

FOOD ETHICS COUNCIL RESPONSE TO THE NATIONAL FOOD STRATEGY August 2021

Time for big changes to our food systems

We're pleased to see significant elements of our vision – of fair food systems that respect people, animals and the planet – in the National Food Strategy (for England). We applaud the call to 'break the junk food cycle', the push to address diet-related inequality, the desire to create a long-term shift in our food culture, and the plea to make best use of our land. We like the emphasis on trade deals that have ethical consistency and don't undercut UK food and farming standards – including on animal welfare, environmental protection and fair treatment of workers.

Henry Dimbleby rightly emphasises the significance of, and priority that should be given to, the public policy dimension of food, too often regarded as of third order significance. The reality is that we can only address climate, biodiversity and public health crises – and address inequality and inhumane treatment of farm animals – if we make big changes to our food systems.

The Food Ethics Council broadly welcomes the report and believes it to be a readable, clear and strong analysis of many of the food issues affecting the UK. The publication of this report is a really positive step and hopefully will lead to significant public discussion and engagement, and to much-needed action from the government, and beyond.

We strongly welcome the diagnosis and the systems approach taken by the National Food Strategy team. This echoes much of what we have called for over a number of years, including the need to reset the goals of our food system. Henry Dimbleby proposes the goals should be to feed us all well, restore biodiversity and sequester carbon. We would add other goals too, like providing fulfilling livelihoods, ensuring farmed animals live good lives and helping build community resilience.

Aligning with the National Food Strategy

The National Food Strategy raises important ethical concerns and opens up opportunities for some of the areas we are working on:

- **Fair farming** – While there is not much in the Strategy explicitly about dairy (one of our current projects), we are encouraged that our work promoting more nuanced dialogue on meat over more than a decade has opened up the window for some of the arguments we see in the Strategy. We welcome recommendations to guarantee a budget for agriculture payments and the intent to create a land use framework. **However, if the Three Compartment model is used, it should encourage agroecology to mainstream. Industrial monocultures and intensive livestock and aquaculture should become increasingly marginal in land use.**
- **Fair and resilient food communities** – We want to help everyone meaningfully participate in fair food systems. We welcome measures to address hunger and hardship in the short-term and Henry Dimbleby's statement that Universal Credit should cover the cost of healthy, sustainable diets. We like the encouragement of local authorities in England to "develop local food strategies, with reference to national targets and in partnership with the communities they serve." We want to see action to build community resilience and to address structural causes of household food insecurity (even if some of this was deemed beyond scope of this report).
- **Fair research** – We want to make food and farming research fair. Investing £1 billion in innovation to create a better food system could shift us in a fairer direction, if invested wisely and if put in the hands of farmers and citizens. We urge the Government to ring-fence the majority of public research and innovation support in England for processes led by biodiversity-enhancing farmers. We want benefits to

be made publicly available, rather than captured by corporate intellectual property. There is a risk that the National Food Strategy recommendations will be read selectively and be used by some to prioritise market-friendly, higher tech solutions over potentially more effective approaches. The national R&D environment moving forward should instead support a greater diversity of innovation, from lower-tech approaches (many of which are already in existence and proving effective at different scales) to higher-tech solutions. All approaches should involve early and continued critical assessment during development to understand their social and ecological implications. We also call for more diversity in investment models to support food innovation that builds in principles of open-access research, collective ownership and participatory design, and reduces the current dominance of intellectual property-protected technologies and systems.

- **Building a food citizenship movement** – There is a need to shift from a consumerist to a food citizenship mindset, where we enable people to see themselves, and treat others, as food citizens. We want everyone to be able to participate meaningfully in shaping a better food system in multiple ways. We are pleased that citizen dialogues were an important part of the National Food Strategy process (and that we were able to feed into those). We want to put more power into the hands of the people, hence would love the government to make it possible for the public (or different publics) to have a greater say in decision-making about contentious decisions in food and farming going forward. Putting more decisions in citizens' hands and strengthening localised food systems would help greatly.
- **Enabling business environment** – The Strategy may be tough reading for food businesses reliant on producing and selling unhealthy and/ or unsustainable food, but it should act as a much-needed wake-up call that change is needed. Many business leaders want a level playing field and the right regulation, plus mandatory reporting on key environmental and social concerns. The Strategy provides opportunities for progressive businesses to flourish.
- **Enabling policy environment** – We back interventions in the Strategy to create a healthier food environment, proposals for a greater role for the Food Standards Agency and the idea of a Good Food Bill. If done well, these could help hold government to account and encourage 'in the round' progress. How these fit with Devolved Nations will be key. For example, England should learn from Scotland striving to enshrine a right to food in legislation. We encourage an outward-looking, internationalist perspective, where the UK takes responsibility for environmental and social impacts in other countries of our food imports.

Time for a strong, coherent response

The National Food Strategy draws attention to possibilities and goals that have the potential to transform our food systems, improve the health of the nation and the planet, and address the climate emergency. In areas that need further strengthening or in gaps beyond the original scope, let's bring together NGOs, food businesses, farmers and growers, food workers, chefs, trade unions, local authority leaders and food citizens to ensure that the White Paper response is as strong as it can be. **The immediate priority? Ensure trade deals promote the same ethos as the National Food Strategy, not undermine it.**

The National Food Strategy rightly tries to embrace the complexity of the food system, for which it should be applauded. Moving to a better system will require a complex, interconnected set of responses. We urge those producing the White Paper response – and indeed everyone working to influence that – to avoid a siloed approach. **A fragmented or piecemeal response will result in a fragmented and half-hearted Plan.** What we need is a strong overarching Strategy – with the government doing what it *should* be doing – and with gaps that were not 'in scope' addressed too. Those working in/ on food and farming plus food citizens should play their part too. Government should set direction and enable it to happen, but **a fair food system is a collective mission that links people across the world.** If we treat people, animals and the planet fairly – and give everyone a voice, particularly those who are marginalised – then we're more likely to reach the desired goal, as Colin Tudge puts it, of good food for everyone, forever.