

**POLICY PAPER 154**  
**Food and  
Farming**

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Democrats

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<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 A Liberal Democrat National Food Strategy	5
<b>2 Sustainable Food and Farming</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Introduction	9
2.2 A Land and Sea Use Framework	10
2.3 Supporting our Farmers	10
2.4 Minimum Standards for All Farms	12
2.5 Climate Change and Emissions	13
2.6 Bioenergy	14
2.7 Reducing Methane Emissions	14
2.8 Over Reliance on Fertiliser	15
2.9 Pesticide Overuse	16
2.10 Smarter Use of Inputs and Sustainable Crop Management	18
2.11 Antimicrobial Resistance and Animal Sustainability	19
2.12 Horticulture Strategy	20
2.13 Public Procurement Policy	21
2.14 Conclusion	22
<b>3 Farm Payments System</b>	<b>24</b>
3.1 Introduction	24
3.2 Clear Objectives for ELMs	25
3.3 Accessibility	26
3.4 Delivering a Fair Implementation	26
3.5 Other Public Goods	28
3.6 Conclusion	29
<b>4 Food Security and Resilience</b>	<b>30</b>
4.1 Introduction	30
4.2 National Food Security	30

## *Food and Farming*

4.3 Food Supply Chains	32
4.4 Local and Community Food	33
4.5 A Better Approach to the Workforce	34
4.6 Conclusion	35
<b>5 Food Poverty and Nutrition</b>	<b>36</b>
5.1 Introduction	36
5.2 Ending Food Poverty	37
5.3 Food Deserts, Food Swamps and Community Planning	39
5.4 Children, Schools and Education	40
5.5 Advertising	41
5.6 Reformulation in Industry	42
5.7 Conclusion	43
<b>6 Fishing and Seafood</b>	<b>44</b>
6.1 Introduction	44
6.2 A Fair Deal for Fishing Communities	45
6.3 Markets for Fish	46
6.4 Sustainable Fisheries	47
6.5 Protecting our Seas	48
6.6 Aquaculture	48
6.7 Conclusion	49
<b>7 Trade and Development</b>	<b>50</b>
7.1 Introduction	50
7.2 Developing Trade with Europe	51
7.3 Trade Agreements Outside the EU	52
7.4 Improving Democratic Scrutiny of Trade Agreements	53
7.5 International Aid	54
<b>8 Research and Innovation</b>	<b>56</b>
8.1 Introduction	56

8.2 Research and Innovation Fund	56
8.3 Alternative Meats and Foods	57
8.4 Growing the Emerging Sector	58
<b>9 Food Labelling and Safety</b>	<b>60</b>
9.1 Introduction	60
9.2 The Food Service Sector and Reducing Food Safety Risks	60
9.3 Food Integrity	61
9.4 Food Labelling	62
<b>10 Conclusion</b>	<b>64</b>
Food and Farming Working Group	66

# 1 Introduction

1.0.1 Today's food systems, both the UK's and global, are failing to serve the interests of citizens, whether they are farmers or consumers. As Henry Dimbleby put it in the introduction to *The National Food Strategy*, published in 2021, *"the food system we have today is both a miracle and a disaster ... modern intensive agriculture produces more than enough calories (albeit unevenly distributed) to feed 7.8 billion of us: the biggest global population in human history. But the food we eat – and the way we produce it – is doing terrible damage to our planet and to our health"*. The strategy was largely ignored by the Conservative government.

1.0.2 The global food system is the single biggest contributor to biodiversity loss, deforestation, drought, freshwater pollution and the collapse of aquatic wildlife. It is the second-biggest contributor to climate change, after the energy industry. Agriculture produces 10% of UK greenhouse gas emissions, despite contributing less than 1% of GDP. Only 60% of food by value is produced in the UK, down from 78% in 1984.

1.0.3 The current food system also damages the nation's health. 80% of processed food sold in the UK is unhealthy, mainly because it is high in fats, sugars and salt. Often processed foods are much cheaper than healthier foods, because agri-food companies have invested more in developing and marketing processed foods. This is a major reason why a bad diet is an acute problem among poor households. Almost three in ten of the UK's adult population is obese. The NHS spends around a tenth of its entire budget on treating diabetes, and the proportion is rising year on year. Four out of the top five risk factors in the annual estimate of years of healthy life lost to avoidable illness, disability and death are diet-related.

1.0.4 At the same time the food system is failing to deliver adequate rewards to farmers. At the moment, cereals, general cropping, cattle, sheep and mixed farms receive most of their Farm Business Income from direct payments, whilst horticulture, pigs and poultry receive very little. There are also considerable differences between farms, with upland farmers receiving £98 per hectare in support whilst lowlands receive £151 per hectare.

## **1.1 A Liberal Democrat National Food Strategy**

1.1.1 Clearly, this situation is unsustainable. Without radical reform, the food system will continue to fail Britain's farmers while also undermining the country's environmental targets, standards of health and the NHS. This paper sets out a vision for a Liberal Democrat National Food Strategy that meets the following interrelated objectives:

1.1.2 **Providing a decent livelihood for farmers.** We would reform the Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) and other farm support schemes, and increase their overall budget, to support farmers' critical role in delivering public goods, including landscape management and environmental objectives (see below), while producing sustainable food. At present, the most highly productive farms receive 40% of the per-area support payments despite the fact that such farms do not usually require subsidies to be profitable. Under our proposals, over 60% of farmers would receive a greater financial return than they do now.

1.1.3 **Delivering access to healthy diets for all the UK's citizens.** Historically the production and consumption of fruit and vegetables has received far less support than grains and meat, but is far better for human health; we aim to double consumption per head by 2030. We aim to

achieve these radical shifts in diet by adopting a National Food Strategy focused on improving food education, using public procurement policy, extending free school meals to all children in families on universal credit and encouraging agri-food companies to reformulate their products.

**1.1.4 Tackling the climate emergency.** As set out in Policy Paper 139, *Tackling the Climate Emergency*, Liberal Democrats aim to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions in the UK by 2045. This requires a major reduction in emissions from food systems and a major increase in volumes of carbon absorbed by soils, peatland, woodland and grassland. We will achieve this by redirecting farm support schemes, and increasing their total budget, supporting agroecological farming, and extending and managing woodlands, wetlands and extensively grazed grasslands, particularly on poor and moderate-quality farmland. The UK is already seeing reductions in the consumption of meat and dairy; we will encourage this move, including by supporting the development of alternative proteins (creating new jobs in Britain, reducing dependence on imports and improving diets), while maintaining domestic production of high-standard, high-value meat and dairy products.

**1.1.5 Protecting biodiversity and habitats, and minimising other environmental impacts on water, air and soil.** This would be achieved by improving the government's ELMs, expanding agroecological farming. Farmers would be rewarded to change low productivity farmland into more nature friendly areas. These measures will ensure that we meet the target we set out in Policy Paper 156, *Tackling the Nature Crisis*, of doubling nature by 2050, by significantly expanding natural habitats and protecting wildlife. This land is not abandoned; it becomes well-managed biodiverse woodlands, wetlands and extensively grazed species-rich grassland. Ending the overuse of antimicrobials in industrial livestock production will also

help protect animal and human health, the UK has already made good progress, but more needs to be done.

1.1.6 **Ensuring food security.** In a world in which food production and supply chains will be increasingly disrupted by the impacts of climate change, it is essential that UK food supplies are secure, while also being sustainably produced. The measures we have set out above will themselves help to reduce dependence on imports, primarily of processed food, but we also aim to ensure that Britain's food supply chains are resilient. This requires a much healthier relationship with the UK's nearest neighbours and largest trading partners. Policy Paper 144, *Rebuilding Trade and Cooperation with Europe*, sets out our proposals for reforming the Trade and Cooperation Agreement to enhance access for UK food and animal products to Europe (which will also improve farmers' incomes and national prosperity).

1.1.7 In order to achieve these aims, government also needs to ensure **effective governance and regulation** of UK food systems, agriculture and land use. We would seek to strengthen DEFRA, currently an under-resourced and undervalued department, as well as enact a comprehensive National Land and Sea Use Strategy, which DEFRA would be tasked with implementing. This would also include explicit commitment not to lower British standards of consumer, environmental or labour protection (see Policy Paper 144, *Rebuilding Trade and Cooperation with Europe*). It also requires the reform of those free trade agreements the Conservative government has signed which undermine the UK's high environmental and animal welfare standards.

1.1.8 Finally, maintaining high standards of animal welfare is also one of our key objectives. This is not covered in this paper, but will be dealt with



## *Food and Farming*

through a separate policy motion to be submitted by the Federal Policy Committee to the party's spring conference in 2024.

1.1.9 Fishing, agriculture and rural affairs are devolved issues. As such, this paper only covers England except with regards to international trade, aid and immigration.

## **2 Sustainable Food and Farming**

2.0.1 Liberal Democrats will support our farming community and put the UK's food system on a sustainable footing by:

- Introducing a comprehensive land and sea use strategy.
- Providing an effective public money for public goods programme, that supports all farmers and properly funding and resourcing the Agricultural Development & Advisory Service to provide comprehensive training and advice to farmers.
- Introducing a minimum mandatory Sustainable Land Standard for all farmed and managed land.
- Putting UK farm animal management on a sustainable environmental footing and tackling antimicrobial resistance.

### **2.1 Introduction**

2.1.1 The Conservatives' approach to farming and the environment is currently working for neither; it has left farmers without the proper financial or logistical support, putting both the environment and food production at risk. There is no trade-off between environmental and climate sustainability and food production and food security – they can all be achieved together.

2.1.2 Furthermore, the Conservatives' have failed to link their own 25 year environment plan with the outcome's they are trying to achieve from ELMs.

2.1.3 The 2022 Farm Practices Survey indicated that 64% of farmers thought it important to consider greenhouse gases when making farm

business decisions and 44% thought it would improve farm profitability - in other words it's clear that farmers want to be part of the solution to climate change and a significant number view it as a business opportunity.

2.1.4 Liberal Democrats would give farmers the support they need to tackle the climate and nature emergencies – delivering food security, prosperity and a thriving natural environment at the same time.

## **2.2 A Land and Sea Use Framework**

2.2.1 Unlike other factors of production, land is finite and cannot be increased significantly. At the moment, there is little strategic planning for how to use land, with decisions around housing, building, environmental protection, renewable energy production and food production made on a piecemeal basis. This is unsustainable, and has often led to high quality agricultural land being used for energy production or building, when lower quality land would be more suitable.

2.2.2 As set out in policy paper 156, *Tackling the Nature Crisis*, we would introduce a strategic Land and Sea Use Framework, which would effectively balance these competing demands. This paper sets out how we would ensure that farmland and our oceans are able to make their contribution towards tackling the climate and nature emergencies, delivering prosperity to rural and coastal communities and help feed the nation.

## **2.3 Supporting our Farmers**

2.3.1 There has been a reduction in the uptake of agri-environment schemes in recent years, not because of a lower appetite among farmers to

do good environmental work, but because of weaknesses and uncertainty in policy and a complete lack of support.

2.3.2 Farmers have not been given the proper support, advice and training to move towards sustainable farming methods. As such, they have been forced by the government to employ expensive consultants in order to meet the new ELMs standards. For smaller farmers, this is simply not an option, and as a such they have been forced off any government support. Not only does this not benefit the environment, it also undermines UK food security and contributes towards unemployment and poverty in rural areas.

2.3.3 We would properly fund and resource the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS), so that it can provide all farmers, no matter the size, tenure or produce type, the comprehensive training, advice and support needed to make the transition to ELMs. This would include support for agroforestry, hydroponics, low impact and precision farming and organic farming, and means to reduce methane emissions (for example by improvements in animal husbandry) and nitrous oxide emissions, including creating a national nitrogen balance sheet to inform reductions from nitrogen fertiliser use. It would also help farmers to reduce their own energy usage (e.g. from more precision farming techniques) and to develop renewable energy schemes, including 'Farm Power' schemes to supply energy locally to neighbours and communities.

2.3.4 This would be free at point of use for all farmers, so that every farmer from small scale tenants through to the large estates can make use of it.

## **2.4 Minimum Standards for All Farms**

2.4.1 All land needs to make a contribution towards tackling climate change and restoring our natural environment. We reject proposals for extremely intensive, environmentally damaging farming practices to take place in some areas, whilst only some farms are sustainable. This will create a race to the bottom on standards and fail to halt environmental and climate breakdown.

2.4.2 The Conservatives have promised to support high-standards farming, but have not set out future expectations, or protected farmers in law against lower standard imports. This has damaged our farming sector, undermined UK food security and will result in environmental harm being exported abroad – a completely self-defeating and short-sighted approach.

2.4.3 We will set a new Sustainable Land Standard, embedding regenerative and agroecological agricultural practices and high expectations for the environment and animal welfare. We will require all imports to be produced to equivalent standards, so that our farmers are not undercut by low quality imports and ensure that environmental harm is not exported abroad. This will create a fair and level playing field for our hard-working farmers and growers.

2.4.4 Our new Sustainable Land Standard will set out a new regulatory baseline for sustainable farming, forestry, moorland and other land uses. While allowing flexibility based on local conditions and environmental farm advice, it will set clear expectations for farming businesses. It will include investment in firm but fair enforcement to ensure that all domestic growers meet good standards. This standard would be mandatory once farmers

and land managers have been given the proper support to transition to its standards.

## **2.5 Climate Change and Emissions**

2.5.1 After transport, agriculture has been the weakest sector for emissions reductions since 1990; emissions have fallen from 53.6 million tonnes to 44.8 million. 1.7% of total carbon dioxide emissions come from agriculture, but 69% of nitrous oxide and 48% of methane emissions do as well. Overall, 10% of UK greenhouse gas emissions come from farming and the food sector as a whole contributes around one third of emissions.

2.5.2 Only 10% of agricultural emissions are from the use of fossil fuels; the remaining 90% stems from methane (from the digestive systems of cattle and sheep, and waste and manure management) and nitrous oxide (from the use of nitrogen fertiliser, and inputs from animal manures and crop residues incorporated into soils).

2.5.3 The Government's current approach to emissions from agriculture essentially depends on voluntary measures by the farming sector, which has clearly failed. The National Farmers Union is more ambitious, calling for net zero from the sector by 2040.

2.5.4 Currently, technology for decarbonising the 10% from fossil fuels is patchy. Whilst insulation of buildings and drawing electricity from renewable sources is achievable, electric or hydrogen powered tractors, combine harvesters and other heavy machinery and equipment are well beyond the reach of even the most well-resourced farmer. We will therefore focus most of our efforts on the 90% that come from methane

and nitrous oxide, whilst continuing to invest in these emerging technologies.

## **2.6 Bioenergy**

2.6.1 The current government is placing excessive reliance on the use of bioenergy – burning solid biomass, mostly wood, in power stations, or using biofuels, mostly from vegetable oils, in transport – on the assumption that because the trees or crops grow after harvesting, these energy sources are zero-carbon. In reality, however, because of the time lags involved, and because of the likelihood of displacing other crops, these sources are almost never zero-carbon, at least in the short and medium-term. Existing subsidies also risk seeing bioenergy trees and crops taking an increasing share of UK land, to the detriment of food production and nature protection.

2.6.2 As explained in Policy Paper 139, *Tackling the Climate Emergency*, we would phase out regulatory support and subsidies for biomass power, and for transport biofuels produced from food crops. Support for biofuels would be restricted to waste products such as tallow or used cooking oil, which are currently the main UK feedstocks; this support would be phased out over time as electric vehicles capture an increasing share of the market.

## **2.7 Reducing Methane Emissions**

2.7.1 Methane from the farming sector makes a considerable contribution towards the UK's emissions – methane as a whole is around 13% of the UK emissions, with just under half of this coming from agriculture. Most of these emissions come from cattle and sheep. COP26 saw the launch of the Global Methane Pledge (GMP) with the commitment

to collectively reduce global methane emissions by at least 30% by 2030 – for the UK, most of this reduction will have to come from agriculture.

2.7.2 Over the past 30 years, the UK has reduced methane emissions through greater efficiency – since 1990 we are producing a litre of milk with 21% less greenhouse gas emissions, and a kilogram of pork with 40% less GHG emissions.

2.7.3 A new Food and Farming Research Fund would make funding available for new innovative approaches to animal management, including improved husbandry practices, new kinds of feeding, changes in how animals are housed and new methods of waste management.

## **2.8 Over Reliance on Fertiliser**

2.8.1 Since the introduction of the Haber-Bosch process for artificially producing ammonia at the start of the 20th century, farming has come to rely excessively on artificial fertiliser. Nearly half of the world's population is fed with crops grown with synthetic fertilisers, predominantly used in the developed world.

2.8.2 Globally, manure and synthetic fertilisers emit the equivalent of 2.6 gigatonnes of carbon per year – more than global aviation and shipping combined. Excessive fertiliser use also has significant environmental consequences locally. A large amount of fertiliser gets washed away, entering water courses where it can poison rivers, lakes and seas – contributing to the poor state of the UK's rivers.

2.8.3 Recent studies have estimated that emissions from manure and synthetic fertilisers could be reduced by as much as 80%, to one-fifth of



current levels, without a loss of productivity. Achieving complete zero would be impossible with current global population levels, but it would remain an ambition to achieve this reduction by 2050 nationally through investment in farmers' skills and technology.

2.8.4 The war in Ukraine has driven prices of fertiliser up significantly, which has resulted in voluntary reductions in its use in the UK and in many other countries across the world, especially those with very little domestic production. 63% of farmers have said that they are improving nitrogen fertiliser application accuracy to reduce their use of it. This shows a clear appetite from farmers to lower their costs and inputs, which we would support in a sustainable way. We will also support organic and other agroecological systems which use clover and other legumes to naturally fertilise soil.

## **2.9 Pesticide Overuse**

2.9.1 Globally, pesticide use has doubled in the last 20 years, whilst in the UK 150 different pesticides are used every year. This growing use of pesticides has led to a rise in pest resistance, soil and biodiversity degradation, and the destruction of natural resources. It is also linked to many health conditions in humans. Like fertilisers, pesticides often end up being washed into our rivers and lakes, causing further environmental degradation. In many places in the developed world, where pesticide use has been common for decades, yields have plateaued or begun to decline due to these environmental harms pesticides cause.

2.9.2 This puts the whole global and national food system at a crossroads – yields are plateauing and declining under the current

approach but global demand continues to rise. In other words, without change the world could face major crises in the future.

2.9.3 A recent study<sup>1</sup> has shown that economic costs of pesticides outweigh the benefits – with industry profits being vastly outweighed by the environmental and human health impacts.

2.9.4 The EU has set a target of reducing chemical and hazardous pesticide use by 50% by 2030. We support this approach of reducing both the total amount of pesticides used, as well as targeting the extremely hazardous pesticides. Liberal Democrats would at a minimum align ourselves with EU targets to reduce pesticide use, while being more ambitious where possible.

2.9.5 A 2014 study has estimated that 50% reduction in pesticide use would result in a reduction in yields of between 5 and 13%<sup>2</sup>. However, this does not take into account the use of precision methods and alternative methods of pest reduction, which could offset most of this reduction. Its impact on prices through reduced supply would also be offset by the reduction in input costs, as farmers would be spending less on pesticide.

2.9.6 We would also significantly strengthen the pesticide approval process for any future pesticides that are developed – so that small quantities of extremely harmful pesticides don't replace the large-scale use of mildly harmful pesticides. We would adopt the 'precautionary principle' and demand a high burden of proof on new pesticides impacts, both individually and cumulatively.

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<sup>1</sup> [Pesticides – a model that's costing us dearly - November 2021](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Effects of halving pesticide use on wheat production - Scientific Reports 4\(1\):4405 - March 2014](#)

2.9.7 We would support the use of biopesticides and encourage the development of new ones. Some are already approved under organic standards, which are based on natural bacterial or fungal antagonists, predators and parasites.

## **2.10 Smarter Use of Inputs and Sustainable Crop Management**

2.10.1 To tackle the overuse of pesticides and fertilisers, we need to be smarter about how we use these inputs – moving towards a targeted approach as well as using more sustainable methods of pest control and fertilisation.

2.10.2 ADAS would provide farmers with the training and technology to make more efficient use of fertiliser and pesticides. This would include providing them with the technology and training to undertake precision farming, using tools such as drone and satellite mapping, sensors, soil monitoring, smartphone applications, machine learning and data analysis.

2.10.3 As part of our new Food and Farming Research Fund, we would also fund studies and trials of alternative and emerging methods of pest control and fertilisation. New approaches which have been proven to work could then be rapidly scaled up and implemented through ADAS, rather than being shared through word of mouth.

2.10.4 For small farmers with little capital to invest, these technologies and new practices can also be expensive, at least in the short term. 32% of farmers said that investing to tackle climate change was too expensive for them, and prevented them from doing so. As part of our wider plans to invest in new green technologies and in our countryside, we would make

low-cost grants, loans and tax incentives available to farmers to invest in these new technologies.

2.10.5 Many of these technologies require specialist knowledge that farmers, and indeed most of the public, don't have and as a result they are underutilised and poorly understood. 44% of farmers said that uncertainty around what to do was preventing them from reducing their emissions, and 30% said there was a lack of information available to them.

2.10.6 What approach works best for each farmer is best determined locally, for some it may be a move towards organic production, rotating crops and planting hedgerows and trees, for others it will be greater use of technology and the precision use of fertilisers and pesticides. Farmers would develop site specific plans with input from local authorities and community groups that contribute towards DEFRA's national target.

## **2.11 Antimicrobial Resistance and Animal Sustainability**

2.11.1 We also will put the UK's farm animals on a sustainable footing by tackling the growing problem of antimicrobial resistance. Antimicrobial resistance is an enormous problem globally. In 2019, over 1 million people are estimated to have died because of antibiotic resistance, and 73% of antimicrobials sold globally in 2017 were for farmed animals rather than humans. The UK has made progress in reducing use, but now risks falling behind our neighbours.

2.11.2 In February 2023, the Government put out to consultation its proposals which would introduce stricter rules for farm antibiotic use. The proposals include some rules that were introduced in the EU in January 2022, but also deviate from the proposals include:

- A ban on routine farm antibiotic use.
- A restriction on preventative antibiotic use to exceptional circumstances, where the risk of infection is high, and where the consequences of not using antibiotics is likely to be severe.
- A ban on using antibiotics “to compensate for poor hygiene, inadequate animal husbandry or lack of care or to compensate for poor farm management”.

2.11.3 In 2022 the EU ended the preventative use of antibiotics for groups of animals, but the UK Government has since moved away from promising alignment with these rules.

2.11.4 We would match the EU’s proposals, as well as developing a comprehensive plan to tackle antibiotic resistance and their overuse in UK farms.

2.11.5 Alongside this, part of our new approach would include investing in mapping genetic resources in farm animals, as well as plants. We would aim to ensure diverse and robust genetic materials are preserved and native species are able to thrive.

2.11.6 We would reward farmers who take steps in the right direction through our public money for public goods programme (see chapter 3) so that they are able to transition to a sustainable animal management system.

## **2.12 Horticulture Strategy**

2.12.1 England has tremendous potential to grow more of its fruits and vegetables, helping improve our diets, food security and ecological sustainability. We would introduce a national Horticulture Strategy to increase production and consumption of horticultural goods.

2.12.2 The main field vegetables grown are carrots and other root crops, onions, brassicas, legumes and leafy salads. Protected crops are mainly mushrooms, tomatoes and cucumbers.

2.12.3 Vegetable production is concentrated on the most productive soils: peatlands in Cambridgeshire and silts in Lincolnshire. These two areas account for 37% of the field vegetable area and 24% of potatoes. But the Committee on Climate Change has set a restoration target of 25% of lowland peat by 2050. As these soils are the most productive in the UK, we are going to need to find a bigger area of land than is being restored, to take account of lower productivity.

2.12.4 As part of our comprehensive National Land and Sea Use Strategy, we would encourage more land to move towards horticulture production.

## **2.13 Public Procurement Policy**

2.13.1 The public sector is an important source of demand for food and catering, for hospitals, schools, the civil service, prisons and the military. These institutions serve an estimated 1.9 billion meals a year – over 5% of total UK food service turnover – at a cost of £2.4 billion. By requiring public purchasers to follow minimum criteria, for example for sustainably produced, high-quality and nutritious food, the public sector can have a

significant impact on raising standards above the minimum standards set in law.

2.13.2 The government has made some moves in this direction, but the current government buying standard for food and catering lacks ambition and its implementation is neither monitored nor enforced. We would amend the government buying standard for food and catering to:

- Require high standards of environmental and social sustainability, including organic, Fairtrade and deforestation-free foodstuffs.
- Require more nutritious and healthy foods to promote better diets, including the greater uptake of sustainable and healthy British produce.
- Increase resilience in UK food production by making greater use of locally produced and seasonal food, and promote under-consumed British foods such as seafood.
- In due course, require minimum proportions of alternative foods, to support the growth of this sector.
- Require products produced to high standards of animal welfare.

2.13.3 We would also reform the procurement process by making it easier for SMEs to bid for contracts, rather than see them dominated by large catering companies. These new procurement rules need to be promoted and supported throughout the public sector, including in organisations not currently subject to central government procurement criteria, such as the NHS, local authorities and universities, and their uptake should be monitored and enforced.

## **2.14 Conclusion**

2.14.1 Now that the UK has left the European Union, the UK needs to develop a replacement for the Common Agricultural Policy – one which rewards farmers for environmental goods while supporting sustainable food production. The Conservatives have failed to develop a positive alternative that works for our farmers and for our environment.

2.14.2 There is no trade-off between food security, prices, farmers' livelihoods and the environment – all can be achieved through a well resourced and well supported agricultural sector, which Liberal Democrats would deliver.



## **3 Farm Payments System**

3.0.1 Liberal Democrats will deliver a fair Farm Payments System that:

- Delivers for our natural environment, by rapidly implementing Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) by 2027.
- Delivers a fair deal for farmers, by increasing the ELMs budget by £1bn immediately.
- Removes the 5 hectare eligibility criteria for access to ELMs payments on day one, so that all farm sizes are eligible for payments.
- Expands the range of other public benefits, including improving access and flood prevention.

### **3.1 Introduction**

3.1.1 The Conservatives have badly let our farmers down. The Conservatives promised a ‘public money for public goods’ system to reward environmental farming replacing the old Basic Payment Scheme under the CAP, comprising three new schemes that aim to reward environmental management: Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery. These are intended to support the 25 Year Environment Plan through agreements with farmers and other land managers.

3.1.2 The introduction of the new schemes is being rolled out over the next few years and it is far from clear what payments farmers will receive and when they will start. What is clear is that many of those payments are unlikely to cover the cost of delivering the ‘public good’ prescribed. This is causing great uncertainty and a reduction in the uptake of

agri-environment schemes, not because of a lower appetite among farmers to do good environmental work, but because of weaknesses and uncertainty in the Conservatives policy. Liberal Democrats want to provide farmers with the support and certainty that they need to fully transition to ELMs by 2027.

## **3.2 Clear Objectives for ELMs**

3.2.1 In policy paper 139 *Tackling the Climate Emergency* and policy paper 156 *The Tackling the Nature Crisis*, Liberal Democrats set out ambitious targets of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2045, and doubling the UK's nature by 2050. Farmland covers nearly three-quarters of the UK's land, and will need to be part of the effort to achieve those objectives.

3.2.2 At a national level, the ELMs will aim to achieve these two targets in the agricultural sector. ELMs payments will be set out over 10-year periods under Liberal Democrats, with targets and development milestones over each period.

3.2.3 At an individual farm level, farmers would produce bespoke and individual plans, which will feed into the overall national picture set out by DEFRA. Local authorities and community groups will be able to input into these plans too, Farmers would be given comprehensive advice, training and financial support to achieve the aims that they set themselves.

3.2.4 Every part of the country is different – planting trees along boundaries might be highly beneficial for a farm in Norfolk, but to do so on peatland and bogs can have disastrous consequences for carbon capture and the local environment. That's why we would not seek to prescribe what every farm will look like centrally.

### **3.3 Accessibility**

3.3.1 We want to see farmers fairly rewarded and supported by a payments system which works for them, the environment and the public. We believe that any farm payments system should be underpinned by four key principles. The farm payments system must be:

- Accessible to all farmers.
- A fairly implemented system.
- One that rewards farmers for providing public goods.
- Consistent with WTO trade rules.

3.3.2 Any farm payments system should be accessible to all farmers, regardless of their size, produce type and land tenure type. Upland farmers, tenants, those in share farming or other tenure types should all be able to access the scheme, without onerous paperwork, or requiring excessive technical know-how.

3.3.3 That's why we would remove the 5 hectare eligibility criteria for access to ELMs payments on day one, so that all farm sizes are eligible for payments. We would also make sure payments are used to diversify the UK's farm industry, which is set out in other chapters.

### **3.4 Delivering a Fair Implementation**

3.4.1 The Conservatives have bungled implementation of the ELMs – they have provided too little support and left too many hardworking farmers to fend for themselves, leaving them to either do more environmental damage by increasing stocking densities or farming more

land at the expense of the environment, or facing economic ruin – all during a cost of living and food and energy security crisis.

3.4.2 This has resulted in larger farms having to hire expensive consultants to help them navigate the new system, costing them money and time as well as drawing resources away from producing food and public goods. Meanwhile, smaller farms, who cannot afford consultants, have simply been forced out of the new payments scheme, which for many will lead to destitution. This is grossly unfair, punishing the smallest farmers and creating significant unnecessary costs and bureaucracy.

3.4.3 We believe that delaying or postponing the scheme would create even more uncertainty in the sector. We would therefore increase the ELMs budget from £2.4bn to £3.4bn immediately, with an aim to increase the budget further, to ensure an orderly and just transition. With the additional funding, we would:

- Fully fund ADAS, so that it would provide the comprehensive training and advice farmers need to understand the new system, how to access it and how to transition to a more environmentally sustainable system of farming.
- Provide farmers with grants to purchase new equipment, hire new staff and invest in their farms in order to meet the new system's criteria.
- Create a package of financial support to mitigate the impact of the War in Ukraine, targeted at small and tenant farms, and those sectors most affected by energy price hikes.
- Ensure farmers are not left out of pocket during the transition.

3.4.4 After the initial implementation period, we would set out, in consultation with the sector, ten year investment plans, at least five years in advance, to make clear how much money will be paid to farmers and land managers for public goods. This plan will provide farmers with the certainty and stability they need to keep Britain fed and to develop effective environmental improvements.

3.4.5 We would also prioritise payments to those who work the land rather than those who own it. They are delivering the actions, and therefore, should be the ones who are directly rewarded. However, there are some exceptions: in cases where clear evidence can be presented as to why the money should go elsewhere, payments can be available to others, including the landowner.

### **3.5 Other Public Goods**

3.5.1 As well as environmental and climate goods and improvements, we would also make money available for other public goods. Other payments for public goods would include:

- Flood prevention measures.
- Creating or restoring green spaces (where appropriate).
- Improving or creating footpaths and public rights of way.
- Making animal welfare improvements above statutory requirements.
- Resilience measures like protection against disease and genetic diversity of crops/livestock.
- Measures to reduce food waste.
- Investment in infrastructure, skills and technology which contribute towards wider rural development and prosperity.

- Educational programmes in partnership with local schools and colleges.
- Paying workers higher wages and investing in skills and training.

3.5.2 However, this would not be funded from the existing ELMs budget – money for environmental goods would not be spent on anything except environmental improvements. For instance, funding for rights of way and access would come from local highways authorities, who would have greater powers and resources under wider Liberal Democrat plans to empower local authorities.

3.5.3 Furthermore, farms which are not part of at least one ELMs once it has been fully implemented would not be eligible for any public money at all. All farms will need to make a contribution towards restoring our natural environment.

## **3.6 Conclusion**

3.6.1 Liberal Democrats would deliver a fair deal for our hardworking farmers and for our environment with an effective and just approach to farm payments. We would make sure that all farmers are equipped with the knowledge, support and funding to access the new scheme and take advantage of it, delivering for farmers, consumers and our natural environment.

## **4 Food Security and Resilience**

4.0.1 Liberal Democrats will put our national food security on a sustainable footing by:

- Putting our domestic production of food on a sustainable footing.
- Redressing the imbalances of power and wealth in the supply chain.
- Tackling the workforce shortages through a fair immigration system and investing in skills, training and rural areas.
- Building greater resilience into the supply chain through public sector procurement and greater consumption and production of locally produced food.

### **4.1 Introduction**

4.1.1 As well as environmental sustainability, we also want to build economic and social sustainability into our food system. The Conservatives have deprived the sector of support, failing to invest in skills and training in rural areas and cutting the sector off from hard working and skilled workers from abroad. We've also seen huge imbalances of wealth and power emerge in the supply chain – which fails to deliver for producers as well as consumers.

### **4.2 National Food Security**

4.2.1 The UK currently ranks 9th on the The Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Food Security Index, making us one of the most food secure nations in the world.

4.2.2 Covid and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have shown that domestic food production is vital to food security. Singapore, which imports over 90% of its food, was ranked as the most food secure country in the world in 2019, but the experience of the past 3 years has shown that this is not a sustainable position and the Singaporean government is now seeking to significantly increase domestic food production and move away from its old strategy of importing all of its food needs.

4.2.3 We would seek to sustainably increase the UK's national food security which will be achieved through greater domestic production, greater resilience in our domestic food supply chains and diversity of supply from abroad. The last time the UK was self-sufficient in food production was around the time of the Napoleonic Wars, when Ireland was also a part of the Union. Currently, the UK produces 60% of domestic food by value, or around half of what is eaten in the country after taking into account exports. This is a considerable reduction from 78% of the UK's food needs being met domestically in 1984. Whilst it would not be feasible to return to the levels of 1984, we do want to see more UK food grown and eaten.

4.2.4 But national food security isn't just about increasing domestic yields – growing more food in the UK could in fact make us less food secure if it increases the amount of imported pesticides, fertilisers and equipment from abroad, which, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine has highlighted, would leave us vulnerable to global shocks. Environmentally harmful practices like this are also ultimately feet of clay; eventually, environmental degradation would curb output significantly.

4.2.5 That's why we would be focusing on ecologically sustainable growth – making greater use of urban spaces, reformulating the farm payments



system so the UK grows food that is more suitable to our climate and encouraging the sourcing of food locally.

### **4.3 Food Supply Chains**

4.3.1 There is significant inequality and unfairness in the overall food supply chain. Research from Oxfam<sup>3</sup> showed that between 1996 and 2015 UK supermarkets increased their share of the value created in the supply chain on a basket of 12 goods from 41.3% to 52.8% – with small scale farmers and workers being squeezed from 7.6% to 5.7% of the value in the chain. This was a higher proportion than in Germany, the Netherlands or the USA.

4.3.2 Meanwhile, in pre-farm inputs, 4 companies (Bayer, BASF, Syngenta/ChemChina and Corteva) control around two-thirds of the global market in seeds, fertiliser and pesticides, which has allowed them to achieve a profit-to-turnover ratio of between 10 and 20% – significantly above manufacturing industry averages.

4.3.3 These inequalities pre-date the current costs of living crisis driven by the War in Ukraine – which has made the situation worse – with farmers and food producers being squeezed by the manufacturers and retailers and consumers facing relentlessly spiralling costs.

4.3.4 What is clear is that we need to see more collaboration up and down supply chains and the development of longer-term relationships that benefit all parties between the farmer and the consumer.

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<sup>3</sup> [UK Supermarket Supply Chains: Ending the suffering behind our food - Oxfam - June 2018](#)

4.3.5 We would immediately ask the Competition and Markets Authority to investigate whether any profiteering has taken place among food retailers, and empower the Groceries Code Adjudicator to ensure that big supermarkets don't raise prices of essentials more than they need to. We would further extend the Adjudicator's remit to cover the whole food supply chain, not just retailers, as well as ensure it covers all food retailers.

4.3.6 We would also take significant steps to wean UK farming off expensive imported chemical inputs, which are outlined chapter 2.

#### **4.4 Local and Community Food**

4.4.1 Recent research has indicated that the UK could grow up to 40% of its own fruit and vegetables by using urban green spaces. This could improve many people's physical and mental health, and provide habitat for wildlife. Planning should include space for new allotments and encourage regenerating neglected ones.

4.4.2 We want to restore market garden hinterlands around our towns and cities. This would reduce food miles, provide satisfying jobs and reduce food waste and packaging. There would be a combination of SMEs and CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). We would make it easier to build a home on a smallholding, and provide affordable housing for workers close by.

4.4.3 This doesn't have to be in traditional horticulture areas, for example Our Food 1200 is supporting a new project in Wales aims to rebuild a thriving local food economy across Monmouthshire and Bannau Brycheiniog National Park (formerly known as the Brecon Beacons), creating a network of modern, small-scale regenerative horticulture

enterprises (485 ha) and providing fresh, locally-grown fruit and vegetable for local communities.

4.4.4 Traditional orchards have declined by 81% since the 1900s. They are a valuable habitat for wildlife and can be combined with low-intensity grazing and hay cutting. We will encourage the creation and restoration of community orchards, by providing support for restoring old ones and requiring new developments to include provisions for new ones where appropriate.

4.4.5 Furthermore, local authorities already have powers to mandate the creation of allotments when permitting new housing developments. We would encourage councils to make more space available for allotments so more people can grow their own fruit and vegetables as well as reducing waiting lists. Ideally no one should wait more than one year for an allotment.

## **4.5 A Better Approach to the Workforce**

4.5.1 The food and farming workforce has been one of the hardest hit from the Government's botched deal with Europe and post-Covid skills and labour shortages. Thousands of farm animals have been culled with the meat unable to be sold due to lack of staff in abattoirs, fruit and vegetables are being left to rot in fields due to a shortage of pickers, and the Conservatives' draconian visa rules mean that fishing fleets are unable to function.

4.5.2 Not only does this undermine rural and coastal communities, it also harms our environment as food is wasted and harms our food security as the UK becomes more reliant on imports – all the unnecessary result of the Conservatives' failed immigration and seasonal worker policies.

4.5.3 We would introduce an immigration system that prioritises the UK's needs over meeting arbitrary targets. This would allow workers to come to the UK and take up opportunities in the food and farming sector – reducing the amount of food being left to rot in fields and farm animals being culled without farmers being able to sell their products.

4.5.4 As part of our wider efforts to rebalance our economy, we would also invest in rural areas infrastructure, housing, transport and education. This would help ensure that rural communities are viable and can attract and retain UK workers, particularly from younger age groups. We would also ensure that farmers that pay good wages are fairly rewarded through our public money for public goods programmes.

4.5.5 In some rural areas the proliferation of second homes and short-term holiday lets is also contributing to the viability of communities. In Policy Paper 155 *Tackling the Housing Crisis* we propose new planning classes and other powers of local authorities to help ensure viable communities.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

4.6.1 The food system in the UK is currently not working for either producers or consumers. It has seen consumers endure a costs of living crisis whilst farmers are squeezed by chemical giants and retailers. We would deliver a fair deal for the sector, which rewards hard working farmers as well as ensuring safe, reliable and sustainable supplies of food to consumers.

## 5 Food Poverty and Nutrition

5.0.1 Liberal Democrats would put our nation's health on a sustainable footing by:

- Extending free school meals to all children in primary education, and to all secondary school children whose families receive Universal Credit.
- Guaranteeing children receive healthy and nutritious meals at school.
- Reinstating the food A-level and appoint a national champion for food education.
- Introducing clear health information on High in Fat, Salt and Sugar (HFSS) food.
- Developing a comprehensive strategy with industry to reformulate HFSS foods so that they are healthier.

### 5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 The 1996 United Nations World Food Summit stated *“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”*.

5.1.2 Despite the UK's wealth, the UK's food poverty rate is now among the highest in Europe, with 9.77 million adults experiencing food insecurity in September 2022 and 4 million children in food poverty in January 2022. This is not only morally indefensible, it holds back millions of children and adults from achieving their full potential, trapping them in poverty and

creating greater costs to public services. Malnutrition costs the UK's health and social care system £23.5bn a year – or around 15% of total spending.

5.1.3 Meanwhile, the level of obesity in the UK is significantly higher than the OECD average (19.5%), with levels of adult obesity increasing to 38% in the most deprived areas. At age 10-11, 25.5% of children were obese in 2019 and 15.4% overweight. In the least deprived areas 15.5% of children are obese, compared with 32.1% in the most deprived areas.

5.1.4 Obesity related diseases cost the NHS more than £6bn per year and cost wider society £27bn per year. By 2035/36, type 2 diabetes is projected to cost the NHS £15bn a year. The risk of type 2 diabetes increases 7 times in obese people compared with those of healthy weight.

5.1.5 In other words, poor nutrition and diet cost the NHS nearly £30bn a year – the equivalent of cutting 5.5p off the basic rate of income tax. Reducing obesity and malnutrition is the single biggest action that can safeguard the future of the NHS.

5.1.6 We would aim to end food poverty within a decade – because it is morally right and because it will reduce the burden on our public services.

## **5.2 Ending Food Poverty**

5.2.1 As well as ensuring that the nation has enough food, we also want to ensure that each individual enjoys food security – which means ending food poverty. The nation as a whole may have enough food, but if the poorest cannot afford sufficient food with the right nutrition, they are food insecure.

5.2.2 There are broadly two underlying causes of food poverty and insecurity; financial poverty and lack of access to healthy, nutritious food. The primary cause of food poverty in the UK is financial, the main reasons for food bank referrals to the Trussell Trust in 2019/20 were low incomes (39%), benefit delays (17%) and benefit changes (15%).

5.2.3 In policy paper 150 *Towards a Fairer Society*, we set out a Liberal Democrat plan to end deep poverty within a decade. We would introduce a comprehensive set of proposals, including rebuilding the social safety net and introducing a system of Guaranteed Basic Income, so that everyone is lifted out of deep financial poverty within a decade. This would tackle most of the underlying causes of food poverty in the UK.

5.2.4 However, many groups require additional support in order to have access to healthy and nutritious food, even if they have been lifted out of financial poverty, for them to be food secure. The three main groups at risk of food insecurity are the less well off, the young and the elderly. We think introducing a 'Right to Food' in UK law will provide an effective framework for tackling food poverty, together with targeted measures for the most at risk groups.

5.2.5 For young people, education and school is a key area where the government can make a significant impact on food poverty and insecurity. Unlike the Conservatives, who would see children go hungry, we would ensure that all children are able to have a nutritious meal during school. We would extend free school meals to all children in primary education and to all secondary school children whose families receive Universal Credit, and automatically enrol eligible children.

5.2.6 Many elderly people, especially the least well off and those with physical and mental disabilities, are unable to prepare healthy and nutritious food for themselves. In policy paper 151 *A Caring Society*, we set out a Liberal Democrat plan to ensure that all elderly people have their care needs met, including providing free personal care and better care services to help with household tasks.

### **5.3 Food Deserts, Food Swamps and Community Planning**

5.3.1 We already have a comprehensive plan to tackle financial poverty, but we also need to end 'Food Deserts' and 'Food Swamps' – areas of the country where fresh and nutritious food is hard to come by at an affordable price.

5.3.2 We would reform and properly resource our planning system, as set out in policy paper 155 *Tackling the Housing Crisis*, which will focus on building more sustainable and balanced communities. At the moment, there is a clear correlation between poverty and the density of fast-food outlets, with almost twice as many in the most deprived areas compared to the least.

5.3.3 We would reform the system to ensure that fast food outlets are located away from schools and introduce reforms to licensing to allow local authorities to permit them in certain places, in much the same way as casinos and betting shops. This would be part of a wider approach to rebalancing our society and our economy. We would ensure that new and existing communities have access to shops that sell fresh produce, whilst also disincentivising the use of fast food and takeaways through reforms to the licensing system.



## **5.4 Children, Schools and Education**

5.4.1 Many dietary habits start early in life, that is why we would provide children with the best start at schools so that they are able to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to live healthy lifestyles.

5.4.2 For some children, a free school lunch may be the only healthy, cooked food they get – or even their only meal of the day. As well as helping children to eat more healthily and tackling child hunger, free school meals help to improve concentration and performance in the classroom, and save parents money.

5.4.3 It was a Liberal government that introduced Free School Meals over a century ago, and Liberal Democrats who extended them to all infant school children in 2014. However, the Conservatives have excluded 800,000 children in poverty from receiving Free School Meals by introducing an arbitrary £7,400 household income threshold in 2018. In addition, more than 200,000 eligible children are missing out on Free School Meals because they are not registered.

5.4.4 We would extend Free School Meals to all children in primary education and all secondary school children whose families receive Universal Credit, and automatically enrol children who are eligible.

5.4.5 We would also ensure that all children are getting the right nutrition to help them develop. We would guarantee children receive healthy and nutritious meals at school, by ensuring that school meals meet the highest standards of nutrition and quality, as well as being from British farmers where possible.

5.4.6 Food was added to the school curriculum in 2013, but frequently at the moment, it is treated as an optional extra and many schools have

wound up Food Tech classes due to pressure on resources. We would go further in equipping children with the skills they need to lead healthy lives as adults.

5.4.7 We would reinstate the Food A-Level, with a special emphasis on healthy and sustainable diets. We would also appoint a national champion for food education in the Department of Education so that healthy diets are at the heart of decision making.

5.4.8 We would commission a review of existing and new qualifications such as T-Levels in Science and Catering to provide an adequate focus on food and nutrition. We would also require Ofsted to publish regular reviews setting out the latest evidence on best-practice for food & nutrition.

5.4.9 In further and higher education, we would introduce a nutrition education module for medical students, nurses and other medical professions in the UK and as part of continuing professional development for qualified clinicians.

## **5.5 Advertising**

5.5.1 Currently, 31% of food and drink advertising spend goes on HFSS foods whilst only 3% goes on fruit and vegetables: it is not a fair playing field. As such, we think there is a strong case for tighter regulation of fast and processed food advertising.

5.5.2 Parliament has legislated for a ban on advertising HFSS foods on television between 5.30am and 9.00pm and online, but the Government has delayed its introduction until October 2025 following lobbying from the industry. Meanwhile, junk food adverts have been banned on Transport for London. Whilst these are positive steps, we think we need to go further.

5.5.3 We would introduce health information labels on HFSS advertising and packaging, with clear and simple messages and information. We would also introduce more robust restrictions on advertising HFSS foods.

## **5.6 Reformulation in Industry**

5.6.1 Highly processed foods are on average three times cheaper per calorie than healthier foods. Consumption of this highly palatable but low nutrient food is one reason for both higher levels of obesity and higher levels of malnutrition in deprived areas and households.

5.6.2 The 2016 Soft Drinks Industry Levy introduced what was effectively a tax on sugary drinks. Coming into effect in 2018, the Levy led to a major reformulation of drinks in the sector; by April 2018 only 8.4% of the market was liable to the levy because drinks were reformulated. Research from the Medical Research Council suggested that around 5,000 cases of obesity per year were prevented in reception year and year 6 girls; an 8% relative reduction in obesity levels.

5.6.3 We would go further than the current Levy, closing many of the loopholes that exist in the current system and extend it to include juice- and milk-based drinks that are high in added sugar.

5.6.4 The Levy shows both how effective government action can be and how responsive industry can be in reformulating products. However, sugary carbonated drinks are low hanging fruit – they are fairly easy to reformulate compared to food products. As such, we would not adopt the same approach and timescales as the Levy, which would not work for every sector.

5.6.5 We would develop a comprehensive strategy over 10 years for the industry producing and selling HFSS foods on how they will achieve reductions in salt, sugar and fat content from their products. The specific reductions would be agreed on a sector-by-sector arrangement, as not every product has the same problems and solutions.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

5.7.1 Food poverty is a national disgrace – no one in the UK should be going hungry, especially not children. We would end UK food poverty within a decade, with a comprehensive plan to tackle financial poverty and to make nutritious and healthy food available to all.

5.7.2 Alongside this, malnutrition and obesity are some of the biggest health and financial challenges tackling the UK. The Conservatives have been too timid to tackle the issue, caving in to the fast food lobby and failing to put the health of the country above company profits.

5.7.3 Liberal Democrats would launch a comprehensive plan to feed the nation, encourage companies to reformulate products, and level the playing field in advertising, save our NHS and help people live healthier lives.

## **6 Fishing and Seafood**

6.0.1 Liberal Democrats would deliver a fair deal for our fishing and coastal communities by:

- Giving our fishing communities a fair deal, with a fair allocation of quotas and investment in infrastructure.
- Allowing our fishing fleets to operate by putting in place an effective and fair immigration system.
- Removing the trade barriers and red tape preventing our fishing communities from accessing European markets and building more resilient domestic markets.
- Putting our fish stocks on a sustainable footing, with better monitoring and allocation of catchments.

### **6.1 Introduction**

6.1.1 Fishing has been one of the UK's most enduring and valuable industries. As an island nation, we have a historic connection to the sea and our success depends upon healthy and vibrant oceans.

6.1.2 Coastal communities are frequently some of the most deprived and forgotten about by successive governments. They were let down by the Conservatives when we joined the EEC in the 1970s, and they have been let down again by this government failing to develop a coherent strategy for fishing and our coasts and with its botched deal with Europe.

6.1.3 This chapter sets out how Liberal Democrats would deliver a fair deal for our coastal and fishing communities in England, ensuring that they

are able to enjoy good livelihoods whilst also putting our seas and fish stocks on a sustainable footing.

## **6.2 A Fair Deal for Fishing Communities**

6.2.1 Our fishing communities have been badly let down by successive governments and the UK's coastal communities have become some of the poorest in Europe.

6.2.2 Over a quarter (29%) of the UK's fishing quota is owned or controlled by just five families, and half (49%) of English quota is held by companies based overseas. We would radically overhaul how our quotas are allocated, prioritising supporting SMEs, revitalising local economies and better protecting our seas from environmental harm.

6.2.3 We would also reform the Conservatives' failed approach to immigration and visa requirements. At the moment, most workers on the UK's fishing fleets are from abroad. The Conservatives have changed visa rules, which has put almost the entire UK fishing workforce in legal limbo. We would introduce a proper immigration system, which allows fishing communities to access the workers they need to help feed the nation.

6.2.4 We also want to ensure that coastal towns have the proper infrastructure in place to develop their fishing economies. Too many fish are exported abroad for processing before coming back to the UK again – generating greater transport costs, emissions and a missed opportunity for creating jobs in this country. We would give coastal communities greater powers and resources so that they can properly invest in their local area, with a comprehensive plan for spreading resources and economic

opportunity set out in policy paper 150 *Towards a Fairer Society*, and the forthcoming paper on Opportunity and Skills.

### **6.3 Markets for Fish**

6.3.1 As well as building a positive and co-operative relationship with Europe, so our fishers can export and import with ease, we also want to build more resilient domestic markets for UK seafood. British people seem averse to buying British seafood – most of the seafood caught in our waters gets exported to Europe. Britain has twice the coastline of Spain and yet eats just one third of the seafood as Spain does.

6.3.2 We want to see British people buying more locally sourced, sustainable seafood, reducing transport and supporting local industries. This will help create a more resilient sector, ensuring domestic markets for our hardworking fishing communities even during turbulent global economic times.

6.3.3 A 2018 survey found that almost three quarters of people (74%) do not know how much seafood they should be eating and 68% said they were not eating the two portions recommended in government health guidelines but 55% said they would like to eat more.

6.3.4 We would make use of public sector procurement to encourage the buying of locally produced seafood. We would also develop a public education programme around seafood, as part of our wider efforts to change consumer diets and choices. Most people are put off by the fact that they do not know how to prepare and cook many fish, particularly the less well-known ones, meaning they do not buy it or eat it.

## **6.4 Sustainable Fisheries**

6.4.1 As well as supporting our fishing communities, we will ensure that fishing is put on an environmentally sustainable footing. At the moment, 65% of fish species are overfished above scientific advice and many unsustainable methods, like bottom trawling, are also employed, causing huge environmental damage. Over time, this reduces catches and is not sustainable.

6.4.2 If the depleted UK fish stocks were recovered and managed sustainably, they could support significantly higher catches, create 14,000 jobs and add £2bn to UK GDP.

6.4.3 We would set meaningful and measurable targets to meet the objectives of the Fisheries Act. This would include key targets on species recovery, biodiversity, reduced ocean waste and moving seafood production towards net zero.

6.4.4 We would ensure that adequate data is available for all species to ensure good management, and that no species are fished beyond scientific advice, with financial support and training for fishing communities to make the transition to a sustainable future. We would set a clear timetable for the roll-out of Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras on all commercial fishing vessels which will deliver effective at-sea monitoring, high quality data for fisheries management and compliance with fisheries regulations, including Marine Protected Area management.

6.4.5 We would also require English fish farms to meet high environmental and welfare standards. They would have to undertake regular monitoring of water quality, animal health, and the health of the



wider area, with regular inspections by the Environment Agency to ensure they are up to standard.

## **6.5 Protecting our Seas**

6.5.1 Alongside sustainable fishing practices, we also want to see greater protections for our seas. The Conservatives claim to have made 30% of our seas protected – but this is another one of their broken promises. In practice, there are no protected seas in the UK, with overfishing, harmful practices and pollution taking place across the seas.

6.5.2 We want to meet the 30% protection target by the end of the next parliament, with real protections so that our seas can regenerate. Wider efforts to put our seas and oceans on an environmentally sustainable footing can be found in policy paper 156 *Tackling the Nature Crisis*, which includes an extensive network of marine protected areas and major proposals to tackle waterway pollution.

## **6.6 Aquaculture**

6.6.1 Britain has tremendous potential for the production of seaweed, kelp and other oceanic farming, with its lengthy coastlines. The global seaweed farming sector is estimated to be worth \$5bn annually, with around \$2bn of this in Japan. It is a labour-intensive industry, which could potentially create thousands of jobs in coastal communities, particularly in Devon and Cornwall.

6.6.2 Seaweed, kelp and oceanic farming also have potential to help restore oceans that have been overfished and tackle climate change since the crops can absorb carbon whilst requiring very little input from the

farmers. They also can counteract some of the effects of fertiliser runoff which has caused algae blooms and significant environmental damage in parts of the country, such as the Solent.

6.6.3 We would promote aquaculture by making grants available for research and development as part of our wider Food and Farming Research Fund. Exploratory farms would be carefully assessed for their wider impact on ocean quality, as well as impact on Blue Carbon.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

6.7.1 Liberal Democrats would deliver a fair deal for our coastal and fishing communities. We would ensure that they have markets for their catches abroad by fixing our broken relationship with Europe, and greater domestic markets through encouraging greater consumption of UK seafood. We would also give coastal communities the powers and resources they need to invest in their infrastructure, skills and local economies, so that they can enjoy the prosperity they deserve.

6.7.2 We would also put our seas and oceans on a sustainable footing, by ensuring that fish stocks caught at a sustainable level and that our waterways are cleaned up after decades of Conservative neglect.

## **7 Trade and Development**

7.0.1 Liberal Democrats would put our trade in food on a reliable and fair footing by:

- Fixing the Conservatives' botched deal with Europe by rebuilding trade and cooperation.
- Renegotiating the Australia and New Zealand trade deals to ensure British standards are not being undercut.
- Introducing rigorous democratic scrutiny of trade deals, before, during and after they are negotiated and agreed.
- Restoring the International Development budget and using the money to invest and support sustainable farming overseas.
- Ensuring British animal welfare standards are not undercut in trade deals.

### **7.1 Introduction**

7.1.1 Government regulation of food systems and standards is critical to meeting the objectives we have set out in the rest of this paper. As well as requiring high standards for food produced in the UK, we would ensure that imports meet the same standards, to avoid undercutting British farmers. This includes not only health, veterinary and phytosanitary standards, but production standards in such areas as climate and nature protection, animal welfare, the use of pesticides, veterinary drugs and processing agents, and labour standards for farmers and other workers.

## 7.2 Developing Trade with Europe

7.2.1 The EU continues to be the largest export market for UK-produced agricultural goods, with the most important single country being Ireland. Although the UK has left the European customs union and single market, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement provides for zero tariffs and zero quotas on UK product exports and imports from the EU. However, it does not eliminate export documentation, border controls, or veterinary and phytosanitary (plant health) inspections, which have contributed to a decline in food exports to the EU of about 5% between 2019 and 2022.

7.2.2 The EU is also the biggest source of food imports to the UK. The UK has extended import control exemptions from the EU to the end of 2023 but the reverse is not the case and exports to the EU are negatively affected by the lack of both veterinary and phytosanitary agreements with the EU. The current UK Government's moves to vary standards from those of our European partners will add further barriers to trade. If this trend continues UK manufacturers and producers wishing to export food to the EU and vice versa will gradually have to conform to divergent standards from those in their domestic markets.

7.2.3 Liberal Democrats will fix the UK's broken relationship with Europe. We have set out a four-stage roadmap to deepen the trading relationship between the UK and the EU, as set out in policy paper 144, *Rebuilding Trade and Cooperation with Europe*.

7.2.4 As part of our roadmap, we would:

- Make an explicit commitment to maintain a level playing field between the EU and UK markets, and not to lower standards for

environment, health, animal welfare and consumer protection in the UK with the EU.

- Continue to mirror EU regulatory standards in UK law, aim to reach mutual recognition agreements to avoid double-testing and seek association with or – ideally – full membership of EU regulatory standards agencies, including the European Food Safety Authority.
- Reach veterinary, sanitary and phytosanitary agreements with the EU as soon as possible, removing many remaining barriers to UK–EU trade in food.

7.2.5 The roadmap further sets out that once the trading relationship between the UK and EU has been deepened and the ties of trust and friendship have been restored, we aim to place the UK-EU relationship on a more formal and stable footing by seeking to join the Single Market. Our plan will remove the red tape and trade barriers erected by the Conservatives.

### **7.3 Trade Agreements Outside the EU**

7.3.1 Following the UK's departure from the EU, it has struck trade agreements with other countries. The Australia and New Zealand agreements, which entered into force in May 2023, are likely to prove disastrous to British farmers. Lower production costs and weaker standards, especially in Australia, will see the introduction of more competitive imports that will become completely tariff-free after 15 years. Australian beef is more carbon-intensive than UK production, and Australia vetoed the UK's efforts to include any references to net zero in the agreement.

7.3.2 Asking UK farmers to compete with these imports while maintaining their sustainability, environmental, and animal welfare commitments risks significant damage to the UK agricultural sector. Government ministers knew of the projected impacts, including a fall in UK farming and food processing employment and output before they signed the deals, but went ahead regardless.

7.3.3 Liberal Democrats would ensure all free trade agreements include requirements that imports of food and agricultural products meet the same environmental, health, labour and animal welfare and production standards that apply in the UK. We would also renegotiate the Australia and New Zealand agreements to meet these requirements, and if this cannot be achieved, the UK should withdraw from them.

7.3.4 As well as ensuring that high animal welfare standards are maintained in trade deals, Liberal Democrats would also ban the import and sale of meat which falls below UK animal welfare standards, and products such as fur and foie gras, neither of which can be legally produced in the UK. Although this commitment was included in the Conservative manifesto for the 2019 election, in 2022 the government U-turned on its plans.

7.3.5 A comprehensive motion on animal welfare will be covered by an upcoming FPC motion on Animal Welfare in the Food System.

## **7.4 Improving Democratic Scrutiny of Trade Agreements**

7.4.1 There is no democratic scrutiny of trade deals under the Conservative government. Ministers oversee and sign off the negotiations. Although the government established an independent Trade and

Agriculture Commission in 2020, it is only advisory, its mandate is too narrow and it only comments on agreements after they have been negotiated.

7.4.2 Liberal Democrats believe that Parliament should be involved in defining a set of objectives and no-go areas for all trade negotiations, which should periodically be updated; UK negotiating teams' positions would be greatly strengthened if their objectives were confirmed by Parliament. For trade negotiations with any medium or large country or trading bloc, Parliament should be involved in setting negotiation mandates before discussions begin, scrutinising deals which are brought back and having the final say in approving them.

7.4.3 Post-agreement monitoring has an important role to play. The Trade and Agriculture Commission should be given a broader mandate, going beyond legal scrutiny, and a wider membership, facilitating input from farmers' representatives, business, consumers and NGOs. All its reports should be made public.

## **7.5 International Aid**

7.5.1 We would also seek to help put the rest of the world's food supply on a sustainable footing, especially in tropical regions which are most vulnerable to climate change and famine. We would step up on our global obligations to the world's poorest, restoring the International Development budget to 0.7% of Gross National Income and helping them develop resilient, environmentally sustainable food systems.

7.5.2 Investment and development aid to encourage sustainable production, as well as responding to local shocks like wars and floods, will be covered by the FPC's upcoming International Security paper.



## **8 Research and Innovation**

8.0.1 Liberal Democrats will deliver a fair, sustainable and efficient food system by:

- Introducing a new research and innovation fund for food and farming.
- Growing emerging alternative food industries through:
  - Investing in research and development.
  - Making better use of public procurement and education.
  - Providing a beneficial regulatory framework.

### **8.1 Introduction**

8.1.1 The UK has tremendous potential to develop cutting edge new technologies and methods of producing food. We have some of the best research institutions in the world which can help the UK become a world leader in new foods and methods of growing and producing it.

### **8.2 Research and Innovation Fund**

8.2.1 It is fair to say that often modern agriculture has embraced technology, genetic improvement, nutrition and training for example, but it is also fair to say the adoption of these has often been slow and sporadic. Resource use efficiency, professional development and technology will play a role not only in producing the food we need but producing it in a manner that is in harmony with the environmental challenges faced by a modern society.

8.2.2 We would introduce a new Food and Farming Research and Innovation fund which would provide grants and low cost loans to farmers,

food producers and those developing technology for the sector to spur innovation and development. This would help develop the UK into a world leader in emerging new technologies, like precision farming and alternative proteins, which will be essential for feeding future generations. This should include home-grown pulses such as beans, peas and lentils not just synthetic meat alternatives.

8.2.3 We would also ensure that ADAS is well resourced and funded to provide training and support in using new and emerging technologies and farming practices, so that they can be taken up across the country, whilst ensuring public goods are delivered.

### **8.3 Alternative Meats and Foods**

8.3.1 Alternative foods and methods of production have proliferated extensively over the last few years. In almost every supermarket in Britain you will now find meat-free meat replacements and dairy-free dairy replacements, whilst experimental production methods are being developed in this country and abroad.

8.3.2 On British supermarket shelves, the most common alternative meats are based on pea, soya and wheat proteins. There are also foods which are made of vegetables, frequently mycoprotein, and then moulded and shaped into familiar meat shapes. Dairy-free alternatives have also been introduced, replacing milk and egg products.

8.3.3 There are also lab-grown meats. These are typically cells of animals that are cultivated in a bioreactor. At the moment, only Singapore has legislated for the consumption of lab-grown meats, with Eat Just creating chicken nuggets grown in a bioreactor for several restaurants. Recently,

concerns have been raised about the climate impact of some of these lab-grown products. Many are still in their early stages of development, but they do have potential to help improve our climate and environment.

8.3.4 The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) has said that Britain needs to reduce its meat and dairy consumption by around 30% in order to meet net zero. The National Food Strategy has also called for this, for climate reasons as well as to benefit public health. Britons have cut their meat consumption by 17% over the past decade.

8.3.5 We believe that this reduction should come from cutting low-quality, environmentally harmful products such as highly processed food made from products that come from deforested areas and with greater consumption of alternative foods, in which Britain can become a world leader.

## **8.4 Growing the Emerging Sector**

8.4.1 Liberal Democrats see the development of alternative methods of producing food as a critical part of our strategy for reducing the impacts of food production on climate change and nature. It also has the potential to generate jobs and exports and improve food security by reducing imports of low-quality processed foodstuffs.

8.4.2 As part of our wider Food and Farming Research Fund, we would make grants available for the development of alternative methods of producing food, while ensuring that it conforms to the highest ethical and safety standards. This includes investment in scaling-up facilities, such as the existing plant at CPI Teesside and in sustainable protein start-ups. Together with our commitment to rebuild relations with Europe, this will

help avoid the current trend of companies intending to move production to the EU.

8.4.3 The alternative protein industry also represents a major opportunity for farmers to grow plants as inputs. ADAS should facilitate connections between British farmers and alternative protein companies. This is crucial to avoid products being made with imported inputs like soya.

8.4.4 We would also encourage the uptake of alternative foods through our proposals for public procurement policy (see Chapter 2) and ensure that alternative foods already on the shelves are included in the school cooking curriculum, so that future consumers know how to cook and use them properly.

8.4.5 Finally, we would provide a regulatory framework that removes barriers to the uptake of alternative foods. At the moment, the UK is too slow at allowing alternative foods to be produced and sold, largely due to inertia and under-resourced government agencies. We would provide the necessary additional funding for the Food Standards Agency, enabling it to speed up the approval process for new products that have met high health, safety and environmental standards. This will support an increase in both domestic production and exports, with associated greater employment opportunities.

## **9 Food Labelling and Safety**

9.0.1 Liberal Democrats would ensure consumers have access to safe, reliable food by:

- Providing local authorities with greater powers and resources to inspect and monitor food production.
- Ensure all food meets UK standards for health, and ensure goods are properly checked where necessary.
- Introducing robust and clear to understand food labelling.

### **9.1 Introduction**

9.1.1 Food labelling and food safety are some of the most important issues for our diets and health. They allow consumers to make informed choices, ensure food is safe and consistent with consumers' ethical beliefs.

9.1.2 We want a food regulatory and labelling regime that supports new startups and small businesses, helps consumers make informed and healthy choices and doesn't compromise on food safety.

### **9.2 The Food Service Sector and Reducing Food Safety Risks**

9.2.1 The food service sector (restaurants, cafes, pubs, take-away and home delivery services) were affected in two very different ways by the pandemic. Many premises were closed for prolonged periods of time, with staff laid off or furloughed. Although there were support schemes like 'Eat out to help out', many businesses struggled to reopen or to recruit staff.

9.2.2 Conversely, the pandemic also saw a massive increase in micro-businesses particularly in the home delivery sector as people turned

to cooking and delivering meals to supplement their income either from existing food premises such as pubs or residential premises.

9.2.3 This has led to a huge number of new and innovative businesses starting up, and creating a large number of jobs in SMEs. But it has in many cases led to a weakening of consumer protection and dilution of the right to safe food because of the disruption to existing businesses training and quality programmes, a proliferation of inexperienced business owners and managers and the huge growth of the largely unregulated home delivery sector.

9.2.4 As part of our wider efforts to improve food integrity and empower local communities, we would provide local authorities with greater powers to undertake health and safety inspections of food premises, as well as an effective planning system that ensures they are in appropriate locations.

### **9.3 Food Integrity**

9.3.1 In recent years we have seen a plethora of issues in relation to food integrity. The most high profile of these was the widespread issue of horsemeat but this is far from an isolated incident and these incidents are happening regularly and often more frequently. Only recently it was revealed that Booths supermarket was selling beef it believed to be British, but was in fact from Europe and South America, with the supplier now under investigation. We believe not only are these acts illegal, they are also doing serious damage to trust in relation to food, farming and the wider supply chain.

9.3.2 Part of this is the result of the Conservative government's botched deal with Europe – it has created significant safety risks according to the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and Food Standards Scotland, with checks not taking place until the end of 2023. The FSA has also highlighted risks to our

food integrity and human health due to a fall in the number of inspections of food businesses due to budget pressures on local councils.

9.3.3 In the approach to establishing food safety, the dominant philosophy of the EU has been the precautionary principle, in other words something should not be permitted if there is a possibility of harm, until such time as it is clearly proven that there is no harm. Standards also need to be revised if previously approved products are shown to be doing harm. As part of our proposals for rebuilding trust and cooperation, we would adopt the same precautionary principle to food safety.

## **9.4 Food Labelling**

9.4.1 As liberals, we do not want to tell people what they can and can't eat – everyone must have the freedom to choose for themselves. However, those choices should be well informed and not come at a cost to wider society. Food labelling is essential to helping consumers make good, healthy choices.

9.4.2 A large range of different labels have been suggested to include on food, however going beyond a small number of items will simply confuse consumers, who then won't read them. We would therefore prioritise:

1. Ingredients, including allergens as is included currently.
2. A clear traffic light system relating to nutrition and health. Although commonplace at the moment, we would make it simpler. For instance, many products use a "portion size" which is frequently not obvious to the average consumer who, understandably, doesn't weigh food before they eat it.
3. Carbon and environmental labels, which would be determined by a new independent body (as set out in policy paper 156)

*Tackling the Nature Crisis*) to prevent greenwashing and ensure high standards.

4. Accurate and verified location of production – so people can choose locally produced food.

9.4.3 We would apply the same labelling standards to UK food as well as imported food. If something is sold as free range or sustainably fished that should not have a different meaning depending on where the food was produced or which body labelled it.

9.4.4 We would also seek to remove unnecessary ‘best before’ and ‘use by’ dates from some foods to reduce food waste, after undertaking a programme of engagement with the public and the industry so that consumers will be able to spot the signs of spoilage for themselves.

9.4.5 Beyond retailers, we would require food hygiene, nutrition and safety labelling on food outlets, third party delivery websites and menus, so that consumers can make informed choices when eating out.

9.4.6 In the longer term, we would work with industry and consumer groups to develop easier ways of accessing information about food, including the use of QR codes and other methods, so that consumers can find out what they need to know more easily.

9.4.7 More details on labelling and animal welfare will be covered by an upcoming FPC motion on Animal Welfare in the Food System.



## **10 Conclusion**

10.1 Liberal Democrats would deliver a fair deal for our farmers, fishers, workers and citizens by building a food system fit for the future.

10.2 We would end the national disgrace of food poverty, ending it within a decade by lifting millions out of deep financial poverty and providing nutritious and healthy food to thousands of children.

10.3 We would ensure that our hard working farmers and fishers are properly supported and rewarded for their efforts, and given the tools they need to protect and enhance our environment.

10.4 We would strengthen the UK's food security and tackle food price rises, by sustainably growing more food domestically, supporting and investing in our farmers and fostering resilient and sustainable trade relationships abroad.

10.5 We would make the UK a leader in alternative foods and ways of producing them, by investing in a food and farming research and innovation fund, as well as providing an effective and safe system for bringing products to the market.

10.6 We would give everyone confidence in the safety of the food they buy, by giving local authorities the powers and resources to carry out safety checks, require all imported food to meet UK standards on health and to introduce clear and robust labelling on food.

## **Food and Farming**

### **Policy Paper 154**

This paper has been approved for debate by the Federal Conference by the Federal Policy Committee under the terms of Article 7.4 of the Federal Constitution.

Within the policy-making procedure of the Liberal Democrats, the Federal Party determines the policy of the Party in those areas which might reasonably be expected to fall within the remit of the federal institutions in the context of a federal United Kingdom.

The Party in England, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Northern Ireland Local Party determine the policy of the Party on all other issues, except that any or all of them may confer this power upon the Federal Party in any specified area or areas.

The Party in England has chosen to pass up policy-making to the Federal level. If approved by Conference, this paper will therefore form the policy of the Federal Party on federal issues and the Party in England on English issues. In appropriate policy areas, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland party policy would take precedence.

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Further copies of this paper can be found online at

<https://www.libdems.org.uk/members/make-policy/food-farming>



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