



# LAURA FARRIS MP

*Member of Parliament for Newbury*

Victoria Prentis MP  
Minister of State  
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
Nobel House  
17 Smith Square  
London  
SW1P 3JR

Our Ref: LF8834

24 June 2022

Dear Victoria,

Earlier today I participated in an NFU roundtable meeting with a number of farmers in West Berkshire, in which a number of strong views were expressed that I want to relay to you.

The headline issue was that Government was felt to be vacillating in its policy objectives in a way that was costly, confusing and making planning unnecessarily difficult:

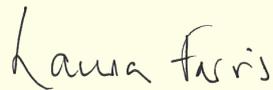
- 1. Food Production:** There is now a deep and consistent perception that many of the trade deals which the UK has concluded are designed to permit cheap food imports and undercut British farmers. The new Food Strategy was commended in its broad objectives but it was unclear how, if at all, this would support British production, what timeframe it was seeking to meet or how it would counter the issue of cheap imports.
- 2. Loss of Basic Payment System:** There is agreement that any substitute payments made under the ELMS will not match the amount lost under the BPS, which means that farmers will have no choice but to increase food prices if they are to break even. There was little sense that the Government had a plan to assist them with this, or even that it would be supported if cheaper imports were available.
- 3. Mixed messaging on the environment:** Having been led to believe that they would be required to dedicate land for environmental purposes including rewilding under the Agriculture Act, farmers were aware that the emphasis had recently shifted to domestic food production. They make a number of points including the fact that rewilding (and equivalent projects) are beneficial to landowners but detrimental to tenant farmers who need to earn a living. They also point out that as farmers they are natural custodians of the land and understand intimately how best to look after it, much of which is reflected in the beautiful high-quality farmland across West Berkshire. I think it would be fair to say that they find it patronising that they are being asked to conserve the land for environmental purposes when many would argue that they already do that. But anyway, they pointed out that their primary role as farmers is in food production, and that they feel this is being overlooked.

**4. Labour shortages:** Serious concerns were expressed about the shortage of available labour and the effects of not being able to recruit sufficient seasonal staff on appropriate visas. Examples were given of turkey farmers, pig farmers and abattoirs who are all woefully short-staffed. I understand the seasonal visas that have been made available have been concentrated on horticulture and fruit-picking, with insufficient flexibility to permit those same workers to transfer to other forms of farming and too few visas in general being made available. My impression was that there needs to be at least a 30% increase in the number of seasonal visas available.

I know how hard you are working on addressing issues in farming and am aware that when the detail comes through on the Food Strategy it will be positive for British farmers. However, the views I heard today suggested a loss of faith in Government and a frustration with divergent messages that are coming from DEFRA. To give one further example, farmers told me about a prohibition that was issued on muck-spreading last year that was abandoned, overnight, a few months ago. Some of these issues are impacting on the future planning and the decisions they are making about livestock and crop production. I am sure you can understand why this is so urgent and frustrating.

Please don't worry about replying to this letter or asking one of your officials to do so. I would instead be very grateful if we could meet before Recess to discuss these points so that I can go back to my farming community as swiftly as possible. Also, I very much hope that you will be able to visit us in September so that we can discuss some of these issues with you directly.

With very best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laura Farris". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

**Laura Farris MP**