

Midlands Engine APPG meeting – Future Food Alliance

Date: 22 March 2022, 13.00 – 14.00.

Attendees:

Parliamentarians

Midlands Engine APPG Co-Chair: Darren Henry MP, Conservative, Broxtowe
Midlands Engine APPG Co-Chair: Lord Ravensdale, Crossbench Peer
Lord Taylor of Holbeach, Conservative Peer
Baroness Burt of Solihull, Liberal Democrat Peer
Jane Hunt MP, Conservative, Loughborough
Jo Gideon MP, Conservative, Stoke-on-Trent
Josh Boughton for the office Philip Dunne MP, Conservative, Ludlow
Lillie Grant, for the Office of Darren Henry MP, Conservative, Broxtowe
Jacob Coad for the office of Caroline Johnson MP, Conservative, Sleaford and North Hykeham
Oliver Lees for the office of Ruth Edwards MP, Conservative, Rushcliffe

Guests

Gayle Aughton, Senior Executive Officer, Midlands Engine
Professor Timothy Foster, Professor Emeritus (Food Structure), University of Nottingham and Director, Creating Food Meteorites
Martin Collison, Director, Collison and Associates Limited and Agri-Food Advisor, Greater Lincolnshire LEP
Mita Lad, Senior Executive, Food and Drink, University of Nottingham

Notes

Meeting was opened by APPG Chair Darren Henry MP (Con, Broxtowe) who welcomed attendees and speakers. Highlighted that the focus of the meeting would be to consider how MPs could best support the Midlands-based food sector. Then handed over to Martin Collison, of Collison and Associates Limited and Greater Lincolnshire LEP, for the first presentation.

All presentation slides utilised by the three presenters can be accessed [here](#).

Presentation 1 – Martin Collison, Greater Lincolnshire LEP:

- Outlined his position at the Greater Lincolnshire LEP, where he leads on the agricultural and food agenda and said that his presentation would focus on the steps required to drive this sector forward in the Midlands.
- Explained that the Future Food Alliance is a public/private partnership focusing on driving growth and creating jobs in the Midlands. Said the organisation is focused on a wide range of big-picture issues, including Net Zero and skills, and aims to bring together a consortium of actors from the private, public and academic sectors to think critically about these issues.
- Outlined the scope of the most pressing current challenges facing food and drink manufacturers in the Midlands and said that the war in Ukraine was by far the most significant challenge. Explained that the wider food and drink supply chain in the UK is very exposed to the economic consequences of the war as the sector is enormously energy

intensive, thus very impacted by rising energy prices. Further, said that farmers have also seen the prices of their feed and fertiliser go up four-fold since the beginning of the war.

- Explained that these price increases would mean higher prices for consumers and would make farmers unable to scale up production. Said that this would be a particular problem because the UK remains very dependent on Russia for food imports, including 30% of UK fish imports.
- Highlighted that the Future Food Alliance wants to build on the many existing capabilities in the food and drink sector in the Midlands and would very much like to work with the Midlands Engine APPG on efforts to unlock additional government funding to further capitalise on the growth potential in the region. Said that the Alliance would particularly like to work with the APPG on the following objectives:
 - Future-proofed transport infrastructure
 - Low carbon energy
 - Commercial food sector space
 - An innovation ecosystem
 - A highly skilled workforce
- Moreover, said that the Alliance hopes to work with the Midlands Engine APPG on making the case to Government for developing an industry-led food chain centre of excellence in the Midlands. Said the Midlands is particularly well suited to be the home of such a centre of excellence given the cutting-edge research and innovation capabilities right across the region.

Presentation 2 - Timothy Foster, Professor Emeritus (Food Structure) at the University of Nottingham

- Explained that his presentation would focus on the food and drink trade organisations currently operating in the Midlands.
- First highlighted the [Food and Drink forum](#), which is a non-profit industry trade body for food and drink manufacturing. Said that this organisation has helped more than 1500 businesses create more than 2000 jobs and £100 million GVA.
- Further highlighted the work undertaken by [SmartParc](#). Explained that this was an old manufacturing plant in Derby, which has been re-developed to a campus-style collection of world-class food production facilities. Said that twenty units have already been completed and are operational. One of the completed units will be a science and innovation centre, aiming to link up universities and businesses from across the region.

Presentation 3 – Mita Lad, Senior Executive (Food and Drink) at the University of Nottingham

- First said that her presentation would set out to highlight the role of Midlands-based universities in supporting the thriving food and drink sector across the region.
- Went on to explain that most Midlands universities are well connected with food and drink manufacturers in the region via organisations working to bring stakeholders together (including the organisations mentioned above). Said that these connections mean that the research expertise within the universities is effectively linked up with companies working in the sector and can help to develop and commercialise new products. Further explained that the universities are really focused on working to leverage the clustered capabilities that exist in the region.

- Concluded that there is a genuinely unique opportunity in terms of the food sector in the Midlands and said that the universities are really wanting to work with the APPG to bring this sector opportunity to the attention of Government.

Darren Henry MP (Con, Broxtowe): Thanked presenters and opened the floor for questions.

Questions:

Jo Gideon MP (Con, Stoke-on-Trent):

Asked if health needs to be a bigger part of the discussion when thinking about the food and drink sector? Also said that it would be good to see more Staffordshire universities involved in the wider food and drink sector initiatives highlighted.

- **Timothy Foster:** Said that he fully agreed with the idea that overall health needs to be a bigger part of the conversation, as many major businesses in the sector are very invested in working to make healthier food more accessible, especially plant-based foods. Further said that none of the initiatives and organisations discussed are closed shops, as such there is plenty of potential for Staffordshire-based universities to get involved.
- **Martin Collison:** Echoed Tim's points and said that there is an extraordinary amount of work going on around the healthy eating agenda. Specifically highlighted the examples of fruit manufacturing and fish farming, both of which have seen a significant amount of recent investment in an effort to further secure the healthy food supply chain in the UK.

Jo Gideon MP (Con, Stoke-on-Trent):

Asked if the Future Food Alliance is working to increase awareness of healthy eating in schools? Also highlighted that this is a particularly relevant issue in Stoke-on-Trent and said that work is on-going to organise a food summit in Stoke-on-Trent to tackle these issues.

- **Timothy Foster:** Replied that the Alliance is actively considering how working with schools around healthy eating awareness is best done and is currently exploring what best practice would be.

Darren Henry MP (Con, Broxtowe):

Remarked on the fact that the UK currently imports 85% of its fruit, and asked if there is a way of making the UK population embrace more seasonal eating?

- **Martin Collison:** Replied that there is certainly important work to be done in terms of consumer education around healthy eating. However, regarding seasonal eating and fruit imports, explained that it would likely be easier and quicker to reduce the UK's reliance on imports by investing in growing more fruit in the UK.

Lillie Grant (from the office of Darren Henry MP):

Asked if there is an identifiable trend towards plant-based proteins, and whether such a trend is something that the Midlands could capitalise on? Further asked what impact such a trend would have on the meat sector?

- **Martin Collison:** Replied that there is a flurry of activity in this area of the food and drink sector, particularly in the Midlands with over £200 million invested in plant-based proteins

in the region in the last four years. Explained that many of the biggest businesses in the sector are particularly interested in this aspect of healthy eating and many are undertaking work focused on pea protein in particular.

- **Timothy Foster:** Echoed Martin's points and explained that consumers have a real desire to integrate healthy plant-based proteins into their diet, and that there is a massive opportunity for the Midlands to invest in this.
- **Mita Lad:** Said that businesses are already investing in this at a large scale, and that the Midlands has the capability, both in terms of innovation capabilities and manufacturing, to make the most of this shift towards plant-based proteins.

Oliver Lee (from the office of Ruth Edwards MP):

Asked what the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been on the food and drink supply chain?

- **Martin Collison:** Explained that one of the key challenges in the early stage of the pandemic was workforce availability, however this challenge had become more manageable. Additionally, said that a pronounced uptick in demand from the retail sector had presented challenges for food and drink manufacturers and that this demand remained elevated from before the pandemic. In terms of the shortage of HGV drivers seen in late 2021, said that this was also somewhat more manageable now and that the industry was starting to see the effects of newly qualified drivers entering the workforce.
- **Martin Collison:** Went on to consider the impact of the pandemic on long-term consumer trends and explained it has reinforced an existing trend towards consumers becoming more health conscious. Further said that this trend might be in danger of being disrupted due to rising prices and the wider cost of living crisis, which might make consumers feel like they cannot afford to make healthy choices.

Josh Boughton (from the office of Phillip Dunne MP):

Asked what the export opportunities might exist for the Midlands in relation to the changes observed in the food and drink market?

- **Martin Collison:** Explained that there are significant opportunities around the more premium food market, especially in relation to plant-based proteins. Also said that there are potentially exciting opportunities in terms of the UK's science and innovation capability in the UK, both in terms of specific research strengths and consultancy.

Concluding remarks:

Darren Henry MP (Con, Broxtowe):

Thanked presenters and attendees and reminded all that the next meeting of the Midlands Engine APPG will be held Tuesday 26 April and that Michael Gove will be the keynote speaker at this.