

FARMS FIELDS & FOOD

The Social Democratic Party

Green Paper on Agriculture and Countryside

February 2024

SDP
Social Democratic Party

*“We make our oxen drag our rusty plows,
long laid aside. We have gone back
far past our fathers’ land.”*

From ‘The Horses’ by Edwin Muir

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
BRITAIN’S FOOD SYSTEM	3
TARGET 1: AFFORDABLE, HEALTHY FOOD AND FAIR PRICES TO PRODUCERS	6
Showcase: Connecting producers and consumers	8
TARGET 2: SUSTAINABLE FARMING AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION	12
Showcase: Farming with nature – profitably	13
Showcase: High tech, high yield, low impact	14
TARGET 3: THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES AND A SMALL FARM FUTURE	18
Showcase: Farming for the community by the community	21
TARGET 4: FOOD SECURITY IN A GLOBAL MARKET	24
A DEMOCRATIC VOICE FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE	27
CONCLUSION	28
REFERENCES	30

The Social Democratic Party offers its warmest thanks to the authors of this paper - Dr Paula Lightfoot and Kathy Bushell.

FOREWORD



Cheap food is very expensive.

This is one of the many contradictions of our present food and farming system - a system which is harmful to both animal welfare and public health and degrades our fields, rivers and wildlife.

Our farmers - squeezed by the supermarkets and food cartels - struggle to make a living and most make more from subsidies than from farming itself. The abuse of antibiotics, pesticides and nitrate fertilisers have made farming neither economically secure nor ecologically viable.

We've become a country of food banks and yet over 25% of food is wasted in the home and 9% before leaving the farm gate. Obesity and diabetes are rocketing and yet some people go hungry. We must stop deceiving ourselves. We must face the fact that this is both an economic and a cultural problem - the marker of a throwaway society.

The primary causes of our difficulties - ignored for a generation by our political class - relate to the structure of our farming and food systems and the incentives they apply. The solutions lie in facing up to the true cost of good food, the value of ecological restoration and the necessity of trade policies aimed at greater national food security.

Like the power of nature itself to regenerate I have no doubt that we can transform our system into one in which the countryside recovers, rural communities thrive, and our citizens consume locally-sourced, healthier food.

A re-think is overdue and while the benefits of a re-balanced system will take time to bear fruit, the ideas contained in this serious report are an important step forward.

William Clouston

Party Leader

Social Democratic Party

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Britain's food system is broken. For every £1 we spend on food, we spend another £1 in hidden costs. These costs are externalised into areas that don't appear on the balance sheet – health, environment, animal welfare, and the wellbeing of food producers and wider rural communities. Successive governments have sacrificed long-term prosperity – our natural capital – for short-term gain. We propose a holistic approach to restore nature, revitalise rural communities, ensure food security and improve the national diet.

In this paper we present a suite of policies to achieve the following four targets.

1. Affordable healthy food and fair prices to producers

- Establishment of Charter Co-ops, Regional Marketing Boards and infrastructure grants to improve local food resilience and sustainability.
- Tax on wholesale purchase of sugar and salt by food producers. Restrict promotion and advertising of unhealthy food.
- Free school lunches for every child. Practical home economics and cooking classes.

2. Sustainable farming and environmental restoration

- Target subsidies to enable farmers to produce food sustainably with help from 'Farmer Champions' and guarantee this support for as long as it is needed.
- Maintain at least 90% of existing farmland for agriculture, and target nature restoration projects to non-food producing land and least-productive farmland.
- Support research into science, technology and innovation to make high-yield farming less environmentally damaging and small-scale farming more efficient.

3. Thriving rural communities and a small farm future

- Provide affordable housing ring-fenced for local working families and invest in rural infrastructure and policing.
- Re-establish land-based colleges, increase apprenticeships in rural trades and strengthen integration of food and farming into the school curriculum.
- Restore diversity of farm size across the UK.

4. Food security in a global market

- Ensure that trade deals do not disadvantage British food producers.
- Establish a Buy British policy for public sector procurement, with an emphasis on local sourcing.
- Clear country of origin and animal welfare labelling on both raw and processed foods.

BRITAIN'S FOOD SYSTEM



Cheap food has hidden costs

In the 1950s people in the UK spent half their income on food. For the past decade household expenditure on food has been between 10-11% of income. The reduced cost of food in real terms was achieved through a combination of intensive farming, global free trade, free movement of labour and a competitive retail market.

But for every £1 we spend on food, we spend another £1 in hidden costs¹. These costs are externalised into areas that don't appear on the balance sheet – health, environment, animal welfare, and the wellbeing of food producers and wider rural communities.

Our natural environment is in a terrible state. Increasing agricultural intensification, demanded for decades by the prevailing political and market conditions, has led to declining biodiversity, loss and fragmentation of habitats, polluted rivers and degraded soils.

Public health is poor. Over 60% of UK adults are overweight or obese, conditions which are more prevalent amongst lower-income sections of society and predicted to increase². Diet-related ailments reduce economic productivity and cost the NHS over £6 billion a year³. Ultra-processed foods, which are associated with increased risk of diet-related disease, comprise over 50% of the UK's diet, a far higher proportion than in other European countries⁴. Overuse of antibiotics in food production presents a potentially devastating global health risk. Increasing detachment from nature impacts our mental and physical wellbeing.

Food has been devalued. Over a quarter of food grown in the UK is wasted. Households throw away 4.5 million tons of food every year, accounting for 70% of the food wasted after it leaves the farm. Nearly 16% of the average household grocery budget is spent on food which ends up in the bins⁵.

Rural and coastal communities are in decline. Mechanisation of farming coupled with the use of cheap migrant labour has had a significant impact on rural populations. Villages which were once thriving hubs have suffered closures of schools, pubs, post offices and shops. Local families have been pushed out by a combination of rising house prices and lack of work. The rise in second homes and holiday lets has seen some areas hollowed out and empty for half of the year. Rural crime is increasing rapidly, costing nearly £50m per year and putting additional pressure on farming families⁶.

Farmers are struggling. Almost every type of farm, regardless of size, makes more money from subsidies than from food production. The bureaucracy and inconsistency of the subsidy system has been a source of frustration and demotivation for decades. Post-Brexit, the transition to a new system requires increased form-filling for reduced income, while uncertainty and delays have left farmers unable to plan for the future. Politicians urge farmers to adopt less damaging practices, while signing new trade deals that force them to compete against countries with lower environmental and animal welfare standards.

Unsurprisingly, farmers increasingly feel betrayed, undervalued and demonised. Research shows that 94% of farmers under the age of 40 rate poor mental health as the biggest problem facing the sector today⁷.

All this for cheap food. And as we are now discovering, cheap food is no longer guaranteed.

BRITAIN'S FOOD SYSTEM

In 2022, UK food prices rose to a 45 year high. Rising energy costs and reduced availability of grain following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have driven global food price inflation. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in the UK's food system, notably the length and complexity of supply chains and reduced capacity in domestic food production⁸.

Environmental impacts arising from intensification are starting to threaten future food production. Three quarters of the crop types we grow rely on pollination by insects, whose numbers have declined drastically due to pesticide use and habitat destruction. Chemical fertilisers played a key role in increasing yields and reducing prices, but their sustained use over decades is polluting watercourses and weakening soils to an extent that could ultimately threaten food security⁹.

Successive governments have sacrificed long-term prosperity – our natural capital – for short-term gain. They have favoured free-market liberalism over protecting the interests of British citizens. And now, the myopic focus on reducing domestic carbon emissions threatens our food production sector through the imposition of arbitrary targets, while diverting resources from environmental issues we could actually address.

It's time for change

"A strong food system can underpin a strong society, having a profound impact on the nation's health, happiness and overall prosperity. Sustainably producing our food can shape our countryside and landscapes, boosting biodiversity and regenerating wildlife. Our food system can be instrumental in positively shaping our nation and our lives."

The Broken Plate 2023: The State of the Nation's Food System

We propose a long-term holistic approach to restore nature, ensure food security and improve the national diet. In this paper we present a suite of policies to:

- Support farmers to produce food sustainably and ensure this support is guaranteed for as long as it is needed. Ultimately, we aim to remove dependence on subsidies by aiding transition to more profitable farming methods and ensuring producers are paid a fair price.
- Stimulate demand for, and supply of, healthy, locally-sourced food through education and market interventions.
- Invest in science, technology and farmer-led research to increase yields while minimising environmental impacts and reducing reliance on imports.
- Reinvigorate rural communities through investment in infrastructure, housing and vocational training.

As with all SDP policies, we prioritise the interests of communities and families.

Families on low incomes spend a far larger proportion of their household budget on food than those on higher incomes. Measures to improve environmental sustainability must not disadvantage consumers, especially the poorest in society. Until recently, the availability of ever-cheaper food has helped to mask social inequalities caused by de-industrialisation, mass immigration and neo-liberal economic policies. Addressing the social ills caused by these policies, for example by increasing wages and reducing housing costs, would mean that food prices could rise to reflect the genuine cost of food production without causing hardship.

We reject calls for drastic, authoritarian measures and arbitrary deadlines. UK ecosystems have evolved with farming in the mix. Farmers must be at the centre of environmental restoration, but they must be adequately recompensed and protected from unfair competition.

Change is never easy, but it is necessary and it is achievable. The SDP seeks the common good in Britain's national interest. Fixing our broken food system is crucial to ensuring the welfare, prosperity and security of British people.



TARGET 1

AFFORDABLE, HEALTHY FOOD AND FAIR PRICES TO PRODUCERS

Between 2022 and 2023, food retail prices rose by nearly 20%, the sharpest increase since 1977. This hit the poorest sections of society especially hard, but these communities were already facing significant obstacles to buying and preparing good quality, nutritious food. Deprived areas are frequently ‘food deserts’ characterised by a lack of shops selling fresh ingredients, or ‘food swamps’ defined by an excess of outlets selling high-calorie, low-nutrient food. Living in a food desert or food swamp has serious health implications, particularly during childhood when it can harm development and influence the formation of long-term eating habits¹⁰. Over a third of people on low incomes feel that healthy and nutritious food is unaffordable in the UK¹¹.

The speed and scale of recent food inflation has been a shock to consumers, but the cost of growing food has increased far more steeply over the same period than the cost of buying it. This reduction in farmers’ margins is part of a longer-term trend. For decades, the cost of inputs such as fertiliser and animal feed has increased at roughly twice the rate of food prices to consumers. This has been a key factor contributing to the ongoing loss of British farming businesses, particularly our small family farms. One in five farms in England closed down between 2005 and 2015, the number rising to one in three of the smaller farms¹².

Free markets make a vital contribution to a successful economy, but markets are justified by their social function. Making healthy food affordable for all while ensuring farmers are paid a fair price is a vital goal which has eluded successive governments, but it can be achieved in a social market economy.

Making supermarkets part of the solution

Any plan to improve Britain’s food system for both consumers and producers needs to start with our supermarkets. From the 1960s, the availability of a wide variety of affordable, fresh produce under one roof revolutionised people’s lives and was particularly liberating for women. Supermarkets now control over 95% of the UK grocery retail market, with just under 75% of market share held by the top five chains¹³. But convenience comes at a significant cost in terms of impacts on suppliers and on public health.

Supermarkets have been widely criticised for using their cartel-like power to force suppliers to accept extremely low prices and unfavourable contractual terms. Farmers make less than a penny of profit on many everyday purchases such as bread, cheese and meat products¹⁴. Orders are frequently cancelled at the last minute, often due to the supermarket finding a cheaper source overseas. Huge quantities of perfectly good produce are rejected for aesthetic reasons. Contracts routinely push all the risks onto suppliers; one in five farmers incurred significant costs because of inaccurate forecasting by retailers in 2022-2023¹⁵.

Supermarkets are well aware of the public’s desire to support British farmers; they use this widely in their marketing campaigns. However, reality often fails to live up to the patriotic slogans and advertisements, such as when Asda and Sainsbury’s recently abandoned their Buy British commitments to purchase 400 tons of beef imported from Poland.



Promotion in supermarkets through high-visibility displays and special offers has been shown to have considerable influence on purchasing decisions, but to date unhealthy foods are more likely to be promoted. More insidiously, Britain's leading supermarkets were found to have been marketing foods high in salt and saturated fat as 'healthy options' via product labelling and in-store displays¹⁶.

The prominence of supermarkets means they have unparalleled potential to bring about positive change. Genuine commitments to prioritise British suppliers and promote their products to consumers through labelling, in-store display and online shopping filters would have great social and economic benefits. Promotional offers and honest labelling of healthy foods would help consumers to make informed and affordable choices.

We propose to establish an independent regulatory body for supermarkets, with powers to impose fines for bad conduct and award tax rebates and recognition for good conduct.

We will initiate a review of the Groceries Supply Code of Practice (2010) to ensure it continues to provide adequate protection to supermarket suppliers in light of geopolitical and technological changes. We will increase monitoring and enforcement to ensure compliance with the Code.

Revitalising local food networks

The majority of farmers are keen to have access to locally based infrastructure and to shift partly or fully to farmer-focussed supply chains. In one study, over 50% said they would like to join or start a co-operative buying group, with a further 25% saying they would consider this¹⁴. Professionals throughout the food and farming sector would like to see greater collaboration, with 90% supporting shorter, local food supply chains and more diverse UK food production¹⁷.

Consumers, too, are hungry for change. During the Covid-19 pandemic, millions of British people started buying from alternative outlets such as veg box schemes, local food partnerships or farm shops, and 85% said they would like to continue these shopping habits¹⁸.

TARGET 1

AFFORDABLE, HEALTHY FOOD AND FAIR PRICES TO PRODUCERS

There are excellent examples of local, often community-led, initiatives forging better and more sustainable connections between producers and consumers, but these are currently too few and far between. Despite the desire for collaboration, the low numbers and consequent isolation of those working in agriculture make this difficult to achieve. The burden of subsidy paperwork is another barrier, leaving farmers little time to think about working together to gain better access to market and fairer prices.

To overcome these challenges, we will incentivise and support farmers, fishers and growers to form regional **Charter Co-operatives**. Run by members for members, these will act like guilds to improve sustainability and find collective ways to add value and achieve stable, viable prices. Their establishment will be informed by research into the most successful co-operative movements in other countries.

SHOWCASE

Connecting producers and consumers

Unicorn Co-op, Manchester makes its staple foods cheaper than those sold in supermarkets out of a commitment to make organic food affordable to all. They buy directly from local farms and contribute 1% of revenue to a growers' fund, which gives farmers grants for equipment and infrastructure. They pay on time and work closely with suppliers to forecast need and plan future orders. They support consumers by providing information on healthy cooking using seasonal produce.

C'est qui le patron? (Who's the Boss?), France is a co-op which has achieved remarkable success in recent years, initially in the struggling small-scale organic dairy sector and now more widely. Small farmers buy a share in the business for €1 and run informative marketing campaigns to consumers. This has allowed them to set their own, viable, prices while still farming in a nature-sensitive way.

The Small Food Bakery, Nottingham uses seasonal ingredients bought directly from local farmers, with a particular focus on supporting small-scale agroecological farming. Bakery owner Kimberley Bell also set up UK Grain Lab which brings together researchers, growers and food producers to share knowledge and advance a more innovative and sustainable UK-based grain economy.

Street Goat Initiative, Bristol is a community project that raises goats for milk and meat on unused urban land. Families take an active role in the dairy, enabling milk to be sold at below supermarket prices while covering all costs, and building a connection between local people, their food and the wider environment.

The Food Circle, York is a social enterprise that makes healthy food available to residents in one of the most deprived areas of the city. They provide free labour to farmers at harvest times in return for some of the harvest for them to sell on and process to add value. They work with small-scale local producers and run a twice-weekly market selling staple products at affordable prices. By providing cooking and food-growing classes, preparing shared meals and running events for children in school holidays they are empowering the local community to be healthier and happier.

By signing up to the Charter, members will commit to working towards regenerative principles that protect the environment, benefit wildlife, create regionally closed nutrient cycles and more robust supply chains. The five principles of regenerative agriculture are:

- 1. Do not disturb the soil.**
- 2. Keep the soil surface covered.**
- 3. Keep living roots in the soil.**
- 4. Grow a diverse range of crops.**
- 5. Bring grazing animals back to the land.**

The Charter Co-op scheme will include large regional marketing boards (which could trade with each other), local food processing hubs and a nationwide chain of local shops. They could also run training schemes and insure members against crop failure.

Regional marketing boards will coordinate with members to anticipate harvest yields and set pre-agreed minimum prices. They will act as buyers of last resort for perishable goods, working with local food processing hubs to turn food gluts into products with a longer shelf life. These products will be sold in the region's Charter Co-op shops in the first instance, with any surplus being supplied to adjacent regions, and then further afield or to supermarkets. Supermarkets will be incentivised through the corporation tax system to stock a certain percentage of food from regional Charter Co-op sources. This percentage will initially be low, and will vary regionally and seasonally, but it will rise over time.

Charter Co-op products from all regions will carry the same easily identifiable branding, helping consumers to support the Co-op initiative through their purchasing decisions. National advertising campaigns will promote Co-op products with a focus on easy, nutritious and seasonal recipes.

A 2% tax will be introduced on non-Charter goods purchased from supermarkets. The revenue will support further development and maintenance of local food networks, and enable investment in critical infrastructure to improve food security and resilience. A country-wide network of abattoirs will be set up to reduce livestock transport time and make it easier for small farmers to sell meat locally. Grants will enable Co-ops to establish local shops and markets, to set up storage, processing and packaging facilities, and to provide services such as doorstep milk delivery. Shared access to infrastructure and services will help farms to diversify and make them more economically resilient.

To facilitate their engagement with Charter Co-ops, **farmers will receive practical support from a 'Farmer Champion' allocated to their region.** Their role will include identifying marketing opportunities, providing business advice and freeing up farmers' time through administrative support with grant and subsidy paperwork. This named person will make regular farm visits and be directly contactable via phone and e-mail to provide quick responses when required.

Change should not be enforced in a top-down way and should not happen overnight. A clear long-term vision will allow for careful planning and slow, steady change with maximum buy-in. As more farmers sign the Charter, we will see a gradual return to a more patchwork-style landscape and resilient food economy, where each region has at least some of every category of food production and supply chains are shortened.

TARGET 1

AFFORDABLE, HEALTHY FOOD AND FAIR PRICES TO PRODUCERS

Improving the national diet

It is not the role of the state to tell people what to eat. Nevertheless, the state has a responsibility to remove obstacles to healthy eating through economic and educational interventions. The main barriers to eating healthily are confusing messaging about what is and is not healthy, the cost of healthy food and not having enough time to cook healthy meals¹¹. Investment in overcoming these barriers will deliver long-term economic benefits to the UK as well as improving the lives of millions.

"The OECD estimates that the combined cost of food-related disease, in lost workforce productivity, low educational outcomes and NHS funds, is 74 billion every year in the UK. This is equivalent to cutting the country's GDP by 3.4%. To cover these costs, each person in the United Kingdom pays on average £409 in taxes per year."

Henry Dimpleby and Jemima Lewis, Ravenous

Good quality, nutrient-rich, local and seasonal food should never have become a luxury exclusively for the wealthy. The Charter Co-op scheme will give people greater choice and make healthy food universally available and affordable. We will prioritise establishment of Charter Co-op shops in the 'food deserts' and 'food swamps' where it is currently hard to find wholesome ingredients and where obesity is prevalent. Charter Co-ops will initially receive state subsidy to ensure prices of staple goods are no higher than in supermarkets. Additionally, recipients of benefits will receive a discount card for Charter Co-op shops and for purchasing Charter Co-op produce from supermarkets. These are worthwhile investments to strengthen local food production and ultimately reduce public spending on healthcare.

We will adopt the recommendation in the National Food Strategy to introduce a tax on sugar and salt sold to food producers, restaurants and caterers¹⁹. This will incentivise companies to use less sugar and salt in their recipes, improving public health and generating significant revenue that can be invested in initiatives to help children develop healthy eating habits.

We will improve practical home economics education in schools and run pilot schemes in conjunction with the NHS to help parents develop skills in planning and preparing healthy, affordable, seasonal meals. Classes could be run from demonstration kitchens located in Charter shops or in school kitchens during weekends or holidays, choosing areas where obesity is particularly prevalent.

Every child and staff member will receive free school lunches made on the premises from local and seasonal ingredients. Information about the source of the food and how it was prepared will routinely be displayed. Fruit and water will be provided at break times and unhealthy snacks banned. This will establish healthy eating patterns to last for life; not just the nutrition, but the convivial ritual of sitting down together to enjoy good quality food cooked from scratch, presented well and with pride.

Despite extensive public support, government proposals to restrict junk food advertisements have suffered many delays. We will ban all junk food advertisements on television and online at any time of day. We will also ban multibuy promotions on unhealthy products, which encourage people to overeat, or to overbuy and then throw away.



Policy Summary

1. Support the establishment of regional Charter Co-operatives, enabling farmers, food producers and retailers to work together to process and sell food locally at viable prices.
2. Provide infrastructure grants to improve local food resilience and sustainability.
3. Introduce a 2% tax on sales of non-Charter goods sold in supermarkets.
4. Review the Groceries Supply Code of Practice and ensure better monitoring and enforcement of compliance. Establish an independent regulatory body for supermarkets.
5. Through Charter Co-ops, subsidise the cost of healthy food for low income households.
6. Enable 'Farmer Champions' to facilitate collaboration through business advice and administrative support with grant and subsidy paperwork.
7. Initiate a tax on wholesale purchase of sugar and salt by food producers and caterers.
8. Provide free school lunches made on the premises from local, seasonal ingredients.
9. Improve practical home economics teaching in schools and provide education for adults in healthy, affordable meal planning and cooking.
10. Ban junk food advertising and retail promotions on unhealthy food products.

TARGET 2

SUSTAINABLE FARMING AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION



Our natural environment provides vital goods and services, such as crop pollination, healthy soil, clean water and pest control, as well as the social and cultural benefits of access to nature. Environmental damage makes ecosystems less resilient, affecting their ability to deliver the services we need - including food production and drinking water.

Three decades ago, the UK signed a global commitment to halt biodiversity loss, becoming the first country to produce a national action plan to conserve species and habitats. A raft of legislation and policies has been produced to protect our natural environment. Public sector spending on UK nature conservation has doubled in the past twenty years.

Despite this, the UK is now described as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world²⁰. We are seeing long-term declines in many species, including farmland birds, woodland birds and pollinating insects. Pressure from invasive species is increasing. Less than 10% of terrestrial habitats of conservation importance are in favourable condition and just over a third of freshwater habitats have good ecological status²¹.

Modern agriculture has been a major cause of environmental decline in the UK, but this is largely because market pressures left farmers with no good options. For decades there has been a political and societal belief that the role of agriculture was only to produce ever-cheaper food for a growing population. At the same time, economic liberalism enabled the food processing and retail industries to become more oligopolistic and powerful. To gain the maximum yield from their land and to survive financially under these conditions, farmers were forced to specialise and intensify.

The transition from traditional mixed farming to specialise in either livestock or arable raised productivity but had a devastating impact on wildlife. Reduction in crop types and changes to cropping patterns have reduced habitat diversity.

Over-use of chemical fertiliser has weakened soils and damaged freshwater habitats. Pesticides and weedkillers have caused declines in insect populations. Hedgerow removal has destroyed valuable bird nesting habitat and wildlife corridors. Increased stocking density has led to over-grazing, soil damage and pollution of watercourses.

There are social impacts too. Food produced rapidly by intensive methods is often less nutritious than that produced more slowly by traditional agriculture. The focus on efficiency has led to larger farms with fewer workers, causing the decline of once thriving rural communities.

Farmers are well aware of the negative impacts of specialisation and intensification, and many are striving to combine food production with nature restoration. Not only is this better for the environment, it is often more profitable in the long term. Financial analysis of over 160 farms showed that reducing outputs to a level that can be supported by the farm's natural resources improved commercial returns by up to 45% while benefiting nature²².



SHOWCASE

Farming with nature - profitably

Durie Farm, Fife has been following a regenerative system for over 20 years, featuring crop rotation, no ploughing or insecticide use, and using cover crops and compost to replenish nutrients. This has greatly reduced expensive chemical fertiliser and fuel inputs with no reduction in arable yields. Introduction of mob grazing for organic beef production has saved costs on animal feed and winter bedding, while enabling pastures to recover. Throughout the farm, wildlife is thriving and soil quality has greatly improved.

Nethergill Farm, Yorkshire Dales found that conventional beef and sheep farming was not profitable in the uplands. They reduced stocking density, introduced hardy breeds, and restored hay meadows and natural drainage. For over 10 years, this approach has enabled the farm to run at a profit by reducing expenditure on feed, fertiliser and veterinary bills. Surveys show that habitats are improving, and that otters, red squirrels and black grouse have all returned to the area.

Bwlchwernen Fawr, Ceredigion is Wales' longest certified organic dairy farm. Hedgerows, field margins, woodland areas, hay meadows and watercourses are managed to benefit wildlife as well as the herd. Diverse plant mixtures in an arable crop rotation maintain soil fertility. The cows' naturally varied diet and the presence of healthy bacteria communities in the soil ensure the production of high quality milk and cheese, demonstrating the commercial benefits of farming in harmony with nature for over 50 years.

Dougherty Farm, Derry established a conservation grazing pattern for native breeds of cattle and sheep. This protects habitats from both under- and over-grazing, improves the quality of pasture and removes the need for expensive supplemental feeding. Using hardy breeds and planting hedges to provide natural shelter enables stock to be wintered outdoors, again saving costs. This beneficial grazing regime and establishment of hedgerows has increased biodiversity on the farm.

Elston Farm, Devon is one of seven farms taking part in a 12-year silvopasture trial. Combining grazed pasture with woodland in the same field can increase the productivity of the land area while improving the welfare of the animals. It also creates habitat for wildlife and can increase drought resilience and reduce flooding. Time will tell, but farmer Andy Gray is confident that planting 5,600 trees on his 165-acre farm will prove profitable: "I'm a commercial farmer. This is a commercial enterprise and I will make it make money."

Tolhurst Organic, Oxfordshire is one of the longest running stock-free organic vegetable producers in England, farming without chemical or animal input for over 30 years. Soil quality and crop health are improved by fertility-building crops and green manures grown as well-designed rotations, along with vegetable and woodchip compost from the farm's waste. Profitability is further increased by selling directly to customers via on-farm sales and catering, local markets and a box scheme.

TARGET 2

SUSTAINABLE FARMING AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION

Some would like to see a return to more traditional methods of farming throughout the entire sector, but unfortunately this approach couldn't produce the amount of food that we need. Environmentally friendly traditional farming is estimated to produce between 5% to 45% lower yields depending on crop type^{23,24}.

At the other extreme, some environmentalists want to reclaim vast swathes of land from agriculture and even ban livestock farming altogether. This would simply increase our reliance on imported food while offshoring our ecological footprint to other countries and irreversibly impacting our own rural communities. Farmers and citizens in the Netherlands and Ireland have pushed back against these measures.

We proposed a **balanced approach** that combines centuries-old farming wisdom with investment in new sustainable technology.

SHOWCASE

High tech, high yield, low impact

Smartkas, Harlow – this vertical farm aims to produce 500 tons of strawberries per year on 10% of the area that would be needed by traditional farming. The plants are grown hydroponically in water, solar panels provide heat and light, pollination is carried out by a bee colony, and no pesticides are required due to the enclosed conditions. The ability to grow fruit throughout the year reduces the demand for imports, thereby delivering both environmental and economic benefits.

Fischer Farms, Lichfield and Norwich grow salad and herbs year-round in a vertical hydroponic system using renewable energy. Grown in a bio-secure environment without herbicides or pesticides, crops do not need to be washed, which extends their shelf life and reduces food waste. Future expansion plans include the production of soft fruits, wheat, rice and soya.

Elemental, Devon have developed an innovative protein and fat recovery technique which reduces food waste and increases profit by recovering up to 15% more high-quality meat from butchered animals.

Better Origin, Cambridge have partnered with Morrisons supermarkets to integrate containerised insect farms into free-range chicken farms. Fruit and vegetable food waste from supermarkets is converted to protein by insect larvae, which are then fed to chickens. Replacing soy protein with insect protein in the chickens' diet has health and environmental benefits. Nearly 90% of the UK's soy imports are used for animal feed; cutting these imports reduces our contribution to deforestation and biodiversity loss overseas.

Mays Farm, Oxfordshire have increased arable yields by selecting crop varieties with high disease resistance, undersowing clover to boost fertility and suppress weeds, analysing data on multiple environmental variables, and are currently trialling precision planting to improve light capture and reduce competition pressure.



Agricultural technology - encompassing biotechnology, smart farming, automation, remote sensing, and innovation in transportation and storage - is a growing industry which shows great promise for increasing food production while minimising environmental impact. However, most new techniques are still in the early stages of development. It is not yet clear which will be most beneficial, whether they will have any unforeseen impacts, and when they will be ready to roll out at scale.

We will support agri-tech research and development to ensure that the UK stays at the forefront of innovation and that we have the necessary knowledge to develop effective land use strategies. We will achieve this through direct government investment, tax relief schemes both for SMEs and large companies, and grants for farmers to engage in collaborative research with the private sector or academia.

Because learning and innovation take place in the field as much as in the laboratory, we will support farmer-led research into cultivation and husbandry practices. Subsidies and grants will be available for practical experimentation in areas such as Korean Natural Farming and Bokashi, swales, no dig and no till, John Letts Heritage grain, radial wood-chip mulch, herbal leys and seaweed supplements for livestock.

Space for farming and nature

The UK is one of the most densely populated territories in Europe. Population density has increased by over 15% since 2000 and is predicted to keep rising. There is intense conflict for space from competing land use types, which will only increase in future.

Over 70% of our land area is dedicated to farming and this does not supply all the food we need. The majority of this is livestock pasture, partly because much of our land is not viable for arable farming. To support rural communities and reduce reliance on imports while conserving our countryside, we need to make smart decisions about land use.

The SDP advocates maintaining at least 90% of existing agricultural land with food production as its primary purpose. A small proportion of this would be used for high tech, high yield, low impact farming (e.g. vertical farms), while retaining the majority for lower yield, profitable, wildlife-friendly farming, which provides cultural and aesthetic benefits as well as food. As understanding of new technologies improves, the proportion of land dedicated to high yield farming may increase, provided this is justified by the environmental and economic benefits and is not detrimental to rural communities.

Farmers will be supported financially to take 5-10% of farmland out of food production and dedicate it to nature restoration, such as planting broadleaf woodland and restoring peat bogs. Financial support will be maintained to cover ongoing monitoring and management, contingent on outcomes. Such activities will be subsidised only in areas of least productive farmland. Best and most versatile farmland will be protected from all other land use types.

Ultimately, decisions on land use must be made at a local level by farmers and landowners, with input from the community. Land use cannot be dictated by central Government, but guidance can be provided and subsidies targeted to enable food production in harmony with nature restoration. Crucially, trade policy will ensure farmers are protected, not penalised, for farming to high standards (see Target 4).

TARGET 2 SUSTAINABLE FARMING AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION



Reforming agricultural subsidies

For many decades, agricultural subsidy has had a huge influence on farming methods, productivity and the UK landscape. Post-war subsidies incentivised agricultural intensification and specialisation to increase yields and drive down food prices. As the impacts on nature became apparent, environmental stewardship schemes were introduced with the aim of improving soil and water quality, enhancing landscape character and restoring farmland wildlife. Post-Brexit, new schemes are being developed to deliver ‘public goods for public money’ although the details are still being worked out, and uncertainty and delays during the transition period are causing huge problems for farmers.

Despite the best intentions, the agricultural subsidy system has created more problems than it has solved. Over the years, targets and goals have continually been changed in a top-down, prescriptive way. Excessive bureaucracy, particularly during the EU-era, meant farmers spent too much time form-filling and faced severe penalties for late or incorrect applications. Area-based subsidies rewarded wealthy landowners, many of whom do not produce food at all. The amount of money available for environmental stewardship has been far too low to enable farmers to make any real difference, particularly on the most intensive farms where change is most needed. Small-scale interventions such as setting aside field margins have been shown to have very little impact on species recovery. The emerging post-Brexit schemes are more ambitious, but are doomed to failure unless the root causes of damaging farming practices are also tackled through trade and economic policies.

Ultimately, the SDP aims to enable farmers to be financially secure without relying on subsidies. This can be achieved through changes to domestic market and trade policies, as outlined under Targets 1 and 4, but it will take time. The current situation is that almost all farms, regardless of size, make more money from subsidies than from agricultural produce, and nearly 40% of farmers in England rely on basic payment subsidies to remain solvent. Uncertainty and bureaucracy in the agricultural subsidy system have actually increased since Brexit, leading many farmers to consider retirement and deterring potential new entrants. It is therefore essential that agricultural subsidies provide a stable environment for as long as necessary to ensure that those actively involved in food production stay in the business and that they can hand it on to a new generation when they retire.

Rather than paying farmers not to farm, or only giving them enough to ‘tinker around the edges’ environmentally, we will provide subsidies at the required level to enable all farms to make the transition to ecological and financial sustainability. Direct subsidies will be maintained for as long as needed but will be capped at £150,000 per farmer and will only be available to those whose primary land use is food production. Subsidies will be based on land area, but the rate per hectare will reduce as the total number of hectares increases, favouring small and medium-sized farms.

Environmental restoration subsidies will be targeted at the most intensive and polluting sectors to enable them to convert to better systems. Changes such as reducing stocking densities, switching from indoor to outdoor rearing, and cutting chemical usage are costly to implement but will bring the biggest environmental benefits and must therefore be prioritised.

As outlined under Target 1, farmers will receive support with application and reporting paperwork from a ‘Farmer Champion’, who will also carry out follow-up checks. This will remove barriers to uptake, reduce farmers’ administrative burden and ensure most effective use of the subsidy system.

Regulation of harmful practices

In addition to supporting environmentally friendly farming through subsidies and better market conditions, we will strengthen regulation of harmful practices.

Antibiotic overuse in livestock farming leads to the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria which can spread to humans, an issue which is recognised as a global health threat²⁵. Agriculture accounts for 30% of antibiotic use in the UK, of which 75% is routine ‘preventative’ application of antibiotics, some of which are deemed critically important for use in humans. Routine application prevents illness from stress caused by intensive farming systems, such as overcrowding, confinement, early weaning and tail docking. In addition to welfare concerns, the practice of keeping large numbers of genetically similar animals in cramped conditions is conducive to the emergence of new viruses and has been identified as a ‘disease bridge’ between animal and human infections²⁶. We will ban routine use of antibiotics and support farmers to move away from intensive livestock farming practices that rely on antibiotics and present a high risk to human health.

Chemical fertilisers can pollute watercourses and weaken soils. Their manufacture requires large amounts of fossil fuels, which are a finite resource. They also present the problem of diminishing returns, although the impact on UK crop yields has so far been offset by improvements in seed quality and sowing/harvesting techniques. We will introduce a tariff on chemical fertilisers to begin three years after the availability of subsidies to aid transition to less intensive methods. The rate will initially be low but will increase in subsequent years.

River pollution comes from many sources, including sewage, transport and industry, but agriculture remains one of the main factors. In spite of regulations on chemical and organic fertiliser application, and more recently financial support for better slurry storage, there remains a minority of farmers who breach the rules. Through better resourcing of regulatory bodies, we will ensure effective monitoring and enforcement of water pollution regulations.

Policy Summary

1. Maintain at least 90% of existing farmland with food production as its primary purpose.
2. Taking land completely out of food production for nature restoration will only be subsidised on least productive farmland.
3. Best and most versatile farmland will be protected under the planning system from all other land use types.
4. Support agricultural innovation through direct government investment, tax relief schemes for SMEs and large companies, and grants for farmers to pursue independent research or engage in collaboration with the private sector or academia.
5. Agricultural subsidies will be maintained for as long as necessary to ensure retention and recruitment in farming. They will be phased out when wider economic policies make sustainable farming financially viable.
6. Direct subsidies will be capped at £150,000 per farmer and will only be available to those whose primary land use is food production.
7. Environmental restoration subsidies will be targeted at the most intensive and polluting sectors.
8. Better resourcing of regulatory bodies will ensure effective monitoring and enforcement of water pollution regulations.
9. Ban routine use of antibiotics and support farmers to move away from intensive livestock farming practices that rely on antibiotics and present a high risk to human health.
10. Introduce a rising tariff on chemical fertilisers to begin three years after the start of subsidies for transition away from intensive methods.

TARGET 3

THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES AND A SMALL FARM FUTURE

“What images define the British countryside in 2023? Closed pubs; a new estate of boxy, pricey houses; the packed waiting room at the one doctor’s surgery within 20 miles; farmers at kitchen tables reading trolling tweets by vegans and rewilders; polluted rivers; empty beer cans beside bus stops where the bus no longer stops; the red-brick cottage which working people once rented, but which has now been turned into an Airbnb; the Ocado van delivering supplies to the second-homers.”

John Lewis-Stempel, UnHerd.com, June 2023

Just as the collapse of coal mining had devastating consequences for pit villages, our rural communities have been decimated by mechanisation, the use of cheap migrant labour and the trend towards ever larger farms with fewer workers. Tourism brings money into the local economy in some areas, but the jobs created tend to be seasonal, and the rise in holiday lets and second homes makes housing unaffordable for local families. Thousands of houses are built in large developments on agricultural and greenbelt land every year by the private sector, yet there remains a severe shortage of suitable homes for local people²⁷. The ratio of average house price to average income is higher in rural than urban areas, with the exception of London²⁸.

Even in affluent rural areas there are pockets of deprivation. Although overall levels of poverty and ill-health are slightly lower than in urban areas, their impacts are exacerbated in the countryside due to social and economic factors including poor access to services, sparse public transport, longer travelling distances, weak broadband and mobile phone coverage, and higher domestic fuel costs²⁹. A combination of geographic isolation, loss of local facilities, poor communications networks and the changing demographic structure lead to increased loneliness amongst rural residents with resulting impacts on health outcomes.

Contrary to popular perceptions, the countryside is not free from crime and anti-social behaviour. In the past ten years, crime rates have risen three times faster in rural towns and villages than in the rest of the country. In 2022, the cost of rural crime rose by 22% to nearly £50 million, largely due to organised and often international gangs stealing farm equipment and livestock⁶. Fear of crime is leading to loss of confidence in rural communities, particularly amongst farmers, young people and families. A third of rural people believe that crime has a moderate or great impact on their lives, one in ten feel unsafe in their own homes after dark, and only two in ten have a good perception of the local police force’s ability to prevent and reduce crime³⁰.

The rural population is ageing, as wealthy retirees move to the countryside while young people are forced to move away due to high house prices and limited job opportunities. Over half of the farmers in England and Wales are over 55 years old, and nearly a third are over 65³¹. Many farmers are simply selling their land when they retire because their children do not want to take over the farm. At the same time, new entrants who are not from farming families find it hard to start a career in agriculture due to a shortage of suitable farm and smallholding tenancies. This is exacerbated by inflated land prices caused by hedge funds seeking to profit from commodity crops or carbon credits. The future for the countryside is bleak unless we can give a new generation the skills, access and most importantly the desire to get into farming and associated rural trades.



Over the past 70 years, the total number of farms in the UK has decreased while the average farm size has increased. The rate of farm loss has accelerated in recent years and is steepest amongst small and medium-sized farms¹². If this trend continues, it has been predicted that British family farms could die out in the next 30 years – and with them the rural communities they support and the unique landscape they have created.

We propose a suite of policies to revitalise rural communities and bring working families back to the countryside through:

- investment in infrastructure, affordable housing and rural policing
- reform of countryside planning and land ownership legislation
- revival of land-based education
- support for the establishment of smaller-scale farming.

Investing in rural communities

The reinvigoration of rural communities will require significant investment to reverse decades of economic neglect, but it will have long term social and economic benefits. Target 1 outlines plans for investment in food and farming infrastructure, such as abattoirs, orchards, local shops and markets, and food storage, transport and processing facilities. This will create jobs and boost local economies, but investment in the wider rural infrastructure will be needed to fully realise the benefits.

We commit an additional £500 million to support rural bus routes to connect villages and hamlets to towns and cities. We will also provide grants for communities to develop other transport solutions, such as purchase of vehicles for shared use.

We will maintain investment in the rollout of gigabit broadband to rural households and businesses, ensuring there are no limits on access to information, education and economic opportunities.

Resources in front-line policing will be significantly increased, with a particular focus on tackling organised crime gangs that target the farming community. The SDP's commitment to maintaining a high-quality public realm applies as much to our countryside as to our city centres; we will ensure police and local authorities have the necessary resources to prevent vandalism and anti-social behaviour. Fly-tippers will be subject to stricter penalties including seizure of vehicles, and fines will be applied to home and business owners whose waste is found in fly-tipped locations.

Most importantly, we will invest in housing. We will commit £2 billion annually via the newly established British Housing Corporation to construct new social housing for rural workers in consultation with local communities.

TARGET 3

THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES AND A SMALL FARM FUTURE



Rural homes

Polling of residents in rural constituencies shows that over 40% would support more homes being built in their area and believe that reform of the planning system would help to stimulate growth in rural economies³². Sadly, where development does occur, it is often out of keeping with the landscape and does nothing to fulfil local needs. Consequently, over 600 grassroots campaigns have been set up across the UK by communities aiming to protect their green space from development.

To address the need for suitable, affordable housing in rural areas while preserving the essence of the countryside, we propose that the state once again takes an active role in house building. Newly created County Housing Corporations (CHCs) will assess housing need in rural areas and plan and build new housing developments to address that need. CHCs will have powers to make Compulsory Purchase Orders to acquire land and the ability to grant Planning Permission for new schemes. They will also be mandated to set up skills colleges to rapidly scale a local construction workforce. A priority will be the creation of affordable rent-to-buy and rental homes for land workers and their families. New build houses will include features to minimise environmental impact such as compost toilets with integrated humanure collection.

The British countryside is a national asset, but there are currently no limitations on foreign individuals or offshore trusts owning UK land. The Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022 requires overseas entities acquiring UK land to disclose their beneficial owners, but rules do not apply to foreign individuals and they set no restrictions on foreign ownership. Foreign interests feature prominently in the top 50 UK landowners, accounting for well over half a million acres. We will prohibit the sale of food-producing land to non-UK citizens or entities.

We will provide 50% match funding for local community groups wishing to buy land for sustainable community-run food production initiatives similar to those showcased below.

Cultivating knowledge - empowering a new generation of rural workers

In an increasingly urbanised population, it is a matter of urgency to restore connections between people, food production and the countryside. Numerous surveys have highlighted an alarming lack of knowledge amongst British children about where food comes from and how it is produced. Examples include high proportions of primary school children not knowing that eggs come from chickens, that milk comes from cows, thinking that tomatoes grow underground and that pasta is made from animals. The British Nutrition Foundation found that over 80% of primary school children would like to visit a farm to find out more about where their food comes from.

Food and farming will be included on the school curriculum from early years to key stage 3 and will include practical activities and farm visits.

SHOWCASE

Farming for the community by the community

Fordhall Farm, Shropshire became England's first community-owned farm following a successful campaign in 2006. It is fully organic and rears cattle, sheep and pigs in an outdoor extensive grazing system. Community ownership has given the tenant farmers the security to plan and diversify, with new ventures providing leisure, volunteering and education opportunities as well as fresh, healthy food.

Greenmeadow Farm, Cwmbran was bought by the local community in the 1980s to protect it from development and preserve 250 years of farming history. It has thrived thanks to investment by the Council, which it repays by attracting visitors to the region, conserving the landscape and providing local people with a hub for events, activities and education.

Lauriston Agroecology Farm, Edinburgh was being used for intermittent grazing and silage production but was transformed by a workers' co-operative in 2021 to a large-scale food growing farm using organic regenerative and agroecological practices. The farm includes a community orchard and allotments to give city residents the chance to get involved in food production, and offers education opportunities by working with local schools and youth groups. Produce is sold through a veg box scheme, with a discounted pricing model to make it affordable for all.

Jubilee Farm, Co. Antrim is Northern Ireland's first community-owned farm. They rear free-range, high welfare pigs, grow organic vegetables sold through a veg box scheme, and offer curriculum-based lessons on food, farming and the environment.

Land-based colleges were set up to provide the skills and knowledge needed by rural economies, working in partnership with farms and other rural businesses to give students hands-on experience. Over the past four decades, nearly 80% of land-based colleges have closed, largely due to high running costs and high-value assets which made them attractive targets for liquidation. The decline of this once influential, highly successful, world-leading education and technical skills sector since 1997 has been nothing short of a travesty.

We pledge to re-establish the significance, role and prominence of land-based colleges. We will return to the land-based college sector the power to devise and validate their own land-orientated qualifications, on the understanding that agriculture degrees must provide a solid grounding in regenerative practices and soil science.

Within each land-based college will be a bank-sponsored Countryside Business Centre to help focus investment and rural business innovation at a regional level. This could include business initiatives to deliver services in areas where people are dispersed, bringing social as well as economic benefits.

Apprenticeships in fields such as farming, forestry, horticulture and soil health will be increased through partnerships between land-based colleges, the wider education sector and rural businesses. We will set up a mentoring scheme for new entrants to receive advice and encouragement from experienced farmers during the first five years of their career.

TARGET 3 THRIVING RURAL COMMUNITIES AND A SMALL FARM FUTURE

Creating routes into farming and restoring diversity of farm size

Family farmers form the backbone of our rural communities. To me, it is essential the contribution of the small-scale family farmer is properly recognised – they must be a key part in any fair, inclusive, equitable and just transition to a sustainable future. To do this, we must ensure that Britain’s family farmers have the tools and the confidence to meet the rapid transition to regenerative farming systems that our planet demands.

Charles, Prince of Wales, The Guardian, May 2021

Giving people the skills and knowledge to get into farming is not enough; new entrants need routes into farming through affordable agricultural tenancies or land ownership.

Where once the British countryside was a patchwork of farms of different sizes, the relentless pressure for increased yields and cheaper food has tipped the balance towards ever larger farms. Livestock farmers in particular have been forced to adopt industrial-scale methods to compete with imports from countries where these practices are widely used. The UK has nearly 800 CAFOs – concentrated animal feeding operations – in which thousands of animals live crammed together in barns, fed by automated machinery.

It is not always the case that large-scale farming is bad for animal welfare and for the environment, nor that small-scale farming is inefficient or irrelevant to overall food production. Both large and small farms can be productive and environmentally sustainable if good practices are followed. However, diversity of farm size must be restored and maintained to improve resilience in food production, regional economies and rural communities¹².

We propose the following measures to restore diversity of farm size across the UK and facilitate entry into farming for a new generation.

We will divert 1% of all inheritance tax (£50-£70 million per year) to a land acquisition scheme for ten years. This will be used to buy green belt land for market gardens and orchard villages, as well as to buy large, specialised, nature-depleted farms to split into smaller farms and smallholdings, sharing some infrastructure.

County farms are an important national resource, covering 200,000 acres in England alone. Owned by local authorities and rented to tenant farmers at reasonable rates, they are a key lever for helping new entrants into farming. They provide environmental and social as well as economic benefits, but their area has declined by 50% in the past four decades as councils have sold off land³³. We will prohibit further sale of county farms by local authorities and provide land from the above scheme to expand their county farm holdings, with a focus on increasing the availability of small starter units.

To encourage those selling large farms with more than one house to break up the farm into smaller units capable of supporting more farming families, we will donate a portion of the stamp duty received from the sale to the seller. We will research ways of incentivising retiring farmers with no succession to gift their land to the nation as county farms.



Where a large area of farmland contains only one house, we will relax planning rules to enable more houses to be built on the land under a covenant that the land will be farmed regeneratively by the people living in those dwellings. Any farm over 500 acres wishing to acquire neighbouring land will have to apply for special permission, which will only be granted if there are demonstrable benefits for the environment, local economy and community.

Policy Summary

1. We will invest in rural infrastructure, particularly communications, transport and housing.
2. Resources in front-line policing will be significantly increased, with a particular focus on tackling organised crime gangs that target the farming community.
3. Food and farming will be on the school curriculum from early years to key stage 3 and will include practical activities and farm visits.
4. We will re-establish the significance, role and prominence of land-based colleges, and invest in apprenticeships and mentoring schemes to facilitate access to rural careers.
5. Within each land-based college will be a bank-sponsored Countryside Business Centre to help focus investment and rural business innovation at a regional level.
6. We will prohibit the sale of food-producing land to non-UK citizens or entities.
7. We will provide 50% match funding for local community groups wishing to buy land for sustainable community-run food production initiatives.
8. We will divert 1% of all inheritance tax to a land acquisition scheme to establish market gardens, orchard villages, small farms and smallholdings.
9. We will prohibit the sale of county farms by local authorities.
10. Through tax incentives and planning reform, we will reverse the decline in small farms and restore diversity of farm size across the UK.

TARGET 4 FOOD SECURITY IN A GLOBAL MARKET

It's probably unwise to assume that current patterns of peaceful worldwide seaborne trade, built on large and vulnerable containerised vessels, will last long into the future.

Chris Smaje, *The Land*, Issue 33

Food security is achieved when all people, all of the time, have access to sufficient, affordable, safe, nutritious, sustainably produced food. Food security is under threat at a global level and in the UK due to unsustainable production methods and resulting environmental decline, complex supply chains, pest and disease outbreaks, extreme weather events, rising energy and input costs, population growth, availability and cost of labour, competing demands for land and water use, and socio-economic inequalities³⁴.

Achieving food security does not mean becoming fully self-sufficient. International trade enables countries to diversify their national diet and minimise risks from unpredictable growing seasons and poor harvests. Nevertheless, UK self-sufficiency has declined considerably since the 1980s-1990s³⁵, and we now import more than we export for all food categories except beverages³⁶. Although the UK produces around three quarters of the indigenous food we eat, the proportion varies greatly between food categories. We are largely self-sufficient in grains, meat, eggs and dairy products, but heavily reliant on imports of fresh vegetables and fruit³⁷.

The policies outlined under Targets 1-3 will all go some way to improving UK food security.

Investing in local food and farming infrastructure, reducing regional specialisation, creating new orchards and market gardens and adopting technology to extend growing seasons will help to shorten supply chains while increasing and diversifying production of indigenous food types.

Supporting innovative and sustainable farming methods will reduce threats to food security from environmental decline and from rising costs of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides.

Training a new generation of land workers and providing affordable rural housing, while investing in automation where appropriate, will mitigate risks due to labour shortage.

Establishment of Charter Co-ops and regional marketing boards combined with education programmes will cut waste and reduce the impact of socio-economic inequality on food security.

Retaining existing farmland for food production, preventing sale of agricultural land to foreign buyers, and restoring diversity of farm size across the UK will increase resilience to conflicting demands for land use.

But more is needed to ensure UK food security in an increasingly unsettled global economy. To achieve this, we propose:

- Trade policy that protects British farmers and minimises our global impacts.
- A 'Buy British' public sector procurement policy.
- Clear labelling to empower consumer choice.
- Regular assessment of food security.

Trade policy

There is little point investing in making UK agriculture more environmentally sustainable if its economic viability is undermined by cheap imports from countries with lower environmental and animal welfare standards. Furthermore, the UK's consumption of food produced overseas has devastating environmental impacts in the producer countries which are only just starting to be monitored³⁸.

There is considerable public support for trade policy which would protect British farmers while giving us greater control over the impacts of our consumption. A survey commissioned by the National Farmers' Union found that 85% of respondents would like future trade deals to protect UK farmers from being undercut by cheaper, sub-standard food imports³⁹.

We pledge to veto any trade deals that would harm British food producers, and to prohibit imports of food and drink not produced to our environmental and animal welfare standards. The production of soy and palm oil has particularly severe impacts in producer countries, including deforestation, biodiversity loss, water use, soil degradation and the opportunity cost of growing food for domestic consumption. Nearly 90% of the UK's soy imports are for animal fodder, mostly for industrial pig and poultry production.

A rising tariff will be applied to soy imports and the revenue used to fund research into environmentally sustainable substitutes. We will also ban imports of meat from countries where animals have been primarily raised on soy. We will maintain the UK's commitment to achieving the target of sourcing 100% of palm oil from RSPO-certified sustainable suppliers. This requires a particular focus on reducing palm-derived ingredients in animal feed as part of the transition to regenerative and extensive farming methods outlined under Target 2.

A 10% tariff will be applied to imports of fresh fruit and vegetables. Revenue will contribute to the re-establishment and maintenance of UK orchards and development of the fruit and vegetable agri-tech sector. Regional marketing boards will process perishable goods to extend their shelf-life. Charter Co-ops will encourage consumption of preserved (e.g. frozen, dried, tinned) fruit and vegetables. Education programmes will raise awareness of the nutritional value of preserved goods, which is often higher than that of fresh goods⁴⁰. Together, these measures will increase year-round availability and consumption of home-grown produce, cutting waste and reducing reliance on imports.

Buy British in public sector procurement

The public sector spends over £2.4 billion per year providing meals in schools, hospitals, prisons, the military, care homes and other institutions. Previous governments have pledged to increase sourcing from British suppliers⁴¹, but have yet to deliver on that promise.

We will establish a 'Buy British' food and drink procurement policy within the public sector. Each department and local authority will report annually on the proportion of total food and drink procurement sourced from British suppliers and from local suppliers.

Public procurement will seek to increase consumption of sustainably sourced British fish, particularly in schools. Fish consumption has been declining for years and we now eat less than half the amount recommended by the Government's Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition. This will be an increasingly important source of protein as meat yields from sustainable extensive farming methods will be lower than those from current unsustainable intensive systems.

TARGET 4 FOOD SECURITY IN A GLOBAL MARKET



Empowering consumer choice through clearer food labelling

Many consumers are keen to support British food producers and high animal welfare standards through their purchasing decisions, but current food labelling protocols make this difficult.

The aforementioned NFU survey found that 84% of respondents supported clearer labelling of British food and 73% said they look specifically for British food when they go shopping³⁹. More recently, a proposal for supermarkets to add a 'Buy British' button or filter to their online ordering systems rapidly gained over 21,000 signatures⁴². Research conducted for British Lion Eggs found that over half of shoppers would be prepared to pay more for food made from British ingredients, while seven in ten believe food should not be imported if it can be produced in the UK⁴³.

Under the Food Information to Consumers regulations, country of origin must be stated on unprocessed, packaged meat and fish. Unprocessed meat must be labelled to show the country or countries where the animal was born, reared, slaughtered and butchered. Marketing standards require origin labelling on unprocessed fruit, vegetables, eggs and dairy products. However, there is currently no requirement to provide origin information on processed foods unless the product name, description or other labelling suggests it is from a certain country. There is no requirement to list the origin of key ingredients if the origin of the processed product is not stated.

We will enforce clear and prominent country of origin labelling on both raw and processed foods and their ingredients. Charter Co-ops will run marketing campaigns to promote British food and drink, with a focus on locally grown seasonal produce. A 'Buy British' filter will be mandatory for all online food retail systems.

Although most UK farm animals are reared using intensive farming methods, there is currently no law requiring food labels to state how an animal has been raised, with the exception of whole hens' eggs. UK consumption of eggs produced under 'cage-free' conditions doubled after the introduction of mandatory labelling in 2004, which is often held up as a consumer-driven animal welfare success story. But these regulations apply only to whole eggs; one third of the eggs used in food manufacturing come from abroad, and the rearing conditions are not listed on the processed output. Between 2021-23, the UK saw a 2,000% increase in egg imports from Poland produced under low welfare conditions.

We will introduce mandatory animal welfare labelling for raw and processed animal-derived products sold directly to consumers. The first priority will be to develop and test standard protocols for labelling poultry and pork, working with producers and consumers to define a system that captures and clearly communicates the nuance within different production methods. Protocols will then be established for other meats and derived products. The labelling protocols will also apply to imports, creating a level playing field for British farmers.

In the longer term, we will expand country of origin and animal welfare labelling to food sold in catering environments.

Monitoring progress

To monitor progress in this critically important and rapidly changing area, we will maintain the current commitment to an annual Food Security Summit and will increase the frequency of Food Security Assessments to at least once every two years.

Policy Summary

1. Veto trade deals that would harm British food producers.
2. Prohibit imports of food and drink not produced to the UK's environmental and animal welfare standards
3. Rising tariff on soy imports and the revenue used to fund research into environmentally sustainable substitutes.
4. 10% import tariff on fresh fruit and vegetables.
5. Establish a 'Buy British' food and drink procurement policy within the public sector.
6. Enforce clear country of origin labelling on both raw and processed foods.
7. Mandatory 'Buy British' filter for all online food retail systems.
8. Mandatory animal welfare labelling for raw and processed animal-derived products.
9. In the longer term, we will expand country of origin and animal welfare labelling to food sold in catering environments.
10. Hold an annual Food Security Summit and produce biennial Food Security Assessments.

A DEMOCRATIC VOICE FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE



Over a third of UK parliamentary constituencies are defined as largely, mainly or significantly rural, but Westminster is dominated by urban voices and priorities. The countryside has no champion and no leader. It was ravaged by New Labour policies, which in 2002 gave rise to the largest rural protest the UK has ever seen. It has been taken for granted and badly let down by the Conservative Party, with years of economic neglect now compounded by the phasing out of agricultural subsidies, harmful trade deals and the likely impacts of net zero legislation.

12 million voters live in rural areas, but they increasingly feel unrepresented by the main parties. Just over a third agreed that Conservatives, Labour or Liberal Democrats understand and respect rural communities and the rural way of life³². While a political divide between urban and rural areas is not a new phenomenon, there is evidence of growing polarisation on political, socio-economic and cultural issues, and of disenchantment and distrust in democracy increasing along a gradient from city to countryside⁴⁴.

The policies outlined above aim to re-invigorate the countryside, its people and their way of life. To ensure their successful implementation and re-set the balance between rural and urban voices in Parliament, we propose a further two measures.

We will establish a **royal commission** into conserving the British countryside. The commission would be tasked with defining the countryside's true culture, values and identity, and making a suite of recommendations to be accounted for in all policy areas relevant to the countryside, including by devolved administrations. We will set up a dedicated **Countryside Policy Committee** in Parliament, whose chair and members will be drawn exclusively from MPs representing rural constituencies. This will go some way to addressing the urban bias in matters concerning the countryside.

CONCLUSION



There is broad consensus about the increasingly severe environmental, social and health problems arising from our food system – so why have they not been addressed?

There are two reasons why attempts to change the UK's broken food system have never seriously been implemented.

Firstly, governments have been too scared to challenge the narrative that all people want is cheap food and that they will not tolerate a 'nanny state' telling them what to eat. This narrative is simply not true. Research shows that citizens now want visible political leadership in this area and that there is strong public support for the bold interventions we propose in this paper⁴⁵.

Secondly, other parties are fettered by neoliberal economic policies which prevent any meaningful attempt to tackle this issue. Free trade and open labour markets have deterred investment in training and innovation, increased our reliance on over-extended global supply chains, forced food producers to prioritise yield over sustainability, and sold swathes of our countryside into foreign ownership.

The SDP advocates a social market economy based on the beneficial coexistence of pro-public sector and pro-market policies. We are free from vested interests and not afraid to take radical action where necessary to ensure the health, prosperity and security of British people. This includes curbing the power of supermarkets and protecting our food producers from unfavourable trade deals.

We will also ensure that actions to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels are never allowed to undermine the UK's energy security and food security.

The proposals outlined here will initially require substantial public investment. We are honest about that. But over time, reliance on state support will diminish and rural economies will thrive independently in the hands of their local communities.

Investment in technology and farmer-led research will increase productivity without sacrificing sustainability, ultimately removing dependence on subsidies. Initiatives to encourage and enable healthy eating will reduce healthcare costs in the long term. Once fully established, Charter Co-ops, regional marketing boards and associated local food infrastructure will create wealth, especially as they will be further supported by Land-based Colleges providing a skilled workforce and Countryside Business Centres investing in rural business innovation. Adopting this bold, holistic approach now will deliver our vision for the countryside within 10-15 years.

The British landscape will once again be a patchwork of different-sized farms, interspersed with clean rivers and hedgerows buzzing with life. Farmers will be respected as they should be, both for putting food on our tables and for restoring the environment. They will be able to plan for the future, with a new generation ready and willing to take the reins when they retire. Villages and market towns will once again be home to thriving multi-generational communities, with housing, jobs and services to support them. 'Food deserts' will become 'food oases', where people can afford to buy healthy, locally-produced ingredients and know how to prepare nutritious meals for their families. The countryside will be a living, working landscape for all to enjoy.

Can we afford to do it? We can't afford not to.

You have to grapple with trade policies to protect farmers from being undercut on price by worse farming systems; you have to regulate poor practices to raise their cost; you have to curb the cartel-like power of supermarkets; and even do the unthinkable, and make food more expensive to reflect its true cost (and make sure to help the poorest in our society by redistributing wealth so they can afford it).

James Rebanks, UnHerd.com, December 2020



REFERENCES

- (1) Sustainable Food Trust. The Hidden Cost of UK Food; 2019. <https://sustainablefoodtrust.org/our-work/true-cost-accounting/> (accessed 2023-08-19).
- (2) Keaver, L.; Pérez-Ferrer, C.; Jaccard, A.; Webber, L. Future Trends in Social Inequalities in Obesity in England, Wales and Scotland. *J. Public Health* 2020, 42 (1), e51–e57. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdz022>.
- (3) Rayner, M.; Scarborough, P. The Burden of Food Related Ill Health in the UK. *J. Epidemiol. Community Health* 2005, 59 (12), 1054–1057. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2005.036491>.
- (4) Monteiro, C. A.; Moubarac, J.-C.; Levy, R. B.; Canella, D. S.; Louzada, M. L. da C.; Cannon, G. Household Availability of Ultra-Processed Foods and Obesity in Nineteen European Countries. *Public Health Nutr.* 2018, 21 (1), 18–26. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980017001379>.
- (5) WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme). Food Surplus and Waste in the UK – Key Facts; WRAP, 2022. <https://wrap.org.uk/resources/report/food-surplus-and-waste-uk-key-facts> (accessed 2023-08-27).
- (6) NFU Mutual. Rural Crime Report 2023; 2023. <https://www.nfumutual.co.uk/farming/rural-crime/> (accessed 2023-08-26).
- (7) Farm Safety Foundation. The Little Book of Minding Your Head 5th Edition; Farm Safety Foundation, 2023. <https://www.yellowwellies.org/resources/> (accessed 2023-08-26).
- (8) Garnett, P.; Doherty, B.; Heron, T. Vulnerability of the United Kingdom's Food Supply Chains Exposed by COVID-19. *Nat. Food* 2020, 1 (6), 315–318. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-020-0097-7>.
- (9) Pozza, L. E.; Field, D. J. The Science of Soil Security and Food Security. *Soil Secur.* 2020, 1, 100002. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soisec.2020.100002>.
- (10) The State of the World's Children 2019 | UNICEF; Unicef, 2019. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children-2019> (accessed 2023-08-28).
- (11) Corfe, S. What Are the Barriers to Eating Healthily in the UK?; Social Market Foundation, 2018. <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/barriers-eating-healthily-uk/> (accessed 2023-08-28).
- (12) CPRE. Uncertain Harvest: Does the Loss of Farms Matter?; Campaign to Protect Rural England, 2017. <https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/uncertain-harvest-does-the-loss-of-farms-matter/> (accessed 2023-08-28).
- (13) Grocery Market Share - Kantar. <https://www.kantarworldpanel.com/en/grocery-market-share/great-britain> (accessed 2023-08-27).
- (14) Sustain. Beyond the Farmgate: Unlocking the Path to Farmer-Focused Supply Chains and Climate-Friendly, Agroecological Food Systems | Sustain; Sustain, 2021. <https://www.sustainweb.org/reports/beyond-the-farmgate/> (accessed 2023-08-26).
- (15) Groceries Code Adjudicator. GCA Annual Survey 2023; Groceries Code Adjudicator, 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/improved-compliance-from-retailers-despite-inflationary-pressure-persisting> (accessed 2023-08-27).
- (16) Supermarkets Misleading Shoppers on Healthy Food, Say Nutritionists. BBC News. February 24, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-47311097> (accessed 2023-10-25).
- (17) Food, Farming and Countryside Commission. Learning from Lockdown Survey; 2020. <https://ffcc.co.uk/publications/learning-from-lockdown> (accessed 2023-08-28).
- (18) Local Trust; Sustain. How Can We Build Resilient Food Systems in the Covid-19 Recovery?; Sustain and Local Trust, 2020. <https://ffcc.co.uk/events/building-resilient-food-systems> (accessed 2023-08-28).
- (19) Dimbleby, H. The National Food Strategy - The Plan; 2021. <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/> (accessed 2023-08-27).
- (20) Natural History Museum. UK has “led the world” in destroying the natural environment. <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2020-september/uk-has-led-the-world-in-destroying-the-natural-environment.html> (accessed 2023-08-19).
- (21) Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. UK Biodiversity Indicators 2022. <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/uk-biodiversity-indicators-2022/> (accessed 2023-08-19).
- (22) Nature Friendly Farming Network; The Wildlife Trusts. Farming at the Sweet Spot - How Farming with Nature Can Make You Happier, Healthier and Wealthier; 2023. https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/Farming%20at%20the%20Sweet%20Spot_1.pdf (accessed 2023-08-19).
- (23) Smith, L. G.; Kirk, G. J. D.; Jones, P. J.; Williams, A. G. The Greenhouse Gas Impacts of Converting Food Production in England and Wales to Organic Methods. *Nat. Commun.* 2019, 10 (1), 4641. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-12622-7>.

- (24) Poux, X.; Aubert, P.-M. *An Agroecological Europe in 2050: Multifunctional Agriculture for Healthy Eating*. 2018.
- (25) O'Neill, J. *Tackling Drug-Resistant Infections Globally: Final Report and Recommendations*; 2016. <https://amr-review.org/> (accessed 2023-08-20).
- (26) UN Environment Programme, U. N. *Frontiers 2016: Emerging Issues of Environmental Concern*; 2016. <http://www.unep.org/resources/frontiers-2016-emerging-issues-environmental-concern> (accessed 2023-08-20).
- (27) CPRE The Countryside Charity. *State of the Green Belt 2023: A Vision for the 21st Century*; CPRE, 2023. <https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/state-of-the-green-belt-2023-a-vision-for-the-21st-century/> (accessed 2023-09-21).
- (28) All Party Parliamentary Group for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse. *The Rural Premium: Exploring the Impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Rural Areas*; APPG for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse, 2023. <https://www.cla.org.uk/news/government-failures-have-created-cost-of-living-rural-premium-mps-find/> (accessed 2023-09-24).
- (29) Local Government Association; Public Health England. *Health and Wellbeing in Rural Areas*; LGA and PHE, 2017.
- (30) National Rural Crime Network. *National Rural Crime Survey*; 2018. <https://www.nationalruralcrimenetwork.net/research/internal/2018survey/> (accessed 2023-09-22).
- (31) Office for National Statistics. *The occupations most dependent on older and younger workers (Census 2021 data)*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/theoccupationsmostdependentonolderandyoungerworkers/2023-05-31> (accessed 2023-09-23).
- (32) Country Land and Business Association. *The "Rural Wall". The Countryside's Voting Intentions for the next General Election.*; CLA, 2023. <https://www.cla.org.uk/news/rural-wall-collapsing-as-conservative-support-in-rural-england-falls-by-18-points/> (accessed 2023-09-21).
- (33) CPRE The Countryside Charity. *Reviving County Farms*; CPRE, 2019.
- (34) Economist Impact; Corteva Agriscience. *Global Food Security Index (GFSI)*; 2022. <https://impact.economist.com/sustainability/project/food-security-index> (accessed 2023-10-28).
- (35) Defra; DAERA; Welsh Government; Scottish Government. *Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2022; 2023*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/agriculture-in-the-united-kingdom-2022> (accessed 2023-10-28).
- (36) Finlay, J.; Ward, M. *Food Security: What Is It and How Is It Measured?*; 2020. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/food-security-what-is-it-and-how-is-it-measured/> (accessed 2023-10-28).
- (37) Defra. *United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021 (Updated 2023)*; 2023. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021> (accessed 2023-10-28).
- (38) Defra. *Global biodiversity impacts of UK consumption*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/england-biodiversity-indicators/17-global-biodiversity-impacts-of-uk-consumption> (accessed 2023-10-29).
- (39) National Farmers' Union of England and Wales. *Farmer Favourability Survey*; 2021. <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/new-survey-shows-british-public-wants-government-to-champion-and-protect-british-food-in-trade-deals/> (accessed 2023-10-29).
- (40) Loth, S. *Fruit and veg: is fresh always best? - Which? News*. Which? <https://www.which.co.uk/news/article/fruit-and-veg-is-fresh-always-best-aVK2k6y43b4n> (accessed 2023-10-30).
- (41) Bonfield, D. P. *A Plan for Public Procurement*; 2014.
- (42) National Farmers' Union of England and Wales. *More than 21,000 people back buy British online option*. <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/british-at-a-click-more-than-21-000-people-back-buy-british-online-option/> (accessed 2023-10-29).
- (43) British Lion Eggs. *Research and Resources*; 2021. <https://www.egginfo.co.uk/news-and-press> (accessed 2023-10-29).
- (44) Kenny, M.; Luca, D. *The Urban-Rural Polarisation of Political Disenchantment: An Investigation of Social and Political Attitudes in 30 European Countries*. *Camb. J. Reg. Econ. Soc.* 2021, 14 (3), 565–582. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsab012>.
- (45) Food, Farming and Countryside Commission. *So, What Do We Really Want from Food?*; 2023. <https://ffcc.co.uk/so-what-do-we-really-want-from-food> (accessed 2023-10-29).

Britain's food system is broken. For every £1 we spend on food, we spend another £1 in hidden costs. These costs are externalised into areas that don't appear on the balance sheet – health, environment, animal welfare, and the wellbeing of food producers and wider rural communities.

Successive governments have sacrificed long-term prosperity – our natural capital – for short-term gain. We propose a holistic approach to restore nature, ensure food security and improve the national diet.

Change is never easy, but it is necessary and it is achievable. The SDP seeks the common good in Britain's national interest. Fixing our broken food system is crucial to ensuring the welfare, prosperity and security of British people.



www.sdp.org.uk