

Groceries code boss sees gains

By Anita Howells

THE UK's first **Groceries Code Adjudicator** (GCA) Christine Tacon CBE, has said the UK needs to be "leading edge" to ensure food security ahead of an appearance at one of the agricultural region's biggest festivals.

Christine's comments come as she approaches the end of her first year in the new GCA role, the **Groceries Code Adjudicator** conference looms and she makes a star appearance in Hay Festival's Hay on Earth programme.

Her lips were sealed until the London conference on June 23 as to how she has improved relations so far between the retail sector and producers, however, she said it would be "unrealistic to expect a major change" yet.

Christine, whose appointment in June last year was seen as a major opportunity for farmers and producers to see a fairer deal from supermarkets, was a speaker at Hay Festival on the Herefordshire Powys border at the end of May.

As *Three Counties Farmer* went to press she was due to join in a discussion with UK global food champion Tim Benton and rural commentator Rob Yorke, from Abergavenny, on Food Security and Self Sufficiency, examining how self

sufficient the UK should be and how diet influences supermarkets and farmers.

Food security is increasingly under discussion however Christine said she doesn't believe self sufficiency is the way forward.

"I don't believe self sufficiency is right for anybody but we need to be aware of how much we are producing ourselves," she said

"We are all part of global trading but we need to recognise that what is important is that we are at risk from fuel prices, weather and disease."

Self sufficiency can be tackled in innovative ways. Christine said the Dutch have responded by putting up greenhouses in the UK.

Interestingly she said the biggest imports to the UK are from northern Europe in the form of pork, fruit and vegetables, despite them all being produced here. The UK's biggest export is whisky.

She may be able to help smooth breaches of the **Groceries Code Adjudicator** Bill but farmers who have looked to Christine to help out with price negotiations with supermarkets have been disappointed.

"I have had a whole wave of complaints from the agricultural industry that I don't get involved with price

negotiations," she said.

"I am hearing from those who are direct suppliers that the code has made a difference but I am getting complaints from the farming industry that the price of beef has gone down.

"I can only get involved if a retailer had gone back on an agreement.

"If a meat processor has supplied retail directly and the code has been breached that's when we get involved," she explained.

Clarifying her role, which became effective when the Groceries Code Act went live last June, Christine said that it is her job to oversee compliance in the Grocery Supply Code of Practice which was set up following an inquiry by the Competitions Commission into whether there was an abuse of power in the grocery supply chain, with too much risk being passed on to suppliers.

"I can either work in arbitration when a retailer and supplier can't agree on whether the code has been breached, or as an investigator to get information from all sides of the issue.

"I protect the anonymity of the person who has made the complaint."

As an arbitrator

Christine can award costs and compensation and as an investigator she said she can make recommendations that become legal and binding, name and shame in the press and impose fines.

She is using her experience in farming; she ran the Co-operative Group's farming unit for 11 years, and retail, having worked for Anchor, Vodaphone and Mars, to work in a "collaborative" way with all parties.

"We are in the middle of a survey at the moment which closes on the weekend. I want to prove through the survey that things have got better and there's compliance of the code.

"People are saying to me things like you can buy packaging from who you want to and they are being given reasons for why they have been delisted."

One practice banned by the code of conduct involved supermarkets receiving a payment from a packaging firm in return for forcing their suppliers to use that firm even if it was more expensive.

"There are some improvements but a lot of grey areas too," added Christine.

Looking forward to the Hay Festival, where Rob, who chaired the discus-

sion, invited her to appear for the fifth time, Christine was poised to answer questions on food security, which she says Britain could work harder to achieve.

"We need to make sure we are leading edge. Our engineers should be thinking of ways of using far less pesticides for getting the same yields.

"There are huge opportunities to get involved. There's a lack of engineers and scientists working on practical solutions," she said.



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