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Wednesday 14th October 2026

FAO: The Chief Minister Mr C Thomas
CC: Chief Executive Officer Mr M Lewin, CO of DEFA, Members Of Tynwald
The Office of the Chief Minister
Cabinet Office
Third Floor, Government Offices
Buck's Road
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An Open Letter - Formal Vote of No Confidence in the Senior Leadership of DEFA

Dear Chief Minister

The Office of the Manx National Farmers' Union writes to formally record the MNFU vote of no confidence in the Senior Leadership of the Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture. This is due to a considerable lack of understanding of the challenges for the sector, poor delivery of strategy, continual failure in decision-making and absence of progress from the Department, when required to address and rectify serious and urgent issues.

The agricultural industry on the Isle of Man has endured many set-backs and Government induced failures over the last few years, much of which was avoidable. The MNFU has consistently and repeatedly raised concerns over trade, escalating input costs, declining farm profitability, increasingly restricted routes to market and the consequential contraction of agricultural businesses which in turn deepens risks for the Islands food security. The MNFU is the largest recognised representative of agricultural interests, and agriculture is a keystone industry for the Island, yet it is noted that our stakeholders are not included in key discussions on Food Security, Land Management Framework, Carbon code development or other significant Department strategy or policy development, despite being a key contributor and directly affected.

The Agricultural Strategy

DEFA Statement (IOM Government website);

The Agriculture team works in partnership with the agricultural and aquaculture industries to try to achieve a reliable and self-reliant Manx food chain and international trading opportunities. The Directorate provides advice, guidance and support to the agricultural industry to assist Manx agriculture to evolve.

DEFA Agricultural Strategy 2024;

Change is constant, and the pace and scale of change in agriculture is currently unprecedented. We are stepping into a place where we cannot rely upon past experiences to guide us through today's agricultural challenges, such as climate change, changing trade



patterns, international frameworks, global pandemics, and geopolitics, along with the ever increasing economic, human health and mental health challenges. It has been tough in recent years, with significant pressures building and impacting upon the agriculture sector. We are committed long-term to ensure the sector is innovative, strong and sustainable.

The Department needs to have an effective, trusted partnership with the sector, to:

- Build confidence*
- Share data, information and knowledge*
- Strengthen farmer to farmer knowledge exchange*
- Ensure the sector has a strong and viable route to market*
- Fund and support schemes that aid, encourage and increase the speed and uptake of new ideas, opportunities and innovation (PG 4)*
- Ensure farmers can develop and have access to high-value markets and marketing opportunities (PG 6)*
- Support the Island's Agri-Food infrastructure including the Meat Plant, the Creamery, the Flour Mill, and associated industries (PG 6)*
- Highlight the importance of strong biosecurity measures in protecting our Island from harm (PG 7)*

As a consequence of the current Senior Leadership approach, industry confidence in the Department has broken down. We give evidence of some key situations where the Department Senior Leadership has failed the industry;-

Safe Imports of Breeding Stock

The Island has been unable to import from the UK for some years due to ongoing BTV restrictions. Earlier this year, the MNFU negotiated the opening of a safer trade route from N.I. with the Chief Veterinary Officer, with mutual recognition for the need to replenish breeding stock while protecting biosecurity. Around the same time, the IOM Steampacket Company advertised that sailings routes with N.I. would continue throughout the year. Both of these changes were considered as positive steps which would go some way to alleviate the problems caused by shortage of new breeding stock on Island, while continuing to protect animal health and welfare through stringent biosecurity measures.

Following the breakdown of the Manxman this summer, and the diversion of the Ben My Chree (originally scheduled to cover the N.I. route) to the Heysham route, Manannan was rerouted to N.I.. The Manannan will not take livestock. Recognising the problem this created for stock purchased but unable to leave N.I., the MNFU had discussions with IOMSPC on the matter, which resulted in agreements that the Arrow could potentially provide the service required, but that they were not minded to support, and would expect to recover full cost from the charter estimated at around £20,000.

It is acknowledged that changes to the service provided by IOMSPC would of themselves be beyond the control of DEFA, however the Senior Officer response to the situation clearly demonstrated a reluctance to act in a time critical situation. After some pressing by MNFU, it was felt that DEFA Senior Leadership misrepresented the industry request and was not willing to consider underwriting of the safe shipment of breeding stock, despite this being the best animal welfare option. We will clarify that the industry was not requesting reduced or subsidised fares for this journey. Instead, it was presented to the MNFU by DEFA that transporting the stock from Ireland, through Scotland and England to the Island was the only option for the industry.



This of course would cause the livestock to have to be in transit much longer, and to have to travel through BTV areas, on the journey to the Island, as well as be a more costly operation for farms to cover. But it would mean the Chief Officer would not be required to progress any funding bid to Treasury or the Minister. The Senior Leadership had prioritised their concern over the funding gap for the IOM Steampacket above the safe transit of breeding stock. Without the intervention of the then Chief Minister, Mr Cannan, Treasury Minister Mr Thomas (now Chief Minister) and some proactive MHK's, who recognised the situation needed immediate action, the Department Leadership would have been content to allow the agricultural industry to bear both increased risk and cost, again demonstrating a complete lack of understanding of the situation from DEFA's most Senior Officer.

BSE Risk Status Disparity

The Department's handling of the BSE risk status divergence with Great Britain has been particularly damaging to the Islands agricultural sector. Failure to anticipate the regulatory changes, followed by an appallingly inadequate response to the consequential trade limitations and devaluing of cattle subsequently imposed on Manx farms, has resulted in significant financial losses and restricted access to market. Rather than acknowledge this failure and address the consequences to the industry, the Department has persisted in downplaying the impact to Tynwald, leaving farmers to absorb significant losses, and lose trade due to factors entirely beyond their control, and not of their making. Manx trade reputations are damaged and a significantly depressed industry, having already endured a year of this situation, is expected to sustain losses for another year at best. The Senior Leadership has acknowledged the situation but will not act to address the loss in trade or the cost to the industry. Simple measures such as parity with the UK on cull cow pricing at IOM Meats, or underwriting a trade sale, would have demonstrated support, but have not been initiated.

The Meat Plant, The Creamery, and the Mill

Isle of Man Meats is another clear example of inadequate Departmental oversight. Despite repeated warnings from the Industry, concerns over the continuing obfuscation of the purpose and use of the increasing subvention, the questionable governance from DEFA has perpetuated. Millions of pounds of additional Government expenditure has so far failed to deliver certainty to producers or value to the public. This additional financing of IOM Meats Ltd continues to be portrayed by the Department as support for agriculture despite requests for clarifications from the MNFU.

The Department's has permitted the reputation of Manx meat to be severely damaged, and to date, there is little progress in restoring confidence or improving sales. While the current Senior Leadership could not be responsible for all of the past errors, there has not been an effective demonstrable understanding of the requirements of the industry or trade to ensure stability and enable progress. The Department must be much more honest about the increases to subvention, and delays that prevent progress towards an efficient and less costly operation of the plant, and improvements to the Islands reputation within the wider Meat industry.

Heavy budgetary bias towards the Meat Plant continues to overshadow support options for agriculture in general, and other vital sectors have subsequently been neglected. The dairy sector has similarly appealed to the Department for support to counter escalating operating costs and depressed pricing for producers. However, the Department falls back, rather than engaging genuine support. Representatives from the dairy sector are given confusing and conflicting advice regarding the Departments ability to support, and potential funding options. The Senior Officer seems unsure about what can be supported, when and how, and there is a perceived reluctance to action anything with DEFA's agricultural team.



We emphasise that a Meat Plant, a Mill, and a Creamery are essential components for a sensible food security plan, and for a viable agri-food industry. They are valuable strategic assets and should be invested in accordingly and equitably.

Food Security

Extract from the Food Security Strategy 2024;-

We aim to:

- *Promote locally produced food to encourage a circular economy and offset imports*
 - *Encourage exports to create capacity and inward income streams*
 - *Identify labour and skill shortages and take action to resolve*
 - *Encourage innovation and solutions to help feed the nation*
 - *Collaborate with local retailers to promote local foods, availability and contingency capacity*
 - *Increase food storage and distribution preparedness*
 - *Facilitate the increased capacity for on-island cold storage*
 - *Support key food infrastructure including an abattoir, creamery and flour mill*
 - *Ensure inputs to support production are secure and reliable (fuel, animal feed, fertiliser)*
- (PG 7)

Extract of DEFA Ministers statement on the MNFU Food Security Petition, TYNWALD COURT, THURSDAY, 11th DECEMBER 2025;-

'Therefore, I rise with an amendment that seeks to strengthen the motion before you and to ensure that there is a reinforced commitment to supporting local produce, food security and, in turn, the agricultural and food production sectors on our Island.

I beg to move the amendment standing in my name:

(a) To leave out the words 'Tynwald should ensure, including by way of legislation, if necessary' and in their place to add the words 'the Department of Environment, Food and Agriculture and the Department for Enterprise should ensure, through the delivery of the actions in the Isle of Man Government Food Security Plan';

(b) to leave out 'UK' and the word 'all' before 'Manx produce';

(c) to leave out the words 'for all its services' and in their place to add the words 'where possible'; and

(d) to add at the end the words 'and that an annual update should provided to Tynwald on the delivery and outcomes of the Food Security Plan 2024 [GD 2024/0114]'.

The Department chose to weaken the proposals of a petition supported by the public and industry, rather than strengthen, yet even the amendments have not been progressed to our knowledge. The failure to deliver any action even on the amendments to the MNFU petition, is a dereliction of duty regarding the Islands Food Security, particularly regarding essential improvements to local food production.

If the Department is progressing some of this work, it must present evidence. We have repeatedly requested updates and received nothing. Discussions with supermarket representatives suggested they were unaware of



work in this area also. A Food Security Board with funding has been talked of, but no further information is available.

The Agricultural Budget

During MNFU and DEFA official meeting in February of this year, the MNFU queried whether DEFA had made efforts to improve the budget for agriculture. In response the Minister and CO stated that they had been discouraged from this, and that IOM Meats financial pressures had significantly affected the wider budget.

'Members discussed the additional £5m fund of which £1m supports AES and £4m supports the Meat Plant. Concerns were raised that agricultural funding has remained flat despite sector pressures, with SC (MNFU) noting the risk of Agriculture being overshadowed by Meat Plant costs.'

The agricultural budget has remained broadly static for over 15 years, despite unprecedented increases to the cost of production and continuing global instability. Government must remember that agricultural businesses are price takers on both sides and cannot increase prices to absorb costs like many other businesses. In recent years, markets and trade opportunities have been lost through negligence or errors by IOM Government. All sectors should now be considered high-risk, recognising that resilience has eroded and farm businesses are unable to continue to bear the cost. The failure of DEFA to adequately represent or respond to the industry's needs has played a significant role in this.

The Agri-Environment Scheme

The MNFU representatives requested review of the 2026 scheme earlier in 2025, but this did not materialise, and the opportunity for industry feedback could not be engaged as a result. The MNFU wrote to the Department stating that as the scheme had not been reviewed by the industry, it should remain the same in 2026 to maintain a degree of stability, but this was ignored and changes were implemented regardless. The Department has still not sought to improve the budget for the Agri-Environment Scheme five years from its inception.

Capacity Protection And Resilience Scheme (CAPRI)

We remain unsure how or why the CO of DEFA was able to provide funds out of existing budgets to support an emergency scheme, when the Department continually states there is no remaining budget. We remain of the view that emergency funding schemes should not be sourced out of existing budgets where the Department has sought not to fully utilise existing funds at the expense of the industry.

The MNFU has supplied further feedback from the Membership on areas that need attention and made suggestion for future proofing, all requiring action, yet nothing has been progressed. Correspondence and discussion repeatedly drawing attention to these major issues has largely been met with varying explanations of why action *cannot* or will not be taken, rather than efforts to action solutions. The apparent determination to minimise or obscure serious errors rather than acknowledge and address them is deeply concerning.

The continued decline of Manx agriculture, the loss of market opportunities and the failure to respond effectively to repeated warnings demonstrate that the current Senior Leadership is not capable of delivering what the industry urgently requires.



The MNFU remains willing to work constructively with Tynwald Members and IOM Government to pursue and secure solutions, but this requires competent and responsive leadership prepared to recognise problems, accept accountability and take positive and decisive action.

Therefore, the Manx National Farmers' Union formally declares that it has no confidence in the current Senior Leadership of the Department of Environment Food & Agriculture. We call upon the incoming Administration to undertake an urgent review and implement the necessary changes, including the replacement of those whose leadership has demonstrably failed the industry.

The MNFU considers it appropriate that this correspondence be issued as an open letter to the Isle of Man Government and shared with Members of Tynwald, our MNFU Membership and the wider public. We request written response within 10 days as immediate action is required.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Sarah Comish

General Secretary,
On behalf of the Board of The Manx National Farmers Union

