

Cross-Party Group on Rural Policy

8th October 2025 18.00- 19.30 (Hybrid)

How can we change the food system?

Minutes (Approved)

Present

MSPs

Emma Harper MSP

Ariane Burgess MSP

Speakers

Professor Alex Johnston University of Aberdeen

David Thompson Scotland Food & Drink Federation

Ben Nunn Knoydart Farm

Non - MSP Pre-registered attendees

<u>Last Name</u>	<u>First Name</u>	<u>Organisation (if relevant)</u>
Atterton	Jane	SRUC
Arai	Kanako	
Armour	John	
Beaton	Christine	
Beingessner	Naomi	
Bell	Julian	
Blasberg	Sara	
Bradley	Sara	
Burgess MSP	Ariane	
Burney	Harrie	
Calder	James	DCC Energy
Cameron	Mhairi	Chirrup Ltd
Campbell	Jennifer	DM Hall
Clark	Patricia	MSP office

<u>Last Name</u>	<u>First Name</u>	<u>Organisation (if relevant)</u>
Cooper	Gemma	NFU Scotland
de la figura	Marta	Vml
Dimitrova	Martina	The University of Edinburgh
Doyle	Carey	SRUC
Dykes	Hannah	
Eory	Vera	SRUC
Erber	Claudia	
Faungfoung	Ekthip	Environment and Development, University of Edinburgh
Fawcett	Fiona	
Findlay	Graeme	
Foster	Gail	
Glendinning	James	SRUC
Halhead	Vanessa	Scottish Rural Action Tyne & Esk (CLLD)/East Lothian Rural Economy Group
Hastie	Anne	
Heald	Andrew	
Hislop	Lisa	NFU Scotland
Hutchison	Grace	North Ayrshire Council
Jabir	Samurath	InspirAlba
Jepson	Anne	Scottish Parliament
Jepson	Anne	Scottish Parliament
Johnstone	Alexandra	University of Aberdeen
Kelly	Barbara	
Kelly	Barbara	
Kennedy	Jillian	SAYFC
Knottenbelt	Miesbeth	Nourish Scotland
Krayem	Mixar	
Luken	Lisa	University of Southern Maine
MacLeod		
Rivett	Mary	HES
MacPhail	Eilidh	UHI
Marks	Andrew	Scottish Environment LINK
Marshall	David	
Martin	Irina	Nourish Scotland
McKay	David	Soil Association Scotland
McWilliams	Michelle	The Rowett Institute, University of Aberdeen
McWilliams	Michelle	
Morrice	Beatrice	NFU Scotland
Morrison	Theona	CoDeL/SRA/Scottosh Food Coalition/Crofter
Ng	Jasmine	
Nunn	Ben	

<u>Last Name</u>	<u>First Name</u>	<u>Organisation (if relevant)</u>
Okoth	Judith	
Paterson	Elena	
Reynolds	Alex	Borders College
Rice-Jones	Sharon	
Roan	Tracey	Owen Farm Services
Scott	Douglas	individual
Scott	Karen	Rowett Institute
Sinaga	Martha	University of Edinburgh
Skene	David	UHI
Smith	Alison	
Stuart	Ninian	Falkland Estate
Tennant	Rachel	Scotland's Landscape Alliance
Thompson	Louise	Quality Meat Scotland
Thomson	David	Food and Drink Federation Scotland
van Gaalen	Augustijn	SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum
Vester	Sterre	
Walker	Alexander	NFU Scotland Nature Friendly Farming Network & Peelham Farm
Walton	Denise	
Watts	David	Rowett Institute, University of Aberdeen
Wright	Rowan	
Wylie	Anna	

Apologies

MSPs

Edward Mountain MSP,

Non-MSP Apologies

Julie Steele

Wendy Barrie

Bo Dahlgren

David Glass

Davy McCracken

Agenda item 1

Welcome, introduction and apologies

Emma Harper welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that there were 85 people who signed up for the meeting. This meeting's focus was on the food system and how it can be improved for people and planet.

Agenda item 2

Approval of minutes and recap of action items

As agreed at the June meeting of the Group on the circular economy, three letters have been drafted on the issues raised in that meeting. These will be sent to Mairi Gougeon MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands), Gillian Martin MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy) and Jim Fairlie MSP (Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity).

Minutes for the June meeting were not approved on the night. (Note: They have since been approved by email by Edward Mountain MSP and Jim Hume at the AGM in December).

Agenda item 3

Presentations and discussion

Emma introduced the three speakers and explained that they were all going to focus on different parts of the food system:

- **Professor Alex Johnston** (University of Aberdeen) talking about the consumer (“fork”) end.
- **David Thompson** (Scotland Food & Drink Federation) talking about the manufacturing (“middle”) sector.
- **Ben Nunn** (Knoydart Farm) speaking online about farming (“farm”) end.

Presentation 1: Prof Alex Johnstone

Alex began by defining the food system as a complex network extending beyond the farm-to-fork chain, incorporating food security, nutrition, livelihoods, health, and environmental sustainability. She highlights the global “triple challenge”:

1. Providing nutritious food for a growing population,
2. Supporting livelihoods along the supply chain,
3. Ensuring environmental sustainability.

She explained that the UK adherence to healthy eating guidance, including the Eatwell guide is low and in some cases this is due to affordability. Data from the Food Foundation shows that poorer households would need to spend a significant proportion of their income to follow a healthy diet.

Johnston highlighted her research funded by UKRI on improving healthy and sustainable food choices, particularly through working with retailers. She presented findings from evaluating England's High Fat, Sugar and Salt (HFSS) placement legislation, showing:

- Significant reductions in HFSS purchases (around 2 million fewer items per day).
 - The policy had equitable effects across regions with varying levels of deprivation.
 - Retailers and consumers were generally supportive.
- These findings are relevant as Scotland plans to introduce similar legislation next year.

She also highlighted Scotland's Population Health Framework and the Good Food Nation Plan, which aim to improve public health, reduce inequalities, and steer the country toward a fairer, more sustainable food system.

Johnston concluded by noting her involvement with the Scottish Government's ENRA research programme, which informs rural, environmental, and agricultural policy, and emphasises that the work is a collaborative effort.

Presentation 2: David Thomson, CEO, Food and Drink Federation Scotland

David started by acknowledging that his role is to represent food manufacturers and help both industry and government understand one another's needs.

He highlighted the sector's economic importance:

- £5.2bn in gross value added
- £15bn turnover
- £8bn in exports (a third of the UK's total food and drink exports)
- 47,000 jobs across 1,220 businesses, most of them small or medium-sized
- Strong links with Scotland's agricultural and fishing industries

Despite its strengths, the sector is under significant pressure, mainly due to:

1. High inflation – UK food and drink inflation (5.8%) is much higher than in comparable countries like Spain and Germany.
2. Global instability – Brexit, COVID, the war in Ukraine, trade volatility, labour shortages, rising energy and packaging costs, and increased commodity prices.
3. Regulatory costs – New UK rules, such as extended producer responsibility (£1.1bn cost) and increased employer National Insurance (£400m cost), add further financial strain.

He discussed the expanding legislative landscape, including HFSS (high fat, sugar, salt) regulations, bans on multibuy promotions, advertising restrictions, plastics taxes, and the upcoming deposit return scheme. These changes reshape product development, marketing, and consumer expectations, creating heavy burdens—especially for small businesses.

David emphasised the need to improve resilience in the supply chain, especially in rural areas where small producers are more vulnerable to climate events, supply chain

disruptions, and global shocks. Local sourcing and shorter supply chains can help but require investment.

He also identified significant opportunities:

- Scotland is well-positioned to lead on sustainability, through responsible sourcing, long-term farmer partnerships, and innovations such as climate-focused investment networks.
- Major companies like Nestlé and PepsiCo already demonstrate strong rural engagement.
- There is potential to expand exports, especially if small businesses re-enter exporting after Brexit-related challenges.
- Net-zero targets cannot be achieved without food, drink, and agriculture working together.

He stated that the Good Food Nation plan will only succeed if local authorities meaningfully involve small businesses and integrate them into economic planning.

David concluded that aligning health, environmental sustainability, and economic viability is possible—but requires investment in rural infrastructure, better collaboration across the food system, and strong implementation of the Good Food Nation Act.

Presentation 3: Ben Nunn, Farm Manager at Knoydart

Ben Nunn, farm manager at Knoydart Farm, shared his perspective on “small-scale” farm production. He explained his background in biofuels research and small-farm agriculture before describing the community farm he now manages in Knoydart: a remote community of around 100–120 residents that receives 30,000 tourists annually.

Knoydart Farm was established two years ago and is now operating at full productivity. It employs five local people—many moving from low-skill tourism jobs into skilled agricultural roles. The farm has secured £250,000 in capital and revenue funding, none of which was specific to food production but instead came from social enterprise funders.

The farm supplies local community-owned businesses, exports vegetables to nearby areas, runs school and nursery visits, hosts workshops and events, offers volunteer placements, and is developing a community composting scheme. Future plans include value-added food products and mushroom cultivation.

Ben emphasised the strong social benefits of the farm: community engagement across generations, volunteer involvement, and educational opportunities. He argued that small, high-productivity community farms are an important solution to rural food, economic, and social challenges.

However, he outlined several barriers:

1. Lack of agricultural subsidies – Small community farms do not benefit from the kinds of support available to large farms.
2. Small population base – Community-supported agriculture models are hard to sustain.
3. Lack of horticultural training – Local workers often need skill development.

4. Administrative burden – Complex funding applications require skills many rural communities do not have.
5. Unequal support structures – Despite providing jobs, education, environmental benefits, and food security, small farms face disproportionately high barriers.

Ben called for:

- Parity of support for community farms within subsidy frameworks.
- Simpler, more accessible funding channels tailored to small rural agriculture.
- Targeted infrastructure investment rather than competing with unrelated social projects for the same funds.
- Greater recognition of the social, economic, and environmental value of community market gardens in national food policy.

Ben welcomed people to get in touch with him.

Agenda item 4

Key Issues raised in Discussion

- Question asked: What recommendations should be taken from England's HFSS (high fat, sugar, salt) legislation when introducing similar regulations in Scotland? Experience from England's HFSS legislation suggests that while the rules reduced purchases of HFSS products, they also revealed several gaps in implementation. Retailers sometimes filled restricted promotional spaces, such as aisle ends, with products like alcohol or baby food, or even large food imagery that still functioned as indirect advertising. This highlighted the need for clearer guidance on what can replace HFSS items in these prominent retail spaces. For Scotland, the key lessons are to provide clearer rules on permitted displays, reduce loopholes and ambiguity in the regulations, support enforcement officers with strong guidance, and improve data sharing from retailers so the policy's impact can be evaluated consistently and fairly.
- Question asked: Why do many farms focus on cereals like barley and wheat instead of vegetables, despite the need for more local fresh food? Many farms prioritise cereals such as barley and wheat because they provide more stable and predictable markets. Farmers typically produce what they can reliably sell, and when local authorities moved away from buying local fresh vegetables in favour of cheaper frozen alternatives, an important market was lost. In addition, cereal production is generally less labour-intensive and involves fewer financial risks than growing vegetables, particularly given the high costs of machinery and the uncertainties of supply contracts. Domestic production of fruit and vegetables therefore remains relatively low, reflecting a broader tension between maintaining farm profitability and ensuring households have access to affordable fresh produce.
- Question asked: How might local authorities practically respond to the Good Food Nation duties and work more closely with businesses? Local authorities and health boards are required to develop Good Food Nation plans

that improve food systems and public health outcomes. These plans should recognise the economic importance of food businesses while strengthening collaboration between the public sector and local producers. One practical approach is expanding local procurement, for example by sourcing food for schools and hospitals from nearby suppliers. By aligning public-sector demand with local production, councils and health boards can help strengthen local supply chains, support local food businesses and contribute to healthier local food environments.

- Question asked: Why is prime agricultural land being used for housing when there are food security concerns?

The development of prime agricultural land for housing reflects a policy tension between two pressing needs: increasing the housing supply and protecting land for food production. Planning decisions often require balancing these competing priorities, which can lead to valuable farmland being allocated for housing development. Efforts are underway to reduce this pressure by making better use of vacant and derelict land, as well as repurposing existing buildings, in order to meet housing needs while preserving productive farmland for long-term food security.

- Question asked: Why is prime land in some regions being developed for housing while other rural areas face depopulation and housing shortages? What should be done?

Regional differences in building costs and infrastructure help explain this imbalance. In remote rural areas, high costs for materials, transport and skilled labour make housing development more difficult, limiting the number of homes that can be built. Land quality also varies, and land that appears less suitable for conventional farming can still support highly productive small-scale agriculture through intensive approaches such as market gardening or polytunnels. However, these systems require stronger structural and policy support if they are to contribute effectively to local economies and food production.

- Question asked: Other countries with little farmland (like some Nordic countries) manage to be largely self-sufficient using small farms. Why can't this be replicated, and how do we compare internationally?

In several countries with limited farmland, small farms are supported by government policies designed to maintain both agricultural production and rural populations. In contrast, the UK's agricultural policy and culture have historically favoured large-scale farming models, which can lead to the productivity of small farms being underestimated. Small farms can produce high yields per acre and create local employment, but they often lack equivalent levels of recognition and support. International examples, such as Finland, also show how greater local control over food procurement and policy can help support healthier diets and stronger local food systems.

- Question asked: Should there be a term or recognition similar to "crofting" for mainland small-scale rural enterprises facing similar challenges?

The term "crofting" is tied to a specific legal and historical system and cannot easily be applied to other rural contexts. However, the challenges faced by small-scale

enterprises in fragile mainland rural areas suggest that additional recognition and policy support may be needed. This could involve developing new policy tools or designations to support small rural enterprises outside traditional crofting areas, and there have been discussions about creating a broader rural development framework comparable to existing strategies for island communities.

- Question asked: What is the long-term cost of people not eating healthily, and what are the consequences of poor diet?

Poor diet and obesity have significant long-term consequences for individuals, families and public services. Addressing these issues requires improving the affordability, availability and accessibility of healthier foods. Many experts argue for a shift in focus from treatment to prevention, including reformulating foods to reduce fat, sugar and salt and supporting the availability of healthier products. Community-based food initiatives and small farms can also help improve access to fresh produce, particularly in remote areas.

- Question asked: Even if healthy food becomes available and affordable, how can we change people's attitudes and habits so they actually choose and cook healthier food?

Changing eating habits is complex and often occurs only during significant life events such as illness, parenthood or bereavement. New weight-loss medications are beginning to influence both consumer behaviour and food industry practices, although they raise ethical and cost considerations. Practical community-based approaches can also help encourage healthier choices, such as providing recipes with vegetable boxes, offering workshops on cooking and food preservation, and using social media or local events to increase familiarity with different foods. At the same time, the discussion emphasises that responsibility should not be placed solely on individuals. Tackling poverty and reshaping the food environment—through measures such as subsidies for fruit and vegetables and reduced promotion of high fat sugar or salt foods can help ensure that healthier choices become easier, cheaper and more visible.

Agenda Item 5

AOB

Emma Harper asked the secretariat to provide a 2-page briefing on the key points raised at the meeting.

Agenda item 6

Next meeting: Wednesday 21st January (This date has since been rescheduled to 9 March)

Emma thanked everyone for coming along.