

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

## AGRICULTURE BILL

*Ninth Sitting*

*Tuesday 3 March 2020*

*(Morning)*

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CLAUSES 8 TO 26 agreed to, one with an amendment.  
Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.

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**not later than**

**Saturday 7 March 2020**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chairs:* SIR DAVID AMESS, † GRAHAM STRINGER

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| † Brock, Deidre ( <i>Edinburgh North and Leith</i> ) (SNP)    | † Kruger, Danny ( <i>Devizes</i> ) (Con)  |
| † Clarke, Theo ( <i>Stafford</i> ) (Con)                      | † McCarthy, Kerry ( <i>Bristol East</i> ) (Lab)   |
| † Courts, Robert ( <i>Witney</i> ) (Con)                      | † Morris, James ( <i>Halesowen and Rowley Regis</i> ) (Con)   |
| † Crosbie, Virginia ( <i>Ynys Môn</i> ) (Con)                 | † Oppong-Asare, Abena ( <i>Erith and Thamesmead</i> ) (Lab)   |
| † Debonnaire, Thangam ( <i>Bristol West</i> ) (Lab)           | † Prentis, Victoria ( <i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs</i> ) |
| † Dines, Miss Sarah ( <i>Derbyshire Dales</i> ) (Con)         | † Whittome, Nadia ( <i>Nottingham East</i> ) (Lab)  |
| † Doogan, Dave ( <i>Angus</i> ) (SNP)                         | † Zeichner, Daniel ( <i>Cambridge</i> ) (Lab)   |
| † Goodwill, Mr Robert ( <i>Scarborough and Whitby</i> ) (Con) |   |
| † Jones, Fay ( <i>Brecon and Radnorshire</i> ) (Con)          | Kenneth Fox, Kevin Maddison, <i>Committee Clerks</i>  |
| † Jones, Ruth ( <i>Newport West</i> ) (Lab)                   |   |
| † Jupp, Simon ( <i>East Devon</i> ) (Con)                     |   |
| † Kearns, Alicia ( <i>Rutland and Melton</i> ) (Con)          | † <b>attended the Committee</b>   |

## Public Bill Committee

Tuesday 3 March 2020

(Morning)

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

### Agriculture Bill

9.25 am

**The Chair:** Before we continue with line-by-line consideration of the Bill, I remind Members to switch off electronic devices or put them on silent. Tea and coffee are not allowed during sittings. The selection list for today's sitting is available in the room.

*Clause 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

#### Clause 9

POWER TO MODIFY LEGISLATION GOVERNING THE BASIC PAYMENT SCHEME

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Stringer. Clause 9 provides the Secretary of State with the power to modify, for England, the legislation governing the basic payments scheme, which includes the greening and young farmer payments. We will remove the unnecessary bureaucracy. From the responses to the extensive consultation that the Department undertook in 2018, and further consultation with stakeholders, we think that that will be welcomed by farmers up and down the country.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to continue our discussion with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I want some clarification from the Minister. The clause is obviously quite apposite, as it will give the Government powers to simplify the system, and it is topical, given that the three-crop rule is controversial and unpopular, and something on which many farmers would like urgent action.

*Farmers Weekly* reported that Minette Batters, the president of the National Farmers Union, said at its conference last week that farmers were hugely frustrated:

"We have left the EU, half the country is under water and...we are still going to abide by the three-crop rule and process thousands of force majeure applications. It just seems absolutely extraordinary."

The Secretary of State explained the complex situation we find ourselves in, but I ask the Minister to explain why we cannot move more quickly, given that we have now left the European Union.

**Victoria Prentis:** The situation is under consideration, and I ask the hon. Gentleman to wait for the Department to consider the matter further. Farmers are undoubtedly suffering because of flooding in their fields and concerned about whether they will be able to plant their crops. There are, for them, many other mechanisms for asking—whether by force majeure or otherwise—for the three-crop rule not to apply.

The position is under active consideration and I am happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman outside the confines of the Agriculture Bill, which refers to future payments—so

probably this is not the place to be having the conversation. I want him to be clear that the Department is looking carefully at the next steps for this year.

As to future years, it might help if I say that we intend to make some minor simplifications in 2020 on greening payments, if I can use that terminology, using our existing powers. We intend to simplify the penalties for small overclaims of land, for example. We are also removing some of the paperwork connected to the young farmers scheme, which I think will be widely welcomed. We plan to introduce further simplifications for the 2021 scheme, such as removing some of, or possibly all, the greening rules, so watch this space.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 9 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

#### Clause 11

POWER TO PROVIDE FOR PHASING OUT DIRECT PAYMENTS

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**Victoria Prentis:** The clause allows the Secretary of State to make regulations to apply reductions to farmers' payments under the basic payment scheme in England so that we can phase them out. We plan to start reducing payments in 2021. Clause 11 concerns reductions to be applied to direct payments under the basic payment scheme; de-linked payments are dealt with in clause 12.

We will apply the reductions fairly, with higher reductions initially applied to amounts in higher payment bands. All farmers will face some reductions from the start of the transition. That reflects strong calls from industry stakeholders and many farmers for the reduction to be shared across the sector.

We have set out the maximum reductions that we intend to apply in 2021. We will set the reduction percentages for subsequent years taking account of our detailed plans for future schemes—which, as we have rehearsed many times, we do not yet have—and the wider perspective of Government spending. I reassure the Committee that regulations setting out the reductions will be made using the affirmative procedure, so there will be an opportunity for Parliament to scrutinise and debate them carefully.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am grateful for that explanation. We had quite a discussion of some of these issues last week. Unfortunately, it appears that there is a second policy paper, which I am not sure every Committee member was entirely aware of last week. The Minister will be delighted to know that it is my new favourite document.

**Victoria Prentis:** Oh good!

**Daniel Zeichner:** But before people start applying cold compresses to their heads, I assure the Committee that I will not subject that document to detailed scrutiny. Some of it would have been helpful in our discussions last week, but it is as it is.

The document, which is entitled "Farming for the future: Policy and progress update", sets out at page 36 the approach that is going to be taken to phasing out direct payments. As the Minister said, the reduction will

be 5% for payments up to £30,000, and so on up to 25% for payments of £150,000 or more, so there will be significant reductions.

I have a genuine question, which I would like to explore. It is not clear to me what constitutes a payment in this sense. Can one simply look at recipients? The database shows that some recipients get a £1 million payment. Do these figures apply to that amount or to all the smaller payments that go to make it up? There would be a significant difference between the two.

I sought advice from one or two people, who were also puzzled, so I do not necessarily expect the Minister to know the answer this minute. However, it seems to me that it makes a huge difference, both to the people who receive payments and to the amount of money available in the system. If we cannot get an immediate answer, perhaps we can come back to that point later in the day, because it is key to the discussion.

**Victoria Prentis:** I hesitate to behave like a lawyer, but it seems to me that what is specified under subsection (2) is the power to reduce basic payment scheme payments and, of course, any regulations made in the past under the basic payment scheme. I hope that is a sufficient answer for the hon. Gentleman. If not, perhaps we can take the conversation offline and I can talk him through what is planned. I accept that this is difficult. One of the problems with the common agricultural policy is that it has been accused of being not very transparent and difficult to manage, and it has different pillars, but I assure him that we are talking about BPS payments.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I understand the difficulty, but I think this is a pretty important point. This is a framework Bill, but people are looking for certainty over the next couple of years and will want to know how much they stand to lose. There could be a huge difference, depending on how the figure is calculated. Someone in the Department must know the answer to that question. I am not necessarily expecting it this minute, but it is important that we find it out.

**Victoria Prentis:** I am reassured by the departmental staff present that the reductions will be applied to the total basic payment, including the greening and young farmer allowance. That is my understanding of the scheme and I hope that is sufficient for the hon. Gentleman. I am not sure that I fully understand his question, so this is possibly not the most productive place to have this conversation. We could discuss the matter on our own or exchange letters, if he is still confused.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 11 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 12

#### POWER TO MAKE DELINKED PAYMENTS

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**Victoria Prentis:** The clause provides the Secretary of State with the power to make regulations to enable de-linked payments to be introduced in England for the remainder of the transition period. De-linked payments

will remove the requirement to farm land. Once introduced, de-linked payments will replace the basic payment scheme for all farmers in England.

De-linked payments benefit from further simplification during the agricultural transition period. Farmers can access payments for the remainder of the transition without the bureaucracy of the basic payment scheme. Instead, farmers will have maximum flexibility to plan for the future, choosing to spend the money as best suits their circumstances. That should help those who wish to retire to do so, freeing up land for new entrants.

The clause allows us to introduce de-linked payments from 2022 at the earliest. Alternative enforcement mechanisms will be introduced before direct payments are de-linked, so that we can maintain agricultural and environmental best practice.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 12 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 13

#### POWER TO PROVIDE FOR LUMP SUM PAYMENTS IN LIEU OF RELEVANT PAYMENTS

**Daniel Zeichner:** I beg to move amendment 74, in clause 13, page 11, line 8, leave out subsection (4) and insert—

“(4) Regulations under this section shall make provision for circumstances in which an eligible person may receive a lump sum under this section.

(4A) The circumstances under subsection (4) shall include a commitment by the eligible person to use the lump sum to—

- (a) make a change or changes to practice in managing land in such a way as to deliver one or more of the purposes under section 1(1) or 1(2); or
- (b) make land available to other persons or bodies who undertake to manage the land in such a way as to deliver one or more of the purposes under section 1(1) or 1(2).”

Before making my comments on the amendment, I would like to point out that I am not confused about the previous issue; the Government are the ones who have the confusion. We will seek that out, I am sure.

**Victoria Prentis:** Okay, we will discuss that.

**Daniel Zeichner:** We will do that.

Turning to clause 13, de-linking is significant for our farmers and there is a worry around it. The House of Commons Library briefing talks about the effect and the responses to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs summary last year. A lot of respondents felt this was a less popular option than retaining and simplifying the existing scheme. More significantly, the DEFRA evidence and analysis paper, “Agriculture Bill: Analysis and Economic Rationales for Government Intervention”, says:

“Most farm businesses will be able to make modest cost reductions in order to improve efficiency, which will be required when Direct Payments come to an end.”

That is strong statement. A lot of people will feel that it is not going to be easy to make those changes.

The analysis that DEFRA published alongside the paper notes that the impact of the removal of direct payments on overall profit margins is likely to be “non-negligible”. That is a wonderful civil service word that

[Daniel Zeichner]

can be synonymous with “considerable”. I urge the Government to be cautious. De-linking has some positives, but the reductions are challenging for many.

The Bill outlines the seven-year agricultural transition period during which direct payments will be phased out, which is a significant change. It means there will no longer be a requirement to farm the land in order to receive the payments. In some ways, that is the gist of the Bill. Some will remember that, on Second Reading, a Government Member said, “Surely not!” because the common agricultural policy used to reward people for not farming. This is CAP on steroids in that case, because it completely breaks that link and is a significant change, and it is something that needs to be thought about.

In clause 14, we also look at how someone who potentially wants to come out of farming can request to have their remaining de-linked direct payments put into a lump sum. We understand the attraction of that for some, giving some flexibility and, as the Government have said, a route out of farming and the possibility of setting up a new business or diversifying, if they do not want to transition into the new world of environmental land management schemes. As the Minister said, the Government’s policy statements have made it clear that the intention of that is to increase opportunities for new entrants. In a wonderful, idealised world, this is all one would hope to happen—but the world does not always work in the way one expects.

Without a condition requiring farmers to make their land accessible to new entrants or to encourage transition on their land to a more sustainable way of farming, we believe the Bill poses a risk whereby retiring farmers could simply take lump sum payments and possibly sell the land to a larger holding or move out of farming altogether. That may be part of the Government’s underlying intention, but there are significant consequences to it. It is not entirely obvious that that will lead directly to new entrants.

I have mentioned the additional policy paper we have discovered. I point to page 39, which Members will probably not have to hand but which I will quote:

“Receiving a delinked payment will not disqualify the recipient from applying for payment under our new schemes, including our Environmental Land Management system.”

I ask the Minister whether the intention of that is as it seems to me to be read. Many of my constituents on benefits would love to continue getting their benefits when they got a new job, but no one would think that remotely reasonable. There is potential for double payment here and I ask for some explanation on that.

Going back to where the de-linked system has been initiated, we could conceivably be left in a situation whereby the provision of de-linked lump sum payments had incentivised a reduction in the amount of land being farmed in accordance with the aim of securing environmental public goods. It takes the land, which we are hoping will be managed in a more environmentally friendly way, out of the framework. I am sure the Minister gets the drift of where I am going with this.

That concern was raised by a number of witnesses in Committee, particularly the Landworkers Alliance in their written evidence. We think that that would be not

only a detrimental and unintended consequence, environmentally speaking, but an unjust and politically unacceptable use of public funds, as it would hand public money to farmers who might already have a large capital asset in the farm and the house.

I have already said that the double payment point is an issue. How are we making sure that land will be put to continued use and deliver the environmental public goods at the heart of the Bill? There is a danger that the land will be left to the market with no guarantees that new entrants will take over and farm in an environmentally conscious way.

That is why amendment 74 would help the Government to tackle this conundrum by making the receipt of a lump sum de-linked payment conditional on either transitioning the farm to being run according to purposes outlined in clause 1(1), delivering public goods, or in clause 1(2), improving productivity, or on making land available to new entrants or for community ownership to ensure it continues as farmland. We think that would allow the Secretary of State to make regulations that stipulated that retiring farmers wishing to sell their land must offer it for sale to new entrants or the local community for a fixed period before offering it on the open market.

9.45 am

We are not trying to be difficult here; we are trying to make some suggestions to avoid what we think could be the unintended consequences. Farms and farmland could be placed on a national register of land for sale with an established time period for its availability before going to the open market. That would give local people—community land trusts and cooperatives—the opportunity to raise the capital to buy the land. It would also allow for flexible options for how farmers receiving lump sum payments who do not simply want to sell their land could move forward in the way that is helpful to new entrants.

The Landworkers Alliance pointed to some key examples: farmers who wish to pass their land on to a new entrant but also want to retain involvement in the business could enter into a farm partnership, enabling them to pass on their skills and knowledge while providing opportunities for new entrants to access land and get started in farming.

For those who want to keep their farm and stay in their house but retire, private land could be made available to rent as a series of rental units on a farm. The farmer would remain the owner of the farm, but its house and buildings, and lump sum payments, could be invested into conversion to a series of units for rent. That would provide the farm owner with a retirement income. Those units could include horticultural units, micro-dairies, and land and buildings for a beef or sheep enterprises, as well as housing for farm workers.

Farmers who do not wish to retire could use the lump sum to transition their farm to become run along agroecological principles. The agricultural transition period could be used to fund the capital investment required to change the direction of their farm business, including infrastructure, machinery and new livestock.

The flexibilities and possibilities reflect the fact that farmers and their families will be in a wide variety of circumstances. There are huge differences across the

sector, and many farmers are not driven solely by profit. It is not just a business; it is their life. This change will be hard for many. Some may wish to release capital by selling their land, but others will want to retain an involvement. That is what we are trying to frame. These proposals would help farmers who do want to be able to move out to retire with dignity. If they wish, both their skills and their attachment to their farm could be managed as it is transitioned to a new generation.

Amendment 74 does not go far beyond the Government's intentions as already explained: clause 13 already stipulates that the Secretary of State has the power to "make provision" for these lump sum payments via regulation and that any recipient must meet criteria as set out in these regulations, which the Secretary of State has the power to choose. Amendment 74 simply adds to that, with the clarification and guarantee that the criteria for receiving these lump sum payments will be to ensure that the land is genuinely made available to new entrants, or that the money is used to improve farm holding within the purposes of the Bill.

Many questions arise from the general provisions for de-linking and making lump sum payments in and of themselves, and I have already alluded to one or two of them. There is uncertainty over whether farmers will get a lump sum from their total, de-linked payments over the transition period. The document "Farming for the future" is vague on the issue: it says that the Government will look at offering farmers

"the option of taking a one-off lump sum payment"

that is "subject to affordability". That is a pretty big caveat. It partly goes back to my earlier question about how much money will be in the system to allow for these things. It then says that the rules for receiving these payments, which will be consulted on, will cover who would be prioritised for these payments

"if we need to prioritise applications to manage affordability".

That is not a concrete promise or explanation for what could be a complicated and controversial set of issues. If this is as attractive as I have made it sound, there may well be a rush.

This is a framework Bill and I understand that, but I refer back to my basic point: farmers want to know what they will be faced with in coming years. We need a little more detail. There are a great number of questions to be answered about the general issue. What measures are in the Bill to ensure that the land will be managed in line with environmental principles once payments have been de-linked in the transition period with no cross-compliance measures to EU environmental standards? Those receiving de-linked payments will be eligible to apply for the ELMS—the double payment point I made earlier—but there is no guarantee or likelihood that all will wish to do so. It goes back to the need for strong baseline environmental standards, as raised last week.

A statement on page 40 of the policy document says:

"We will confirm the tax treatment of lump sums, as well as delinked payments, in due course."

This is a framework Bill, but gosh, there are huge implications as to how attractive or not that may be. As we all know, the tax issues are pretty significant, and people will be pretty uncertain about how the system will work in practice. In the light of all that uncertainty—and, from the taxpayers' point of view, how much it

might cost—it would be sensible to amend the clause to deliver better what is intended and encourage the take-up of farms by new entrants.

**Victoria Prentis:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and the spirit in which he made them. We will certainly all have to work together on perfecting the new schemes for the benefit of us all. The amendment seeks to apply conditions on those opting for a lump sum. Given the tenor of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, it would be helpful, with your leave, Mr Stringer, if I made a few comments about de-linked payments and the definition of de-linked payments and lump sum payments. It is important to be clear about that.

De-linked payments, once introduced, will replace the basic payment scheme for all farmers. They will not be paid as a lump sum. A lump sum payment will be completely optional for farmers; it is something they can apply for. Such payments will replace any future basic payment scheme or other delivered payments that they would have been entitled to receive under a previous payment regime. De-linking payments from the land will allow farmers to access their payments easily and, we hope, bring much simplification.

Along with the phasing out of direct payments, de-linking sends a clear signal that we are leaving behind the common agricultural policy. It will give farmers greater flexibility to plan for the future, because they will be able to choose how to use the money they receive to best suit their circumstances. Some farmers may choose to use it to contribute to their retirement from farming, which would help new entrants get into the industry, while others may use it to adapt or expand their business.

When clause 12 becomes effective and we introduce de-linked payments, those payments will replace the current basic payment scheme for all farmers in England and be paid each year during the remainder of the agricultural transition, rather than as a one-off lump sum. Separately, clause 13 provides the power to make regulations to offer farmers the option of taking a one-off lump sum payment in place of future payments, whether BPS or de-linked payments, during the agricultural transition.

On the hon. Gentleman's points about regulation and the current cross-compliance regime, we have a strong domestic legal framework for enforcing environmental and animal health and welfare protections, but we will, of course, keep those powers under review to check that they are adequate. We will maintain strong regulatory standards and introduce a new approach to monitoring compliance and enforcement.

Currently, as the Committee has rehearsed, checking takes place in only a small number of cases. We hope to move to our new system as we go through the transition period. We hope for improved co-ordination between authorities, better data sharing and greater use of earned recognition. Enforcement will be proportionate and fair, and those who do not comply with regulations can expect to be sanctioned in future.

The Government want to see more public goods and farming to become more productive. The amendment is counter to the purpose that underpins lump sums: it would tie lump sums to financial assistance under clause 1, but the whole point of lump sums is that they are separate from that.

[Victoria Prentis]

As the Secretary of State outlined in his speech to the National Farmers Union last week, we are looking to provide a means for older farmers to leave the profession with dignity. We are committed to phasing out direct payments and doing so in a way that helps those in the profession to adjust. Lump sums could bring many benefits. They could increase the ease for new entrants and those existing farmers who wish to expand and acquire land. They could also help those remaining in the industry to invest in their businesses.

The Bill gives the opportunity to move away from the highly bureaucratic and complex rules in the CAP. The amendment would go against the thrust of the desire to move to lump sum payments, by adding conditions to the receipt of funding without any consultation.

The clause would allow the Secretary of State to attach conditions on those opting for a lump sum, but we want to get it right. Therefore, it is important for the Government to consult the industry, so that a lump sum scheme is effective in achieving our aims, without introducing needless bureaucracy. I heard what the hon. Gentleman had to say about specific ideas. I would like him to rest assured that we will take those into account and that we are also very keen to discuss with him any further ideas he may have about the lump sum scheme.

Our commitment to the farming industry and to the provision of greater public goods is clear, but lump sum payments are different, as is this chapter. It is about phasing out direct payments. Lump sum payments are one way that we are going to help farmers during the transition, alongside our other plans to deliver real simplification of the scheme. I therefore ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw his amendment.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I have listened closely to the Minister's response. Although I recognise some of the points she makes, she has not addressed our fundamental concerns. All Governments talk of spending public money wisely. There is a real risk that it will be hard to keep track of how the system is working, and that public money might not be used for the hoped for outcomes. That is why we are cautious and will press the amendment to a vote. It is important to get more clarity.

We keep coming back to the same point. The Minister wants to set out options for the future, go to an iterative process and learn from it. The truth is that, once it starts, unless there are protections in place, there are the risks we have outlined. There are also risks around taking away some of the cross-compliance rules. The irony is that it could inadvertently allow for lower environmental standards rather than the higher ones that we are all keen to achieve.

I do not underestimate the complexity and difficulty, and I understand why the Government would not want to be constrained by extra suggestions put at this point. However, it is not clear that we will be able to exercise much leverage further down the line. The Government are asking for a huge amount of trust to go and design these systems and schemes, taking away many of the protections, both regarding money and the environment.

I do not think I heard the Minister address the double payment issue, which I would like to know about. Many people outside will not necessarily be following

this closely. I say to the Minister that Governments are rarely rewarded for the successful bits of policy but are tripped up on the bits that the media can alight on and ask why they are happening.

The Government might want to look at the issue and be ready to explain to the public why that might happen. We are facing huge pressures on public expenditure in general and this could look very generous to those outside. I have nothing against being generous; I would like the Government to be more generous in general. I just think there are potential problems in this area. On that basis, I would like to press the amendment to a vote.

10 am

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 6, Noes 11.*

### Division No. 12]

#### AYES

Debonnaire, Thangam	Opong-Asare, Abena
Jones, Ruth	Whittome, Nadia
McCarthy, Kerry	Zeichner, Daniel

#### NOES

Clarke, Theo	Jupp, Simon
Courts, Robert	Kearns, Alicia
Crosbie, Virginia	Kruger, Danny
Dines, Miss Sarah	Morris, James
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert	Prentis, Victoria
Jones, Fay	

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.*

**Victoria Prentis:** I will say a few words, not least because I hope they will answer the hon. Gentleman's point. Clause 13 provides the Secretary of State with the power to make regulations to give farmers greater choice, by offering them the opportunity to apply for a one-off lump sum payment. That lump sum payment would be instead of receiving basic payment scheme or de-linked payments during the remainder of the agricultural transition. I hope that answers his question. We feel that lump sums would provide extra flexibility and choice for farmers.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am afraid that does not answer the question. I will repeat what the policy document says on page 39:

"receiving a delinked payment will not disqualify the recipient from applying for payment under our new schemes, including our Environmental Land Management system".

It seems to me that there is a risk there. That is not to do with the lump sum, but with de-linking in general. I suspect we will go around in circles on this, and I do not intend to go any further now, but that is why I have raised a concern.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 13 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*



### Clause 14

#### GENERAL PROVISION CONNECTED WITH PAYMENTS TO FARMERS AND OTHER BENEFICIARIES

**Victoria Prentis:** I beg to move amendment 43, in clause 14, page 11, line 45, leave out “any”.

*This drafting amendment removes an unnecessary word from clause 14(3) for consistency with other similar provisions of the Bill.*

As the explanatory statement says, this drafting amendment removes an unnecessary word from clause 14(3) for consistency with other similar provisions in the Bill.

*Amendment 43 agreed to.*

*Clause 14, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 15 and 16 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 17

#### DUTY TO REPORT TO PARLIAMENT ON UK FOOD SECURITY

**Daniel Zeichner:** I beg to move amendment 7, in clause 17, page 14, line 20, leave out “five years” and insert “year”.

I am very happy to move this amendment; as keen-eyed Members might notice, it was originally tabled in the name of the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), so this is probably a circumstance that neither of us would ever have predicted. We entirely agree with the proposal to make this extremely important change to the clause 17 food security provisions and amend the timing of the reports from once every five years to every year.

We are all glad that the Government paid heed to the warnings of stakeholders and our predecessors on the previous Bill Committee and included a duty in the revised Bill to report to Parliament on UK food security. It was widely commented at the time that it seemed curious that an Agriculture Bill’s purposes would not include producing food. I think that the clause is the Government’s response to that. It is unthinkable that food security provisions—particularly the Government’s intentions with respect to the proportion of food to be produced domestically or imported—should not be included in discussions of the post-Brexit future of our agriculture sector. Clause 17 is welcome, but the stipulation that the Secretary of State must prepare a report on an issue as important as the state of the nation’s food security only once every five years seems weak.

**Abena Oppong-Asare** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I completely agree with my hon. Friend about the five-yearly reports. There should be annual reporting. The guidelines in the Bill are not clear, so does he agree that there should be clear targets and actions, and that the Bill should say what needs to be carried out to look at food security?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I agree with my hon. Friend. We need much more clarity. The clause is clearly not strong enough, at a time when food security has the potential to become a major cause of uncertainty and concern as we leave the EU and negotiate our own trade deals. It is of course an extremely topical matter, given many of the discussions going on at the moment.

Our food security in terms of self-sufficiency is already in long-term decline. We now produce only 61% of our own food, which is down from 74% around 30 years ago. It is a matter of strategic national interest to ensure that our country can, as far as possible, feed itself. A reasonable level of domestic production in a volatile world is a critical aspect of food security. It is a hugely complicated and contested issue. The modern world that we live in is highly interconnected—something that, as we speak, is looking increasingly difficult, for reasons we are all aware of. Those things raise questions, and different approaches are taken in different countries, but this is a good time to be discussing them.

There is still a huge amount that we do not know about the impact that the Government’s new trade and immigration policies will have on domestic food production year to year. Last week I quoted the concerns from some sectors—particularly the poultry sector—about our ability to continue without the people to do the work. We do not know whether the Government will make good on their as yet empty promises and protect our domestically produced food from being swamped by imports of a lower standard. That is the—I was going to say “the elephant in the room”, although I am not sure that we are farming elephants. This is a huge issue, which we shall obviously be coming to in the next few days, and, I suspect, returning to on Report and Third reading. It is one of the top issues at the moment. We do not know what the impact will be of any outcomes with respect to trade deals, but I suggest that they should be informed by a view on what we are trying to achieve overall. This Committee is a place where we can have at least part of that discussion.

I guess that some of those advising the Government have rather let the cat out of the bag over the weekend. I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby is not here, as he has had problems with cats in the past, although I was not going to tease him about it too much. The Sunday newspapers, of course, were full of the press scoop that one of the new Chancellor’s top economic advisers thinks that our entire food sector is not critically important to the UK.

I recognise that the comments of one adviser do not Government policy make, but for many of us it feeds into a concern about where these policies are going. It is also part of the argument I made last week—that there is a real risk that we are looking at a much smaller, albeit high-quality and environmentally friendly, food sector in this country than we have now. That is something on which we really need clarity from the Government.

It was not just agriculture; the adviser also talked about fisheries, and suggested that maybe we should follow the example of agriculture in Singapore. We are a very different nation from Singapore. We are hugely different geographically, because they do not have much arable land in the way that we do, so they rely almost entirely on imports of food. I would go further than that and say that this is part of the debate about what it means to be English or British. Our rural heritage is a key part of our country, and the suggestion that we do not need some of it is, frankly, deeply shocking.

I am sure the Minister will disassociate herself from that kind of comment, but, given the extraordinary turmoil going on within No. 10 at the moment, this seems a classic example of taking advice from weirdos and misfits. I am afraid that the frivolous musings of

[Daniel Zeichner]

people in such positions have very real consequences on the good work that the Minister is trying to do on a Bill such as this, and I am sure she did not welcome some of the publicity over the weekend. I would gently impress on her the importance of paying heed to something that we on the Opposition side have been trying to warn her about throughout this Bill Committee: that this Bill needs to be strengthened to guard against exactly this kind of approach, which undermines many of the worthy intentions behind it.

Going back to the food security report itself, the danger in that, under this clause, we will not even see the first one until after the next election, when we will have been out of the EU for half a decade. To us, it seems extraordinary that we would wait so long. We believe it needs to be done much more frequently. Given the kind of dramatic changes we are seeing around the world with the climate crisis, flooding and so on, we think that having reports on our food security annually would be a vital tool in the Government's toolkit, enabling them to react to trends as they develop year on year and to address them. A further weakness of the food security report approach is that we can have a report, but we then need some tools to respond to what the report is telling us.

There is considerable consensus, not just among the hon. Members who have signed the amendment previously and on this occasion, but across the sector. We have heard from the NFU and the Tenant Farmers Association, and from the environmental organisations Greener UK and the Nature Friendly Farming Network. It is unusual; we have seen remarkable consensus on a number of these points, but on this point there is real consensus. I hope that the Minister has been paying attention to the fact that the original proposal came from her Government's own Back Benchers. There is now a cross-party effort to shift the Government on this.

This is the first time in more than 40 years that a Secretary of State has been directly responsible for the nation's food security. It is vital that we get this right, so we welcome the cross-party support for the amendment—not necessarily from the Government, but from their Back Benchers. Five years is simply too long to wait for these important reports. I hope the Minister has noted the strength of feeling. It is not going to go away, and that is why we will push this amendment to a vote.

10.15 am

**Victoria Prentis:** Although the issue of standards is not entirely on-topic, I will deal with it briefly. I refer the hon. Gentleman not to leaks from Downing Street advisers but to a speech in the Chamber last night by the Secretary of State for International Trade, who said very clearly that

“we will not lower our standards. We will maintain our food safety and animal welfare standards and will not lower them as part of this free trade agreement. We decide which standards we abide by here in the UK. We have exceptionally high standards of animal welfare”.—[*Official Report*, 2 March 2020; Vol. 672, c. 649.] I am sure we will come back to that later in our consideration of the Bill.

I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about the amendment and its cross-party origins, and I understand why it may appear to be an attractive proposition.

However, I will explain the clause's proposed frequency of reporting “at least” every five years and why we think that will provide for both a more meaningful report on food security in the medium and longer term and a sounder basis for any relevant and appropriate policy response.

Food security is a complex issue that cannot be measured or defined by a single metric. The Government work closely with the food industry to ensure that we have a secure food supply. As the hon. Gentleman says, this is very important at this important point of change in our farming practices, and it may well be that it is appropriate to have a report before the five years is up. However, I would like to maintain the provisions in that allow the Government to decide that this is appropriate “at least” every five years.

I also ask the hon. Gentleman to view this in context. There has not been a food security report since 2010. I think we all agree that a report is a positive step. We are making an important new commitment to analyse and publish a regular report on this important subject. The report will use a set of core measurements for each key topic area, so that we can consider the trends over time. These will be drawn from a blend of national and international data sources. Sources that we expect to draw on include trade and domestic production data and statistics on energy, household expenditure, food and food safety. Many of those sources are in the public domain already and can be considered by anybody who wishes to consider them in between reports, but we propose that we do a really substantial report not on an annual basis but within a longer period, and at least once every five years.

The frequency of reporting every five years was included to balance the commitment to regularly report with the need to allow sufficient time to observe key trends from this vast variety of sources. I hope that explains why the clause is in the Bill. I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the amendment.

**Daniel Zeichner:** The Minister makes a fine attempt, but I am afraid that this is a basic issue of trust. Governments are rarely trusted, however hard they try. She asks us to take this on trust, and frankly we do not. As we will come back to time and again, we hear Ministers repeatedly say this, in which case they should put it in the Bill. That would solve the problems. Of course, we know that they will not, because this is all part of the new macho-posturing negotiating world that we now live in post Brexit. We used to have a civilised approach to the world, but no longer. This is the new world, but these questions are not answered.

Food security reporting is particularly interesting, and our further amendments will tease more of this out. The Government could reassure people by saying roughly what they expect the future to look like for food security. By not so doing, they absolutely stoke the scepticism of people who look at that adviser's comments and think that that is actually where some of these people want to go. I invite Government Members to think hard about whether they are actually in the loop on this. I think some people out there have a very clear idea about where we should want to go. That is why the Government are reluctant to issue a food security statement. That would give some idea of what they hope for in future. If they do not have an idea, that is also pretty

scary. There are plenty of reasons why Oppositions and the country do not always trust Governments. Sadly, experience often suggests they were right to be sceptical.

It is absolutely right to ask these hard questions, particularly because the Minister said that it would be at least once every five years. We are being asked to trust the Government. If the Government have stuff to hide, which I suspect they have, they are not going to do that very often. Five years is far too long. I agree with the Back-Bench Government Members on the side who tabled the amendment and clearly share my concerns. I want to see a much clearer outcome, which is why I will press the amendment to a vote.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 6, Noes 10.*

### Division No. 13]

#### AYES

Debbonaire, Thangam	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Jones, Ruth	Whittome, Nadia
McCarthy, Kerry	Zeichner, Daniel

#### NOES

Clarke, Theo	Jupp, Simon
Courts, Robert	Kearns, Alicia
Crosbie, Virginia	Kruger, Danny
Dines, Miss Sarah	Morris, James
Jones, Fay	Prentis, Victoria

*Question accordingly negatived.*

**Daniel Zeichner:** I beg to move amendment 75, in clause 17, page 14, line 25, at end insert—

“(aa) the impact of food production upon global resource sustainability (including global carbon emissions, impacts on biodiversity and water usage);”

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 76, in clause 17, page 14, line 27, at end insert—

(ba) food poverty and progress towards achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goal on hunger, malnutrition and food poverty (SDG 2);”

**Daniel Zeichner:** We believe there are a number of missed opportunities to strengthen clause 17 to provide adequate reports on food insecurity. Very little has been revealed in the Government’s “Farming for the future” policy document about what those reports might involve. It merely repeats the provisions in clause 17 that the reports may include global food availability; supply sources for food, including the availability to the public of food from domestic and other sources; the resilience of the supply chain; household expenditure on food; and food safety.

All of those are important, but we believe there could be much clearer requirements relating to the degree of the nation’s food security derived from domestic production. That is a point I have already alluded to. There should also be a clear commitment to prevent any further decline in self-sufficiency. That prompts the question of whether one considers the current position to be the right one. I am happy to engage in a debate on that.

As a starting point, we believe that a further decline would be unwelcome. All I am trying to find from the Government is whether they agree, which they ought to be able to tell us. The clause could also have included a requirement to specify food security targets and to identify the actions to be prioritised if those targets are not being met. That goes back to my point that it is all very well to produce a report but, if it is to be used as a tool for change and action, levers will also be needed. We believe amendment 75 would help with that.

Entirely absent from this clause is the contribution of our agricultural workforce to food security, and how immigration changes will affect that. It is fairly clear to those of us who are close to the sector and know what it is talking about that, as it stands, there could be quite substantial changes. They could be unintended, but changes there would be, and we need to know how they will be dealt with.

I turn to amendment 76. It is disappointing that the remit of the proposed report does not include that aspect of food security: not just supply, but whether people can access that supply. It is worth noting that the Environmental Audit Committee’s January 2019 report “Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow up” found that

“Food insecurity is a significant and growing issue in the UK, with...levels...among the worst...in Europe, especially for children.”

Avid watchers of “Countryfile” will have noticed that this weekend one of the lead reports was on food banks in rural areas.

The report—the Environmental Audit Committee’s report, not the “Countryfile” report, although “Countryfile” is more fun in some ways; I really should not ad lib when I have notes—explicitly highlighted how the

“Government has failed to recognise and respond”

domestically, allowing these issues fall between the cracks. The Committee recommended that the Government appoint a Minister for hunger, but they have not responded to that sensible suggestion. The fact is that, sadly, food poverty is now all too rife in this country. The stat frequently quoted is that there are now more food banks than McDonald’s outlets, and we know how many of those there are.

In “Countryfile” I was struck by the Frome community fridge. There is also an excellent one at the Edge Café in Cambridge. We did not previously have to concern ourselves with such things, because there was a presumption that policy in general would ensure that we had a plentiful supply of affordable food; that is, of course, part of the aim of the common agricultural policy. That goes to the heart of our discussion of the Bill, because for too many of our people that is not the case. Although it is wonderful that people make the effort to try to deal with this problem, in a rich country we should not be in such a situation. Food is an essential and basic human right, and it is shocking that the country is not performing better on that. It is therefore right that that aspect of reporting on food security should be included in the Bill.

The recording of household expenditure on food, as suggested in the Government’s new policy document, will not properly record the free, charitable provision of food that has become a core staple for so many people. I urge the Government to consider expanding their proposed report to include the prevalence of hunger and malnutrition

[Daniel Zeichner]

among the population, and the extent and distribution of food bank demand and provision. I suspect that, not many years ago, many of us would have thought it highly unlikely that in 2020 we would have to be discussing the need to report on hunger and malnutrition. It does not reflect well on the Government's record that we have to ask for that, but we must do so if we are to eliminate this problem.

The amendment seeks to address that by stipulating that UK food security reports include analysis of food poverty and our progress towards achieving UN sustainable development goal no. 2, which is to end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. The Government signed up to that goal, and they probably thought we would never seek to apply it here, because we had assumed that it would not be necessary. Sadly, it is, and we are signed up to it, so the Government should not have any problem including those provisions in their flagship post-Brexit Bill on their commitment to food and food production.

The themes that the food security reports will cover are remarkably similar to those of the UK food security assessment carried out by the previous Labour Government in 2009. In fact, it looks like much of that has been carried forward. In stipulating that the reports may include data about

“global food availability...supply sources for food...the resilience of the supply chain...household expenditure on food”

and “food safety”, the Bill and the recent policy document adopt every area covered by the previous Labour Government's report on food security, except one: global resource sustainability.

10.30 am

That area was explicitly included in Labour's report on food security to provide a global environmental context to UK food security, to ensure that we were paying sufficient attention to longer term environmental challenges that could impact food production, particularly climate change and agricultural intensification, and to enable us to understand the impact of our own food production on natural resources in order to prevent issues such as soil degradation and resource depletion. It is puzzling that in a Bill about reforming our agricultural system to take greater account of such ecological and climate concerns, the Government have left out that area in their provisions to provide reports on food security. It would be interesting to know the thinking behind that decision.

It is particularly frustrating because, as we have established, there is nothing strong enough in the Bill to guarantee the measurement of the Government's progress in what they are trying to achieve by financially supporting the clause 1 public goods that focus on sustainability. We know the Bill includes a requirement for the Secretary of State to have regard to the need to encourage the production of food in an environmentally sustainable way, but there is no requirement to report regularly on whether they are achieving that.

The Bill stipulates that the Secretary of State must, from time to time, produce multi-annual financial assistance plans laying out their strategic priorities for providing assistance for the clause 1 public goods that focus on

sustainability issues—we discussed that at length last week—and monitor and report on the impact of each financial assistance scheme. According to the explanatory notes, that could include an assessment of the extent to which public goods have been delivered. However, the Secretary of State has complete discretion over the number and frequency of these reports, and no requirement to act upon them.

The Government have rejected our amendments that aimed to pin down the multi-annual financial assistance programmes, and to stipulate that the opinion of the office for environmental protection should be sought as to whether the financial assistance given under the Bill has been sufficient to meet the strategic objectives of the funding. The provisions lack the consistency required to make them robust enough to secure those worthy objectives, to which we all subscribe. The Bill has lofty aims, which are welcome, but lacks a strong overarching framework for measuring progress and success, or even failure, in order to ensure the aims are achieved.

The inclusion of global resource sustainability in the Government's food security reports could have been a simple way—entirely following the precedent set in previous UK food security reporting—to ensure that we considered the impact of global issues, such as the climate crisis and water use, on our food security. Not only that, but it could provide a way of measuring the success of the Bill's overarching aim of supporting sustainability in our agriculture by considering our impact on global resource sustainability. Therefore, we think global resource sustainability should be included in the areas covered by the Secretary of State's food security reports.

**Victoria Prentis:** Self-sufficiency has only ever been one part of food security in this country. We supplement our produce with a range of other products from around the world that are difficult to grow and rear here. Our high degree of food security is built on access to a range of sources, including robust supply chains across a wide range of countries in addition to domestic production. It is important to view the debate on food security in that light.

I begin with amendment 75. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are planning to include in the food security report a theme relating to global food security and how it affects food security in the UK. I have a summary of some of the reports that we might consider in the section on global food availability, which may reassure him. However, I do not want him to think that what I will say is conclusive or relates to other issues that will be considered in the report; this is just about global food availability, which relates to amendment 75. We would expect to look at global output per capita, cereal yield per region, commodity price analysis, country consumption data and country commodity trade proportions. In addition, I suspect many other reports and factors will be considered, many of which will be publicly available between reports.

We will include consideration of the sustainability of global resources, but I hope the hon. Gentleman will understand that we do not intend to list in the Bill all the indicators and data sources that we intend to use in the preparation of the report, because doing so would make the Bill unwieldy—one can imagine a situation in which one of those data sources becomes unavailable

between reports. That is why the clause is structured as it is. It is not that we will not look at those sources; it is just that we do not want to list them. In producing the report, we will set out our analysis of the wide range of statistics relating to food security in the UK, from global UN data to UK national statistics. I therefore ask him to withdraw amendment 75.

On amendment 76, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we already intend to address food insecurity in the report. The Government are committed to achieving the principles set out in the UN sustainable development goals. We plan, under subsection (2)(d) of clause 17, to report on how the UK is performing against those goals. As part of that theme, we intend to consider all the key indicators that will help us to understand the impact of household food insecurity, including data from the Office for National Statistics.

As I said last week, food insecurity is an issue that we should all take very seriously, and the Government are committed to having a strong safety net for those who suffer from food insecurity. I will politely say again that the £95 billion welfare budget is the first port of call for people who suffer from food insecurity. It is proper that we consider food insecurity as part of this report—we have said that we will do so—but the welfare system is the place for people with food insecurity, and that is where they should go. I do not denigrate in any way the efforts and the great achievements of food banks and food fridges around the country.

I hope that I have suitably clarified our intentions and explained why it is not necessary to include specific text in the Bill. I therefore ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the amendment.

**Daniel Zeichner:** We will not withdraw these amendments. I hear what the Minister says about the welfare system, but the welfare system is failing. That is why people are hungry. It did not use to be the case and it does not have to be the case, but that is the case. That is why it is right that the Government set out their position and the Opposition say, “Frankly, you are wrong, and we will not accept this.”

This is a Bill about agriculture, which many of us still think is as much about food as environmental protections, although we want to ensure we do that they are of the highest standard. Those things should not be contradictory. If we are talking about food, we must talk about access to it. It was striking to see people on “Countryfile” who are on such low wages that they can barely afford to buy the food that they are producing. There is something seriously wrong here. We do not think this is a big ask, given that the Government have signed up to the sustainable and millennium development goals.

I am afraid it is, again, a question of trust. The Government want a vague framework. I am grateful to the Minister for making some points about global food production, because they are now on the record, so when we come to rehash this argument, when we do get some of these food reports, we will hold her to that. In the meantime, it is essential to press this amendment to a vote, because too many people across this country—thousands every week—use food banks. It would be a dereliction of duty on our side not to press this to a vote.

*Question put.* That the amendment be made.

*The Committee divided:* Ayes 6, Noes 10.

## Division No. 14]

### AYES

Debonnaire, Thangam  
Jones, Ruth  
McCarthy, Kerry

Oppong-Asare, Abena  
Whittome, Nadia  
Zeichner, Daniel

### NOES

Clarke, Theo  
Courts, Robert  
Crosbie, Virginia  
Dines, Miss Sarah  
Jones, Fay

Jupp, Simon  
Kearns, Alicia  
Kruger, Danny  
Morris, James  
Prentis, Victoria

*Question accordingly negatived.*

**Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** I beg to move amendment 62, in clause 17, page 14, line 32, at end insert—

“(f) food insecurity.

(3) For the purposes of this section ‘food insecurity’ means a person’s state in which consistent access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources at times during the year.

(4) Before laying a report under subsection (1) the Secretary of State must—

(a) consult the Scottish Ministers, the Welsh Ministers, the relevant Northern Ireland department, and such other persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate, and

(b) have due regard to international best practice on food insecurity, including but not limited to the United States Household Food Security Survey.

(5) A report under subsection (1) must include—

(a) an assessment of trends in food insecurity, broken down by different parts of the United Kingdom and different regions of England, and

(b) a summary of actions to be taken in areas of high food insecurity by the UK Government, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government or the Northern Ireland Executive.

(6) The Secretary of State must consult the Scottish Ministers, the Welsh Ministers and the relevant Northern Ireland department before preparing a report under subsection (1).

(7) In this section—

‘parts of the United Kingdom’ means—

(a) England,

(b) Scotland,

(c) Wales, and

(d) Northern Ireland;

‘regions of England’ has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics.”

Amendment 62 was initially tabled in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck), but it has support from at least three parties. I pay tribute to her and the work she did on the all-party parliamentary group on hunger with the former Member for Birkenhead, which led to the establishment of Feeding Britain and its offshoots, such as Feeding Bristol. I am pleased to have been involved in that.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Shields introduced a private Member’s Bill a while ago, and as a result of that pressure the Government agreed to measure household food insecurity as part of the family resources

[Kerry McCarthy]

survey. The first data will be available in 2021. In a recent press release, she referred to the amendment saying that

“there is no commitment...that the measure will continue for future years, nor that the results of the survey they are conducting will be laid before Parliament for scrutiny.”

The point of amendment 62 is to try to give some certainty. As she says, we have seen

“devastating levels of hunger right across the UK”

and the UK has been

“dragged kicking and screaming into agreeing to measure food insecurity”

but we do need a degree of certainty about it.

As to the Minister’s comments on the welfare system, a Department for Work and Pensions Minister in the House of Lords said yesterday that there is “no doubt” at all that universal credit has driven people towards using food banks. Many people who use food banks are experiencing in-work poverty. We have had examples of people who work for Tesco selling cheap food but who are still not being paid enough, particularly if they are casual workers or on zero-hours contracts, and the welfare system is not flexible enough to adapt to that. Clearly we have a crisis. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields says:

“It is clear urgent action is needed. To keep ignoring this issue is a shameful dereliction of duty.”

We need firm data. Amendment 62 would give the Government the tools they need to identify the key drivers of food bank use in detail, as well as which groups in our society are most likely to request emergency food parcels. It will shine a light on the number of people who, year-on-year, go several days without food, as well as on others who skip meals due to lack of money or parents who sacrifice their own meals to feed their children—not all of them will be food bank users. In the past, the Government have been sceptical of data produced on food bank use by, for example, the Trussell Trust. That is all we have been able to rely on. It has become a proxy measure for hunger and food insecurity, but there will be many families who rely on broader programmes of support. Feeding Bristol had a holiday hunger programme to compensate for the fact that children do not get access to free school meals during the long summer holidays. That would not necessarily be picked up by the food bank data, because food distributed with play schemes and so on.

10.45 am

I was privileged to take part into the children’s future food inquiry last year. The chief executive of the Childhood Trust, Laurence Guinness, told the inquiry:

“We have spoken to children who have shoplifted for food, scavenged for food from bins, eaten tissue paper to fend off hunger, bartered for food at school, sold drugs for food, and mugged other children for money for food.”

I am sure some of those issues are familiar to hon. Members here today. It is essential that we try to pin down what we are doing as a country to tackle food insecurity and food poverty, and that Ministers have a yearly duty to monitor those trends in people who are food insecure.

In some cases, people may not need to rely on food banks yet, but they may be only one crisis away. I always think that when people rely on very low incomes, all it

takes is for the fridge or the washing machine to stop working, or for there to be some sort of flooding and the house to not be insured, for “just being able to manage” to become “not being able to manage at all”.

This amendment would not only mean that we have the data and a clearer understanding of the problem, but enable the Government, when they make the report to Parliament, to set out the actions they would take to relieve food insecurity in the areas where it is highest. It is the whole package of measures. I will conclude by saying that the amendment is supported by Feeding Britain, the Food Foundation—established by a former Conservative MP, Laura Sandys, who has done great work there—Sustain, the Independent Food Aid Network and the Food Ethics Council.

**Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): I would like to speak in favour of amendment 62, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields. I commend her tireless work on food poverty and insecurity, and her considerable knowledge and expertise in the area.

In February last year, the Government agreed to measure household food insecurity and to report on it by March 2021. I welcome the fact that the Department for Work and Pensions has included food insecurity measurement questions in the family resources survey, but this breakthrough, and the duty to report on the survey results, must be enshrined in law. We have an opportunity to do just that, so that the measurement happens routinely.

As it stands, the Government’s commitment fails to ensure that the measurement will continue for future years, or that the results of the survey will be laid before Parliament for scrutiny. Amendment 62 would also serve to make the Government’s pledge more comprehensive, by expanding the definition of food insecurity to consider whether everyone in the UK can get access to or afford the food available.

The definition of food security in the Bill currently covers only global food availability, where food comes from, the resilience of the supply chain and data on household food expenditure, food safety and consumer confidence. It does not include any measure of food poverty or household food insecurity, contrary to an internationally agreed definition of food security. Year after year, charitable food banks have provided evidence of the gigantic increase in the number of our constituents running out of money for food. Teachers tell us of children in their classes struggling because they are going hungry. Local authorities are cancelling meals on wheels services due to unprecedented cuts in their budgets.

For too long, the problem of food insecurity, which affects children and adults in all corners of the UK, has been overlooked. It leaves lifelong scars on health and wellbeing. Food banks and other food aid providers cannot be left to continue to pick up the pieces and distribute increasing numbers of emergency food supplies. We need the Government to commit to regular food insecurity measurements and to the resulting data being scrutinised.

**Victoria Prentis**: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Lady, and I welcome her to her place. I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East for the amendment, and I recognise the commitment of the hon. Member for South Shields

in her important work around food insecurity and in ensuring engagement with the devolved Administrations on the amendment.

We are planning to include a theme on household food security, which is clearly set out in subsection (2)(d). As part of that theme, we will be considering the key indicators that help us take a view on food insecurity and why it happens. I hope that the hon. Member for Bristol East will understand that we do not intend to list in the Bill all the data sources we will use in the report, as it would make the Bill unhelpfully unwieldy.

As I said on a previous amendment, our purpose in producing the report is to set out our analysis of the widest relevant sets of statistics relating to food security in the UK, ranging from global UN data to UK national statistics. Many of those data sets are only published at UK level, so breakdown to the devolved Administration area or regional level will not be available in all instances. We will not commit at this stage to the precise data we will use, but all available relevant data will be considered, including breakdown by devolved Administration area if appropriate.

It is our intention that the report will inform discussion and debate about UK food security, both across Government and with wider stakeholders—that is why we are doing it. I assure the hon. Lady that we will of course consider the themes covered in the report, and the analysis, evidence and trends within it, with all sorts of stakeholders, including the devolved Administrations. We have well-established forums for discussion of that nature. Introducing a more formal requirement for a consultation for Ministers with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland before the report is even laid is therefore unnecessary.

I hope that clarifies the intention of the clause and provides the hon. Lady with sufficient assurance. I ask her to withdraw the amendment.

**Kerry McCarthy:** The problem with subsection (2)(d) is that it just talks about

“household expenditure on food (including in comparison to expenditure on other items)”.

As we have outlined today, that does not go anywhere near looking at the scale of the problem and the many factors that contribute to food insecurity. I am not prepared to withdraw the amendment.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 6, Noes 10.*

#### Division No. 15]

##### AYES

Debbonaire, Thangam	Opong-Asare, Abena
Jones, Ruth	Whittome, Nadia
McCarthy, Kerry	Zeichner, Daniel

##### NOES

Clarke, Theo	Jupp, Simon
Courts, Robert	Kearns, Alicia
Crosbie, Virginia	Kruger, Danny
Dines, Miss Sarah	Morris, James
Jones, Fay	Prentis, Victoria

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Clause 17 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### Clause 19

EXCEPTIONAL MARKET CONDITIONS: POWERS AVAILABLE  
TO SECRETARY OF STATE

*Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.*

**Victoria Prentis:** In the health and harmony consultation, the majority of respondents suggested that Government intervention is essential in extreme circumstances, identifying market interventions in times of extreme price volatility as an area of particular concern. However, a high proportion of responses argued that farmers should self-manage risk. While the Government understand that there are events that even the most resilient of farmers cannot provide for, the agricultural industry must be sufficiently dynamic and self-reliant to survive in a free market. The clause tries to balance those two factors by creating new powers for the Secretary of State to provide financial assistance to farmers in England and to run public intervention and private storage schemes during exceptional market conditions.

**Daniel Zeichner:** Before speaking on the clause, I give the Minister advance notice that I will also say a word on clause 22, on data. I draw attention to paragraph 170 of the explanatory notes to the Bill. This is potentially a big issue and goes back to our philosophical discussions last week on what the common agricultural policy had been for, to some extent. Of course, it was there to deal with extreme volatility and difficulty and so on. The Government make the fair point of questioning whether that is appropriate in a modern, more complicated world. However, I urge a slight note of caution to those who imagine that this is pretty much a carry-over of the current system.

There is a pretty clear cautionary note in paragraph 172 of the explanatory notes, where the Government say:

“Analysis suggests that public intervention and private storage aid are not required to enable farmers to manage their risks.”

That is quite a strong sentence. The notes continue:

“They can have negative effects, encouraging more risky farming practices and crowding out the development of futures markets, innovative contracts and private sector insurance products. Such market intervention schemes, if available routinely rather than in genuinely exceptional circumstances, run counter to the image of a dynamic and self-reliant agriculture industry.”

That could lead to many an academic paper, because it is a huge subject for discussion and debate. Many of us will think that it is probably fair enough that risk should be transferred on to the agriculture sector itself. During the foot and mouth crisis almost 20 years ago, many commentators made exactly that point. In particular, those from the manufacturing sector, who had seen their sector decimated by market forces, wondered why it was different for others. The reason is that food is a basic human need. This goes almost back to the discussion we were just having about food security. We may be able to live without some widgets, but we cannot live without food.

This is a really big, substantial issue, but is tucked away in a subsection. I suspect that some farmers will look at it and think not only that the future will hold no support and a much more complicated—in the view of some us—move to environmental land management systems, but that they will also have to deal with “futures markets, innovative contracts—

[Daniel Zeichner]

I think a lot of us know what “innovative” often means—“and private sector insurance products.”

I raise that just to sound a warning note. I am not sure that the matter has been discussed sufficiently.

11 am

**Abena Oppong-Asare:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend’s points. The Tenant Farmers Association highlighted the same matter in its written evidence, saying that the clause mentions only “‘acute’ hardship or difficulty” and would not be invoked for “‘chronic’ or long-lasting difficulties”, which, as has been mentioned, would include foot and mouth disease or epidemic diseases. In the current climate, we should look at that and make sure that agricultural producers are extremely resilient, and that they have that level of support, particularly when such crises happen, because they are expensive. There could be a big impact, particularly on the agricultural community and on consumers, especially in the face of the economic challenges of Brexit.

**Daniel Zeichner:** That is an important intervention, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning the evidence of the Tenant Farmers Association. There is a bigger debate to be had—the Minister is nodding—although I am sure that we can leave that for another day. The issue is important and I hope that it will be looked at more closely.

**Victoria Prentis:** By creating a new power we are moving away from the crisis measures that were designed with the EU market in mind and allowing schemes to be created that are tailored to our domestic conditions. It is important that farmers feel the Government are able to help where necessary. However, it is equally important that those financial assistance and intervention powers will not be seen as a panacea for any issue in agricultural markets. They are intended for use in exceptional situations.

The discretionary nature of the power will, I hope, reassure the sector that the Government will be able to help should extreme circumstances come to pass, by taking action and tailoring it to those exceptional circumstances. It will also ensure that intervention in the market and financial assistance will be limited to occasions when they are really necessary.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 19 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.  
Clauses 20 and 21 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

## Clause 22

### MEANING OF “AGRI-FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN”

*Question proposed,* That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I apologise, Mr Stringer, for not listing the clause earlier as one on which I wanted to make an observation. I should declare—I am a bit of a data person—that I run the all-party parliamentary group on data analytics. The Minister sighs, but the data is important and has huge potential. We are in an era of precision agriculture where we seek to be able to provide, now and in the future, the correct nutrients for the individual Brussels sprout plant. That is an exciting

possibility and many people in Cambridge are working on it. Agri-tech East is a powerful force for innovation and, I hope, good—but alongside all the politics with data there are one or two caveats.

The House of Commons Library briefing says—I imagine this has been deduced from the Bill:

“Data would normally be published in anonymised form”.

Evidence from elsewhere suggests that data anonymity is really hard to achieve. What we have seen with artificial intelligence and all the rest of it suggests that the power is there to trace anything back, so I urge a word of caution on that.

The reason I am cautious is that my reading of clause 22(4), dealing with people who are “closely connected”, raises a few anxieties in my mind about whether data is going to be collected on people working in agriculture. That is not always a force for good, I am afraid, and I want to make sure there are proper protections for people.

The Bill mentions vets, and there may well be good reasons for that related to animal health. However, we already have a workforce who are, in my view, often poorly paid and who face some serious and relentless challenges. I worry that further scrutinising them through a monitoring and data system would create a series of further problems, so I would welcome the Minister’s observations on that, and ask whether she shares my concerns. I am not sure there is much we can do about this issue in the Bill at the moment, but monitoring is clearly being set out as a way forward, and I hope we can make sure that we protect the people involved.

**Victoria Prentis:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said, and I do not wish in any way to make light of his concerns about data. How we obtain and hold data is extremely important, and I am very happy to answer any concerns that he has on this subject.

The clause seeks to provide clarity about who might be required to provide information. A fairly broad scope has been outlined within the clause, and I think the drafters were trying to take a common-sense and down-to-earth approach to what sort of people we might need to get data from. For example, farmers, abattoirs, vets, wholesalers and retailers might well be in scope, but would not by any means always need to be in the frontline of data collection; it depends on the circumstances. It is important to note that those connected to the agri-food supply chain include people undertaking activities capable of affecting the health of creatures and plants in that food chain, or the safety of products.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I appreciate how difficult it is to frame these things, but that would include pretty much everybody who is involved, as far as I can tell. I cannot think of anybody who is not going to be caught by that definition, which is really my concern. Obviously, we all hope these powers will be used for the right purposes, but it is easy to see how they could become a new tyranny if every tractor had a camera in its cab and people were being monitored.

**Victoria Prentis:** That is not at all the intention. The intention is that where it is necessary to collect data from those in the food chain, the clause gives us the ability to do so. That is not at all to say that we will routinely connect data from all these actors, only that



the power is there to enable us to do so when required. For example, with the coronavirus outbreak, it is possible—although I very much hope this is not the case—that further down the food chain, we will need to know who is touching the food that we eat or is responsible for various areas of it. I can foresee a situation in which it might be possible to ask people who seem far away from the farm gate to provide their data, although I very much hope that does not happen.

Before any data requirements are imposed, a draft proposal must first be sent to all relevant parties. If a supply chain member believes that such a request is not appropriate, they will be provided with at least four weeks to notify the Secretary of State of their reasoning.

**Daniel Zeichner:** Will the Minister confirm whether those interested parties include the relevant trade union?

**Victoria Prentis:** I am not sure that under the drafting of the clause trade unions would be included; in fact, I think they would not. However, it is open to members of a trade union to consult that union as necessary, and I would not seek to stop them doing so.

The idea is that an actor will receive the draft proposal. One example is that if a small-scale blackberry grower does not think it appropriate for them to provide data on productivity, which it may well not be, they will be able to submit that in response to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State will then review whether it is necessary to carry out the initial requirement for data collection.

It has been difficult to draft this clause. The hon. Member for Cambridge understands that the need for public safety and food security along the supply chain has to be balanced with the need to protect people's privacy and not to overburden them with regulation. I hope he feels we have broadly got the balance right.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 22 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 23 to 26 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Ordered, That further consideration be now adjourned.*  
—(James Morris.)

11.13 am

*Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.*





