

Press release: Country stores merger could reduce competition

Mole Valley and Countrywide Farmers each run country stores, operating a total of 99 premises primarily located across the South and West of England. These typically each have a bulk agricultural products supply business – through which they sell large-scale supplies of agricultural products, such as fertiliser or fencing – and a retail business, through which they sell a wide range of products including animal feed, clothing, pet food and gardening tools.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) is investigating Mole Valley's proposed purchase of 48 Countrywide Farmers' outlets, and has identified competition concerns in a total of 45 local areas. This involves both their bulk agricultural and retail businesses.

The companies are two of the largest suppliers of agricultural products in bulk, and there are no or few other suppliers physically located in these 45 areas. The CMA's investigation found that, while the businesses face competition from other suppliers that operate without local premises, many customers prefer to be able to buy products directly from a supplier's store.

Therefore, these alternative suppliers may not provide enough competition to stop customers from losing out after the merger. The CMA's investigation found that competition concerns in the supply of agricultural products in bulk arise in 45 local areas in total.

The CMA also found that the companies' retail businesses compete closely, resulting in reduced competition for customers in 25 of the 45 local areas after the merger. Its investigation found that there would be either no or very few competing country stores in these local areas as, while the companies' retail businesses face competition for some products from suppliers specialising in one type of product (such as DIY stores, garden centres or pet food suppliers), many customers value being able to buy a range of items in one place. Therefore, these specialist suppliers may not provide enough competition to stop customers from losing out after the merger.

Mole Valley now has the opportunity to offer ways to address these competition concerns. If Mole Valley does not make such an offer, or if any undertakings do not sufficiently address the CMA's concerns, the merger will be referred for in-depth investigation through a 'phase 2' inquiry.

Rachel Merelie, Acting Executive Director of Mergers and Markets and the decision maker in this case, said:

It's our job to make sure that people continue to have enough choice, get fair prices and good quality products after companies

merge. Mole Valley and Countrywide Farmers are two of the biggest operators of country stores, and so it's important that their customers can find good deals when they need to buy these kinds of products.

Notes to editors

1. The CMA is the UK's primary competition and consumer authority. It is an independent non-ministerial government department with responsibility for carrying out investigations into mergers, markets and the regulated industries and enforcing competition and consumer law. For CMA updates, follow us on Twitter @CMAgovuk, LinkedIn, Facebook, Youtube and Flickr.
2. Enquiries should be directed to the CMA press team at press@cma.gsi.gov.uk or 020 3738 6460.

[News story: Government review to see how employers are improving ethnic minority progression in the workplace](#)

- Research will show what action employers are taking to remove barriers to progression and prevent workplace bullying and harassment
- findings will reveal whether companies are reporting their ethnicity pay gap – a key recommendation of the McGregor-Smith Review into race in the workplace
- review is part of Industrial Strategy's ambition to create better, higher-paying jobs in every part of the UK

The government has today (21 February 2018) commissioned research into what steps employers have taken to remove barriers to workplace progression for ethnic minorities.

The results of the new research will be used to assess progress made by employers on recommendations in the [independent McGregor-Smith Review](#) into black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) participation and progression in the workplace.

The review found that the economy could benefit from a £24 billion-a-year boost if BAME people had the same opportunities as their white colleagues. The review also called on companies with more than 50 employees to publish a breakdown of their workforce by race and pay band.

The findings of the research, to be carried out by the charity [Business in the Community \(BITC\)](#), will show what action employers are taking to prevent bullying and harassment of BAME people in the workplace and whether companies

report their ethnicity pay gap. This will help to establish whether any further action is needed to ensure workplaces are inclusive.

The one-year-on review is part of the [Industrial Strategy's](#) ambition to help businesses create better, higher-paying jobs and ensure people from all backgrounds can be successful in the workplace.

Business Minister Andrew Griffiths said:

It is unacceptable that people are being held back in the workplace because of their ethnic background – we want to make sure that the economy works for everyone, so people have the same opportunities to progress and can achieve their true potential.

This new research will establish what steps employers have taken to haul down workplace barriers and harness the talent of a diverse workforce, helping us to assess if further action is needed.

I would like to thank both Business in the Community and Baroness McGregor-Smith for helping to shine a light on this important issue.

Sandra Kerr OBE, Race Equality Director, Business in the Community, said:

I'm delighted that we are running the Race at Work survey again in 2018. We received an overwhelming response to the original survey in 2015, which highlighted that this is an issue that people want to talk about.

Now we will see if the recommendations we made in 2015 are being put into practice by employers and what impact that is having on BAME employees across the UK. I also welcome the Government's commitment to support the survey and championing of the race equality agenda.

Baroness McGregor-Smith, who conducted the McGregor-Smith review of race in the workplace, said:

This one-year-on review of the government's report on race in the workplace gives us the opportunity to take stock of progress and consider if stronger actions are needed for us to see change.

I welcome the involvement of Business in the Community in delivering this review and am interested to see what it will reveal about the experiences of BAME employees in the UK.

[The McGregor-Smith Review 2017](#) outlined 26 recommendations on areas such as raising transparency and celebrating success, to help increase black and

ethnic minorities' participation and progression in the workplace.

In response to these recommendations, the government has worked closely with Business in the Community and others to develop a guide to talking about race at work, created an online portal of best practice and found ways to celebrate success such as the top BAME employers list.

[Speech: Reaffirming UK commitment to a two-state solution which ends the Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#)

Thank you Mr President,

Thank you to the Secretary General and Mr Mladenov as well.

I'd like to welcome President Abbas and thank him for his address to the Council. I welcome his stated commitment to non-violence, and to engage constructively towards a two-state solution.

The United Kingdom remains committed to a two-state solution which ends the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and we will support all and any efforts to that end.

Our long-standing goal is a negotiated peace settlement that leads to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, with secure and recognised borders and with Jerusalem as a shared capital of both States.

US leadership on this issue is indispensable to achieving a solution that meets the aspirations of both parties, and we look forward to the announcement of peace proposals when the US Administration judges them to be ready. US efforts offer a significant opportunity to deliver peace and they should be supported and encouraged by all. We stand ready to provide political and practical support to help achieve a viable agreement.

We encourage the parties to make a public commitment to renewed peace negotiations, on the basis of a two-state solution. In order to move forward, it is important that they reaffirm their commitment to all previous diplomatic agreements which have taken us closer to peace. These agreements remain an important basis for renewed talks. We welcome the Palestinian Authority's continued recognition of the State of Israel, and the parties' continuing security cooperation.

Mr President, if a peace process is to succeed, it needs to be conducted in an atmosphere free from violence. We regret that too many people continue to

undermine efforts to achieve peace. We condemn the detonation of an Improvised Explosive Device along the Gaza border with Israel on Saturday, wounding four Israeli soldiers, including two seriously. We also condemn the recent terrorist attack in the West Bank settlement of Ariel. There is never an excuse for terror, and our thoughts are with the family and friends of the victim, as they are with all those who have been affected by violence. Every Israeli and Palestinian has the right to live in peace and security. There is also a right to dignity and we condemn kidnappings as well as acts that prevent families from being able to properly grieve for their loved ones.

We will continue to press all sides to refrain from engaging in, or encouraging, incitement, hateful action or language. This only serves to stir up prejudice, and takes us further from the goal of achieving peace.

In that regard it is unacceptable for anyone to deny the legitimacy of the connection of either the Jewish or Palestinian peoples to the land. Inflammatory and unhelpful rhetoric on both sides weakens trust, corrodes mutual respect, and undermines prospects for peace. We call on both parties to act with restraint, and to show bold leadership. Only when both parties reject violence and work together to ensure calm and stability can peace have a chance to flourish.

We are concerned by the Israeli Government's recent decision to establish a settlement deep in the West Bank – the second in twelve months. These plans have also raised the possibility of the retroactive 'legalisation' of the illegal outpost of Havat Gilad. And there have been renewed threats from Israel to demolish structures in Susiya, in the occupied West Bank.

We call on Israel to immediately reverse its policies of settlement expansion and demolitions. They undermine the physical viability of the two-state solution and they call into question Israel's own commitment to peace.

Mr President, the lack of Palestinian unity continues to be an impediment to achieving peace. We therefore support reconciliation efforts which lead to the full return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza.

As Special Coordinator Mladenov informed us last week, conditions in the Gaza Strip are dire. Further deterioration of the humanitarian situation would not only continue to put lives at risk but would represent a threat to stability in the region. It is essential that all parties work urgently to improve the situation, and we call for an easing of access controls for people and goods into, and out of, Gaza.

The United Kingdom remains a committed supporter of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). It must be able to continue its vital work to improve the lives of Palestinian refugees, and to help maintain stability across the region. It needs appropriate funding to do so.

Mr President, all United Nations Member States have a role to play in nurturing peace and rejecting violence.

We are therefore concerned by incursions across Israel's border with Syria

earlier this month. Our commitment to Israel's security is unwavering, and we support Israel's right to defend itself.

Mr President,

The United Kingdom's position on an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement has not changed. It should be based on the lines as they stood on June 4, 1967 with equal land swaps to reflect the national, security, and religious interests of the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. Jerusalem should be the shared capital of the Israeli and Palestinian states, and its status must be determined through a final status agreement. A just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees is needed that is demographically compatible with the principle of two states for two peoples.

To conclude Mr President, like all in this Council, the United Kingdom strongly supports peace. We want to see renewed peace negotiations, supported by the international community, which lead to a safe and secure Israel, the homeland for the Jewish People, living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, the homeland for the Palestinian people.

Let us all work together to lay the groundwork for peace.

Thank you Mr President.

[Speech: 13 years since Kyoto and the UK is still leading the charge to a low carbon future](#)

Cast your mind back 13 years to 2005. The world was a very different place. The phrase 'climate change' was not exactly a buzzword and yet an extraordinary moment occurred. A groundswell of momentum across the globe brought the Kyoto Protocol into force, a pivotal agreement committing more countries than ever to internationally binding targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Last week the impact of climate change on sports was in the headlines. Climate change affects us all – and if it takes melting ski slopes and waterlogged cricket pitches to get people's attention, then so be it.

Momentum on climate action is accelerating with the UK in the driving seat. Climate change is no longer just a phrase used by environmentalists and scientists, it forms part of our everyday narrative. This is the moment not only for global efforts to reduce our CO2 output, but also for the growth of green industries and for international climate collaboration.

Climate change crosses party political lines and doesn't respect borders. That cross-party support for climate action and UK leadership was demonstrated in 2008 with the introduction of the historic Climate Change Act, setting an ambitious legally-binding target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 80% of 1990 levels by 2050.

But it was the Kyoto Protocol that truly kickstarted international action in 2005. When world leaders signed up to the charter, it signalled a sea change. Left unchecked, climate change would ravage our natural environment and, along with it, our health and prosperity.

Fast forward 10 years and in 2015 the UK was instrumental in securing the Paris Agreement, committing 175 countries to protect the world from catastrophic warming.

Three years ago in Paris, the UK and other developed countries committed a joint contribution of \$100 billion to help the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world cope with the increasing risk of droughts and floods and provide access to clean energy. We should be proud that the UK is regarded so highly for its climate action overseas as well as at home.

I'm proud that we have got our own house in order. In 2011, the government slashed emissions from 3,000 buildings across Whitehall by nearly 14% in a single year.

It is not only a moral imperative that we leave the world in a better place for future generations, there is an economic argument for tackling climate change. The UK has shown that reducing emissions and growing the economy can, and should, go hand in hand. Since 1990 our national carbon emissions have fallen even more and our national income has risen faster than any other nation in the G7.

The shift to clean energy presents a multibillion-pound investment opportunity for businesses. Our low-carbon sector already directly employs more than 200,000 people. We are clear: through our ambitious industrial strategy the UK is ready to embrace the economic opportunities presented by the transition to a low-carbon economy.

And there's more good news. Latest figures indicate that more than half of our electricity generation in 2017 came from low-carbon sources such as wind, nuclear and solar. Just 5 years ago, dirty coal power accounted for 40% of our electricity – this figure is now 7%. The government has driven this change, investing more than £52 billion in renewable energy since 2010 and committing to phasing out unabated coal power by 2025. We now have the biggest installed offshore wind capacity in the world, and the cost of offshore wind is constantly falling thanks to government support.

On the international stage the UK is leading the charge for clean, green energy. In November the Canadian environment minister, Catherine McKenna, and I launched the Powering Past Coal Alliance, a global coalition of countries, businesses and cities committed to ending unabated coal power. Coal is the dirtiest fossil fuel, emitting twice as much CO₂ as gas per unit of

electricity generated. Phasing out coal will not only reduce pollution and carbon emissions, it will improve our health.

Our action at home and abroad is delivering real results and we are on track to meet or over-deliver against our first 3 carbon budgets. We have come a long way in the last 13 years, but we cannot step off the pedal now. Ambitious climate action must continue, with the UK leading the way to a low-carbon future.

Statement to Parliament: Safeguarding in the aid sector

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on my Department's response to the sexual abuse and exploitation perpetrated by charity workers in Haiti in 2011, and the measures we are taking to improve safeguarding across the aid sector.

I'd like to start by paying tribute to Sean O'Neill of The Times and the two sets of whistleblowers – those in 2011 and later – for bringing this case to light.

On February ninth, The Times reported that certain Oxfam staff when in Haiti in 2011 had abused their positions of trust and paid for sex with local women. These incidents happened in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in 2010, which killed hundreds of thousands of people and left millions more homeless and reliant on aid for basic needs such as food and shelter.

This is shocking, but it is not by itself what has caused such concern about Oxfam's safeguarding. It was what Oxfam did next.

In chaotic and desperate situations the very best safeguarding procedures and practices must be put in to place to prevent harm, but when organisations fail to report and follow up incidents of wrongdoing that occur, it undermines trust and sends a message that sexual exploitation and abuse is tolerated. We cannot prevent sexual exploitation and abuse if we don't demonstrate zero tolerance.

In such circumstances we must be able to trust organisations not only to do all they can to prevent harm, but to report and follow up incidents of wrongdoing when they occur.

In this duty Oxfam failed under the watch of Barbara Stocking and Penny Lawrence.

They did not provide a full report to the Charity Commission. They did not

provide a full report to their donors. They did not provide any report to prosecuting authorities.

In my view Mr Speaker they misled, quite possibly deliberately. Even as their report concluded that their investigation could not rule out the allegation that some of the women involved were actually children.

They did not think it was necessary to report to the police in either Haiti or the country of origin for those accountable.

I believe their motivation appears to be just the protection of the organisation's reputation. They put that before those they were there to help and protect – a complete betrayal of trust.

A betrayal too of those who sent them there – the British people – and a betrayal of all those Oxfam staff and volunteers who do put the people they serve, first.

Last week, I met with Mark Goldring, Chief Executive of Oxfam, and Caroline Thomson, Oxfam's Chair of Trustees.

I made three demands of them –

That they fully cooperate with the Haitian authorities, handing over all the evidence they hold.

That, they report staff members involved in this incident to their respective national governments.

And, that they make clear how they will handle any forthcoming allegations around safeguarding – historic or live.

And I stressed that for me holding to account those who made the decision not to report and to let those potentially guilty of criminal activity slip away, was a necessity in winning back confidence in Oxfam.

As a result of those discussions, Oxfam has agreed to withdraw from bidding for any new UK Government funding until DFID is satisfied that they can meet the high safeguarding standards we expect of our partners.

I will take a decision on current programming after the twenty-sixth of February as I will then have further information which will help me decide if I need to adjust how that is currently being delivered.

Given the concerns about the wider sector this case has raised, I have written to every UK charity work working overseas that receives UK aid – 192 organisations – insisting that they spell out the steps they are taking to ensure their safeguarding policies are fully in place and confirm they have referred all concerns they have about specific cases and individuals to the relevant authorities, including prosecuting authorities.

I have set a deadline of the twenty-sixth of February for all UK charities working overseas to give us the assurances that we have asked for and to

raise any concerns with the relevant authorities.

We are also undertaking in parallel a similar exercise with all non-UK charity partners – 393 organisations in total and with all our suppliers including those in the private sector – over 500 organisations – to make clear our standards and remind them of their obligations, and we are doing the same with all multilateral partners too.

The UK Government reserves the right to take whatever decisions about present or future funding to Oxfam, and any other organisation, that we deem necessary. We have been very clear that we will not work with any organisation that does not live up to the high standards on safeguarding and protection that we require.

I will also be sharing details of this approach with other governments departments, who are responsible for the ODA spend.

Although this work is not yet complete it is clear from the Charity Commission reporting data – and lack of it from some organisations – that a cultural change is needed to ensure all that can be done to stop sexual exploitation in the aid sector, is being done.

And we need to take some practical steps. Now.

We should not wait for the UN to take action. We must set up our own systems now.

My department, and the Charity Commission, will hold a safeguarding summit on the fifth of March, where we will meet with UK international development charities, regulators and experts to confront safeguarding failures and agree practical measures, such as an aid worker accreditation scheme we in the UK can use.

Later in the year, we will take this programme of work to a wide-ranging, global safeguarding conference to drive action across the whole international aid sector.

And I'm pleased to say the US, Canada, the Netherlands and others have already agreed to support our goal of improved safeguarding standards across the sector.

The UK is not waiting for others to act. We are taking a lead on this.

I will also be speaking to colleagues across government and beyond about what more we can do to stop exploitation and abuse in the UN and broader multilateral system.

The message from us to all parts of the UN is clear – you can either get your house in order, or you can prepare to carry out your good work without our money.

I welcome the UN's announcement on the fourteenth of February that the UN does not and will not claim immunity for sexual abuse cases. This sends a

clear signal that the UN is not a soft target, but we must hold the UN to account for this.

Further actions we have taken in the last week include the creation of a new Safeguarding Unit. We have also promoted our whistleblowing and reporting phone line to encourage anyone with information on safeguarding issues to contact us.

We have appointed Sheila Drew Smith, a recent member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, who has agreed to bring her expertise and her challenge to support my Department's ambition on safeguarding. She will report to me directly.

I have asked to meet leaders of the audit profession to discuss what more they can do to provide independent assurance over safeguarding to the organisations that DFID partners with globally.

And I have held my own Department to the same scrutiny that I am demanding of others. I have asked the department to go through our centrally held HR systems and our fraud and whistleblowing records as far back as they exist.

I am assured that there are no centrally recorded cases which were dealt with incorrectly.

Separately, we are reviewing any locally reported allegations of sexual misconduct involving DFID staff. To date our review of staff cases has looked at 75% of our teams across DFID and will complete in a fortnight.

Our investigations are still ongoing and if, during this process, we discover any further historic or current cases, I will report on our handling of these to Parliament.

DFID, other government departments and the National Crime Agency work closely together when serious allegations of potentially criminal activity in partner organisations are brought to our attention and we are strengthening this, as the new Strategy Director at the NCA will take on a lead role for the aid sector.

I am calling on anyone who has any concerns about abuse or exploitation in the aid sector to come forward and report these to our counter fraud and whistleblowing team. Details are on the DFID website and all communications will be treated in complete confidence.

Later today I will have further meetings, including with the Defence Secretary, regarding peacekeeping troops, and the Secretary of State at DCMS regarding the Charity Sector.

My absolute priority is to keep the world's poorest and most vulnerable people safe from harm. It is utterly despicable that sexual exploitation and abuse continue to exist in the aid sector.

The recent reports should be a wake-up call to all of us. Now is the time for us to act, but as we do so we should note the good people working across the

world in this sector – saving lives often by endangering their own – and all those from fundraisers to trustees who make that work possible across the entire aid sector.

In the last week alone UK aid and UK aid workers has helped vaccinate around 850,000 children against polio.

And we should also recognise that work can only be done with the support of the British people.

I commend this statement to the House.