



Food policy

Inconvenient truths

A report of the Business Forum
meeting on 15th July 2008

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Introduction

On 7th July, the UK government launched 'Food Matters: Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century'. While the report's announcements on food waste stole the headlines, its scope is much broader. It sets out the framework for a more joined-up government approach to tackling the major environmental and social challenges facing the food sector. Felicity Lawrence, writing in the Guardian, calls it "the most significant piece of government work on the food system since the second world war" and "a radical shift in government thinking".

The July meeting of the Food Ethics Council's Business Forum discussed the report, focusing on its toughest messages for the food sector and for government.

We are very grateful to Andrew Jarvis, Deputy Director in the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit and leader of the team that produced the report, for speaking and for fielding questions. The meeting was chaired by Helen Browning OBE, Food and Farming Director of the Soil Association and chair of the Food Ethics Council.

This report outlines points raised during the meeting. Contributions are not attributed. The report was prepared by Tom MacMillan. It does not represent the views of the Food Ethics Council, the Business Forum or their members, or the Strategy Unit in the Cabinet Office.

Key points

- The Prime Minister commissioned the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit to examine government's approach to food policy, taking a **system-wide view** and considering global trends.
- The Strategy Unit's report, 'Food Matters', tackles four sets of challenges: **economics** and **equity**; **health**; food **safety**; and the **environment**.
- It commits to three areas of action: **supporting consumers**, especially through better advice; working with industry to tackle **market failures**; and improving **public procurement** by introducing a 'Healthier Food Mark'.
- The report is probably the strongest statement from government of the range and depth of **issues and challenges** facing the food sector.
- The state's **mandate** to address these problems cannot be taken for granted, but depends on stakeholder support.
- **Joined up policy** is easier said than done. Government does not work by command and control. Co-ordinating and communicating consumer advice is a first step, but not enough.
- The problems we face in food are serious and we cannot afford to be distracted by **red herrings**. Efforts to tackle greenhouse gas emissions, for example, should target real hotspots.
- The food sector does not have all the tools to solve its own problems. It has a responsibility to support more **system-wide interventions**.
- The food sector is awash with **competing visions** of a better world. 'Food Matters' challenges the industry and other stakeholders to focus on mechanisms and to keep an open mind.

The Cabinet Office Strategy Unit's report

'Food Matters' is the product of a project lasting 10 months, commissioned by the Prime Minister in 2007. The Cabinet Office Strategy Unit's remit was to examine the government's approach to food policy across the board. It was to look at the food system as whole, not to get bogged down in detail. While it was to focus on the UK, it was to take into account global trends and processes.

The report has proved timely, arriving at a high point in public interest in food issues. Yet the motive was as much curiosity as foresight. The aim was to understand what the 'new politics' of food – the surge in concern and civic engagement around food that has built up over more than a decade – should mean for policy.

The work had three phases. First, the team reviewed a wide range of food-related issues, publishing in January an analysis paper that is available [here](#). Next, they examined how well current policy addressed the array of challenges the analysis identified. Finally, they published policy recommendations in the 'Food Matters' [report](#). The report is subtitled 'towards a strategy', because it is intended to prime and initiate a process, including further consultation, rather than prescribe a fully finalised strategic framework for food.

Main findings

'Food Matters' tackles four sets of challenges:

- Economics and equity, particularly in the light of rising food prices.
- Health, with the headline that 70,000 premature deaths a year in the UK could be avoided if our diets matched nutritional guidelines.
- Food safety, with an estimated 765,000 cases of food poisoning each year in England and Wales, and the rate of decline slowing.
- The environment, including that 18% of the UK's overall greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) are down to producing or consuming food.

The report sets out a vision intended to guide efforts across government to address these challenges. It also commits to three areas of action:

- 'Supporting consumers' – where the focus is on improving advice and product labelling, and encouraging businesses to 'edit' difficult choices where people expect that help.
- 'Engaging the supply chain' – which is mainly about working with the food industry to tackle market failures, including on healthy eating, waste reduction and GHG emissions.
- 'Leadership and the public sector' – where the report emphasises government's strong duty of care towards everybody it feeds directly through public food procurement,

proposing a Healthier Food Mark to push standards upwards across the public sector.

Government is already working in each of these areas, yet the effect of all these efforts seems less than the sum of its parts. The report tries to achieve more within existing resources, rather than pledging major new spending.

A crucial element in pursuing this will be a new Food Strategy Task Force, to be run by the Cabinet Office. One of the main jobs for the Task Force will be to keep Defra, the Department of Health, the Food Standards Agency and others within government on track in delivering the commitments set out by the Strategy Unit.

Serious problems

'Food Matters' throws light on several inconvenient truths, which make awkward reading for some within the food sector or in government.

The first inconvenience is that the problems we face in the food sector really are serious. While the team found that many of the people they met understood the gravity of nutritional and environmental problems, some clearly did not. In particular, some food businesses did not appreciate the direct challenges they faced from policies to address climate change.

The report gathers together evidence that challenges any complacency. Much of this information was already in the public

domain, but the Strategy Unit's analysis has highlighted its combined significance.

Yet, however starkly problems are stated, they are not guaranteed the attention they warrant. Enforcing mandatory standards is one way to address this. Another, on which the report places greater emphasis, is to introduce market mechanisms that make problems such as managing GHG emissions more central to business decision-making.

The good news in the report is that public interest in food issues gives government and the industry a strong mandate to address environmental and social problems.

The state needs a mandate

The Strategy Unit's report represents government as a catalyst. The measures it sets out are about creating the environment in which others can change the food system, rather than intervening more directly.

The report's approach to waste is an example. On both packaging and food waste, the Strategy Unit recommends that government work in partnership with industry and NGOs, and build on the growing public interest in food.

In general, it says, government's role is to put right market failures and to safeguard social equity.

Yet history tells us that government's mandate is fluid. Politicians work within moving limits on their licence to operate. While food remains a very personal matter

for many people, the rise in civic engagement in food issues strengthens the state's mandate to intervene. 'Food Matters' is a product of that growing mandate, and further reinforces it.

Yet government must lead

One arena where central government's mandate has generally weakened has been in public service provision, where the trend has been to give regional and local decision-makers greater autonomy. However, this is also where the report most firmly asserts government's responsibility to lead.

Analysis for the project suggested that, if the public sector is representative of the UK working population, then it employs 3.2 million overweight or obese people. On top of this it has service users to consider, including school children, hospital patients, care home residents and prisoners. 'Food Matters' argues that government carries a heavy duty of care towards the many people it feeds. An inconvenient truth facing government is that it is not yet meeting that duty, let alone fully harnessing the power of the public plate to drive wider improvements throughout the food system.

The report recognises that a great deal is already being done to improve public procurement of food. However, it says the successes have been too small. To drive forward improvements right across the food system, it recommends introducing a new 'Healthier Food Mark' for England (responsibility for such services is devolved). This would be awarded to

public sector caterers who met specified standards on food and food preparation. This will initially be voluntary but may become compulsory.

While the last thing that food businesses want is more audits, the response from caterers and other stakeholders has so far been favourable. One of the frustrations caterers have is that specifications in public food procurement vary from place to place, and the mark would introduce common benchmarks. It might also help address the National Audit Office's finding that around £250 million per year is lost through inefficient sourcing.

The Department of Health has been given the task of developing the Mark. It will probably build on some guidelines that are already in place and it will seek to avoid adding unduly to the industry's audit burden. The Mark needs to recognise the difficulty of specifying standards in catering, where meals are prepared using multiple ingredients. In many cases, the approach may be fairly simple, perhaps similar to work the FSA is already doing to promote healthier products.

There may be some risk that relying on a mark will contribute to further deskilling among caterers. However, the Mark is intended to achieve system-wide improvements, building on educational work that the Public Sector Procurement Initiative has been doing for many years.

It is hard to 'join up'

The Strategy Unit project is one of the most ambitious efforts by government to take a concerted approach to tackling the wide range of problems facing the food

sector, and to make sure it does not undo with one hand what it is achieving with the other. But ‘joined up’ policy is easier said than done.

The food sector poses a special challenge. The sheer breadth of issues that arise is unusual, even in the Strategy Unit’s experience. Yet co-ordinating the work of different departments is always difficult, because government is a very large and complicated organisation.

Consumer advice is of the main aspects of food policy that the Strategy Unit report tries to join up. People want advice on healthy eating and sustainability, and government already provides some information on both. However, the advice is in different places and sometimes – for example with fish, where the FSA urges people to eat fish for health reasons, whereas Defra highlights declining fish stocks – the advice is conflicting. ‘Food Matters’ promises to resolve this by making the FSA a one-stop-shop for consumer advice.

In this case, joining up is about getting government’s house in order. Yet it also shows up two risks of taking a more co-ordinated approach. First, it means expanding how the FSA interprets its remit, raising the question of whether it can carry into this new territory the consumer trust it has built up over food safety and nutritional advice. Second, it shows that joining up has to go further than simply reconciling mixed messages if it is to achieve significant results. Consumer advice is only the tip of the iceberg – government also needs to join

up its work on ‘behaviour change’, product reformulation, international trade policy and much more besides.

The Food Strategy Task Force should keep up the pressure for a joined up approach to food policy from within government. Yet outside challenge to departments and to the FSA from the industry and from NGOs will also be vital in prompting government to maintain its focus on tackling food issues.

No room for red herrings

The seriousness of the problems we face in the food sector and the difficulty of taking a joined up approach to tackling them demands that we focus our efforts tightly. However, the Strategy Unit found that effort – or at least the amount of ink spilled – was not always greatest where the biggest problems lie.

A prime example is the controversy over air freighted food. If we want to reduce GHG emissions from the food sector, then the simple fact is that other aspects of our diet and food supply chain make a much bigger contribution to climate change. Even if you take into account additional strands of the air freight debate, such as airport expansion and competing models of development, it seems to have diverted the resources and public scrutiny away from more important problems.

So, as well as trying to join up policy, ‘Food Matters’ seeks to focus it:

- On competition and fair trading, the report argues that scrutiny should

extend right along the supply chain rather than focus only on food retail.

- On food safety, it announces that the FSA will review whether the combined £300 million government spends annually on food safety is directed where it can achieve the most.
- On public health, the report identifies fruit and vegetable consumption as top priority, and announces that the Department of Health will use money from government's obesity strategy to boost the 5-a-day campaign.
- On employment, the Strategy Unit's approach has been that a thriving food sector is important to the economy, and government needs to foster skills and ensure fair wages in the sector irrespective of whether the UK's capacity to produce food is important to its 'food security'. The report notes that a competitive and productive food and farming sector is an important objective in its own right, which does not have to be justified by reference to food security.

Others have the tools

The Strategy Unit's quest to focus effort on tackling the biggest problems led it a conclusion that may frustrate people working in the food sector: they share a duty to make our food system healthier, fairer and more sustainable; yet many of the tools to achieve those improvements lie outside the food sector. Trying to

tackle wider problems from within the food system can be a recipe for chaos.

Food poverty is a case in point. Rising food prices will hit poorer people hardest, because they spend a larger proportion of their income on food. But policies to make food cheap do not in themselves solve food poverty and they cause other problems to pop up in the supply chain. Indeed, the hidden costs of 'cheap' food to the environment and to workers also hit poorer people hardest. Instead, food poverty specialists emphasise the importance of improving social welfare provision and tackling other contributors to social exclusion.

That is why, instead of proposing much by way of new mandatory standards for the food industry, 'Food Matters' recommends introducing mechanisms that address environmental or social problems more generally. In particular, the report commits government to taking a lead in bringing emissions pricing into European agriculture. While recognising the key role of consumer choice in shifting markets, the report notes that there are going to be limits to the extent to which labels and accreditation schemes based on life-cycle analysis (LCA) can be expected to transform the food system. LCA is useful in understanding the scale and location of the problem, but its contribution (via labelling and the force of consumer choice) to (mis)management and pricing of resources has still to be proven. The core market failures also need to be addressed at source.

While the report is alert to the risk of reducing sustainability to a matter of cutting GHG emissions, it treats ‘sustainable food’ as an oxymoron in the absence of a systematic mechanism for managing emissions. Thus, the report talks about ‘lower impact food’ rather than ‘sustainable food’. To address this gap, the report announced a major review headed by the UK chief scientist, John Beddington. Efforts are also underway to improve emissions inventories and collaborate with New Zealand, which is already experimenting with emissions pricing in agriculture.

This emphasis on finding the right mechanisms brings challenges of its own. The search for an effective way of pricing emissions in agriculture, without perverse consequences for the environment, for farmers or for the public, is likely to take years, and time is not on our side in mitigating climate change. There is also no point in introducing measures in the UK that simply displace the problem elsewhere.

Water scarcity illustrates this bind. Increasing fruit and vegetable consumption to meet 5-a-day targets may drive additional imports from water scarce regions such as southern Spain. Consensus is emerging that LCA-based water labels are unlikely to tackle this problem, and that improving water governance in affected regions must be part of the solution. Suppliers and retailers have a responsibility to use water sustainably, and supporting better water governance is part of meeting that responsibility.

Government shares in that responsibility, yet it is difficult to intervene in how another state manages its resources except indirectly, for example through the European Union. In the meantime, the problem gets worse rather than better.

Overall, the Strategy Unit report urges people working in the food sector to concentrate their efforts on food-specific problems, where they do hold the tools, and to put their weight behind cross-cutting efforts to address more general problems. The sector’s responsibilities do not vanish just because it cannot address all of its problems alone.

Big may be beautiful

While ‘Food Matters’ says it provides a ‘vision’ to guide food policy in the UK, it sketches only the broadest outline – a statement of principles – rather than colouring in the detail. The Strategy Unit’s focus on putting systematic mechanisms in place makes it reluctant to say too much about what the food system should look like. Its approach is to get the mechanisms right, keep an open mind, and be wary of debates being hijacked by one set of interests or ideas.

It is therefore sceptical of ‘visions’ that go further than its own. In contrast to the notion that ‘small is beautiful’ when it comes to sustainability, it implies that big may be beautiful too – some large food processing and distribution systems may offer genuine environmental economies of scale, and should be assessed on their merits. Against the view that food security

in the UK means greater self-sufficiency, it seeks to shift discussion onto resilience and risk, and examine the detail of different foods and supply chains.

The food sector is awash with competing visions from different parts of the industry and civil society. This report challenges them. The strength of that challenge depends on government being able to put in place the kinds of mechanism that 'Food Matters' promises, to keep their transaction costs minimal, and to manage any significant gaps and unintended consequences.

Food politics: here to stay

A final message from the report, awkward for some within the industry, is that politicians will not lose interest in food

soon. Scrutiny and regulatory intervention are likely to grow, not diminish.

Concern over high food prices is unlikely to derail efforts to implement the report's recommendations. People are still concerned about the provenance of their food, and food is still a hot issue politically.

Interest in food from all main political parties suggests that even if there was a change in administration, work to put the report into practice would continue. Little in the report hinges on values that divide the main parties.

Polled on whether the report set out a framework they could work with, most people present at the meeting assented.

Speaker biographies



Helen Browning OBE chairs the Food Ethics Council. She runs a 1350 acre organic livestock and arable farm in Wiltshire, supplying customers with organic meat through a nation-wide home delivery service and via multiple retailers. Since September 2004 she has been Food and Farming Director of the Soil Association, which she previously chaired. In May 2005 she was appointed as chair to Defra's Animal Health & Welfare England Implementation Group. Helen also sits on the Meat and Livestock Commission. She was previously a member of the Biotechnology Commission and of the Policy Commission on Farming and Food, which reported to the Government in January 2002.



Andrew Jarvis is a Deputy Director in the Strategy Unit where he leads specific projects and provides ad hoc advice to No.10 and Cabinet Office on environment, energy, innovation and related issues. He managed the cross-government project on food and food policy which culminated in the publication of the Food Matters report earlier this month. His other Strategy Unit work includes delivery of the energy and environment component of a major Government policy review and a strategic review of science and innovation policy. Andrew previously worked in the private sector. He spent ten years with consultancy group GHK, working principally on environmental policy and infrastructure issues. He headed the company's Hong Kong and China business before becoming chief operating officer of the GHK group in 2001. He has a first in applied biology from Merton College, Oxford, and a MSc in environmental economics from University College London.

About the Business Forum

Ethical questions around climate change, obesity and new technologies are becoming core concerns for food businesses. We have launched the Business Forum to help senior executives gain expert insights into the big issues of the day. Membership is by invitation only and is strictly limited.

The Business Forum meets six times a year for in-depth discussion over an early dinner at a celebrated London restaurant. The forum members shape the meeting agenda.

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