

Turning the Food System Round

The role of government in evolving to a food system that is nourishing, sustainable, equitable and humane

Executive Summary

We have a food system that does the opposite of what it is meant to do: it makes us unhealthy. In addition, it undermines the natural resources on which the future health of farming depends and places our climate targets out of reach. It produces poor and volatile incomes for many farmers and, all too often, animal welfare that falls far short of our obligations to them as sentient beings.

If we want a better system we will need to embark on far-reaching changes.

The question is, how can these be achieved?

This report sets out guidance on the role of Government in achieving a new food system that is nourishing, sustainable, equitable and humane.

A report by Chatham House stresses that while they have important roles to play, the restructuring of our food system cannot be left to “industry goodwill or enlightened self-interest”.¹ The report highlights the need for governments’ non-interventionist approach to be replaced by a willingness to set a strong policy, regulatory and fiscal framework.

Building a fresh vision for future food and farming

Government must itself recognise and then communicate to society the need for a new vision of food and farming. It must generate and sustain commitment among all sectors of society – including of course farmers and food businesses – to realising this vision.

Government needs to move away from the current practice of formulating policy in silos which results in food and farming policies that often do not cohere and are sometimes contradictory. Government must develop integrated, cohesive policies.

Better information: The government should develop programmes to increase public awareness of the implications of different farming methods and dietary choices for human health, the environment, food security, climate change and animal welfare.

Mandatory labelling as to farming method: Since 2004 the law has required eggs and egg packs to be labelled as to farming method. With meat and milk, however, consumers are largely in the dark. The UK should require meat, milk and dairy products, including those which have been produced intensively, to be labelled as to farming method.

End misleading labelling: Meat and milk are often labelled misleadingly.² Images are often used that suggest the animals were farmed outdoors when in reality they were kept indoors throughout their lives. Such labelling is in breach of the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. Government must properly enforce this legislation.

End obfuscation: Defra and industry regularly assert that ‘Britain has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world’. While this may be true in some cases, it serves to hide the fact that many UK animals have poor welfare. Defra talks of ‘Great British food’ which seems inapt in a country in which poor diet is a major contributor to disease.

Creation of a new food culture: The current food culture gives great weight to factors such as low prices and convenience. There is no part of this culture that invites consumers to think about how low-cost meat, eggs and milk are produced. A new food culture must be created which cares about the nutritional quality of food and values farming methods that protect the environment and animals.

The need to challenge the “We’re just giving consumers what they want”

myth: Food businesses tend to justify the production and sale of unhealthy or inhumane food by saying: “We’re just giving consumers what they want” as if these wants had arisen of their own accord. However, consumer demand for certain foods has been manipulated by years of advertising and marketing.^{3 4 5}

Much more needs to be done by government to provide information that counterbalances the food industry’s huge expenditure in persuading people to eat unhealthy food of low nutritional value. In addition, regulatory actions are needed to control the food industry’s production and promotion of unhealthy food as voluntary moves have not been sufficient to tackle diet-related ill-health.^{6 7 8 9}

Improving the nation’s food

The Faculty of Public Health states: “The poorer people are, the worse their diet, and the more diet-related diseases they suffer from”:¹⁰ Government social policies should ensure that everyone has sufficient income to purchase, and opportunities to access, nutritious food. No-one should have to ‘make do’ with unhealthy food.

A growing number of initiatives seek to ensure that nutritious food is accessible by the most deprived in our society and that healthy, local, sustainable food that provides better returns to farmers (by linking them more directly to consumers) is more widely available. Government, local authorities and other public bodies should give greater financial support to – and indeed themselves develop – such initiatives.

Public procurement: Public sector bodies should use their buying power to augment the market for food produced to high nutritional, environmental and animal welfare standards. Government and other public bodies must ensure that nutritious food is the norm in the public sector. Improving the quality of public food does not need to increase costs. There are several examples of public bodies that, by carefully balancing the contents of meals, have been able to improve quality without increasing costs.^{11 12 13 14 15}

Animal welfare in public procurement: McDonald’s has higher standards of farm animal welfare than most public bodies. It uses free range eggs and all its bacon and sausages come from pigs reared to RSPCA Assured standards. Defra’s standards on public food procurement^{16 17} only require meat, milk and eggs to have been produced to legislative minimum standards. This is unsatisfactory. Public bodies should supply food and meals produced to high levels of animal welfare. Scottish law requires the procurement strategy of

public bodies to “promote the highest standards of animal welfare”.¹⁸ The rest of the UK should now introduce similar legislation.

Improving farming livelihoods

Farmers have been swamped by other parts of the food chain. Defra data show that over 80% of the revenue generated by the food chain comes from retailers, foodservice operators and food manufacturers, 11% comes from food wholesalers, and just 7% from agriculture.¹⁹ This must change. Farmers should receive a fair share of the value generated by the food chain and the retail price paid for their products.

Government must encourage food businesses to pay farmers prices that are commensurate with their production costs, provide farmers with decent livelihoods and allow farmers to provide good environmental and animal welfare standards. If encouragement proves to be insufficient, Government should introduce regulatory measures designed to even out the discrepancies in market power between major retailers and farmers.

Restoring the natural world

Intensive agriculture has had a damaging impact on key natural resources, such as soils, water, biodiversity and habitats.²⁰ The link between intensive animal and intensive arable production remains insufficiently acknowledged.

Intensive livestock production is dependent on feeding human-edible cereals to livestock. Defra data show that 47% of UK cereals (wheat, barley and oats) are used as animal feed.²¹ However, animals convert these crops very inefficiently into meat and milk. For every 100 calories of cereals fed to animals, we receive on average just 17-30 calories as meat.^{22 23} Chatham House states that the feeding of cereals to animals is “staggeringly inefficient.”²⁴

Intensive livestock’s huge demand for cereals has contributed to the intensification of arable production which, with its monocultures and agro-chemicals, has led to water pollution,²⁵ soil degradation,^{26 27} biodiversity loss^{28 29} and air pollution.³⁰

To reverse these trends we need to move to forms of farming that restore soils and biodiversity and minimise water and air pollution: It is not sufficient to adopt measures that simply make intensive farming somewhat less damaging and resource-inefficient.

Government must encourage – for example, through the use of post CAP subsidies - a wholly fresh approach as to how we grow crops and rear animals. The role of livestock should be transformed so that they are primarily used to convert inedible materials into meat and milk. The use of monocultures, pesticides and synthetic nitrogen fertilisers should be minimised. We need to move to farming methods that work in harmony with natural processes such as agroecology, circular agriculture, organic farming and agro-forestry. The link between animals and the land should be restored through the use of rotational, integrated crop-livestock systems.

Innovation: Defra places undue reliance on high-tech to reduce the impact of intensive farming. Of course new technologies have a role to play. But in some cases there is a danger that in making damaging systems to a degree less harmful, agri-tech will cement in place approaches that are *inherently* damaging. For example, precision farming can enable better targeted use of agro-chemicals. However, the resulting reduction in the use of pesticides and fertilisers simply makes an intrinsically harmful approach somewhat less damaging. It does not convert it into a form of farming, such as agroecology, which is positively beneficial to natural resources.

A 2019 report by the *International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food System* stresses that “high-tech, capital-intensive, digitization-based innovations end up reinforcing existing production models”.³¹

Research and innovation must be reoriented away from ameliorating the detrimental impacts of industrial production and should instead focus on supporting forms of agriculture that enrich soils, enhance biodiversity, capture carbon and provide first-class animal welfare.

Gold standard animal welfare

We welcome the Government’s ambition to “set a global gold standard for animal welfare as we leave the EU”.³² This section highlights some of the best standards already in use in the world including in the UK. These are what we need to aim for if we wish to achieve gold standard welfare. Defra should use subsidies and other mechanisms (e.g. tax breaks) to help farmers adopt such systems. It should also make it clear that the government’s vision is for approaches such as those referred to below to become the norm.

The **French *Label Rouge* scheme requires broilers** to be reared to the best of free range standards. Around 16% of French broiler production is *Label Rouge*.³³ The UK should seek to emulate and then surpass France.

Free farrowing: Farmers should move from farrowing crates to outdoor breeding or free farrowing systems which, if well-designed, can keep piglet mortality as low as in crates.^{34 35}

Intact tails on pigs: Farmers who get their pigs through to slaughter without their tails being bitten or docked will be operating a very good system. The German State of Lower Saxony pays farmers €16.50 per undocked pig.³⁶

The very best of free range laying hens: These have small flocks, low stocking density, mobile housing and plenty of trees and bushes. Skilful farmers running such systems can manage without beak trimming while achieving low mortality and good plumage scores.

Tackling several sustainability challenges at once - environment, climate, resource efficiency & animal welfare: Normally we prefer free range farms for laying hens. However, the Dutch Kipster farm is a remarkable barn system which not only has very good welfare but also successfully addresses several traditionally intractable problems. It is carbon neutral; it uses no human-edible feed (the hens are fed on by-products such as sunflower meal and left-over bakery products), and the males are reared till the age of 15-17 weeks for various meat products including chicken burgers.

Regenerative agriculture: Kingclere Estates, Pitt Hall Farm – conversion of intensive arable farm to low-input rotational system: Kingsclere Estates has been transformed from intensively farmed arable land to a rotational system with herb-rich grass leys including legumes such as clover and livestock as rotational grazers. Grass leys in rotational farming not only permit the farm to reduce chemical inputs, but provide feed for free-ranging animals. The fertility that is built up over four years of grass production is used to support the growth of four years of arable production without the need for chemical inputs.

Pasture for life: The *Pasture-Fed Livestock Association* is a group of farmers who raise their cattle and sheep exclusively from pastures and grass. No grains are fed.

Dairy calves - the Ethical Dairy: It is standard practice in dairy farming to separate calves from their mothers shortly after birth. This Scottish farm takes an innovative approach; the calves stay with their mothers till the age of 5-6 months.

Pasture Promise Free Range Dairy: Farmers who use the *Pasture Promise* label must graze their cows for at least 180 days a year day and night.

“We need to talk about meat”: Lancet Editorial’s heading

The Government should encourage a public conversation about meat. It should inform people about the relationship between diets and climate change, health, antibiotic resistance and the environment and stimulate national debate.

Reductions in meat production and consumption must come from the intensive pig and poultry sectors not from cattle and sheep kept on well-managed grasslands or in rotational integrated crop-livestock systems. The fact that ruminants produce more GHG emissions per unit of meat produced than pigs and poultry is crucial. However, it does not follow that meat production should switch from ruminants to monogastrics as this would result in increased use of antibiotics and arable land and further deforestation. The increased demand for cereals would have a detrimental impact on the quality of soils, water and air and would drive additional biodiversity loss. A switch to pigs and poultry would undermine food security and animal welfare.

The best response to ruminant GHG emissions is to substantially reduce meat consumption but for the bulk of meat production to be extensive ruminants as industrial pig and poultry production is responsible for a very wide range of harms.

Mending our price system

The Government should explore how fiscal measures could properly reflect the environmental and other externalities of industrial livestock production. A tax should be placed on industrially produced meat and dairy products. The tax should not extend to extensively produced meat and dairy products.

Revenue raised from taxes placed on industrially produced meat and dairy products should be used to subsidise healthy foods such as fruit and vegetables, legumes, whole grains and high quality meat and dairy products as it is crucial from the viewpoint of social equity that the overall price of food does not increase. The tax must be designed so as not to be regressive; it must help those on low incomes to access healthy diets.

Fiscal measures should be used to support farms that have high animal welfare and environmental standards. Such farmers should benefit from more generous capital allowances when calculating their net profits for tax purposes and from increased tax-free allowances.

¹ Garnett *et al*, 2015. Policies and actions to shift eating patterns: What works? Chatham House and Food Climate Research Network

² The Times, 10 March 2018. Idyllic meat wrappers hide harsh reality of mass modern farming. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/past-six-days/2018-03-10/news/idyllic-meat-wrappers-hide-harsh-reality-of-modern-mass-farming-8mkfdmtzt>

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⁴ Ralston *et al*, 2018, Time for a new obesity narrative, *Lancet* 392, 1384-5

⁵ Gordon *et al*, 2018. What Is the Evidence for "Food Addiction?" A Systematic Review. *Nutrients* 2018 Apr 12;10(4)

⁶ Lobstein *et al*, 2015. Child and adolescent obesity: part of a bigger picture. *Lancet* 2015; 385: 2510–20

⁷ Public Health England, 2015. Sugar reduction: the evidence for action: Annexe 3

⁸ UK Health Forum, 2018. Public health and the food and drinks industry: The governance and ethics of interaction: case study 11

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- ¹¹ <https://www.kbhmadhus.dk/english/ourstory> Accessed 30 January 2019
- ¹² INNOCAT *Op. Cit.*
- ¹³ <https://international.kk.dk/nyheder/copenhagens-organic-food-revolution> Accessed 30 January 2019
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- ¹⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/419245/balanced-scorecard-annotated-march2015.pdf
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