

The National Food Strategy

Part Two



Introduction

The much anticipated second part of the National Food Strategy, led by Henry Dimbleby, was released on 15 July 2021. This second publication is titled 'The Plan', runs to 289 pages and presents an analysis of England's food system and its current failures, before proposing an interventionist strategy to reform the future of our national food system. This is the first major review of England's food system for more than 75 years, and a first ever national strategy. Part one of the strategy was released last year as an urgent response to the issues of hunger and ill-health that were raised by Covid-19; it also sought to address the trade and food standards debate that arose at the end of the EU exit transition period. Part two – 'The Plan' - gives a much more detailed and long term overview of the history behind our current food system, interrogating its norms and unveiling its complexities at length. The strategy proposes a radical overhaul of English food consumption and importantly for rural land managers, production. This briefing note will summarise the key arguments and recommendations of the report, as well as providing our own analysis of the findings.

Scope of the report

Much of food policy is a matter for devolved nations, therefore this report applies to England, however Mr Dimbleby explains his team worked closely with devolved nations as the UK's food system is so interwoven. Core elements such as trade remain national policies. The report focuses on food and non-alcoholic drinks, and specifically addresses food produced on land, rather than in the sea. The report not only assesses England's food production but also looks at the country's total consumption in order to take into account the outsourcing of environmental damage that occurs through the food we import. As part of the strategy process, Mr Dimbleby's team consulted over 300 organisations and engaged with approximately 700 people from across the country, both industry stakeholders and members of the public.

The argument

Today's food system is both a 'miracle and a disaster', defying Malthusian predictions of mass famine and producing more than enough calories to feed the global population. However, the Plan argues that our food system urgently requires transformation for two key reasons. The first is for the health of our planet – our global food system as it exists is doing more harm than good to the environment. Globally, the food system is responsible for up to 30% of all greenhouse gases (in comparison air travel represents 3.5% of global greenhouse gases). The biomass of wild mammals has fallen by 85% since the rise of human civilisation and 25% of all remaining mammal species are threatened with extinction, as natural habitats are converted to food production. Society's drive for food production has resulted in the decline of biodiversity and the extraction of nature, leading to water insecurity, pollution and zoonotic disease.

The second reason is because much of the (junk) food we eat is making us ill. Food is the biggest driver of poor health, with obesity, diabetes, heart conditions and other issues related to high BMI or poor diet increasing. The estimated cost to the National Health Service of dietary related ill-health is £74 billion every year. Playing on the public health messaging of covid, the Plan asks policymakers to 'Escape the Junk Food Cycle and protect the NHS'.

Problems and solutions

In order to 'solve' the problems of our current food system, the strategy proposes structural changes to our diet. Compared to 2019, by 2023 the population in England will need to eat:

- 30% more fruit and veg
- 50% more fibre
- 25% less 'HFSS' (High Fat Sugar and Salt) foods
- 30% less meat

These targets on their own are meaningless without effective interventions and the food system is massively complex. The Plan describes how interconnected food production and consumption is, as well as the diversity of drivers that can impact how the system functions. From an English policy making perspective, 16 government departments hold responsibility for some aspect of the food system, demonstrating just how dispersed and decentralised governance of food is. In order to make sense of the complexity and find opportunities for effective intervention, Mr Dimbleby adopts systems thinking and identifies a number of negative feedback loops within the food system. The two key feedback loops that the report targets to disrupt have been labelled as the 'Junk Food Cycle' and the 'Invisibility of Nature', with the latter building on the recent Dasgupta Review of the economics of biodiversity.

Breaking the junk food cycle

The report explains that humans have evolved a biological predilection for calorie dense foods, meaning food companies invest more into these foods as consumers demand more of them, incentivising society to eat more high sugar, high salt processed products and continually expanding the market in a positive feedback loop.

To counter this negative cycle, the strategy proposes:

- **Sugar and salt reformation tax** – the over consumption of processed food cannot be combatted by education and willpower alone and so the introduction of a £3/kg tax on sugar and a £6/kg tax on salt sold for use in processed food, restaurants or catering businesses is recommended. Research suggests that this would reduce the average calories eaten per person per day by 15 – 38 kcal, which could completely halt weight gain at a population level
- **Food company reporting** – a new statutory duty for all food companies with more than 250 employees to publish an annual report on metrics around healthy and unhealthy food sales (for example sales of food and drink high in fat, sugar or salt, sale of protein by type and food waste)
- **Launch a new ‘Eat and Learn’ initiative for schools** – this would include a package of measures designed to increase students’ understanding of food. Measures include reinstating a Food A level and increasing the funding, recruitment and inspection of food-based courses in schools.

Reducing diet-related inequality

Healthy food costs more per calorie and the disparity in health between the richest and poorest areas of England is growing. Poorer households are less likely to have basic cooking and storage facilities at home. To address these structural inequalities, the Plan proposes a number of programmes, but expressly does not tackle the Government’s ongoing welfare and economic policies that sustain the ‘cheap food’ system:

- **Free school meals** – extending eligibility for free school meals
- **Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme** – fund the HAF programme for at least the next three years, and extend the scheme’s eligibility
- **Healthy Start scheme** – expand the scheme’s eligibility and increase the voucher value
- **Community Eatwell** – trial a Community Eatwell programme which is a preventative way to combat those on poor diets. GPs would be able to prescribe fruit and vegetables along with food related education and social support, to patients suffering the effects of poor diet or food insecurity.

Making the best use of our land

Throughout the report, it is made clear that farmers must be at the ‘centre of the transition of the food system’, but as was suggested in Part 1 of the food strategy, a series of measures are proposed to reform food and land use.

A) Methane and meat: The Plan focuses heavily on the net zero consequences of food production. A particular focus is given to reducing methane, as its short atmospheric lifespan means methane reductions can make a significant difference to limiting peak warming. A substantial reduction in UK meat production and consumption is suggested, but it is consistent with what the Committee on Climate Change has also called for. The argument pivots on the fact that 85% of UK farmland is used to rear and feed animals, yet meat, dairy and eggs provide 32% of the calories we eat. Reducing meat-based emissions is seen as critical to the transition and also in ‘freeing up’ land to create more carbon sinks. There is an awareness of the benefits of extensive pasture-fed grazing systems, which the author believes are critical, but with lower yields they remain relevant to a national diet that contains 30% less meat. The prospect of a meat tax was heavily rejected by members of the public.

B) Land use: The report focuses on the fact that rural land is facing many different pressures – the need to sequester carbon, restore nature and produce food, describing the future land use change required across the UK as a feat of ‘acrobatics’. The Plan advocates for a natural capital approach to highlight the externalities of production and endorses the Global Farm Metric as a way to measure the environmental value of food systems. Agroecological or regenerative farming is seen as critical to the future of the UK’s rural economy, because of its ability to produce food and increase environmental resilience. However, it is recognised that our current level of self-sufficiency relies on higher yields that are unachievable solely through regenerative systems.

In order to address this challenge, a compromise ‘Three Compartment Model’ is proposed. Rather than backing the land sharing or the land sparing argument, the Three Compartment Model is about creating a mosaic of three different types of landscape – high yielding farmland (for food production), low yielding farmland (farmed regeneratively) and semi natural land (managed for nature). This model argues that the least productive 20% of the

UK's land should be used for nature restoration and carbon sequestration, and that in order to enable that, 5-8% of our current total farmland would need to be freed from production entirely.

C) Trade: In Part One of the Food Strategy, several measures were suggested to ensure that future free trade deals do not lead to food imports that have worse environmental or animal welfare impacts than domestic production. The government did not implement these measures. Within the Plan, the importance of trade in retaining current levels of food security is recognised, as is the fact that some imports (e.g. tomatoes from Spain) are actually better for the environment than when grown domestically. However, Mr Dimbleby still voices his concern at the lack of regard for standards of equivalence in current trade talks. In order to avoid offshoring food system externalities and in order to prevent domestic production from being undercut, the Plan makes a clear request for the government to re-assess its strategy on 'Global Britain'.

In order to instigate these changes, the Plan proposes the following:

- **Guarantee the budget for agricultural payments until at least 2029** – the government should commit the current agricultural budget past 2024, to enable farmers to survive the transition to sustainable farming, for which they will need more time and guaranteed support. Otherwise, Mr Dimbleby fears farmers will farm more intensively to make up for lost revenue, or give up due to insolvency.
- **Create a Rural Land Use Framework** – if we are to reach net zero, a significant change in the way we use land is needed. The Plan recommends that the government should create a new Rural Land Use Framework to set out which areas of land would be best suited to the different functions of the Three Compartment Model. The Framework should connect and inform the many existing incentive schemes that Defra manages. The Framework will hinge off a National Rural Land Map which would provide assessments of the uses to which land is best suited.
- **Define minimum standards for trade and protect them** – the Plan asks that the government draw up a list of core minimum standards which it will defend in any future trade deal, covering animal welfare, environment and health protection, carbon emissions, antimicrobial resistance and zoonotic disease risk.

Shifting food cultures

As well as making changes to the food system as it currently exists, Mr Dimbleby believes there are aspects to our appetites that require innovation and completely new thinking. Much of this hinges on the importance of data and being able to collect accurate information on the reality of our food system, rather than losing control of it because of its nebulous decentralisation. The development of Artificial Intelligence and satellite technology is critical in this. Within the Three Compartment Model, the 'high yielding farmland' will also require continued scientific and technological innovation, in order to continue to maximise yields and increase efficiencies on a reduced amount of land.

Incentivising a 30% reduction in meat eating is no easy task, particularly as a meat tax is off the cards. Instead, the strategy proposes that part of the solution lies in 'The Protein Transition' – the development of cheaper, alternative proteins. These alternative proteins will be plant based and as technology develops, involve precision fermentation and eventually lab grown meat. Research by think tank RethinkX has estimated that by 2030, 50% of dairy and beef products will have been replaced by alternative proteins. The Plan argues that the UK should be positioning itself at the forefront of this new and growing industry.

To support the shift in food culture, the Plan proposes that the government should:

- **Invest in innovation** – allocate £1 billion of funding into practical food system innovation from schemes such as the £22 billion Innovation Strategy. Research should focus on things such as vertical farming, precision fermentation, methane reduction technologies, fruit and vegetable growing and alternative proteins. Farmers should be involved in research and the government should establish two What Works Centres (one focusing on diet, one on farming methods) to collect evidence of good business ideas and policies.
- **A National Food System Data programme** – create a large scale programme to collect and share data across the whole food system so that stakeholders involved in food can track progress and plan ahead.
- **Strengthen Government procurement rules** – redesign the Government Buying Standards for Food to ensure that taxpayer money is spent on sustainable and healthy food. The government should also introduce a mandatory accreditation scheme for all public institutions to help them reach baseline standards.
- **Future legislation and targets** – the Plan recommends that Defra puts forward a Good Food Bill to include a statutory target to improve diet-related health. It also proposes that the role of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) should be expanded to cover healthy and sustainable food as well as food

safety, with new duties to report annually on our national progress towards a healthier and more sustainable food system. The FSA would be responsible for collecting data on the nutritional and environmental impacts of foods sold by companies, developing an updated reference diet for the nation and working with Defra to develop a food labelling system to describe the environmental impacts of food. Mr Dimbleby also suggests that local authorities should be required to put in place a food strategy.

Our analysis of the Strategy

Henry Dimbleby's report is admirably comprehensive and truthful in the way in which it addresses the full picture of the UK's food system. The strategy takes the many twisting and turning nuances of food production and consumption into full account and manages to find a coherent path through that nexus. The proposed Sugar and Salt tax gained most attention and derision in the press, triggering alarm bells for some as the definition of an interventionist nanny-state policy. However, Mr Dimbleby seemed ready for the critics and anticipated in the report that many will advocate against it; the focus on raising food standards for all will be welcomed by brands and supermarkets working at the cut-throat end of the consumer marketplace.

Whether the proposed path to a better future is enough is the key question. The report fails to deal with the aspects of market regulation and corporate behaviour that legitimise profit-before-health, and it doesn't tackle the Government's sustained use of reducing the price of food as a welfare policy and means of controlling inflation. Many of the suggestions are sticking plasters to soothe core structural issues – why prescribe people vegetables when we should really be asking why they can't access them or afford them in the first place? The report errs on the side of nudging consumer behaviour more than it requires wholesale shifts in the regulation of food systems or challenges the influence of corporate ambition on our human right to nutrition.

Perhaps it is better to have a realistic strategy that has a chance of instigating some change rather than a radically ambitious policy that distracts from the easier wins and so sits on a shelf. After all, can you dismantle the capitalist system of corporate exploitation of the consumer economy in one strategy? Mark Carney's efforts regulating the finance sector to disclose on climate risks is an example of where progress is being made to rebalance a system, but some would argue it is impossible with a problem as wicked as food.

The report is sophisticated in raising and discussing key issues around the future of land management. We have inherited a post-CAP agricultural landscape that is a legacy of a market-interventionist model. As we shift to an environmental land strategy, understanding 'what is best to go where' is critical, as the changes will be stark for those embedded in the legacy landscape and we need to achieve this without undermining our core food system resilience. It is reassuring that the report focuses on engaging farmers to deliver positive outcomes, however it is lacking in the detail of how to implement the changes proposed on the ground. The rural land use framework is an attractive idea but an interventionist approach and one that does not sit neatly with Defra's desire for English farms to be standing on their own two feet based on their local market opportunities.

The government is required to respond to the strategy with a white paper within six months, but the more telling signs will be what industry listens to and chooses to adopt voluntarily, and more importantly, what it chooses to ignore. One thing can be certain however: this strategy is food for thought.

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