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Food Policy on Trial: in the dock – meat tax

We need to wake up and challenge our ultra-processed food obsession by taxing it

Tax ultra-processed foods, not simply meat, to radically overhaul our food environment concludes public policy debate

A simplistic tax on all meat is too blunt a policy tool. That was the finding of the jury at an event convened by the Food Ethics Council to scrutinise the idea of a UK meat tax.

To maximise health benefits, a tax should instead be used to shift people away from ultra-processed food. The UK government must also respond to the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis with fiscal measures to incentivise climate-friendly livestock production and penalise those that contribute to global warming. Examples worth considering include import tariffs on feedstuffs, carbon taxes, nitrogen taxes and subsidies.

‘Food Policy on Trial: in the dock – meat tax’ heard evidence from four expert witnesses. Professor Mike Rayner, University of Oxford, strongly argued the case that a meat tax was necessary and inevitable, and a natural step on from the sugary drinks tax (Soft Drinks Industry Levy). Stuart Roberts, NFU Vice President, and Richard Young, Sustainable Food Trust, both challenged the idea, with Young highlighting the environmental benefits that grazing livestock can bring. Jody Harris, Institute of Development Studies, gave evidence of the negative health impacts of consuming processed and ultra-processed meat, which include higher mortality rates and especially cardiovascular disease. These eminent witnesses were questioned by a Food Ethics Council jury that included Julian Baggini and Helen Browning.

Eating meat in moderation can have nutritional value, while sustainable livestock production can have benefits for people and the environment. However, there are serious animal welfare concerns relating to intensive livestock farming. There are also major environmental impacts from animal feed and food production, including greenhouse gas emissions and widescale biodiversity loss. From a global equity perspective, the UK is one of the many rich countries where the level of meat consumption is far in excess of what would be an equitable fair share; the UK currently eats twice the global average of meat, as Harris pointed out.

There was broad consensus in the room about the need for urgent action to overhaul our food environment but without a knee-jerk reaction that risks unintended consequences. Whilst the majority of the audience felt that a nuanced meat tax might work, the jury felt that it would have to be within a broader framework tackling health and environmental issues.

The jury found the idea of a tax specifically on ultra-processed meat promising, although ideally it would be extended to cover all ultra-processed food. The UK has the most ultra-processed diet in Europeⁱ and there is strong evidence that eating too much ultra-processed food contributes to diet-related ill health.

Dan Crossley, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council said: *“We shouldn’t lump all meat into the same basket, which is why a blunt tax on meat won’t work. The clearest evidence is against ultra-processed meat and other ultra-processed foods, which have been allowed to dominate our daily diets. It’s time to challenge this and seriously consider the idea of an ultra-processed food tax.”*

To mitigate the impacts of such a tax on those that likely to be worst affected, the jury proposed ringfencing any revenue towards two main areas. Firstly, to help everyone, including those on low incomes, to eat healthier diets in a dignified way. Secondly, to support farmers and food producers to transition towards healthy, sustainable food and farming systems.

The next 12 months are likely to see a raft of changes to UK food and farming policies, particularly if the UK leaves the EU later in 2019.

Crossley said: *“Whatever happens with Brexit, we must get on with transforming our food system. We urgently need interventions that can put livestock farming and the food we eat in the UK onto a healthy, sustainable footing. More food policy ideas need to be put on trial. Only by having a respectful dialogue about these critical issues can we make the urgent progress we need.”*

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. This work is kindly supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and The Polden-Puckham Charitable Foundation.

The Thursday, 23rd May 2019 event put meat tax in the dock. You can listen to the evidence and discussion for yourself from 29th May 2019 on Sound Cloud [here](#).

Expert witnesses:

Jody Harris, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies
Professor Mike Rayner, University of Oxford
Stuart Roberts, NFU Vice President
Richard Young, Policy Director, Sustainable Food Trust

Food Ethics Council jury:

[Dr Julian Baggini](#), freelance writer and philosopher
[Helen Browning](#), organic farmer; Chief Executive, Soil Association
[Chloe Donovan](#), founder Hundred River Farm
[Ralph Early](#), Food Scientist, former Professor of Food Industry, Harper Adams University
[Geoff Tansey](#), curator, Food Systems Academy

[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](#).

ⁱ Monteiro, C., Moubarac, J., Levy, R., Canella, D., Louzada, M., & Cannon, G. (2018). [Household availability of ultra-processed foods and obesity in nineteen European countries](#). *Public Health Nutrition*, 21(1), 18-26.
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