

Business Forum notes, July 2021

## **Reflecting on the National Food Strategy**

*How should food and farming businesses respond?*

Notes from a Business Forum online space held immediately after the launch of the Strategy

## The National Food Strategy is important

### It is a landmark piece of work

The National Food Strategy for England is a major, independent piece of work, commissioned by the UK government in 2019. Part One was published in summer of 2020 and Part Two in mid-July 2021.

*“The very fact that we have a National Food Strategy is quite remarkable and very long overdue.”*

The report highlights the need to ‘break the junk food cycle’, to address diet-related inequality, to make best use of our land and to create a long-term shift in our food culture. It includes an analysis of the UK food system, identification of key ‘feedback loops’, case studies, evidence and 14 recommendations. The work draws on desk research, analysis, consultation, engagement with people from different parts of the food system (and beyond) plus public dialogues. It is an immensely readable report, which is important, as more are likely to read it.

### Food and farming businesses have important roles to play

Whilst the report is aimed primarily at Government, there is a lot in there that, if implemented, will have profound consequences for the whole food system, including food and farming businesses. The report is something that business leaders should digest properly and carefully consider their own, individual and collective responses, ahead of the Government White Paper response due six months after the publication of Part Two.

*“Government wants to hear from business as to what will be welcomed. Don’t underestimate your voice.”*

## Immediate reactions to the Strategy

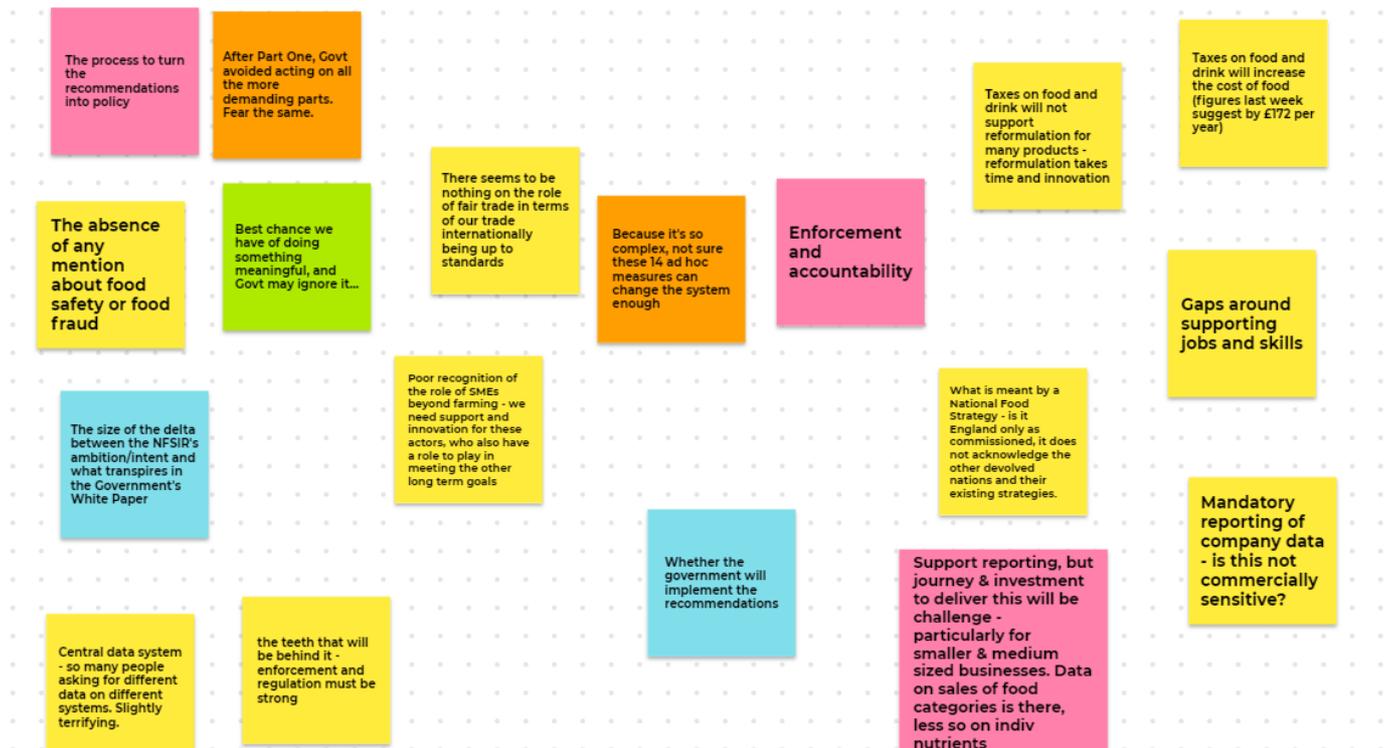
### There is a lot to support in the Strategy

Participants shared initial, personal reactions to the new National Food Strategy document, noting that many had not yet had chance to read and digest it fully (at the time of the Business Forum).



Above: Immediate responses from participants about what excites them about the Strategy

## What CONCERNS you about the National Food Strategy?



Above: Immediate responses from participants about what concerns them about the Strategy

### Opportunities to get behind the strategy

#### There are areas where there is likely to be broad consensus

There are lots of parts of the analysis and evidence base in the Strategy that few would challenge. Equally many of the recommendations in the report are likely to receive a positive (or neutral at worst) response from progressive food businesses. Areas of broad consensus *might* include:

**TRADE AND FOOD STANDARDS:** The trade recommendation in the Strategy is felt by many to be a priority. Some of the recommendations will take time to digest and to get right. However, trade is one where there is a lot of consensus amongst UK food businesses, farming groups, civil society organisations and food citizens. This is arguably the most pressing, given that trade deals are being negotiated right now that could undermine UK food standards. Can food businesses unite with other groups to publicly get behind the recommendation on trade?

**HEALTHY, SUSTAINABLE DIETS:** The report contains proposals to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, particularly amongst low income groups.

**FOOD EDUCATION:** The report contains recommendations around extending free school meals, changing food and cooking culture and a reboot of food education – all aspects that many are likely to be supportive of.

**A 'LEVEL PLAYING FIELD':** The Strategy opens up opportunities for something that food business leaders have long called for, i.e. a level playing field. Without the right legislative framework and systems of incentives, businesses will not be able to do things by themselves. The 'level playing field' message has not yet been 'ticked off' by government. How can organisations in the sector be vocal in support of that over the coming few months?

*“Our focus as an industry should be about getting forceful with government and saying this is the moment. It’s got to happen. Focus on the legislation, not focus on the content so much.”*

**MANDATORY REPORTING** - Mandatory reporting (albeit only for larger businesses) is something that several food businesses supported publicly immediately after the Strategy’s launch. Voluntary action in some areas has made incremental progress, but it was argued that mandatory reporting would accelerate progress.

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*“We need system wide change and we need more players to get on board. Legislation and mandatory reporting are tools that will drive that change.”*

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**INNOVATION** – One of the recommendations is to “Invest £1 billion in innovation to create a better food system”, which is likely to be something that food and farming businesses, small and larger, can get behind, plus stronger support for farmer-led innovation.

**PUBLIC PROCUREMENT** – Another recommendation calls on government to “Strengthen government procurement rules to ensure that taxpayer money is spent on healthy and sustainable food” – a key recommendation in particular for contract caterers.

### Aspects of the Strategy to consider further and/ or push harder on

#### There are some potential areas of contention in the Strategy

**SALT AND SUGAR TAX** - The proposal of a salt and sugar tax has received mixed reactions – from “Taxation is something I would support strongly because there is no viable choice available other than changing the rules of the game” to “I’m quite concerned about the food tax recommendation.... as there are a lot of technical challenges around reformulation and will take a lot of time, plus proposals would increase cost of food”. Whilst any tax proposal can be argued against on the grounds of it being regressive, it is important to also consider areas beyond the scope of the Strategy e.g. real living wage and properly functioning safety net.

**THREE COMPARTMENT MODEL** - The notion of a land use framework was supported by several, although getting the ‘right balance’ in any Three Compartment model is likely to prove difficult. Some argue for sustainable intensification while others believe that agroecological approaches should predominate.

**MEAT AND DAIRY?** Other areas in the Strategy that *may* prove contentious include targets around meat reduction, although this did not feature prominently in initial discussions amongst participants. The National Food Strategy report is clearly trying to highlight the nuances of the meat debate, rather than reinforcing oversimplistic messages about meat (and dairy) being ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

#### There are some gaps in the Strategy, or areas deemed out of scope, that should not be ignored

There are gaps in the Strategy including, but not limited to fish and seafood, food safety, fair jobs and skills, fair trade, right to food, social security and food-related interactions between England and the Devolved Nations.

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*“My biggest concern is that it’s a strategy for England and we can’t afford to segment that way [rather than thinking at UK-level]”*

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Many of these were deemed out of scope of the Strategy, as it had to draw system boundaries somewhere. When responding to the Strategy, businesses shouldn’t ignore important issues such as these.

#### Question marks

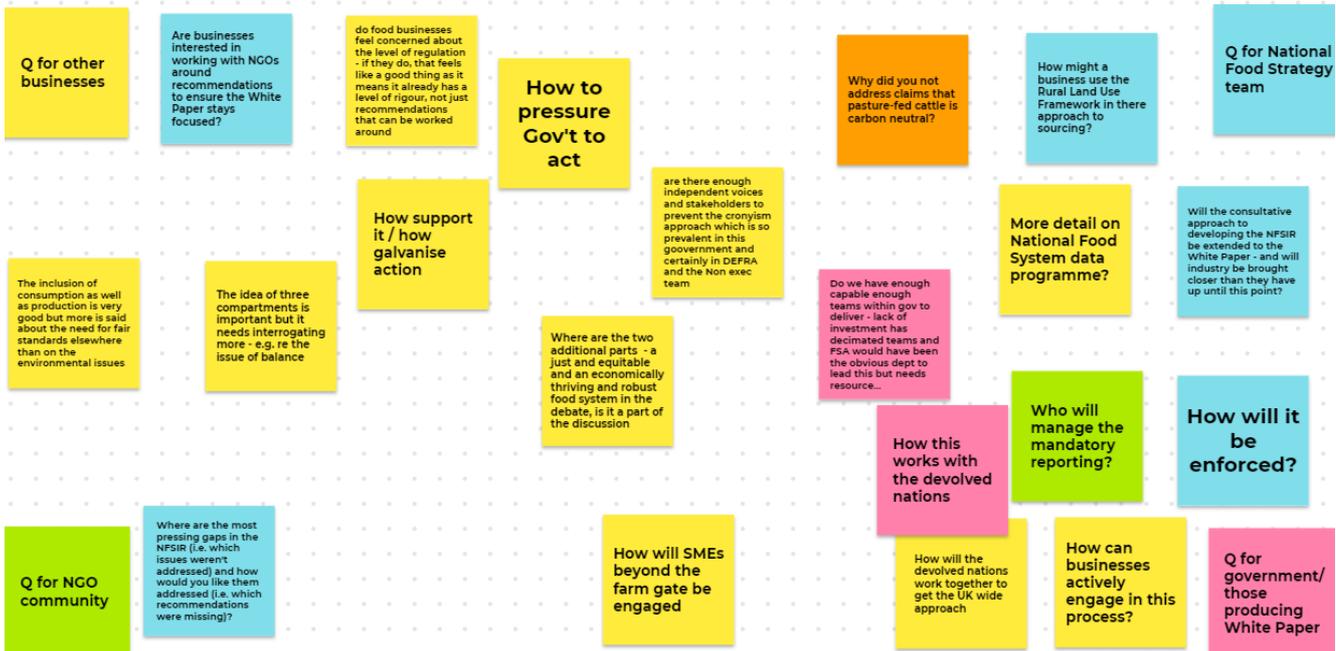
At this initial stage, responding to the National Food Strategy without having necessarily read through it all in full, participants had some questions. These covered a range of areas from wanting further detail on how some proposals would work through to questions about how to demand a strong White Paper response and ensure that ‘some/ most/ all/ all and more’ (delete as applicable) of the National Food Strategy is implemented.

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*“Is there the bandwidth and capability within government to pick this [the National Food Strategy] up and run with it?”*

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## What QUESTIONS do you have about the National Food Strategy? And/ or what would be USEFUL for you & your organisation?



Above: Immediate responses from participants about questions they have about the Strategy (immediately after its launch)

### Concluding comments

#### Joint responses are likely to be more powerful than piecemeal responses and short-term opposition

This is a moment for us to all act from whatever position we have in our jobs and personal lives to do what we can for the biggest challenge of our generation. There are NGOs standing ready to give science, support, signpost and help, to make sure that the government response to the National Food Strategy is as strong as it needs to be, and to help food businesses have the confidence to demand such a strong response. A piecemeal response from food businesses, farming organisations and NGOs is likely to lead to a piecemeal response from government. The National Food Strategy is inevitably imperfect, as it has to balance ambition and pragmatism. However, there is a lot in there that we as individuals and as those working in the sector can get behind.

#### Post-script - food business can shape what happens next

Food businesses can play a key role in what happens next. We at the Food Ethics Council would urge food business leaders to be constructive and long-sighted, and to call for a positive response from government.

### What next?

#### Selected key questions:

- How can like-minded food businesses jointly call for a level playing field and for the right level of regulation?
- What opportunities are there to be publicly vocal in support of aspects of the National Food Strategy and pushing strongly to get the best out of the government White Paper?
- How can we bring in unexpected voices in responding to the Strategy and how can we all encourage greater public engagement on these issues?
- How can food business leaders push for action in areas deemed beyond the scope of the Strategy?
- How can food and farming organisations unite with others to support the key recommendation on trade as an immediate and urgent priority?

This is a write-up of the Business Forum meeting on 19<sup>th</sup> July 2021. **Dan Crossley**, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council chaired the meeting. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Food Ethics Council, nor its members. For more information on the Business Forum, contact Dan Crossley [dan@foodethicscouncil.org](mailto:dan@foodethicscouncil.org) +44 (0) 333 012 4147.