

Your ultimate guide to
**what farmers and
rural businesses
need from Labour**





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As Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Government sets out its goals for the UK, *Farmers Guardian*, in partnership with Carter Jonas, brought together farmers and high profile industry leaders to discuss what they see as priorities for the new administration in a webinar on August 1, 2024.

[Click here to watch the webinar in full](#)

Introduction

Listening to and working with farmers has to be a priority for Sir Keir Starmer's Government if it is to succeed in delivering on shared aims to bolster food and energy security, protect the natural world and create new homes, jobs and restore public trust and confidence.

After 14 years of Conservative power, which has seen dramatic changes to the UK's food system, and many businesses still feeling the ramifications of Brexit, farmers need clear signals that the Government is on their side.

On August 1, *Farmers Guardian* editor Olivia Midgley brought together a range of speakers to discuss what they would like to see from the new Government.

In a webinar entitled 'What do farmers and rural businesses want from the first 100 days of a Labour Government?' and sponsored by Carter Jonas, industry leaders laid out their key priorities on a wide range of topics, from food security, regulation and red tape, to tree planting and recruiting workers.

Changing and more extreme weather patterns, coupled with rising costs of energy,

feed and fuel, is making producing the food we all enjoy more difficult.

And the costs of producing this food are often shouldered by producers, meaning for some, they are quitting the industry.

So how do we improve our self-sufficiency and produce more healthy and nutritious home-grown food?

With the UK buckling under the strain of an NHS waiting list backlog, dietary-related ill health, including type 2 diabetes among adults and children on an upwards trajectory, obesity costing our health service around £6.5 billion a year, plus the use of food banks at an all-time high, food has to be seen as the common denominator.

If we can link health to a climate- and nature-friendly agricultural sector, we will be stronger as a nation.

Now more than ever, the farming industry needs the signals from the Government to bring certainty and give farmers the confidence to invest and grow and fulfil ambitions, not only around producing healthy, nutritious food, but also in caring for our natural world.

Farmers Guardian's manifesto

1 Restore predictability and stability for British farmers, aiding confidence and investment

2 Create an economic model backed by a fair regulatory framework which delivers profitability at the farmgate

3 Commitment to a land use framework which 'values land as a national asset across Whitehall'

4 An immediate and independent review of all border controls and increased resources and inspections to prevent the import of illegal meat

5 Overhaul planning policy to support businesses looking to invest in their buildings and infrastructure

6 Joined-up approach with Defra, Home Office, Treasury, Department of Health and Department of Net Zero all working together on areas where agriculture is the common denominator

7 Negotiate a veterinary or Sanitary/Phyosanitary (SPS) agreement with the EU to alleviate trade disruption

8 Deliver on GB Energy aims by working with farmers to deliver power from rooftop solar, individual wind turbines and anaerobic digestion



Ed Barker



Delivering stability and certainty for the industry

For Ed Barker, head of policy and external affairs at the Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC), a period of 'predictability and stability' among Government would not only help farmers, but the businesses which are looking to invest in UK agriculture.

He said: "We have seen considerable turbulence and varying policy shifts and Defra has had numerous challenges thrown at it, some external, some entirely self-made by Ministers at the time, and a considerable legacy of policy issues and decisions which were just piled up."

"Having spoken to Ministers already, I think there is at least a recognition and acceptance that there is a considerable amount of work which has to be worked through, on issues such as gene editing, deforestation, methane inhibitors and a national action plan on pesticides."

"Within AIC, we worked up about 27 different policies that needed a decision, and these are micro to macro. And so having that time to be able to go through those is quite important before we start embarking on any real changes which are at a more radical level, because a lot of the industry has just been sat waiting on these decisions for some time."

Ed highlighted the 'fallout' of Brexit and how the divergence of UK/EU law was having an effect on businesses.

He said: "Five or six years on, we are really starting to feel divergence and we are starting to see that the variation in policies and really micro issues start to manifest themselves, not just between GB in the EU, but between GB and Northern Ireland as well."

"Overcoming friction to trade, which is the case for a lot of imported agri-inputs and supply goods, is vital. It is going to take a very long time to agree anything with the EU and so we really have to start that work now if we are to try and improve and remove that friction."

And he called for monitoring on the impact of divergence.

"We have had absolutely no monitoring at a Government level of divergence in policy between the UK and the EU over the last five or six years. It has been left to organisations like ourselves on this webinar to have to deal with it among ourselves."

"In addition, we really need to understand where that divergence is before we can even start to entertain an SPS agreement."

Minette Batters



Commitment to a land use framework

A commitment to a land use framework which ‘values land as a national asset across Whitehall’ was also described as ‘pivotal’ in light of Labour’s pledge to build 1.5 million new homes in the next five years, said former NFU president Minette Batters.

She said: “The reason I made such a song and dance about a self-sufficiency target at the NFU, making sure that food is part of the strategic planning for the land use framework, is because the real dangers for these legislated targets are that food is left out and it simply becomes the poor relation.

“I think there is a real opportunity for a global first from the UK Government. We have legislated to deliver Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). I believe that should be broadened to be food, nature and BNG.

“With 72% of the country farmed landscape, there is a real opportunity to see an uplift and improvement in food in nature and biodiversity.

“At the moment, we are seeing land bought up by housing developers taken out of production and trees planted on our grasslands.

“We can deliver all of this and I would like to see all three - food, nature and BNG - all being delivered together.”

And the Wiltshire tenant farmer said Labour’s commitment to GB Energy, a pledge to make Britain a clean, green superpower, increasing energy security and reducing household bills, was an opportunity for farmers.

She said: “The commitment to GB energy is certainly something which should be looked at and worked with farming. Whether it is rooftop solar, individual wind turbines, anaerobic digestion,

farming has a huge opportunity to be a big part of energy provision within rural communities and that must be part of the GB Energy approach.”

Ed Barker agreed, enabling the industry to produce both food and fuel would be key going forward.

He said: “We can have both. I think what has wound so many people up quite understandably is that there doesn’t seem to be any national view as to where our best land assets are.

“When people see 2,000-acre solar farms on the Suffolk/Cambridgeshire border on prime agricultural land, understandably, it rankles a lot of people because once that once that land is taken out, it is out of production for a considerable period of time. You lose critical mass in the industry.”

Ed pointed to Henry Dimbleby’s 2020 National Food Strategy report, which showed how the UK relied on a small amount of high value productive land for a considerable amount of its calories.

He said: “There are other renewables, for example wind, which is slightly less invasive but it has to be more strategic.”

When it came to biofuels, he said the market delivered an important revenue stream in a volatile market.

“But there has to be a clear policy from Government in terms of long-term understanding, not least so the market and farmers know where to invest for all the infrastructure we now have in the UK that supports it in decarbonisation.”

Minette said the UK had the highest level of environmental regulation and legislation of any country and that gold standard comes at a price.

She said: “For farmers to be farming in this high-cost environment, they have to be paid.

“I think we really have to have a way of putting nature on the farm business spreadsheet so that it really is being valued and there is a value coming back to the farmer.”

The former NFU president also called for a ‘producer organisation type scheme’ which values the standards British farmers are adhering to in pigs, broiler meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables.

She said: “We need to have a scheme which replaces the old scheme that allows new people to come into it that really is ambitious about investment in these pivotal sectors that have been unsupported for so long.”

She also highlighted the role of regenerative agriculture, adding farmers’ engagement with the practice would bring ‘huge’ benefits to soils and nature. Building this into farming policy as part of a scheme which delivers for both food production and the environment was key.

“We need to be moving fast ahead with this, having a scheme really that is easy to access, that is valuing our permanent pasture – that has not been done to date.

“That is taking the crops we are growing, where we are bringing nature and biodiversity into those crops in a regenerative way. That will enable

a much more balanced approach and really build a premium market.”

She said help to manage risk was key, and highlighted the Flood Recovery Fund in England, which was one of the levers Government has at its disposal to help farmers affected by flooding. However, not all farmers were eligible and those who were had to wait months for the money to arrive.

She said: “How do we manage our risk in a world where land-based area payments are gone? That question needs to be answered.

“There is another question around market failure. No-one saw it more than the pig sector. When a market fails, what is the mechanism and where is the budget? We know in the Agricultural Act there was no mechanism to have that emergency fund for a market failure situation. And then finally, the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. I absolutely think we have to have a framework which builds in shareholder and board responsibility to deal with a crisis in the market.”

Minette also raised environmental, social and governance requirements.

She added: “Everybody just wants more and more and more and nobody wants to pay for it. There has to be a defined value to all of this. There are lots of silver bullets that need to come together to answer that massive question on profitability.”

Building an economic model for the countryside

“How can the new Government use its farm policy to improve the profitability of farmers when too few farmers make a profit with out support?”

Delegate’s question to the panel



Lizzie Wilson

Fairness in the supply chain

National Pig Association chief executive Lizzie Wilson said supporting the domestic sector and providing an enabling environment had to be taken in tandem.

She said: "We need to review fairness within the supply chain, ensuring that each part of that supply chain is held accountable, that everyone is treated fairly and that farmers are paid a fair price for a fair product."

"We also need to ensure we have access to critical inputs such as labour. Every single farming sector suffers from a desperate lack of labour."

"I think those in the Conservative Government were architects of their own downfall. They were so restricted by their own legacy over Brexit with regards to immigration, etc., that they really

suffered. Labour has a unique opportunity now going forward to be able to deliver on those specific areas where we need a bit more support."

In the pig sector, Lizzie said producers were 'dynamic' and tried to find their own solutions, but on issues such as workforce challenges currently being seen, Government support was required.

She called for the delivery of legislation governing pig contracts which 'would provide producers with the protection that they need and more proportionately distributes the risk and reward throughout the supply chain.'

"And, as new policy proposals or legislation comes through, we would like Ministers to engage with industry to ensure that it is proportionate, it is collaborative, and it is feasible for us to deliver."

New income streams needed for farmers

West Wales dairy farmer and Sustainable Food Trust founder Patrick Holden said in order for farmers to increase their profitability, they needed 'a new income stream.'

He said: "We need to incentivise farmers to farm in a different way and put in place the conditions which make that possible. We need incentives to make a transition to climate, nature, health and culturally friendly agriculture."

"We need a third income stream to complement what we get from the sale of our products and from the Government. The Government is not going to give us a lot more income, they simply have not got enough money. So we need to get that income from the delivery of public goods, for carbon, for BNG and for positive social impacts, including improvement of public health and educating the next generation."

He said previous notions of 'intensify and expand or get out' had to be forgotten and Labour must understand the political importance of a change in farming and food and make it economically viable.

He highlighted the importance of measuring

environmental and public goods outcomes to demonstrate the value of what farming delivers for the nation.

He said: "If we are measuring the impacts annually of our farming systems on climate, nature and social positive impacts, then we can, once we have collected the data, we are seen to be delivering on all those fronts."

"Then banks, asset managers, the industry, the food industry themselves – both retailers and food companies – water companies and utility companies can all come together and fund an acreage payment, which could, I think, be up to £100/acre or even more, for the delivery of those public goods."

"But first of all, we have to measure, and then we have to change the farming systems, which are going to deliver those public goods. That is the challenge. But I think that is the way we can improve our profitability, as well as hopefully producing more climate-friendly and nature-friendly food, which is going to command a better price in the marketplace."

Patrick Holden



"We need a third income stream to complement what we get from the sale of our products and from the Government"

Patrick Holden

A financial framework which helps businesses thrive

Mark Charter, partner and head of estate management at Carter Jonas, said in the run-up to the autumn Budget, farmers and landowners could see changes to the underlying tax regime which ‘underpins’ agriculture and investment in diversified businesses and, while there would be winners and losers, there would be ‘massive opportunities’.

He said: “What we need to see is that continuity of and consistency of policies across all areas of Government, with them then keeping to deadlines and delivering the resources when they say they are going to do.

“If they can achieve that, which is probably the holy grail in many respects, then everybody

Mark Charter



can make those long-term investment decisions, knowing that risk is controlled.”

He said the need to diversify farming businesses was something which would continue.

“For some, those will be small-scale diversifications in terms of just finding three or four acres for dog training or dog walking which just might produce you £2,000

or £3,000-£4,000/year. Or turning a whole barn over to warehousing and storage which can produce you £30,000/year.

“But no matter where we go on subsidies and commodity prices and where agriculture is in the supply chain, I think diversification is essential.”

Benefits of on-farm diversifications

With Defra figures showing that about 65% of farming businesses now have some form of diversification, creating an additional income stream of £24,000/year per farm, the trend is likely to accelerate through the next Parliament and beyond.

But does the Government expect farming businesses to diversify in order to make up for the shortfall in direct payments?

Mark Charter said that looking at diversification as a means of ‘subsidising’ a farm was incorrect and that the right diversification in the right place on a farm, with various factors taken into account, such as location and customer footfall, would not only complement the farming enterprise, but would create opportunities for the next generation, as well as new income streams.

He said: “What we are seeing in where we are acting for landowners, farmers and tenant occupiers, is that the layering of income and being able to layer it across your business from a variety of sources is really important.

“That is already the case now, but I think it absolutely is in the future. I think there will have to be continued diversification in businesses.”

“No matter where we go on subsidies and commodity prices and where agriculture is in the supply chain, I think diversification is essential”

Mark Charter

Young people need to be supported in agriculture

John McCulloch



John McCulloch, trainee auctioneer and young farmer in Dumfries and Galloway, said young people needed clarity on Government policy going forward, especially on the ‘green agenda’.

“How much land are farmers going to have to take out of production and what support are they going to get to do that? The Government has been quite vague and I would say they need to be realistic in terms of their targets. I think a lot of young people are really concerned about how they are going to run a business.”



A planning framework which delivers for growth

The vagaries of planning policy are something all businesses will struggle with at some point, particularly when it comes to expansion.

Ed Barker said: "Planning is just holding back so many businesses to expand, to improve their customer offer or their core infrastructure or improve animal welfare.

"Whether it is abattoirs trying to increase their throughput or new buildings for feed mills."

Planning issues can also cause issues for farmers looking to meet environmental requirements over issues such as nutrient neutrality and emissions.

Ed said: "Planning is brought up time and time again and everyone nods very sagely because everyone knows what the issues are, but as soon as a pig unit applies for planning permission, just to reinvest to improve the buildings that are more than 25 years old and are horribly inefficient, as soon as 'pig' is mentioned within the application, all the red flags go up.

"And we have got nutrient neutrality to contend

with. Slurry storage, for example, with regards to water quality, we cannot do any of that and capitalise on the grant schemes coming from Government if we cannot get that through planning permission in the first place."



Tightening up of border controls

Lizzie Wilson said: "Our great risk at the moment is African swine fever (ASF). And we may be an island surrounded by water, which you would assume is great protection for biosecurity, but ASF jumped 400km across the Baltic Sea to Sweden not so long ago. That was human mediated. So for us, it is contaminated pigmeat coming in, particularly via Dover and the short straits.

"We know that illegally imported pigmeat is coming in in vast quantities and not just pigmeat, meat in general. This not just ASF that is a risk, it is a risk of foot-and-mouth too which would be even more of a disaster. I think no-one really anticipated the vast volumes by which it is coming in and it would appear that it is actually organised crime."

Lizzie called for more resource at borders and at airports to check for illegally imported meat and prevent it from coming in.

She said: "There should be 100 physical checks made per day, currently Border Force officer are not even managing 10% of that.

"What we would really like from Government is an immediate and independent review of all border controls at Dover and at all points of entry into the UK. We would like increased resources at borders and inspections because the last administration had committed to cutting those resources.

"A no brainer for us is a total ban on non-commercial meat imports."

Labour's stance on badger culling

With Labour issuing a manifesto pledge to end what it called the 'ineffective' badger cull in favour of badger and cattle vaccination, John McCulloch said he and his peers were concerned about the impact on cattle health and trade.

He said: "We run pedigree herds of livestock and obviously health schemes are hugely important, with our animals getting sold all over the country. There have issues in

South West Scotland lately, where a lot of dairy farms have had issues with bovine TB.

"Seeing badger culling in England showed us that something was being done to at least lessen the risk and get on top of the problem and to see Labour intending to rule it out is quite disappointing.

"I think the Labour Government should certainly rethink its stance on the badger cull."



How can the Government help alleviate the labour crisis?

Recruiting labour is a perennial problem for farming businesses and, since Brexit, has become increasingly difficult, putting a huge financial burden on farmers.

Lizzie Wilson said the problem came to a head in the pig industry crisis of 2022.

She said: "We need to be able to source labour from overseas when it is required.

"We had to fight tooth and nail after Covid-19 and Brexit to actually fully staff our abattoirs.

"And that is why we ended up in such a mess because we just could not slaughter the number of pigs we needed to because we did not have access to that labour.

"And Government made that as difficult as they could; trying to actually engage with the

Home Office is virtually impossible. We were absolutely desperate."

She called for a more 'enabling environment' from the new administration.

"This will enable us to recruit good quality staff for our farms who actually care about the animals and have a certain skill set."





Promote agriculture as a worthwhile career choice

Lizzie Wilson called on the Government to promote working in agriculture as a positive career option from a young age throughout schools.

She said: "The detail is not taught within the curriculum, that there is a vast range of career opportunities within each sector, and it is not just about working on a farm.

"There are all the ancillary trades which go with it and how complex our different agricultural sectors are. I think Government could do more with the actual mandatory curriculum to help us."

