 2001 outbreak of foot and mouth disease (FMD) is a chilling reminder of the importance of biosecurity investment, enforcement and regulatory alignment with our neighbours in the EU. The UK is falling worryingly behind on all counts. We must do everything to avoid a repeat of the FMD outbreak which caused such devastation to the farming sector and rural communities in the past.

As well as an SPS agreement, the government has got to **ensure import checks are resourced well and increase vaccination capacity and funding, especially for the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA)**, to better support disease prevention and control. We must also have strictly enforced deterrent measures in place to disincentivise the flow of illegal imports.

By rebuilding our relationship with the EU, we can reduce biosecurity risks, provide a level playing field, protect British businesses from lower standards and increase domestic and export opportunities. The government has got to wake up to the urgent need to work more closely with the EU for fairer and more competitive trade and to reduce the risks to food security, safety and standards.

A Fairer Supply Chain

Farmers and growers need fair dealing in the supply chain to survive. The Grocery Code Adjudicator (GCA), established in 2013, built a framework for fairer trading relationships in the grocery supply chain but is now in need of being made up to date, given wider powers, a wider remit and a more robust staffing model. We want to reform the GCA to better protect farmers from unfair trade practices by large UK corporate buyers.

The GCA and Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator (ASCA) should be brought together to strengthen regulation across the sector, with more powers and resources to apply Principle of Fair Dealing, particularly in respect of production, delivery and payment issues.

We want to see fairness throughout the supply chain in both the retail and food service sectors and we want to see all steps in the chain subject to checks and balances rather than just focusing attention on the direct relationships between suppliers and large retailers.

5. CLIMATE, NATURE AND WATER SECURITY

At root, global food supply and its security is largely about water and nature. The government's Food Security Report (2024) highlighted that the long term decline in the UK's natural capital is a pressing risk to food production. The recent heatwaves led to one of the worst harvests on record and pushed up food prices. Drought has threatened wheat and barley production in China, Russia and Ukraine and driven up the price of olive oil in Spain. Lower levels of rainfall in recent years have raised US beef prices to their highest figures ever. It's clear that a healthy natural environment and clean and sure supply of water is vital to productive and nutritious food and to keeping prices down.

In the UK, our climate is getting hotter and less predictable. The last three years were in the top five hottest on record. Flooding and heatwaves are expected to become more regular. Inaction is no option. Extreme weather events, often over many weeks, now pose severe risks to public health, food production, animal welfare, habitats and economic growth. If we fail to manage our water supply well, we will fail to secure our food supply.

Water Management

Alongside local activists and campaigners, Liberal Democrats made the sewage scandal one of the leading topics of public debate at the last general election. We are encouraged that the government has finally listened to us and agreed to replace the water regulator, Ofwat with a new, strengthened regulator as we first called for, back in 2022 and as recommended by the Independent Water Commission. The government must get on with getting a new regulator in place - urgently.

In our submission to the Water Commission, Liberal Democrats called for practical solutions to end the sewage scandal and put water companies onto a sustainable footing. That all starts with serious regulatory reform because the reality is, water companies can pollute and make profit with impunity. We will continue to fight for **a new regulator with the powers and resources to clean up our waterways**, put water companies on a sustainable financial footing, operating for public benefit and investing in infrastructure so that it is maintained, upgraded and built.

The crisis in water is not just about sewage management. Crucially, it is also about managing clean water supply including for agriculture and about protecting farm land from flooding and drought. Water scarcity and limited water storage capacity put acute pressure on farming and food production. There must be more support for the development of local resource options to secure and store water supply including reforms to agricultural permitted development rights to enable farmers to build on-farm

reservoirs more easily. Liberal Democrats pushed this measure in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill but it was rejected by the government. Vital adjustments to planning such as this would help tackle water scarcity and prepare for drought. We urge the government to review their decision and take up this measure.

Managing water well is critical to food security which is why the government must **ensure that all farms affected by flooding or drought are eligible for support** including by tailoring the qualifying criteria for the Farming Recovery Fund so that no farmer affected is left without support. Food producers should be recognised as key users of water and crops which require greater use of water need to be identified to support food security and healthy, nutritious diets. Once again, without more support for farmers, extreme weather events will undermine UK food production, increase prices and worsen food poverty.

The government must work with farmers as part of a new catchment approach to water management. Through ELM schemes, the government must **put fair values on the benefit of margins around water courses to make buffer strips alongside watercourses attractive to farmers.** With the right incentives, advice and support, farmers can play a critical role in improving our waterways; helping to slow water flow, improve water storage and capacity and investing in infrastructure to better distribute captured water.

Investment in new technology here too is critical. For example, by investing in ways to capture and pelletise phosphate, so it is not just spread on land, we can better protect our rivers and stop irreparable damage to those parts of the planet where we are currently mining phosphate unsustainably.

The Climate and Nature Crises

The production of food, the restoration of nature and climate resilience are not deliverable unless delivered together. Farmers understand this all too well. The floods of 2023 and 2024 led to widespread livestock fatalities, crop destruction, equipment damage and tragically in some cases, financial ruin.

Shamefully, nature in the UK is in decline. According to the State of Nature report (2023), the abundance of species has declined on average by 19% since 1970; pollinating insects, which play a critical role in food production and are worth millions of pounds to UK agriculture, have seen an 18% decrease in their distribution since 1970, while insects that support pest control for food crops have decreased by 34%. In Britain, one in six species are threatened with extinction and just 14% of rivers in England are in good ecological health - no single stretch of river is in good overall health or good chemical health. The

restoration of nature – including natural habitats, soils, rivers, uplands, and peatlands – is vital to feeding ourselves in the future.

Regenerative farming methods to improve soil health, water retention and biodiversity need to be championed by the government, with associated certification. This will not only reduce overhead costs in future, but also make for the sustainable use of land and a more balanced environment. The proper funding of ELM is key to making sure the agriculture, land use and forestry sector becomes a collective carbon sink by 2050. Significantly increasing the support and availability of nature-friendly farming schemes will be critical to addressing the climate and nature crises, guaranteeing our long-term food security, and providing vital income for vulnerable farmers.

To set targets for nature, for climate and for food security, we have to have an accurate picture of where we are - across the supply chain. Despite the statistics above, data is sorely lacking on the health of soil, biodiversity, emissions and carbon storage. **The collection of data across the sector must be a priority for the government** to ensure we can track progress, set targets and make informed decisions.

To that end, we endorse the recommendations from Lord Curry's report, A Sustainable Farming Model for the Future, for the government to strengthen the commitment of all industry stakeholders to secure long-term, measurable environmental improvement - soil health and biodiversity in particular; collect data across the sector including farm-scale baselines for emissions, carbon storage and biodiversity; and making smart use of data to measure progress and inform decisions across the supply chain.

The food industry makes a significant contribution to waste and the associated harms to health and environment. Reforms to tackle packaging waste and its environmental impacts have long been delayed. Liberal Democrats have long backed the introduction of a deposit return scheme (DRS) for food and drink bottles and containers, but schemes must be joined up across devolved administrations - and learn from the failures of the attempt to introduce the scheme in Scotland which was blighted by delays and failed to inspire the confidence of the industry. UN Member States are in the process of negotiating a legally-binding, international agreement on plastics that will address their life, from design, to production and disposal. Liberal Democrats will continue to push for targets to cut plastic pollution in the UK to be legally binding.

We have also called for the new and strengthened water regulator to have the power to require water companies to limit the levels of dangerous chemicals in our water supply. The levels of per-and poly-fluoroalkyl substances, PFAS or 'forever chemicals' in our drinking water are too high to be safe and are associated with cancer, infertility, thyroid disease and liver damage, as well as causing harm to crops and wildlife. There is currently no legal limit on the amount of PFAS present in our drinking water - and England has fallen even further behind the EU, as well as Scotland, in PFAS regulation.

6. CONCLUSION

Food Security is national security, but simply mouthing those words will not help us to rise to the challenge of ensuring that the UK's vital food supplies are protected against varied threats.

The Liberal Democrats are serious about understanding those threats, and presenting a plan to overcome them. We have enormous confidence in the UK's farmers and food producers, and in the whole food sector. It is the role of the government to back them and provide an overarching strategy across every part of national and local government which ensures that food security is a practical priority.

These are times when complaining about what is wrong in our country seems to be the priority for many in politics, but there is no route to a more successful and secure Britain unless we have plans to make things better.

The Liberal Democrats' aim is to lead on food security in Parliament and beyond and to provide hope to all who work so hard to ensure that our people can rely on an ample supply of good food that they can afford.

Summary of Recommendations

- 1. Implement a comprehensive National Food Strategy** - from production to consumption, joined up with other strategies, including the upcoming Land Use Framework, Farm Profitability Roadmap, SFI and ELM updates, and Child Poverty Strategy. The Strategy must improve how the government engages with the sector - not just in times of crisis but designed in lock step with farmers and key sector stakeholders who have for too long been undervalued, underconsulted, and undermined by the Conservatives and Labour in government.
- 2. Establish an Upland Reward Scheme** in recognition of the value of those farmers who make the toughest and most remote places productive.
- 3. A new FIELD fund** to create an easily accessible fund to reward farmers for sharing new skills, building farming networks and mentoring each other.
- 4. Establish a farming equivalent to Teach First, 'Farm First', to attract young people into the sector**, providing them with a clear career path and a salaried year of sustainable farming experience, training and skills. Jobs in the agricultural sector should be much better connected with the careers system.
- 5. Ensure that a substantial proportion of ministers and officials in DEFRA are from rural communities, food manufacturing, environmental and agricultural backgrounds.**

- 6. Recognise food resilience as a public good** and a critical part of the climate transition. This will not only help to establish food within transition planning and funding - it will also help to recognise the value of food and farming to the UK's future prosperity.
- 7. £1bn extra a year for the farming budget** to ensure the incentives are in place to support future sustainable food security.
- 8. Implement targets to ensure that at least 50% of food supplied to the public sector is produced by British food producers**, to ensure public procurement policy supports nutritious, locally and seasonally sourced food.
- 9. Work to ensure school meals are locally sourced, auto-enrol eligible children for free school meals**, lift the two child benefit cap, and cap uniform costs to truly change the lives of children in poverty and improve nutrition.
- 10. Ensure surplus food redistribution is worked into a comprehensive national food strategy** - a strategy which must also address the underlying causes of food poverty and the generation of food waste.
- 11. Invest more in research and new technologies to build food resilience with a new Farming and Land Use Catapult innovation centre and a new Food and Farming Research and Innovation fund** which helps to address the barriers to getting new technologies off the ground, from farm-scale pilots to wider roll out.
- 12. School curricula should foster an understanding of nutrition, food production**, and the relationship between environmental land management in tackling the climate and nature crises.
- 13. Promote outdoor education**, with the aim of ensuring every child is offered at least one outdoor education experience during primary school years and at least one such experience during secondary school years so that residential outdoor learning is part of the school curriculum. This would create a new generation of advocates for farming and nature in every community in Britain.
- 14. Guarantee that Parliament is given a vote for every trade deal the UK government negotiates.**
- 15. Urgently implement a comprehensive SPS agreement** with the EU to support British procedures with enhanced access for UK food and animal products to the single market, with minimal need for checks or documentation and negotiate a new UK-EU Customs Union to rebuild our economy.

- 16. Ensure import checks are resourced well and increase vaccination capacity and funding**, especially for the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), to better support disease prevention and control. By rebuilding our relationship with the EU, we can reduce biosecurity risks, provide a level playing field, protect British businesses from lower standards and increase domestic and export opportunities. The government has got to wake up to the urgent need to work more closely with the EU for fairer and more competitive trade and to reduce the risks to food security, safety and standards.
- 17. Bring the GCA and Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator (ASCA) together** under one roof, and with wider and deeper remit and powers, to strengthen regulation across the sector.
- 18. A new water regulator** with the powers and resources to clean up our waterways, put water companies on a sustainable financial footing, operating for public benefit and investing in infrastructure so that it is maintained, upgraded and built.
- 19. Ensure all farms affected by flooding or drought are eligible for support** including by tailoring the qualifying criteria for the Farming Recovery Fund so that no farmer affected is left without support and making sure that food producers are recognised as key users of water - and making sure that crops which require greater use of water are identified to support food security and a healthy, nutritious diets.
- 20. Put proper values on the benefit of margins around water courses**, as part of a new catchment approach to water management. Buffer strips alongside watercourses need to be made more attractive to farmers. With the right incentives, advice and support, farmers can play a critical role in the improvement of water management; slowing water flow, improving water storage and capacity and investing in infrastructure to better distribute captured water.
- 21. Make the collection of data across the sector a priority** to ensure we can track progress, set targets and make informed decisions. Data is sorely lacking on the health of soil, biodiversity, emissions and carbon storage. We endorse the recommendations of Lord Curry for the government to strengthen the commitment of all industry stakeholders to secure long-term, measurable environmental improvement - soil health and biodiversity in particular; collect data across the sector including farm-scale baselines for emissions, carbon storage and biodiversity; and making smart use of data to measure progress and inform decisions across the supply chain.
- 22. Making targets to cut plastic pollution legally binding**, bring forward long delayed reforms to tackle packaging waste and its environmental impacts - including the introduction of a deposit return scheme (DRS) for food and drink bottles and containers, making sure that schemes are joined up across devolved administrations.

This Spokesperson's Paper was led by Tim Farron MP, with drafting by Rebecca Barton-Singer and particular thanks to the following:

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- Dr Lizzie Collingham, historian, books include *The Taste of War*, *World War II and The Battle for Food*
- Edwin Booth, Chairman, EH Booth & Co Ltd
- Elliot Chapman-Jones, Director, Liberals and Democrats for Nature and Climate (LDNC)
- Professor Chris Elliott, Founder, Institute for Global Food Security, Queen's University Belfast
- Stuart Roberts, Hertfordshire cereal, beef and sheep farmer and former NFU Deputy President
- The National Farmers' Union (NFU)

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