

Land Use Change: Food Security

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[DR Andrew Murrison in the Chair]

14:30:00

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con)
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of land use change on food security.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I am grateful for the chance to raise this issue, which goes to the heart of our national interest. When I submitted my bid for the debate, little did I know that it would take place on a day on which there were members of the farming community out on Parliament Square with their tractors, with what we called a muck spreader where I was brought up, on a farm, but others might call a slurry tanker, and even with livestock. That is testament to the determination of the farming community to make sure their voice continues to be heard in this place.

In simple terms, this debate is about what we choose to do with the land beneath our feet. If we keep tarmacking and concreting over our fields, we should not be surprised if one day we find ourselves asking a basic question: “Where is our food going to come from?” We must not become a country that produces some of the finest produce in the world, to the highest standard, and yet becomes dependent on imports of lower grade, substandard produce. Domestic food security is national security, and it must be protected.

It is one of the principal duties of any Government to ensure that their people have access to sufficient safe, affordable and nutritious food. As Baroness Manningham-Buller, the former director general of MI5, has said, food security is national security. If we cannot feed ourselves, we are vulnerable—economically, strategically and in the choices available to us as a country.

I sought this debate because of what is happening in my constituency, which I believe is a small version of what is happening right across the country. We face proposals for major development on open green spaces and on our farms—land that local people quite reasonably understand to be green belt, farmland and open countryside. These are not blank spaces on a map; they are working fields, grazing land and green buffers between communities. They prevent urban sprawl and prevent areas such as mine from simply being swallowed up into a suburb of a greater Birmingham. I want to look at three things: the effect on domestic food production; the environmental consequences, especially flooding; and the Government’s policy direction, which is pushing us down the wrong path, through the treatment of the green belt, the invention of so-called grey belt, and tax proposals that will make it harder for family farms to survive.

In recent years, households across Britain have seen food prices spiral. We see it every time we go into the supermarket; we seem to put less in the trolley but pay more at the checkout. Of course, that is driven by global shocks, the war in Ukraine and supply chain pressures. At its peak, food inflation reached 20%, and people saw it in the basic cost of goods. Global instability, import prices, exchange rates, skyrocketing input costs and continued pressure from the war in Ukraine meant that between January 2021 and April 2025, UK food prices increased by 36%, over three times more than in the previous decade.

At the same time, the UK’s capacity to produce its own food has steadily declined. We now produce roughly 60% of the food we consume by calories; in the 1980s, we were close to 78%. That is a huge shift in one working lifetime, and it is a worrying downward trend. The picture by sector is even starker. We grow just over half the vegetables that we eat and only around 15% of the tomatoes that we consume, and fresh fruit production stands at just around 16%. Those numbers should start to ring alarm bells if they are not doing so already.

While that has been happening, we have lost hundreds of thousands of hectares of farmland to development and long-term environmental land use change. These are not temporary changes. Once productive farmland is built on or turned over to schemes that cannot be reversed, it rarely comes back; when it’s gone, it’s gone. We all accept that homes are needed, but it should worry us that so many have been placed on productive land when large brownfield areas remain underused. There is enough previously developed land in England to take well over 1 million homes, yet the easier, cheaper option of edge-of-town, green-belt development continues to be both developers’ and the Government’s preference. This is where food security starts being undermined not by global events, but by our own planning choices.

Against that backdrop, the last thing we should be doing is making it harder for farming families to stay on their land, yet that is exactly what this Government's changes to agricultural inheritance—now widely referred to as the family farm tax—would do. Most farms in this country are family businesses. They are part of the local economy, of the landscape and of the food supply chain. The Government's proposals would pull most of them into new inheritance tax rules. That is not a small technical tweak; it creates a financial hit at the very moment a family is trying to pass the farm on. If a family has to sell land, or even the whole farm, simply to cover a tax bill under the new rules, there is no safeguard that the land will remain agricultural. More often than not, it is snapped up by developers, meaning that previously productive farms become speculative housing sites.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD)

I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing the debate. The issue about the number of farms above the £1.5 million mark is that 30% of British farms made no money last year. West Dorset farmers are responsible for maintaining 70% of the land. That number will only decrease as they are forced to carve up their assets to pay these bills.

Wendy Morton

That is exactly the point. Many farming families—often the hill farmers, in particular, but the arable farmers too—struggle. The last couple of years have been really difficult for many farmers. If they have one bad year, it is very hard for them to recover the next year. They are working against so many factors over which they have no control, weather being one of them. It is really important that, in all our deliberations, we recognise that.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD)

The right hon. Lady makes a really important point. The value of a farm depends on where it is based, but farmers do not see that money, because they are—I know this phrase is often used—asset rich and cash poor, so families are put in the awful situation of potentially having to sell off parts of their family farm to pay these taxes. However, they need economies of scale to make farming work, so quite often they are looking after their farm and also renting areas from other farms to make sure that the books balance.

Wendy Morton

The hon. Lady makes a really important point, setting out yet again the challenges that farmers face. I am a farmer's daughter; my dad was a farm worker for many years. We lived on a farm; we grew up in a tied cottage. That sort of farm is often very different from the massive farms in parts of the country where there is more arable land rather than land for hill farmers. Every farm is unique—every farm is different—but many of the challenges that farms face are very similar.

All of this comes at a time when family farm businesses are under unprecedented pressure. We have talked about the costs, but input costs have risen by more than 40% since 2015. Fertiliser is up by nearly 40%, feed by over a quarter and energy by more than a third. National Farmers' Union surveys show confidence among farmers at its lowest recorded level. Two thirds expect profits to fall, and nearly half plan to reduce investment.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con)

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does she agree that that depleted confidence comes against the backdrop of all the pressures that she has discussed, including the pressures from the Government to increase house building, and the opportunity that farmers see to replace arable or pastoral farming with a new cash crop in the form of solar, and that ultimately, depletion of morale is probably the worst affliction on the farming community, because, regardless of other considerations, there is a risk that there comes a point when most farmers say, "We just can't do this any more"?

Wendy Morton

My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Sadly, suicide is very high among the farming community, which is another indicator of the many pressures that our farms are facing. I return to the point that I do not think that we appreciate our farms, farmers or farming communities enough in this place. That is the backdrop that some of us are fighting against. To introduce a new tax burden at this moment risks accelerating the loss of domestic production. If we are serious about food security, it is exactly the wrong time to treat a farm as if it were simply an asset to be broken up.

I will return to what is happening locally. At Stonnall Road in Aldridge, there is an outline planning application for around 355 houses on a site that we have always understood to be green belt—a vital green buffer for the village. Hundreds of residents have already backed my petition against the development. They are not opposed to housing, but they struggle to see why that productive land—well-used green space—has suddenly become the soft target, when brownfield sites exist in Walsall and, indeed, Birmingham city centre. Surely that is where we should be doing much more regeneration work.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab)

The right hon. Lady is making an important speech, some of which I agree with and some of which I do not. She will understand, as we all do, that the current planning system does not resolve these issues very effectively. She will also know that the previous Government had plans to develop a land use framework, and that was announced three or four years ago. Why does she think that the previous Government did not bring that framework forward?

Wendy Morton

As the hon. Gentleman said, there are some things that we agree on and others that we do not. However, I have long

campaigned against building on the green belt—on our green fields. Even during our time in government, there were certain aspects of planning that I spoke out about—those who were here at the time of the last Government will probably remember that—and, believe me, I will continue to do so, because I feel so passionately about it.

Over on Chester Road in Streetly, another eight or nine hectares in my constituency—again, green belt and on the edge of the built-up area—are now being described as grey belt and suggested for the local plan. It raises the same concerns: what happens to our fields? What happens to local food production? What happens to roads, GP access and school places? What does it mean when this pattern is repeated across the country? Chipping away at the edges of green space means altering the balance between built land and productive land, and once that balance tips, it is very difficult to recover.

The green belt is not perfect, but it has achieved two essential things: it constrains sprawl around major urban areas, and it provides a degree of protection for farmland and green spaces. To many communities, the introduction of grey belt feels like an attempt to weaken those protections by stealth, because once land is marked as “grey” rather than “green”, the presumption shifts, and with it, the likelihood of development.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD)

In relation to the intervention from the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), the fundamental problem is that although successive Governments have said, “We favour brownfield,” there is not sufficient push behind it. In my constituency, we are legally driven to accept every application on its own merits. Applications are made almost exclusively for greenfield sites, rather than brownfield ones. We have to approve them, because we have no legal means by which to turn them down. That is the essential problem, and I do not think that it has been addressed in the new legislation. There is not enough push for local authorities to promote brownfield sites over greenfield ones.

Wendy Morton

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We talk about a brownfield-first approach, and it can work. We saw examples of it in the west midlands under the leadership of the former mayor, Andy Street. Developments such as those on the Caparo and Harvestime sites show that it can be done, but it needs funding to help level the playing field, so that brownfield is as attractive to developers as greenfield sites. It can be done, but it requires the Government to put money into brownfield remediation and to properly focus it.

Local authorities feel huge pressure at the moment, but brownfield sites, some of them derelict for decades, remain untouched. It is crazy. No one is arguing that the green belt can never change, but there must be a high bar, genuine scrutiny and clear honesty about what is being sacrificed. Above all, we should start with a genuine, not rhetorical, commitment to brownfield first. Farmers also tell me that they face conflicting pressures from all sides. Tree-planting targets, rewetting proposals, biodiversity applications—none of those aims is wrong, but when piled on top of housing allocations and complicated tax changes, they steadily squeeze the land available for food production.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD)

The right hon. Lady has talked a lot about housing and development infringement upon the green belt. An issue in my area, around the village of Scotton, is the proposal for a huge solar farm. While I completely agree and want to see that the targets and net zero are reached, does the right hon. Lady agree that rather than using prime agricultural land, we should be looking at the roofs of distribution warehousing and other alternatives first?

Wendy Morton

I do. The hon. Gentleman talks a lot of sense. There are so many areas where we should be putting solar panels. I despair when I drive down the M40 around the west midlands and see field after field full of solar panels. I can understand why a farmer may want to go down the diversification route—because it helps to balance the books—but there are surely better sites such as rooftops and garage tops. Why are we not being a little more creative in what we are doing?

Edward Morello

I will happily answer the question, drawing on my experience in solar: it is because the amount of money for the export does not make rooftop solar viable on a commercial scale. To provide the simplest numbers: it costs 50p per unit to put it on ground mount, about £1 per unit to put it on rooftop and £1.50 to put it on carports. Unless we increase the export value to 12p to 15p per unit, it will never stack up. That is why.

Wendy Morton

I appreciate a bit of knowledge in Westminster Hall, but the point remains that we still need to be more creative in where we put our solar panels. Maybe they could be put on larger rooftop spaces, and we often talk about brownfield and urban sites; to go straight for productive green fields is just total madness. There are real concerns about proposals that would give Natural England sweeping compulsory purchase powers that could see productive farmland acquired for environmental offsetting. If that goes ahead, the loss of farmland could become permanent and unchallengeable. I hope that the Minister will look very carefully at those proposals.

Flooding is another consequence that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs cannot and must not ignore. Fields at Stonnall Road in my constituency and elsewhere do not only grow crops or support livestock; they also absorb water. They drain slowly and hold back surface run-off. If we replace them with bricks, concrete, tarmac and

driveways there will be nowhere for the water to go. We saw this recently with the heavy rain this weekend causing flooding more quickly because the natural buffers have been reduced. Every time it happens, local people ask the same question: why were those fields built on?

Natural flood management relies on soil, hedgerows, woodlands and wetlands, yet that is rarely at the forefront of planning decisions. If we are serious about preventing flooding, we must consider the cumulative impact of losing those natural soakaways. How is DEFRA working with the Environment Agency and local planning authorities to ensure that the flood risk from losing open land is properly accounted for before permissions are given?

I do not wish to challenge your timings, Dr Murrison, so I will start to draw this all together. First, food production must be treated as a strategic priority. Departments should not be signing off major land use decisions without asking the basic question: what does this mean for our ability to grow food and feed our nation? The NFU is absolutely right to call for food security impact assessments on all relevant policies. We have impact tests for almost everything else, and it is extraordinary that food security is not one of them.

Secondly, we need a firm and practical brownfield first approach. That may require investment to remediate sites, improve infrastructure or bring land back into productive use, but the alternative is the steady, irreversible erosion of farmland. Thirdly, the Government should revisit the family farm tax that introduces a new burden and risks forcing families to break up their farms and sell them to developers, which is surely directly at odds with any credible food security strategy.

Fourthly, Ministers must halt the weakening of green-belt protections, including through the grey belt. Our communities need confidence that national policy is not quietly tilting the scales against them. In view of today's ministerial written statement, my communities want to feel they and our councils still have a voice in planning decisions.

Finally, we need a coherent national land use framework that recognises how housing, farming, environment, energy and flood management overlap. We cannot allow one Department to encourage woodland creation on productive fields, while another encourages development on the next field. Joined-up thinking is not a slogan; it is a necessity.

To return to where I began, land use is about choices. In Aldridge-Brownhills, those choices can be seen from our front doors. We know that when farmland disappears, it does not return. We know that if we keep building over productive land, we will become more reliant on food imports and more exposed to global shocks. Food security is not an abstract concept; it is about whether this country can feed itself at a price that people can afford. If we care about that—and we should—we must take seriously the land that makes that possible.

I hope the Minister will recognise the strength of feeling in my constituency and many others. Protecting farmland, resisting unnecessary encroachment on the green belt and supporting farming families are not about nostalgia—far from it; they are practical steps towards a secure and resilient food system. If we get those choices and decisions right, we can deliver the homes we need and safeguard our ability to produce food. If we get them wrong, the consequences will be felt for generations. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

14:52:00

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this debate.

My constituency consists of many acres of high-quality farmland. I am proud to be a Labour MP representing such a vibrant rural community with farming at its core. I hope the Minister is aware of some of the specific challenges in my county. It is no surprise that it is easy to get solar panels into the ground in Norfolk, which is very flat and sandy; we are likely to be near good grid connections as well. We are seeing more than our fair share of solar farm applications. Solar farms are eyeing up our prime farmland. For example, the High Grove application in my constituency, if approved, would see a third of that site on best and most versatile land and 20% on grade 2 and above. At 4,000 acres, it would be one of the largest solar farms in the UK. Anyone can do the maths about the amount of grade 2 agricultural land that would be lost.

John Milne

In my constituency of Horsham, the peaceful rural village of Cowfold has experienced a bewildering surge of applications for green energy projects. Locals could be forgiven for thinking that the industrial revolution has arrived a couple of hundred years late. Why is that happening? I think the point the hon. Member is making is that it is all about the scarcity of connections to the national grid. Does he agree that we need a coherent national strategy for land use that, crucially, carries weight in planning applications? Right now, we are victims in a wild west of market-driven developments.

Terry Jermy

I agree. That is the point my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) made earlier. That is a long overdue measure on a long list forgotten under the previous Government, but it is essential.

I am sure we will be reminded that, overall, only a very small proportion of solar is to take up agricultural land. I understand that and I fully accept it. What I am particularly concerned about is the use of grade 2 and above agricultural

land. The official statistics will inevitably include the lowest quality agricultural land—we have plenty of that in Norfolk as well—but grade 2 and above is precious, and we need to do far more to protect it. We simply cannot improve energy security but accept worsening food security. There cannot be a trade-off: we need both.

There is three times more grade 5 agricultural land in the UK than grade 1 land, yet solar installations occupy a staggering 22 times more grade 1 than grade 5. That is of huge concern. We are already seeing longer and hotter summers, particularly in Norfolk, and there are challenges for farmers; irrigation is needed more frequently, adding to costs, and more land is becoming unviable for food production as a result of climate change.

Let me be clear: I am not against the use of solar panels, and I back the Government's ambitious goals to achieve net zero by 2050. Absolutely nobody would thank the Government for not doing everything they can to ensure the power is there to keep the lights on. The complete lack of action by the last Conservative Government on energy security has left us dangerously exposed—but food security is also important. The UK already imports a staggering 46% of its food. We grow only 15% of our own fruit and 53% of our own vegetables, making us one of the world's largest food importers. A recent Government Food Security report found that we are 63% self-sufficient, down from 95% just 50 years ago. I appreciate that there are certain types of food we cannot grow and we need to look abroad for them, but why are we importing 2 million metric tonnes of potatoes annually?

A recent report by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, found that DEFRA has no effective system of oversight for border checks, with inadequate and sometimes even banned products passing into the UK. The president of the NFU also believes the UK is not prepared to feed itself in a crisis, with specific reference to the consequences of the current climate crisis.

I am always in danger, when talking about food security, of channelling my predecessor and saying, "That is a disgrace!" but we are importing so much food, I dare say she might have had a point. I hope the Minister appreciates the concerns in places such as Norfolk about too much high-quality farmland being used, and agrees that we cannot trade energy security for worsening food security.

14:57:00

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD)

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this important debate.

British farmers are the best in the world. They are the bastions of the countryside and our rural way of life, and the backbone of our food system. If we lose our farms, we lose our food security, and if we lose our food security, we lose our national security and become vulnerable to volatile global markets and reliant on more foreign inputs.

Glastonbury and Somerton is home to more than 800 farms, mainly productive small family farms, and I want to keep it that way, but many farmers I have spoken to feel under assault, as they face increasing and competing demands for their land. Some are likely to give up farming altogether. It is therefore not surprising, but nevertheless worrying, that DEFRA's land use framework consultation stated that 14% of England's agricultural land could be reduced or totally lost to food production by 2050. As UK food security falls and global instability increases, the land use framework must ensure future food resilience.

Henry Dimbleby's national food strategy called for a focus on food production and nature recovery. Those demands can work side by side. Many farmers in Glastonbury and Somerton already champion ecology and nature-friendly methods. To give a few examples, the Lang Partnership in Curry Rivel has done that for more than 30 years, Upton Bridge farm near Long Sutton farms regeneratively, and Higher farm near Castle Cary has planted more than 3,000 trees, sequestering 400 tonnes of carbon and increasing biodiversity by 25% since 2023. The Liberal Democrats are clear: we must financially support farmers to use sustainable, environmentally friendly methods and encourage others to do so. That is why we will properly fund the farming budget, with an additional £1 billion a year.

Meanwhile, half of UK farmers do not understand DEFRA's vision for farming, and it is easy to see why. With the new sustainable farming incentive not yet available and higher-tier schemes open to only a handful, many farmers have been left in limbo. Over 5,800 countryside stewardship agreements were due to end in December, and although they have been given a short 12-month reprieve, that is far too late for many farmers who were forced to make the decision to destroy years of environmental investment because they did not know what was going to happen.

Those projects have delivered biodiversity, flood resilience and nature restoration for decades. If they are not available, farmers will be denied the opportunity to fulfil their crucial role of achieving a more sustainable and resilient food system. The spring spending review cut DEFRA's budget by 2.3% annually in real terms, including a £100 million cut to the farming budget. The Liberal Democrats believe that such cuts risk doing serious harm to the environment, rural economies, farming communities and food security.

We have already seen a long-term contraction in the UK dairy industry. The number of UK dairy farms has fallen by more than 30% since 2015, while the national herd has dropped by nearly 90,000 dairy cows. The recent drop in farm-gate milk prices is yet another example of the mounting pressure threatening dairy farmers' ability to make a living at all.

In response, I introduced the Dairy Farming and Dairy Products Bill to urge the Government to back and protect our dairy farmers. Dairy farmers deserve fairness in the supply chain, so the Government must regulate it properly. In the Bill, I have called for the Secretary of State to ensure that detrimental trade deals do not cause harm to our farmers, and to enforce point-of-origin labelling on dairy products. The public must know the provenance of their food so that they can make the right choice and are not duped into buying products purporting to be British. I have also called for the Secretary of State to give the Groceries Code Adjudicator teeth and to combine it with a dairy supply chain adjudicator so there are proper enforcement powers.

Our agricultural sector needs fairness, not financial whiplash, and a Government who back it. Instead, it is now facing the impact of the family farm tax and the risks that poses to national food security. The Government have claimed that the policy will impact “only” 27% of farms, but NFU research has shown that 75% of commercial family farms will exceed the £1 million threshold. Analysis shows that an inheritance tax bill based on a £1 million threshold, even spread over 10 years, would far exceed the average return of a medium-sized farm and absorb most earnings from larger farms.

An example of that is Paul and Ruth Kimber, who farm near Charlton Musgrove. They told me that their family have farmed there for 350 years, but they could be the ones who close their farm gates for the very last time. If the policy does not change, many farms will be forced to sell land and other assets to pay the tax. A recent Liberal Democrat freedom of information request uncovered the fact that the Government looked at changing course on this earlier this year. On behalf of farmers in Glastonbury and Somerton and across the country, I strongly urge the Government to look at it once more. Otherwise, they will put our food security at risk.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair)

I will begin calling the Front Benchers at 3.28 pm, so hon. Members need to be aware of time. I am sure that Chris Hinchliff will be an exemplar.

15:04:00

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab)

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and my employment by CPRE before my election to Parliament. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on securing this important debate.

There are fair questions to answer about the effectiveness of planning policies that are supposed to protect our best farmland. They are currently failing far too often, but this is not a new problem, and the Tory record of preserving agricultural land for our food security is, I am afraid, rather shaky. In the 12 years from 2010, we lost more than 14,000 hectares of prime agricultural land to development.

Having listened to Conservative Members speak on this issue many times, I suspect that the debate today is really something of a proxy war. They use the issue of food security as a smokescreen for the fact that they oppose the aesthetic impacts of turning large swathes of our countryside into industrialised landscapes under steel and glass, surrounded by wire fencing and surveillance cameras. I would encourage them to be brave and defend beauty on its own terms.

Wendy Morton

I could not resist intervening on the hon. Gentleman about the rationale for this debate. I spoke about food security in the last Parliament, and I gently say that his interpretation of this debate does not resonate with mine.

Chris Hinchliff

That is a very fair intervention—I take the point. Indeed, the right hon. Member made some powerful arguments about the beauty of our countryside, and we should be up front about the fact that those aesthetic values are worth fighting for—perhaps I should have put it like that. I do not think my hon. Friends on the Government Benches should scorn that argument either, as protecting the beauty of Britain's countryside for all our citizens is a proud part of Labour's heritage. From creating national parks that steward our best landscapes for future generations to launching national trails that are enjoyed by millions and, yes, even establishing the green belt, the Labour movement has always yearned for bread and roses too.

Returning to food security, it has been far too long since we have taken the issue seriously. We have grown complacent in the surety that, as a rich nation, we can import all we want and need. With the worsening climate emergency, however, it would now be entirely unwise to assume that we can continue to rely on those supply chains—when Valencia next floods, we will remember that to our cost—or to step back from trying to achieve net zero. The threat of flooding from climate change to so much of our best agricultural land is too great for that to make any sense, with 95% of grade 1 land in the east of England already at risk of flooding.

We must urgently update our agricultural land classification. The system we use to determine potential farmland productivity is desperately out of date. It uses rainfall data from 1941 to 1970 and temperature measurements from 1961 to 1980. The impacts of climate change are already being severely felt on our farmland and intensive farming is degrading soils, with 5.3 million tonnes of organic carbon lost from our soils every year, so the likelihood is that the

current agricultural land classification system substantially overestimates land productivity. We must update it.

Food security is about not just the amount of land under agricultural use, but what we are producing. Food security must mean nutritional security. To take this seriously, the Government must set a clear and measurable target for a higher proportion of our nation's nutritional needs, according to a recognised diet such as the NHS "Eatwell Guide", to be met reliably by domestic production to high environmental standards. Achieving that will require national policy to guide substantial changes in the amount and types of food that we produce domestically. The essential element of genuine food security is establishing a national policy framework that provides certainty and incentives for farmers to invest in practices that prioritise nutritional needs and environmental outcomes, but that will likely see their yields fluctuate in the short term.

When we consider energy security, Government contracts for difference ensure a minimum price that gives suppliers the confidence to invest in the production needed to secure national policy objectives. Food security is no less essential than energy security, and farming practices that restore nature are as important as the transition to renewable energy. A Government serious about making genuine food security profitable to produce should establish new contracts for food security based on the contracts for difference mechanism in the energy sector, providing certainty through price floors for the key produce necessary to meet the nation's nutritional needs. That is how we can achieve genuine food security.

15:09:00

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. The number of competing demands on Britain's land is growing rapidly. To put that into context, Britain has about the same population as France, but the area of England, Scotland and Wales combined is only about one third of the area of France, and most of us live squished into the bottom half of it. Of course, land is the one resource that we cannot create more of—as Mark Twain allegedly said, "Buy land, they're not making it any more."

I am keenly aware of that situation in my South Cotswolds constituency where a housing development in one place means a risk of flooding in another, and a solar farm or gravel extraction means less grazing land for Wiltshire's cows—a subject that I am sure is dear to your heart, Dr Murrison. I was therefore delighted earlier this year when the Government launched their national consultation on land use, highlighting the potential to restore nature, support food production, strengthen climate resilience and deliver new housing and infrastructure. I absolutely applaud those ambitions, which matter deeply in an age of current and potential global shocks.

As already mentioned, at the moment the UK imports about 40% of its food, and for fruit and vegetables that proportion is even higher. In 2023, after Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, food price inflation reached its highest point in 45 years, adding to the pain of families already struggling to afford the basics. Food and energy sovereignty are not abstract concepts—they are the foundations of a healthy population and a resilient nation—yet sadly, some of the actions taken by the Government since launching the land use framework conversation suggest that they see land as a zero-sum game. House building is pitted against biodiversity, and renewable energy projects come at the expense of food production. That is not going to work.

I will make a couple of points. First, we must recognise the need to move beyond departmental silos and work across Departments in a truly systemic, holistic approach. At the moment, it all feels rather piecemeal, which leaves farmers, councils and communities grappling with apparently contradictory demands. We need a genuinely multi-functional, multi-layered land use framework—one that recognises each piece of land's ability to meet multiple needs at once. The amazing pilot programmes conducted by the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission show what is possible. These pilots in Devon and Cambridgeshire show that co-ordinated planning can support housing, energy, transport, net zero, biodiversity, food production and nature recovery all at the same time.

Planning decisions must reflect the local geography, economies, needs and opportunities, and they must incorporate the detailed local knowledge of residents. If not, their implementation will likely fail and they will not be welcomed by our communities. In my constituency, housing targets have doubled under the Government's house building plans. The proposed 2,000 acre Lime Down solar farm would remove a huge area of farmland from production, which is causing huge local concern and pushback. Of course it is true that we need to decarbonise and protect our natural environment, but that does not need to come at the expense of local communities and food production capability.

Bradley Thomas

Does the hon. Lady regret that the Liberal Democrat manifesto said that the Liberal Democrats want to build even more houses than the Labour party?

Dr Savage

We are calling for more affordable houses and social housing. I stand by that commitment. What we are seeing at the moment is a free-for-all for developers. Unfortunately, now that we no longer have the five-year housing land supply, we cannot be sure that we are going to build the right kinds of houses in the right places at the right price.

I call on the Government to publish the land use strategy as soon as possible. It must extend far beyond DEFRA. Multi-functional land use is about transport, housing, energy, local government and more, so we need a genuinely joined-up

approach.

My second and last point is that our farmers need clarity and support. Henry Dimbleby's national food strategy describes the vicious cycle where agriculture both contributes to climate change and is threatened by it. Instead of breaking the cycle, the Government are creating an economic environment that pushes farmers towards damaging practices, such as excessive fertiliser use and intensive animal agriculture, because farmers see no other viable option if they are to stay in business. From speaking with my farmers across South Cotswolds, I know that they are keen to be allies in tackling climate change and biodiversity loss, but they are being met with mixed messages and one economic blow after another, such as the family farm tax and the abrupt end of the SFI, as has been mentioned. Those decisions undermine both climate resilience and farmers' livelihoods.

We need a strategy that aligns the land use framework, the food strategy and a credible farming road map. We need transparency about how the Government intend to deliver the 10 priority outcomes set out in their food strategy. That is eminently possible. With thoughtful, holistic planning, collaborative working and genuine respect for local knowledge, the Government can chart a path that strengthens our food system, restores our natural world and delivers the development our country needs.

15:15:00

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank my constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), for securing this debate on an issue that sits right at the heart of our nation's resilience. This is a real area of interest for me, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on UK food security and a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Our land is finite, so every acre has to do as much as possible for the country. The choices we make about it must balance food production, nature recovery, clean energy, and the homes and infrastructure we need. If we get the balance right, we not only protect our landscapes, but strengthen our ability to feed the nation and support rural livelihoods for decades to come.

A lot of good groundwork has already been done, as we have heard. Henry Dimbleby's national food strategy set out a compelling vision for our food system and the need for a land use framework to break down Whitehall silos. The national conversation launched earlier this year, involving voices from farming, conservation and communities, shows that Ministers want to get this right. The evidence base gathered gives us something solid to build on, and the publication of the new food strategy for England, with its 10 high-level recommendations, is another important step towards a resilient, affordable and sustainable food system.

The consultation on the land use framework gave us estimates for the amount of land that may need to shift partly or wholly away from agricultural use—the former representing about 10% of land and the latter 9%. Our commitments to the environment, biodiversity and clean energy production necessitate changes in the way that we use land, but I share the view of many in the farming community and the wider food supply chain that we cannot afford to see food production as a sideshow—a “nice to have”. As the Prime Minister said, food security is national security.

We are acutely aware, of course, of the threats posed by cyber-attacks. In my region we have seen the devastating effects of the attack on Jaguar Land Rover and the thousands of jobs that were jeopardised by that prolonged shutdown. In response to that and other high-profile attacks, the public and private sectors alike are rightly investing in cyber-security. Let us place the same emphasis on food security. I am sure we all remember shelves going empty as global supply chains were disrupted during the pandemic, and we have also seen how the price of staples such as wheat has been affected by the invasion of Ukraine. It is not hard to envisage how geopolitical instability or bad actors could destabilise our food supply chains.

By safeguarding agricultural land primarily for food production and by supporting productivity improvements and innovation that help to maintain domestic food production, we can bolster the nation's resilience in this crucial area. From my work with the all-party parliamentary group on UK food security, I know that farmers are ready to embrace new tools and techniques, but they can do so only in an environment of long-term certainty, with clear policies and priorities.

On the contentious issue of our transition to clean energy, the National Energy System Operator's analysis and the solar road map show that the land required for renewables is comparatively modest, and can in some cases remain compatible with farming, for example sheep and poultry grazing, or with measures under the environmental land management schemes. That is not always possible, of course, and that is why we should prioritise high-grade land for arable farming. That is where a land use framework is so crucial.

I am pleased to see that the Government are treating the framework, the environmental improvement plan and other strategies as interconnected. What the sector now needs is a land use framework that does four things: ensures that all the strategies being worked up dovetail, supports food production as a national priority to enable the delivery of environmental goods, facilitates the clean energy transition while ensuring rural communities benefit, and provides clarity and confidence for the people who steward the land every day. With strong evidence, honest conversations and a shared commitment to national resilience, we can ensure that our land delivers for food, nature recovery, clean energy and

thriving communities.

15:19:00

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD)

I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this important debate. It is important for the entire country, including my constituents in Chichester, who regularly think about the land and the way it is used. In our area, with the pressures from the South Downs national park at one end and Chichester harbour at the other, we experience coastal squeeze. There has also been a lot of development across a band of our constituency that used to be used for agricultural practices and farming.

I have some very specific points for the Minister. The NFU has raised concerns about the fruit and veg scheme, which ends in December without a replacement. The impact on my soft fruit farmers in Chichester will be significant. The fruit and veg scheme has been a crucial driver of growth despite a budget of only £40 million a year.

Although food security has never been more crucial, the UK is only 15% self-sufficient in fruit and 53% in vegetables. There was previously a commitment to deliver a replacement scheme. This scheme is due to close at the end of the year, so it would be helpful if the Minister could reflect on whether there will be any support coming forward for soft fruit farmers and fruit and vegetable farmers in this country.

The next point is on an important, but slightly niche topic: in recent years, we are just starting to understand the importance of a varied gut microbiome to ensuring health. Less is understood about the soil microbiome, but I had the opportunity to attend the Goodwood health summit a couple of months ago where we explored the soil microbiome. There is a link between the food that is grown in the soil and that soil's microbiome.

Hydroponics are a source of innovation in the farming industry and food security. It is facilitating the growth of fruit and vegetables on less land in a way that uses less water and has higher yields. I celebrate the companies in my constituency that are championing that way of growing, but that cannot be used to justify the loss of our agricultural land. Just because we can grow up, it does not mean that we should stop growing out. Things that are actually grown in our soil have been proven to carry a far more complex set of nutrients that we need to be able to sustain life on this planet and our own health, including a healthy gut microbiome.

Chichester, as a warm, sunny and low-lying coastal plain with some of the highest levels of grade 2 agricultural land in the country, wants to play its part in the country's food security, but all of those farmers need to be given the right environment to be able to do that. I would also like to briefly champion the horticultural sector, which is valued at more than £5 billion. It accounts for just 2% of farmed land and the delivery of nearly 20% of the total value from farming.

I have a number of horticultural businesses in my constituency, and I pay tribute to the role they play in our land use, supporting us all to make our own little patches of land in our gardens and patios as beautiful as they can be.

15:23:00

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)

It is a genuine joy to serve under your guidance, Dr Murrison. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) not just for her good speech, but for securing this important debate.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) and South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), as well as the hon. Members for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) and Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), all of whom made excellent contributions and made this a really thoughtful, worthwhile debate. I hope I have not missed anybody out. I also welcome the Minister. It is possibly the first time she has addressed Westminster Hall in her current role as the new Minister; I welcome her and look forward to many exchanges.

Britain is not secure unless it is food secure. The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills made a really important point when she quoted the former MI5 director general Baroness Manningham-Buller. I have an additional quote from her:

"The more self-sufficient we are as a nation, the better our ability to withstand price spikes, geopolitical shocks and instability around the world. The truth is, we are moving in the wrong direction".

She is sadly right, and that is horrific. Various figures have been bandied around, but DEFRA's own figures show that in 1984, the UK was 78% self-sufficient. If DEFRA is right, we are now no better than 65 %; the NFU's figure is more like 60%, and I think that I am more likely to believe it. Either way, there is clearly a massive decline in our self-sufficiency. It is vital that our land use policy ensures that we produce the food that Britain needs.

Leaving the European Union perhaps held one single, solitary silver lining: that we would leave the common agricultural policy and be able to set out on our own with something a lot less counterproductive. Yet even that silver lining turned darker, and the last Conservative Government must take responsibility. They are singularly culpable for ignoring our farming communities, taking their votes for granted, and completely botching the transition to the new environmental land

management scheme. Nobody knows—and I could not say—whether they did that harm to our farmers by accident or design, but outrageously, we now have an agricultural policy that actively disincentivises the production of food. That is madness. We must reverse that damage, because that figure for self-sufficiency will only further decrease unless we take radical action.

At the heart of the food security problem is the counterproductive transition from the old payment scheme. Conservative and now Labour Governments have persisted with the same flawed approach—a stop-start payment system that leaves farmers unable to plan even a year ahead, even though farming demands planning cycles over years or even generations. Farmers are being asked to make long-term decisions about land use, stock numbers, crop planting and environmental improvements based on schemes that change suddenly, launch late, or simply close with no warning. The sustainable farming incentive is a prime and awful example. In March this year, farmers were one day being encouraged to apply, then the next day, the door was slammed shut. It is still shut.

Jess Brown-Fuller

I thank my hon. Friend for reflecting on the real and dangerous impact that the sudden closure of the SFI scheme had on farmers. One farm in my constituency was left in limbo by the announcement, having spent four months trying to switch to the SFI scheme. However, to do that, it needed to leave the community stewardship facilitation fund scheme—a process that took months, which meant that it could not complete its SFI application. It then found itself without SFI or the community stewardship facilitation fund. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a totally unacceptable situation for any farmer?

Tim Farron

It is completely unacceptable and the consequences have been huge. I had a public meeting with farmers, on the day after the SFI drawbridge was pulled up, I think, and there is huge anger and disillusionment. There are people who will now not even look at the schemes because they do not trust them anymore. I ask the Minister: when will SFI reopen, and will she ensure that it is accessible to the maximum number of people?

Of course, all that is happening at the same time as the Government's choice to slash the basic payment scheme—what is left of it—by 76% this year alone. The BPS—the old farm payment scheme—has been phased out at sprint speed while its replacements have barely limped into existence, and with small, family farms at the back of the queue. Basically, if someone is wealthy enough to afford land agents and to have the luxury of being able to spend time off their farm, they can get into a scheme. However, if they are working for 90 hours a week to keep a roof over their head, they are outside it. It has been a redistribution of public money from the poor to the rich and away from food production. Now, for the first time since the 1940s, England has no universal option for farmers.

When farmers cannot rely on payments, access schemes or forecast their income, we run the risk of losing them altogether. That is a crushing blow for farming families—people who farmed their valley for generations and have realised that perhaps on their watch, they will lose that farm. Just imagine what that does to the wellbeing and mental health of the people on whom we depend for our food and for nature.

The impact is particularly acute for hill farmers, such as those around the lakes and dales of Cumbria, who maintain some of the most treasured landscapes that we have, and yet they endure some of the lowest farm incomes. The University of Cumbria's figures show that by the end of next year, the average income for a hill farmer will be just 55% of the national minimum wage.

Of course, the proposed inheritance tax charges cause further damage. Those same hill farmers—who are earning, let us say, £15,000 to £16,000 a year—will be hit with a typical tax bill of around £20,000 a year over 10 years. Those hill farmers will have to sell, usually to bigger, less productive estates or a big city corporation seeking to use the land for offsetting, often leading to a monoculture, not a restoration of nature, and certainly not for producing food. The family farm tax is not just unfair; it further incentivises a reduction in Britain's ability to feed itself. It is a strategic disaster as well as being unjust.

Secondly, the Government's failure to publish the land use framework that they promised is causing huge uncertainty and damaging our ability to feed ourselves. Without a clear national strategy, decisions about land are being made in the dark. Farmers cannot know whether to prioritise food production, long-term environmental projects or diversification. Developers and investors act on speculation rather than strategy. A proper framework would give clarity about where food production must be protected. At present, the delay in publishing the land use framework is actively undermining food security.

Thirdly and finally, on top of all this instability we are still waiting for a national food security strategy from the Government. I always hear that the Government have acknowledged that food security and national security are linked, but they have not acted with seriousness or urgency to get an action plan in place. We cannot hope to secure our food supply without a plan that links food production, affordability, nutrition, public procurement, fairness in the marketplace, farming, nature and trade. For instance, about a quarter of the food grown in the United Kingdom, amounting to up to 5 million tonnes of edible food, is wasted every year. The proportion of the population in households experiencing food poverty is 11%, but for children the figure is 18%. Schools, hospitals and care homes rely too heavily on imported food that could be produced affordably and sustainably here at home. A national food security strategy would bring coherence to these challenges. Instead, we have delay.

Of course, food security is national security, but simply mouthing those words will not help us to rise to the challenge of ensuring that the UK's vital food supplies are protected against various threats. The Liberal Democrats are determined to offer a plan for food security that encourages and rewards those who labour 365 days a year to feed us, and to whom we are enormously grateful. It is the role of the Government to back them and produce an overarching strategy, across every part of national and local government, to ensure that food security is a practical priority. The Liberal Democrats would ensure that ELM schemes are boosted with an additional £1 billion-worth of investment towards active farmers and would reverse the damaging family farm tax, which is killing investment in farming and will further suppress food production. We will ensure that food security is formally considered a public good through the ELM schemes.

We will also have an overarching food security strategy across every Government Department, because we declare that the fundamental error of this and the previous Government is that they have bought the lie that there is a contest between whether we produce food or whether we restore our natural environment. That is nonsense. Without farmers we will not eat, and the best environmental policies in the world will simply remain useless—bits of paper in a drawer—unless we have farmers putting them into practice. Farmers in Cumbria and across the whole United Kingdom are vital to food security and to our natural environment. It is time we listened to them and made Government their help and not a hindrance.

15:33:00

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for securing this important debate. We have had valuable contributions from Members across the House. I thank everyone for contributing to this debate on land use and food security, which matters to many of our constituents. May I also use this opportunity to welcome the Minister to her place? I think this is the first time that the two of us have been opposite one another. I would like to work constructively with her as we go forward, to ensure that food security is at the heart of Government policy.

As we all know, land is a finite resource—no one is making any more land—so a national conversation about how we use our land and what use we put it to is crucial. Most importantly, we must ensure that food security is at the heart of that conversation. Right now, as we speak in this Chamber, farmers outside are protesting against the direction in which this Labour Government are taking our food security agenda—most pressingly because of the Budget next week and the issue of the family farm tax, which I will come to. As a result of the choices that the Government have made over the last 16 or so months, we are, quite simply, in a food and farming emergency.

The sustainable farming incentive has been mentioned, but I want to talk to the challenges that many of our farmers are facing to do with cash flow and the cash-flow pressures on our farming businesses. These are the result of the sustainable farming incentive being chopped and the implications of the delinked payments being dramatically reduced to an annual payment of £600 in years six and seven of the transition period. Those dramatically reduced payment rates are having an impact on cash flow. The stopping of capital grants is also having an impact on many of our farming businesses. The end of the fruit and vegetables scheme—it was disbanded with no announcement beyond the end of this calendar year—is also impacting many of our horticultural businesses and has created huge uncertainty for our many farming businesses.

Then there are the taxes announced by the Chancellor, including the dramatic increase in employers' national insurance and the increase in the minimum wage. That has created a disparity between those on the minimum wage and those wanting to get a bit more, and has imposed a huge additional burden on many of our farming businesses. Business rates relief has been significantly reduced, while the fertiliser tax and the double cab pickup tax have been implemented. Those are all decisions that the Chancellor has made in the last 16 months or so, and which have impacted the cash flow of many of our farming businesses. Banks are now speaking to our farming businesses and wanting certainty that they will be able to service their debt. Why? Because many of our farming businesses have an average rate of return of 1%, if not less—sometimes they do not even break even. They are now therefore struggling to provide certainty to the banks that they will be able to service the debt that they hold.

All that is before we start talking about the family farm tax. Simply reducing a 100% relief on agricultural and business property to a threshold of £1 million will impact every farming or family business across the country. The average size of a farm is about 200 acres. Once we take into account the value of the farm land, the cottage, the growing crops, the stocks in store and the machinery, the value will be well above the £1 million threshold, thereby exposing every farming business to an inheritance tax liability of over 20%—one that they simply will not be able to pay. That is the elephant in the room, which not one of the Labour Members spoke about in their speech, despite this being a debate about food security.

Chris Hinchliff

My constituents have raised many of the concerns that the hon. Member has just described about the proposed changes to agricultural property relief, which I recognise. However, will he say whether his party recognises any of the points that the Government are making about that? Do they accept that some improvement could be made to the previous agricultural property relief? Or would the hon. Member just return it to how it was and not make any changes whatsoever?

Robbie Moore

Our position on the family farm tax is absolutely clear: the 100% relief on APR and business property relief needs to remain in place. That is why, as the Conservative party, we are absolutely clear that the family farm tax needs to be axed. When we come to the vote on the Finance Bill, I hope that the hon Member will join us on this side of the House and put his words into action by voting against this disastrous tax policy that this Labour Government are bringing about.

It is disappointing that the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), despite being the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on UK food security, did not mention the inheritance tax changes once in his contribution.

Wendy Morton

On the point about the Budget, I hope that the Chancellor is listening to this debate. She has made several speculative announcements and some U-turns on various tax and financial policy decisions in the last 16 months. Does my hon. Friend agree that she still has the opportunity, if she so wishes, to change her mind?

Robbie Moore

I do hope that the Chancellor is listening to this debate and also that she engages with the farming community. It is incredibly disappointing that the Chancellor has not once met with the NFU, the Country Land and Business Association, the Tenant Farmers Association or the Central Association for Agricultural Valuers in the 12 months since the last Budget was announced. It is a disgrace. Therefore, what is the Minister doing to convince the Treasury to axe the family farm tax—the reduction of the 100% relief on agricultural and business properties?

If it was not enough for the Government to go after our elder generation and our family businesses, they are also going after our next generation, with the decision to scrap the £30,000 grant to the National Federation of Young Farmers. It is an absolute disgrace. Then we have the land use framework consultation, which is setting a direction of taking about 18% of land out of food production for other things—whether it is energy security, housing, biodiversity, offsetting or nutrient neutrality—and away from increasing food productivity. All that is on top of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which further empowers Natural England, not to acquire land at market value, but to acquire it at agricultural value, disregarding hope value. That all suggests that this Government are not interested in food security.

We have yet to receive the findings of the road map for farming, and Baroness Batters of the other place has spent a good deal of time—six months—producing a profitability review, which is on the Secretary of State's desk. That was meant to be published before the Budget, but what has the Secretary of State said? It will not be published before the Budget, but before Christmas. I ask the Minister a second question: where on earth is that profitability review? Why will it not be published before the Budget, so that we can at least use it to urge the Chancellor to do the right thing? I call on the Government to release the profitability review this week, so that the farming community, stakeholders and all Members of Parliament can digest it before the Budget next week.

I cannot stress how urgently we need clarity and certainty from the Government. The implications of the land use framework consultation; the profitability review not being published; the increased taxes on our farming businesses; the decisions to dramatically reduce delinked payments and close the SFI—these are all causing huge uncertainty. What does it say to our many farmers who are outside this building protesting right now when a Chancellor is making those decisions and is not even willing to engage? The emotional toll on our farming community is stark. I therefore urge the Government to have the decency to engage urgently, before the Budget next week, so that our farmers can have clarity on how they use their land.

The Farming Minister will no doubt say that food security is national security, as the Prime Minister has already said. But those are only warm words if they are not backed up with sound policymaking across Departments that brings out a proper food strategy, has all-Government buy-in—including from the Treasury—and does not have a huge, detrimental impact on how our farmers use their land or on their hopes to increase food security for the good and the health of the nation.

15:42:00

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle)

It is a great pleasure to respond to this debate with you in the Chair, Dr Murrison—I hope you are warmer than I am, having sat in what is quite a cold room for the entire debate. It has been a good debate, so I would like to congratulate the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on her success in securing it. We have had a good and serious debate across all parties about a serious, if somewhat complex and multifaceted, issue.

Food security is about land use, but it is also wider than that, so I will begin my response by explaining how the Government are approaching this issue in the round. I do not think anyone would argue that food security is not an important part of our national security. If they were going to argue that before covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, I do not see how they could possibly argue it after living through those occurrences and seeing the effects and implications that those unanticipated events had on our ability to be resilient in future unforeseen circumstances. Being open-minded to learn the lessons, and doing our best to anticipate what the challenges of the future might be, is an important part of how we develop a more resilient stance than we would have if our post-war complacency—if I could put it that way—had carried on without what has happened in the last few years.

Anticipating the challenges of the future requires a close working relationship with the food sector. I chair F4, which brings

together the National Farmers' Union, the Food and Drink Federation, the British Retail Consortium and UKHospitality. That group represents the food system from farm to fork, and ensures that we are prepared for disruption to food supply chains and that we can respond quickly to threats as they emerge. We have heard about some of the threats from right hon. and hon. Members today, ranging from cyber-security threats to threats from Ukraine. Nobody has mentioned pests or diseases, but that is another potential threat that farmers know only too well. We have sadly experienced that in this country while I have been a Member of Parliament.

Robust analysis and transparency are critical. That is why we will publish an annual food security digest report, in addition to the UK food security report, which is published every three years. The most recent was published last December. Those reports highlight how diverse international trade routes and resilient domestic production systems ensure that any disruption from risks, such as adverse weather or disease, does not affect the UK's overall security of supply.

Figures have been bandied around by different people about the percentage of our food we grow ourselves. UK agriculture currently provides 65% of the food we eat—77% of what we can actually grow here. We may not be brilliant at growing bananas, even though people love to eat them. The figure rises from 65% to 77% if we take account of what we can grow in our climate. Those figures have been more or less stable over 20 years.

Recent geopolitical challenges have highlighted increasing risks to food security, but have also demonstrated the resilience of our food system. As we develop implementation plans for the food strategy, we are applying lessons learned from covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine about how to prepare for, respond to and recover from shocks.

For example, one of the lessons from covid-19 was the key role that local communities and food systems played in maintaining access to food, particularly for the most vulnerable. I know from my experience during that strange time that working with the local authority and local kitchens was a far better way of ensuring that those who had to shield had access to useable, nutritious food. That is why the food strategy will focus on strengthening local food systems.

I am working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to end mass dependence on food parcels, which is a moral scar on our society. I raise that point because food security is also about the ability of every citizen to access the nutrition they need. The new crisis and resilience fund will enable local authorities to provide preventive support for communities and assistance to individuals facing a financial shock, improving citizens' financial resilience and reducing the need for future crisis support.

We also face challenges to the resilience of domestic food production systems from soil degradation, disease and climate change. Those are critical long-term risks, but we should be clear that the impacts are here today. We need only speak to a farmer whose fields were underwater last winter and then parched and drought-ridden this summer. They would say that that is not a theoretical risk, but a threat to food production today. That is a threat we can manage because we need to take climate change seriously and do something about it, as we do with more conventional threats.

Wendy Morton

I am genuinely interested in what the Minister is saying about food and food systems, but how does she see the connection between that and our farmers? We do not want anybody to be reliant on a food parcel, but what is her Department doing to ensure that the food in a kitchen, in a parcel or on our shelves is produced by British farmers? That is at the heart of this debate: British food security.

Dame Angela Eagle

I was coming to that. I am happy to get across my view of what this should be. The food strategy that we published in July makes clear that we will act to ensure that our food system can thrive and grow sustainably and continue to provide a resilient and secure supply of healthy, safe and affordable food. It sets out that that should include investment, innovation and productivity, and a fairer, more transparent supply chain, which is why we are dealing with the supply chain adjudicators and introducing regulation on how to ensure fairness. Dairy and pigs are already in a process, but other work is being done for other sectors to ensure that a fair price is paid for the food that is produced, which is important.

Boosting the resilience of our food system will prepare it better for supply chain shocks and disruption. Some of what we have to do is ensure resilience to climate change, which will make us more resilient in the way in which we produce food. Environmental changes therefore go hand in hand with protecting food production. If we do not make our landscapes more resilient and more sustainable environmentally, it is likely that the productivity of our land will decline and it will be harder as the climate changes for us to guarantee reasonable food production. Some of those things bolster each other and should not be set against one another, as the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said in her opening remarks. They can produce a more effective and more resilient result if we do them effectively and properly.

We already manage the resilience of domestic production through updated environmental land management schemes. The good news is that actions taken today to manage these immediate risks can also reduce the risk from climate change. There is a £7 billion farming budget focused on improving the resilience of our food systems. That maintains the Government's commitment to farming, food security and nature's recovery. It includes £5.9 billion for environmental farming schemes, £816 million for tree planting and £385 million for peatland restoration, all of which is vital for sustainability.

The farming budget will pay for land management actions that reduce flood and drought risk for arable systems and

manage heat risk for livestock. The Government will also provide £15 million in funding to stop millions of tonnes of good, fresh farm food going to waste by redirecting that surplus into the hands of those who need it.

The new energy infrastructure and new homes are not a risk to food security. Today, ground-mounted solar covers 13,000 hectares of land, which is 0.1% of England and 0.15% of English agricultural land. Half the agricultural land generating solar power is still producing food because it is dual-use—there are sheep grazing, and so on, on it. By 2035, the plan is for the percentage to rise to 0.4% of England as we increase our solar power generation capacity from 18 GW to 75 GW.

To put that into perspective, golf courses take up 0.7% of UK land and grouse moors take up 4%. At the moment, solar is at 0.1%, with plans to go up to 0.4%. People may not like solar panels appearing in and around the areas they live in, but they are not a threat to food security.

Wendy Morton

I must respectfully disagree with the right hon. Lady—

Dame Angela Eagle

Hon. Lady.

Wendy Morton

I beg your pardon—the hon. Lady. Maybe one day! It is one thing to see a few sheep grazing under a solar panel, but my point is about agricultural arable land that grows crops. I have yet to see a solar panel in an arable field because I do not think that is possible.

Dame Angela Eagle

I was not trying to make out that arable crops could graze around solar panels—

Wendy Morton

The hon. Lady gets my point.

Dame Angela Eagle

The right hon. Lady is correct, but I am trying to get this into perspective in terms of overall land use.

There have been many calls for the land use framework to be published. I hope I can reassure hon. and right hon. Member that we will publish it early next year. Having looked at some of it, I am totally fascinated by it; when we publish it, I think we will have very many interesting debates about what it demonstrates. As I see it, the food strategy goes together with the land use framework, which goes together with the farming road map—all of which are in parallel production even as we speak.

Robbie Moore

Cash flow challenges are hitting many of our farming businesses right now. Baroness Batters, of the other place, has produced a profitability review, which seems to be hidden in the depths of the Department at the moment. Will the Minister guarantee that the profitability review will be published this week, before the Budget, so that all our farmers, the stakeholders and us, as Members of Parliament, can scrutinise it and lobby the Chancellor to make the right decisions before the Budget next week?

Dame Angela Eagle

I do not think that the lack of appearance of Baroness Batters's report has stopped anyone lobbying the Chancellor; lobbying is happening outside even as we speak.

Robbie Moore

But will it be published?

Dame Angela Eagle

Of course it will be published.

Robbie Moore

Before the Budget?

Dame Angela Eagle

Of course it will be published, and it will be published this year. I cannot think of any Government who produce large reports on matters of interest in the week before the Budget. The hon. Gentleman can expect to see it this year, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State told the EFRA Committee in evidence, I think last week.

I could understand why the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills would be worried if solar farms were planned to take up more than 0.4% of land in England in the next period, up to 2035, but they are not. Also, the 1.5 million homes that this Government have said they will deliver in this Parliament are likely to take up approximately 26,000 hectares, which is 0.2% of English land. That is quite a small land take to transform the lives of the many hundreds of thousands of

people who are currently in need of homes. The Government are quite right to pursue a target of 1.5 million homes, and clearly one needs to build those homes on land. As I said, 26,000 hectares, which is 0.2% of English land, is the approximate amount of land that will be needed to ensure that we can house many people who currently do not have the prospect of having a home of their own.

Bradley Thomas

I want to give the Minister an opportunity to answer a question that I have asked several Ministers in the main Chamber. My constituents and I do not dispute the need for more housing in the country, nor do we dispute that it needs to be located in areas where people want to live, but what would she say to my constituents living across Bromsgrove and the villages—an area that is 89% green belt and 79% rural—when I tell her that, as a result of choices made by this Government, our housing target has increased by 85% while the housing target in adjacent Birmingham has decreased by more than 30%? Every area has to take its fair share, but does she agree that that is a grossly unfair imbalance?

Dame Angela Eagle

In the small amount of time left to me before the end of the debate, it is hard for me to answer the hon. Gentleman. It is not up to me to take decisions about local planning issues of that kind. That is what local plans are for.

I thank the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills for securing the debate. I know that she wants to say a few words, so I will sit down.

15:59:00

Wendy Morton

We have had a good debate, but I feel that the conversation has only just started. So many questions remain. The key point is that food security needs to be recognised as critical to national security. There is no more time for warm words; we need some action. Our farmers and our farming community need action.

I will try quickly to list all my asks. I would love the Government to take food security seriously, support our farmers and farming, axe the family farm tax, deliver a truly brownfield-first approach to development, and listen and respect the views of our farmers and local communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of land use change on food security.