

## **The Government's *Food Strategy***

**MP Briefing - October 2022**

### ***Background and summary***

On 13 June the Government published the [Food Strategy](#) - its response to Henry Dimbleby's independent [National Food Strategy](#) review (NFS). The NFS was published in July 2021 after over two years of intensive analysis and consultation, and included a set of 14 recommendations which spanned the full breadth of issues facing the food system. Though the Government's Food Strategy makes a number of new policy commitments (outlined below), it fails to acknowledge or address the breadth of ambition which was included in the NFS.

### **Not truly a strategy**

Originally billed as a new White Paper on food, the Food Strategy has now been downgraded. It is not underpinned by the new primary legislation which we believe is so desperately needed (Sustain and Food Foundation's joint briefing on the need for a Food Bill can be found [here](#)). And though it now calls itself a strategy, it bears few hallmarks of one - lacking both a long-term vision for the UK's food system and the robust plans, targets and accountability mechanisms that would be needed to get us there. The strategy appears unlikely to deliver the consistent progress that is needed over the long-term.

### **Re-siloing food policy across Government**

Rather than capitalising on the opportunity created by the NFS to set out a truly cross-Government, long-term plan for fixing the food system, the Food Strategy has effectively re-siloed the issues back into various Government departments. For example, a handful of Dimbleby's recommendations were supposed to be taken forward via the Levelling Up White Paper, and the Government's response to recommendations on tackling the Junk Food Cycle were deferred to the promised Health Disparities White Paper from the Department of Health and Social Care. Given the recent political upheaval, the status of the Levelling-Up White Paper is now uncertain and the Health Disparities White Paper has been abandoned, demonstrating again why a genuinely cross-Government plan on food is so vital.

### **Some positive announcements, but worryingly weak on implementation detail**

Some of the specific individual measures announced in the Food Strategy are welcome - but even these include little detail or timings. Measures such as the land use framework, the introduction of mandatory health reporting for larger food businesses, a horticulture strategy, and possible changes to public procurement to include local and sustainable food have the potential to have a positive impact. But without robust regulatory mechanisms to ensure that they can be delivered and enforced the proposals do not have the clout that will be necessary to deliver real impact.

## The urgent need for further action

In the face of worsening nature, climate and health outcomes, widening dietary inequalities, and a cost of living crisis that has seen food and (non alcoholic) drink prices rise by 14.6% in the last year, it is of vital and urgent importance for the Government to go back to the drawing board to set out a comprehensive food plan, underpinned by legislation. We note that the strategy said the Government would seek primary and secondary legislation as necessary. A political champion for this work is sorely needed.

## Key new measures announced in the Government *Food Strategy*

1. *Consult on implementing **business reporting** against a set of health metrics and explore a similar approach to sustainability and animal welfare. This will be delivered by a new **Food Data Transparency Partnership** between government departments and agencies in England and the DAs (DHSC, the FSA and Food Standards Scotland) with representatives from across the whole food supply chain and civil society. It is also supposed to champion consumer interests.*

The reporting will initially involve large companies across retail, manufacturing, out of home, food to go and online delivery businesses. The Government also commits to streamline for industry all reporting requirements relating to the production and sale of food and drink by the end of 2023 in England. It is unclear whether reporting will be mandatory (vitaly important, as existing voluntary schemes led by civil society organisations have resulted in patchy business engagement), whether data will be centrally available and what specific metrics will be included. We would also like to know more about how monitoring and enforcement will work. A full policy briefing on this issue from The Food Foundation can be found [here](#).

2. *Consult on **public sector food and catering policy**, including the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services (GBSF). The strategy says Government will consider making this mandatory across the whole public sector. They will propose that the public sector reports on progress towards an aspiration that 50% of its food expenditure is on food produced locally or to higher environmental production standards.*

The consultation proposes extending the higher standards already enshrined in the Government Framework across the whole public sector, and to introduce an “ambition” that half of food expenditure should be on food which is produced locally or to “higher environmental production standards”. Currently, even public institutions such as hospitals – which are supposed to follow the Government Buying Standards – are failing to meet them as they are not monitored or enforced. Schools, hospitals, prisons and defence could be required by law to deliver sustainable meals, and support UK farmers who farm to higher welfare and environmental standards. But to do so it would need new legislation to ensure caterers are required to meet their standards.

3. *Introduce a **land use framework** in 2023.*

A new land use framework is welcome but little detail has been given and we have questions over the accelerated timeline and how this will be achieved. If it is to be successful it must cover rural and peri-urban land, integrate all land use needs (e.g. food, climate, nature, housing, recreation), enable Environment Land Management to deliver a strategic transition to agroecological farming, have democratic processes at the local level, and provide guidance at the national level.

4. *Introduce a new **horticulture strategy**. Government to include industrial horticulture in decisions on industrial energy policy and review the planning permission process to support new developments, incentivize the use of surplus heat and CO2 from industrial processes, and renewable sources of energy.*

A new Horticulture strategy is welcome and we were encouraged that there was mention of the 'diverse role of small, large and emerging growing models'. We would call for investment to go beyond industrial greenhouses and into soil-based, diverse, and regenerative SME horticultural farming models that create jobs. Growth in fruit and nut tree production could help to sequester carbon, boost food security resilience and improve diets.

5. *A new report to monitor progress against the food strategy goals will be published alongside the next UK Food Security report – it will draw on independent analysis from the Climate Change Committee (CCC), Food Standards Agency (FSA) and the Office for Environment Protection (OEP).*

Reporting infrequently on progress without independent oversight or the requirement for Parliamentary scrutiny is unlikely to drive the consistency of progress that will be needed to deliver long-term change in the food system. It is encouraging that the government will draw on analysis from the CCC, FSA and OEP, but we would argue that these organisations need a more substantive independent oversight role to ensure any reporting regime is effective.

*For a full list of measures included in the Government's strategy, timeframes and where we expect to see them picked up, please see [here](#)*

### **Note on Food Partnerships**

The Food Strategy recognizes the positive role of Local Food Partnerships. A food partnership is a cross sector body that owns and drives forward a food strategy or action plan for their local area. Typically they include representation from the public, private, voluntary and community sector. For a case study on how a food partnership can work in practice, please see [this case study](#) of how Greenwich responded during the pandemic, working with the council and local businesses to put together food boxes for vulnerable residents.

Defra says it will learn from their approaches and work to understand and identify best practice in addressing food affordability and accessibility to healthy food – and then target those areas that need the information most.

## Progress against the National Food Strategy Recommendations

| NFS recommendation   | Progress  |        |
|--|---|--------|
| 1. Sugar and salt reformulation tax                                    | No. However, it is significant that the report acknowledges rising levels of obesity, the Junk Food Cycle and a role for government intervention and regulation. It concedes that the voluntary sugar reduction programme has resulted in “mixed progress”.   | ✗      |
| 2. Mandatory business reporting  | There is little detail, but there is a commitment to consult on mandatory health metric reporting, and signals that possible future reporting for environment and animal welfare may also be considered. It is unclear whether data will be centrally available and how monitoring and enforcement will work.   | ✓      |
| 3. Introduce an “Eat and learn” initiative for schools                 | The strategy repeats commitments made in the Levelling Up White Paper, including £5 million for school cooking, voluntary reporting by schools and small amounts of funding for training. Other elements of this recommendation, such as accreditation and recruitment, have not been taken forward.  | Partly |
| 4. Expand Free School Meal eligibility                                 | This has been rejected in favour of being kept ‘under review’. Following the threat of judicial review, the Government permanently extended FSM to children from families with ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’ earlier this year.   | ✗      |
| 5. Fund the Holiday Activities and Food Programme for the next 3 years | Funding was announced in Autumn 2021 for the next 3 years.  | ✓      |
| 6. Expand Healthy Start scheme   | The Government increased the value of Healthy Start vouchers after Part One of the National Food Strategy, but hasn’t implemented the recommendation to expand eligibility or promote the scheme more heavily. Sustain and our partners have flagged that the digitisation of Healthy Start has been problematic and many eligible families have been rejected. | ✗      |
| 7. Trial a “Community Eatwell” programme                               | This was previously announced in the <a href="#">Levelling Up White Paper</a> and is aimed at improving diets.  | ✓      |
| 8. Guarantee the budget for agricultural payments until at least 2029  | The Government has committed to maintain current levels of spending during this Parliament (until May 2024) but not beyond. Defra’s current planning assumptions assume that the current funding of £2.4 billion a year will be available throughout the  | ✗      |

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|--|---|--------|
|  | agricultural transition period to 2027, but this is subject to future financial settlements.  |        |
| 9. Rural land use framework based on the Three Compartment Model     | There is a commitment to create a land-use strategy, but it is unclear whether this will align with the NFS's recommended 'three compartment model' and whether the Government's original Agricultural Transition Plan remains intact.  | ✓      |
| 10. Minimum standards for trade, and a mechanism for protecting them | Government says it will use trade deals to protect standards and producers – but the NFS recommendation for core standards has been ignored.  | ✗      |
| 11. £1billion for food system innovation                             | Commitment to a new farming What Works centre, and to various other pots of farming/food research and innovation funding.   | Partly |
| 12. National Food System Data programme                              | The Food Data Transparency partnership and land use framework go some way to progressing this recommendation  | Partly |
| 13. Strengthen procurement rules                                     | Consultation on making GBSF mandatory, but no commitment to make the standards monitorable or enforceable. There is an "aspirational target" for public sector orgs to procure 50% of their food locally or to higher env standards – but seems to retain a value for money loophole.   | Partly |
| 14. Targets and legislation for long-term change (Food Bill)         | No progress on food bill – The Government doesn't believe that it is needed to deliver the measures in the strategy but they will seek primary legislation if it becomes necessary to do so. No commitment to new legal targets, or independent monitoring/oversight. There is a weak commitment to reporting on progress in 2024 (and on a semi-regular basis thereafter). | ✗      |

For more reaction and commentary, please see Sustain's National Food Strategy [hub](#).

For The Food Foundation's reaction to the Government's strategy see [here](#), for reaction on the lack of free school meals recommendation see [here](#) and to watch a snap analysis webinar from the day of release, with Food Foundation Executive Director Anna Taylor and Professor Sir Charles Godfray see [here](#).

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