

The case for a new Food Bill

MP briefing ahead of ‘National Food Strategy and Public Health’ Westminster Hall Debate, 15 December 2021 09:30

Background and timing:

In July 2021 Henry Dimbleby published his independent [National Food Strategy](#) - the result of two years of intensive research, engagement, and policy development. He laid out four strategic objectives for the food system: 1) escaping the junk food cycle; 2) reducing diet-related health disparities; 3) making the best of our land; and 4) creating a long term shift in our food culture. Amongst the recommendations was a call for a new Food Bill. The Government is set to respond with its own Food Strategy White Paper in early 2022.

Whether the Food Strategy White Paper contains a Food Bill is an essential test:

Bold action to fix the problems that our food system is causing will require legislation. If the Government does not commit to a Food Bill in their upcoming Food Strategy White Paper, this will be a marker that they are not serious about establishing the conditions that will support genuine, long-term food system transformation. We urge you to contribute to the debate on the 15th, encouraging the Government to take Dimbleby’s recommendations seriously and to commit to a Food Bill.

Our current food system is damaging our health and the environment:

Getting food right would be transformative in helping us tackle obesity, meet our climate and nature targets, and reduce health disparities. And through smart investment, standards and the right laws in food, the Government could also unlock innovation, driving economic growth in our largest manufacturing sector and levelling-up jobs.

- The government spends an estimated £18 billion – 8% of all government healthcare expenditure – on conditions related to high BMI every year.¹
- 1 in 7 children in England are already obese when they start primary school. Among reception-aged children, those aged 4 and 5, the rates of obesity rocketed from 9.9% in 2019-20 to 14.4% in 2020-21.²
- Children living in the most deprived areas are more than twice as likely than those living in the least deprived areas to be obese.³
- Globally, our food system produces a third of all greenhouse gas emissions and agriculture is an identified threat to 86% of species at risk of extinction.⁴
- The Government’s Climate Change Committee has said we must reduce the amount of meat we eat by 20–50% in order for the UK to reach net zero by 2050.⁵
- The food and drink industry is the UK’s largest manufacturing sector; it employs more than 440,000 people. In 2019 it had a turnover of more than £104bn.⁶

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/health/the-heavy-burden-of-obesity-67450d67-en.htm>

² <https://digital.nhs.uk/services/national-child-measurement-programme/>

³ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/broken-plate-2021>

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43016-021-00225-9>

⁵ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/land-use-policies-for-a-net-zero-uk/>

⁶ [Food and drink industry - Facts and stats](#)

We cannot fix these issues through willpower and education alone:

The National Food Strategy showed that supply and demand in the food system is driven by a Junk Food Cycle. Our innate biological preference for energy dense foods encourages supply and perpetuates demand for these foods to the detriment of the nation's health.

It's hard (and in many cases economically impossible) to choose the healthy option in a world where highly processed, unhealthy calories have become so abundant, so cheap, and so convenient.

- The poorest fifth of UK households would need to spend 40% of their disposable income on food to meet Eatwell guide costs. This compares to just 7% for the richest fifth.⁷
- On average, 1 in 4 places to buy food are fast food outlets, rising to almost 1 in 3 in the most deprived fifth of Local Authorities.⁸
- Healthier foods are nearly three times as expensive as less healthy foods calorie for calorie.⁹

Government policy on food is fragmented and lacks a coherent strategy:

Work on food is cross-cutting by nature - government departments must work together to make progress.

- 16 Government departments are involved in making policy on food.¹⁰
- The National Food Strategy is the first independent review of England's food system for 75 years.¹¹

Much previous government policy on food has focussed on individual action and willpower.¹² The Government now needs to give itself options to be bolder, to set a framework for long-term change, to break the cycle of ill health. It needs to support businesses to make the changes needed by levelling the playing field and making it easier to do the right thing.

A Food Bill would show that the Government is serious about long-term change:

- Setting a north star for this and future governments - a clear articulation of the benefits which a healthy, sustainable food system should bring to society, our environment and the economy, and which policy and business practice should be supported in law to deliver.
- Driving a cross-Government approach - bringing together all aspects of policy making into a coherent, integrated whole, relating to existing legislation such as the Agriculture Act and Environment Act.
- Because what gets measured gets done - to drive innovation and embed long-term change, a food bill could set long-term statutory goals and enable monitoring of progress against metrics. Mandatory reporting by food businesses would give us the information we need to support them to change and expanding the remit of the Food Standards Agency would mean they could report on progress and advise Government on actions needed to deliver their goals.
- Providing certainty to businesses and investors about the priorities for national food and farming policy, levelling the playing field, embedding transparency into business practice, and rewarding those who have already started to take action on health and the environment. Also, to provide businesses with pre-competitive space to agree ways to help influence consumer behaviour and introduce new products.
- Enabling Government to lead by example where it has a direct role in the food system - namely through the purchasing of food for consumption in schools, hospitals, and for the armed forces etc. and putting in place legally enforceable standards for these settings.

⁷ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/broken-plate-2021>

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ <https://foodresearch.org.uk/publications/who-makes-food-policy-in-england-map-government-actors/>

¹¹ <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/approach-2021/>

¹² <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0009.12498>

Stakeholders across the food system are supportive of Government action

<p><i>Public desire for change is greater than ever.</i> They are looking for leadership to tackle obesity and the link between it and Covid-19. They see empty shelves but hear from British farmers who can't get their produce to market. They are gaining an understanding of the fragility of long supply chains and feel the impact of food price rises. They are passionate about maintaining high British standards.</p>	<p><i>Businesses need support.</i> Many businesses are undergoing fundamental changes in their supply chains, in their labour supply, in their ambitions to tackle climate change, and in their adjustment to new regulations. They hear their customers calling on them to create better choices which help tackle ill health and climate change. Businesses are calling for a clear direction of travel and level playing field so they can future proof their actions and know that their investment in change will not be undercut by less considerate businesses.¹³</p>	<p><i>Investors need data.</i> Investors need consistent data on business performance on nutrition and sustainability. Without this it is not possible for them to accurately understand what progress is really being made, in order to make appropriate investment decisions. Mandating business reporting on the type and volume of food sold for all large businesses would ensure investors have access to high-quality information, and would drive up minimum standards amongst businesses.</p>
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What MPs can do to help:

Next week's Westminster Hall Debate is an opportunity for MPs to make clear to Government:

- That they support the National Food Strategy and that the Government should be ambitious in its response to Henry Dimbleby's recommendations.
- That food system change is a long-term project, which will need a cross-Government approach and robust targets, measurement, reporting and oversight - all this could be created via a new Food Bill.
- That there is broad support for this from the public, from businesses, and from investors.

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¹³ <https://www.retailtimes.co.uk/retailers-and-food-businesses-back-historic-reporting-plans-to-improve-nations-health/>