



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

robert@robertcourts.co.uk

**Response to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Consultation on
Health & Harmony: The Future for Food, Farming and the Environment
in a Green Brexit**

08.05.18

Introduction:

1. I am responding to this consultation within my role as Member of Parliament for West Oxfordshire.
 - 1.1. West Oxfordshire is a rural area with a thriving agricultural sector.
 - 1.2. Following the publication of this consultation I sought the views of local farmers and they have helped inform my response.
 - 1.3. I have also had discussions with local NFU representatives to seek their views.

Environmental Objectives:

2. **The aim to divert farming aid to deliver ‘public good’ is a laudable one.** Leaving the European Union and being outside the restrictions of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) gives the United Kingdom a unique opportunity to refocus our agricultural policy to one that actively encourages environmentally-friendly farming for public benefit.
 - 2.1. I note that current and previous environmental schemes have been too heavy-handed and overly bureaucratic. This process-driven approach has often led to poor results.
 - 2.2. It is vital that the new system of payments is user-friendly and outcome-driven.
 - 2.3. The environmental objectives listed in the consultation are correct. I particularly welcome the emphasis placed on supporting new habitats for diverse wildlife, reducing flood risk and improving air quality.
 - 2.4. I agree that public access is an important public good and improves general health and well-being. It is right to offer farmers a financial incentive to create new or enhanced footpaths.

*From the Member of Parliament for the constituency of Witney in West Oxfordshire
including Bampton, Burford, Carterton, Charlbury, Chipping Norton, Eynsham, Witney and Woodstock.*

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- 2.5. This would benefit local residents by providing them with additional walking routes and a greater connection with the countryside, whilst also promoting recreation and tourism.
- 2.6. I note that small family farms are often the core of rural communities, particularly in the small villages and hamlets of West Oxfordshire. It may not always be as easy for these farms to diversify and their unique circumstances ought to be recognised.
- 2.7. Further, it should be recognised that small local abattoirs can promote better animal welfare and support the local economy. This is because they do not require the long transportation of animals nor the more industrialised methods of slaughter.
- 2.8. In addition to the obvious moral and environmental benefits of encouraging higher standards of animal welfare, it should be noted that reduced anti-microbial use has significant public health benefits. Further, that better quality soils and reduced pesticide use also have public health benefits.

Productivity Objectives:

3. I welcome the recognition of improved productivity and competitiveness as a 'public good.' Improving productivity and competitiveness benefits consumers by reducing food prices and increasing the quality of produce.
 - 3.1. Further, increasing productivity is vital in climate change mitigation.
 - 3.2. I note that for many smaller farms to be able add value to their products and develop their marketing edge they require fast, reliable broadband connection. This does not exist in many areas and there remains insufficient connectivity in rural areas. The rural – urban digital divide dampens growth, reduces productivity in rural businesses and makes it harder to attract working people into the countryside farming sectors.
 - 3.3. Brexit provides an opportunity to develop new and existing markets both domestically and internationally. The prospect of bilateral free trade agreements with third countries, whilst posing challenges, has the potential to boost the competitiveness and exports of UK agriculture.
 - 3.4. The UK's global reputation for high quality agricultural goods should be fully exploited post-Brexit. The Government should build on its 'Great British Food' campaign to release the potential of British exporters to gain market share in a far more global sense than was possible within the EU.



Rural Payments Agency Concerns:

4. Local farmers in my constituency have raised concerns as to the competency of the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) to deliver future schemes.
 - 4.1. It is clear that the RPA has a reputation for inefficiency and that it lacks the trust of the farming community.
 - 4.2. I know from my own casework the regularity with which errors are made by the RPA and their often cumbersome response in rectifying mistakes.
 - 4.3. This needs to be addressed moving forward to ensure farmers have confidence in the new schemes to be implemented post-Brexit.
 - 4.4. The RPA ought to take a more pragmatic and flexible approach post-Brexit to ensure that new schemes do not become overly bureaucratic and place an unnecessary burden on farmers.
 - 4.5. Urgent consideration needs to be given as to the resources the RPA will need to implement the schemes envisioned post-Brexit to ensure a smooth and successful implementation.**

Conclusions:

5. The Government's vision of the UK's future farming policy is an ambitious one and ought to be commended. I fully support the principles outlined in this consultation.
 - 5.1. I particularly welcome the emphasis placed on getting value for money from farm payments and incentivising farming in the 'public good.'
 - 5.2. I support the focus on encouraging higher environmental and animal welfare standards, as well as measures aimed at raising productivity in the farming sector.
 - 5.3. I look forward to these proposals being developed alongside the farming sector to ensure a new era of prosperous and sustainable farming in the UK.**

Robert Courts MP