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Public attitudes to the environment, agriculture and rural development

The Scottish Government recently published results from an independent study into Scottish public attitudes to the environment, agriculture and rural development. The need for the work arose from one of the recommendations by the Agricultural Champions, that "future policies must be guided by real evidence about what the public values".

The team conducting the study gathered evidence in four main ways. Firstly, they reviewed what has been published previously on the topic of attitudes towards agriculture, food, environment and rural policies.

They then conducted fifteen interviews with citizens within Scotland with special dietary needs. These interviews explored issues of cost, authenticity, health, quality, and environment when considering food consumption and production in Scotland.

The interviews were designed to explore the perspectives of groups who are typically under-represented within existing data sources on the issue of food production and consumption. This included those with specific dietary requirements (covering halal, kosher, vegan, vegetarian, gluten free, dairy free and sugar free diets) as well as those on low incomes.

The researchers then conducted an online survey of 2,345 people over 16 years of age, to gather data on attitudes towards a range of environmental, agricultural and rural community issues.

Finally, the researchers held two Citizens' Forums, each lasting two days, to take participants through an intensive process of learning, developing dialogue and deliberation over the issues.

The research findings suggest that public support for farming is growing, with 83% of Scots believing that farming provides an essential public service, and 86% believing that the industry is critical to the success of the Scottish economy.

The research also identified seven key principles for future agricultural policy in Scotland that the public would support: ensuring high quality food production; protecting animal welfare; advancing environmental protection; keeping the land healthy and productive; supporting the rural economy and rural communities; raising the profile of the agricultural sector; and providing financial assistance to the sector.

I was not a member of the research team but I did participate and help provide background information to both of the Citizens' Forums. I was impressed the participants' desire to know more about how agricultural support policy works in Scotland.

But some of their initial misconceptions also emphasised how important it will be to ensure that we all continue to raise the profile of the agricultural sector – and the wide range of agricultural, environmental and social benefits it produces - among the public post-Brexit.

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