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Stop the wild west of dishonest food claims on packaging now, concludes public policy debate

A Food Ethics Council's Food Policy on Trial event put the idea of plain packaging for junk food 'in the dock'. Its key conclusions are:

- Regulation about labelling and claims must be radically reformed to avoid mushrooming of spurious and dishonest claims in the food sector.
- There is an urgent need for honesty and clarity on food packaging if the UK is to avoid descending further into a wild west of lawlessness when it comes to food claims.
- People must be able to trust that the food or drink in their local food outlet does 'what it says on the tin'.
- Radical options such as introducing plain packaging on the worst impact food and drink categories should be kept on the table as potential future policy interventions, as part of a wider strategy.

'Food Policy on Trial: in the dock – plain packaging' heard evidence from four expert witnesses who were questioned by a jury made up of members of the Food Ethics Council that included author and philosopher Julian Baggini and Emeritus Professor Liz Dowler. Expert witnesses were also questioned by an invited audience.

The Food Ethics Council chose to put plain packaging in the dock as an emerging but contentious policy idea. It has been proposed by, amongst others, think-tank IPPR and the RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission. Last week in her last report as Chief Medical Officer, Dame Sally Davies said that *"if sufficient progress is not made, the government should apply either a fiscal lever or standardised packaging (as for tobacco).¹"*

Key findings from the jury included:

- Much stronger regulation is needed on packaging and on food and drink claims, both in what is allowed and how strictly that is enforced. 'Fake farms' and cartoon animations shown on pack to market unhealthy products to children were two examples of where the jury agreed that bans were needed.
- The jury called for honesty to become a central tenet of any food strategy. It proposed a citizens' assembly to decide on which claims about food and drink should and should not be allowed, on packaging and more broadly. It also recommended incorporating that into the National Food Strategy (England) process.
- There are problems with the idea of introducing plain packaging on worst-offending food and drink categories, not least setting boundaries about what should and should not be included. However, the threat of such a radical idea opens up the space for other interventions to be brought in.

Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council, Dan Crossley, said: *"Too many health and environmental claims about food are not worth the paper – hopefully recycled - they're written on. Given the public health and environmental crises we're facing, we need to stamp down on spurious and misleading claims on food packaging, starting with those on infant and toddler foods."*

//ENDS//

¹ [Dame Sally Davies \(10th October 2019\) Time to Solve Childhood Obesity](#)

Notes to editors:

For further information and interviews please contact Dan Crossley, Executive Director; 0333 012 4147/ dan@foodethicscouncil.org

Food Policy on Trial is a series of events organised and promoted by the Food Ethics Council. Designed to explore and scrutinise selected emerging food policy ideas at inquiry-style sessions, expert witnesses provide evidence and are then questioned by both a Food Ethics Council jury panel and members of the audience. Those attending can make their own considered judgements of whether the policy idea 'on trial' is likely to contribute to or hinder progress towards healthy, fair, environmentally sustainable, humane food and farming.

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Expert witnesses:

- Alex Haigh, Valuation Director, Brand Finance
- Craig Mawdsley, Joint Chief Strategy Officer, AMV BBDO
- Dr Helen Crawley, Director, First Steps Nutrition
- Ben Pugh, co-founder and CEO, Farmdrop

Jury – members of the Food Ethics Council:

- Jon Alexander, Founder, New Citizenship Project
- Dr Julian Baggini, freelance writer and philosopher
- Liz Dowler, Emeritus Professor of Food and Social Policy, University of Warwick
- Joanna Lewis (Chair), Strategy and Policy Director, Soil Association

The Food Ethics Council is an independent UK think tank whose purpose is to bring ethics to the centre of the food system. Our mission is to accelerate the shift towards fair food systems that respect people, animals and the planet. Twitter [@FoodEthicsNews](#). Facebook [@FoodEthicsCouncil](#).