

Fruit and Vegetable Alliance



Joint Response to *“Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit”*

May 2018

Like the air we breathe and the water we drink, food is the source of survival, health and life. Fruit and vegetables are the most obvious place where health and food policy conflate and have a dynamic and multiple impact – on our food sector, our health and wider societal costs. Investing in fruit and veg is a win-win-win; rarely do so many interests come together. The development of the UK’s own Agriculture Policy provides a unique opportunity. The new Agriculture Bill will set the framework for future food production in the UK at a time when the food we eat matters more than ever for our public health.

What we eat is now the second largest driver of ill health and death in the UK – second only to tobacco (Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2016). Britain eats the most ‘ultra-processed’ diet in Europe (Monteiro *et al.*, 2018) and the public purse is bearing the consequences of this with soaring NHS bills resulting from heart disease, diet-related cancer, stroke, obesity related diseases and a burgeoning number of people being diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. If much of the food available to us is doing us long term harm, the food system needs to be reformed so that fruit and veg is more accessible and affordable, and Agriculture Policy has an important part to play.

The DEFRA consultation paper is entitled *Health and Harmony*, and yet it has no ambition to use the Agriculture Bill to incentivise the production of healthy food. There is a notable absence of any vision for how British food production can play a vital role in supporting British people to eat well and survive into old age without the crippling consequences of diet-related disease. Future agriculture policy matters for our environment and for our animals, but it also matters for British citizens. Just as the Bill will need to ensure policy does all it can to protect our countryside, improve our soils, and our biodiversity it also needs to promote and support the quality and healthfulness of the food we eat. This needs to be a core element of our British food brand.

We believe The Agriculture Bill should create powers for the Government to develop specific schemes which support public health through the production and consumption of healthy food. Like clean air, and clean water, public health should be regarded as a public good which warrants specific support from policy measures and public money. The Bill should also commit to establish a set of national indicators and targets to monitor improvements in how our food system is impacting on public health and the environment.

We would therefore urge the following:

1. That *public health* be added to the list of 6 public goods which should be supported through the Agriculture Bill.
2. That environmental outcomes / environmental land management schemes be expanded to include “health and environment” in keeping with the title of the consultation paper.
3. The Bill should commit to strengthen schemes, or pilot and create new schemes, which specifically support *high quality, safe and healthy food* production and consumption, with a specific focus on fruit and vegetables. These schemes could aim to improve productivity, reduce the environmental impacts of production and help to stimulate demand. The opportunities for achieving all these objectives are huge.

Increasing fruit and veg consumption to meet dietary guidance on fruit and veg would create an opportunity for the horticultural industry to grow its output by close to 2 million metric tons (Food Foundation calculations based on (DEFRA, 2016)). This creates a potentially huge opportunity to not only increase production of existing varieties but to expand the number of varieties grown to maintain consumer interest and engagement in British produce.

The horticulture sector in Britain is highly productive compared to other sectors of food production. Horticulture currently only takes up 3.4% of the cropped arable land but delivers 25% of the value of arable crops (DEFRA, 2017). Unlike other sectors of farming, fruit and veg growers in the UK have benefitted very little from the farming subsidies from the EU. The latest data on farmer incomes (for England only) show that horticulture farms got on average £5,300 in 2015/16 from EU payments, while dairy farms received £24,000, cereal farms £36,900 and poultry farms £8,800.

While this means that many horticulture businesses are economically more sustainable than other sectors of farming, this lack of public support combined with an extremely competitive retail environment means that margins for producers are generally extremely small (1-3%). These forces can serve to undermine innovation and prevent new smaller scale entrants from succeeding. Risk also tends to be passed down to the growers from the supermarkets, through, for example, late changes to orders, which further compounds the threats to business viability. Furthermore, like other sectors of agriculture, horticulture is facing a lack of seasonable workers. These factors are also increasingly meaning it is more economically viable to relocate fruit and veg production overseas where costs are lower with knock-on effects for the British economy and in some instances reducing the quality for the consumer.

Despite this level of productivity, we have a heavy reliance on imports, particularly for fruit. Thirty years ago, 83% of the veg we ate came from the UK. Now it is 54%. 17% of the fruit supply in the UK is UK grown, a similar proportion to 30 years ago though in the intervening years levels have fluctuated (DEFRA, 2016). The [Food Foundation’s research](#) has shown that there are significant opportunities to increase the productivity of at least a dozen types of our favourite fruit and veg in the UK and compete more effectively with European imports.

We therefore recommend that ministers develop a clear vision for British horticulture which seizes the opportunities Brexit will bring for increasing productivity and keeping fruit and vegetables affordable and accessible for all. This should include a package of support within the new Agriculture Bill which is aimed at improving health and well-being, to run alongside efforts to improve the environmental impact of farming. This would serve to correct existing and potential market failures associated with the high externality costs of our food system born by the health service and offer genuine public good for public money.

About the Fruit and Vegetable Alliance

A group of small and large fruit and vegetable producers, producer organisations, trade associations, and health/food charities have come together to collectively make the case for supporting the production and consumption fruit and vegetables in the UK in order to support the UK’s public health. The Alliance will be officially launched in June and will work in close coordination with a newly proposed edible horticulture roundtable with Defra.

Current members of the Alliance include (alphabetical order): British Growers, British Summer Fruits, Chris Rose Associates/Asplins PO, Community Farm, CSA Network UK, Food Foundation/Peas Please, Growing Communities/Better Food Traders, G’s Fresh, Kindling Trust, Landworkers’ Alliance, Lantra, Organic Farmers and Growers, Organic Growers Alliance, Produce World, Social Farms and Gardens, Soil Association, Sustain, Tamar Grow Local, and Tyfu Cymru – Grow Wales.

References

DEFRA (2016) *Horticulture Statistics 2016*. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/horticulture-statistics-2016>.

DEFRA (2017) ‘Agriculture in the UK 2016’.

Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (2016) *Country Profile: United Kingdom*. Available at:

www.healthdata.org/united-kingdom (Accessed: 8 May 2018).

Monteiro, C. A. *et al.* (2018) ‘Household availability of ultra-processed foods and obesity in nineteen European countries’, *Public Health Nutrition*. 2017/07/17. Cambridge University Press, 21(1), pp. 18–26. doi: DOI: 10.1017/S1368980017001379.