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**Introduction & Context**

The crisis has exposed the fragility of many people’s economic situation and exacerbated many of the problems relating to poverty, food insecurity and health inequalities that our

inquiry examined. The crisis should serve as an urgent wake up call to the Government. People should be able to access not only enough food, but also the food that they need to stay healthy; the food system, and action in related policy areas such as health, welfare and food production, should guarantee this.

The Committee was set up to “consider the links between inequality, public health and food sustainability.” We found barriers at all levels of the food system that make it harder for people, particularly those living in poverty, to access a healthy and sustainable diet. The lack of a unifying Government ambition or strategy on food has prevented interrelated issues such as hunger, health and sustainability from being considered in parallel, meaning that opportunities have been missed to develop coherent policies that could effect widespread change. Our recommendations are built around the central aim of ensuring that everyone, regardless of income, has access to a healthy and sustainable diet.

**Key recommendations**

**Poverty and food insecurity**

1. The relationships between dietary quality and food insecurity must be fully understood. The Government must commit to continuing to run the food insecurity measurement questions currently contained within the Family Resources Survey. To better understand the impacts of food insecurity on diet and related outcomes, the Government must determine how best to collect data on food insecurity and dietary intake in the same individuals*.*
2. The five-week wait for **Universal Credit** presents acute difficulties and requires urgent overhaul. While we cannot anticipate the findings of two Parliamentary reports dedicated to this topic, the Government must fully respond to the reports of both Committees. A replacement scheme must have regard to:
* The recommendations of the House of Commons Work and Pensions

Committee and the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee;

* Analysis of the impact of repayments over a period of time on the ability to

afford a healthy diet;

* The imperative to avoid a situation where a person awaiting benefits has no

choice but to visit a food bank;

* Analysis of data pertaining to the increase in UC claims following the outbreak

of COVID-19;

* The possibility that different groups of claimants may require different

arrangements for advances and their repayment; and

* A continual and effective system of training to help claimants manage their money.
1. **No Recourse to Public Funds:** We recommend that the Government produce an action plan to ensure that the gathering of data on food insecurity includes and records the situations of those with no recourse to public funds. Urgent planning must begin now to establish a Government-funded programme to ensure that all those with no recourse to public funds are able to access sufficient, nutritious food.
2. **Meeting the costs of the Eatwell Guide is unrealistic**: The Government should be fully aware of the cost of eating the diet it recommends, and the ability of different demographic groups to access this diet. To underpin any national food strategy, the Government must, in its 2021 review of benefits rates, commit to giving its dietary guidance—the Eatwell Guide—a firm place in the development of policy.
3. The Government should embed consideration of the cost of the Eatwell Guide into calculations of benefit payment rates.
4. We recommend that the Government should undertake a fuller assessment of the cost of a healthy and sustainable diet. The cost of the Government’s dietary guidance should be built in as a reference point to consideration of government interventions, including those relating to welfare and public food provision.

**The Food Environment**

1. The value of the **Healthy Start vouchers** is insufficient. The vouchers must immediately be uprated. This uprating should be substantial, but as an absolute minimum it should enable recipients to purchase the same amount of food that could be purchased in 2009, when the scheme began. The amount must be linked to the Consumer Price Index thereafter.
2. Comprehensive **reform of the Healthy Start Scheme** is long overdue. The Government must release a wide-ranging consultation addressing “root and branch” reform before the end of 2020 and appoint a Healthy Start champion to raise awareness of the scheme among individuals and retailers.
3. **FSM:** The decision to increase the funding for lunches during school closures is welcome. The value cannot be allowed to regress once children return to school. The allowance allocated to schools for free school meals must be uprated to at least the level provided during the school closures and linked to inflation thereafter.
4. We recommend that the Government outlines how it intends to mitigate the impact that their eligibility proposals will have on those families who will lose eligibility for free school meals. e recommend that the Government must undertake rigorous research on the impact of Universal Infant Free School Meals on health and attainment outcomes and use the results of this evidence base to inform future policy on school meals, including breakfasts.
5. Monitoring and evaluation of the school food standards must be centrally coordinated to ensure consistent compliance. The Departments for Education and Health and Social Care should establish a joint task force responsible for monitoring and enforcing adherence to the school food standards. The taskforce should have the power to publish the names of non-adhering schools and where necessary require the development of an agreed action plan to meet standards.
6. We recommend that the eligibility threshold for the National Schools Breakfast Programme is lowered and funding increased to ensure that the programme reaches all of those who need it.
7. The National Schools Breakfast Programme must support and train facilitators to enable schools to access future external funding.
8. Notwithstanding Government support to access funds, central funding for the National School Breakfast Programme must not be withdrawn all at once, producing a ‘cliff edge’ effect. The funding must be removed gradually and only when schools are able to access reliable sources of funding to sustain the clubs.
9. We recommend that the Government should significantly extend the funding provided through the Holiday Activities and Food programme to ensure that more children can access holiday clubs. It should use generous thresholds based on the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index to determine which areas should receive this funding*.*
10. The benefits of high and robust standards for public procurement and public food offerings are clear. The Government must strengthen and develop the Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services to ensure that they fulfil their potential to create a healthier and more sustainable food environment. In particular, the revised standards should:
* Apply equally and consistently to all Government procurement, including the NHS, prisons and the armed forces;
* Apply to all private suppliers contracted to provide food for the above;
* Require a significantly higher proportion of food to be produced in line with the Publicly Available Integrated Production or Integrated Farm Management Standard than is currently required;
* Embed nutritional standards based on the Eatwell Guide;
* Disallow any escape clause, as currently exists, for measures on the basis of cost; and
* Provide for an enforcement mechanism.
1. The proposals in Chapter 2 of **the Childhood Obesity Plan** to impose restrictions on the advertising of HFSS foods were welcomed by a large majority of our evidence. The Government must, by the end of 2020, roll out these proposals both for television and online.
2. Proposals to end the product placement of HFSS foods in popular supermarket locations were welcomed. The Government must, by the end of 2020, enact them, ensuring that the ban covers the widest range of less healthy foods possible and includes small businesses.
3. The Government must, by the end of 2020, act on their proposals to restrict price promotions on HFSS products.

**Planning Controls**

1. The Government must conduct a review on the use of licensing and planning to ensure that:
2. local authorities are able to enforce exclusion zones of at least 800m around

schools; and

1. when use of a building subject to use class A3 or A5 is transferred, new

planning consent must be obtained.

1. Immediately following the withdrawal of the permitted development rights introduced in March 2020, the Government should consult upon and enact a scheme to enable local authorities to charge out of home food outlets an amount of council tax which is in proportion to the healthiness of their food offering.
2. The Government, in partnership with local authorities, should develop a scheme to support food retailer businesses, including those providing fast food, to develop and sell healthy alternatives. It should also determine and provide support to empower other kinds of food providers such as street vendors to sell healthy food in communities.
3. *The Government must publish its consultation on how to address the marketing and labelling of infant food without delay. The responses to that consultation, and the related measures to ensure parents and carers have accurate information on infant food products must be published in 2020.*
4. We recommend that the Government conduct a review of labelling on food and drink products. The findings of the review should form the basis of regulations which address both date labelling and the standardisation and simplification of front-of pack traffic light labelling. The new regulations should be compulsory for all food manufacturers and retailers.
5. **Schools and local authorities** have an important role in increasing knowledge and skills on nutrition, and supporting people to make healthier choices, but the Government must ensure that they are **adequately** resourced to do so.

**Reformulation and regulation**

1. The Government should review the current zero-rated VAT arrangements on some food products which are known to be energy dense, and contain high levels of salt, sugar and unhealthy types of fat. It should commence this review before the end of the transition period in 2020.
2. As part of any future measures the Government sets out to tackle obesity and poor dietary health, it should develop and publish a consultation with industry on the issue of mandating maximum calories per portion. This consultation process must involve active engagement with SMEs and the catering sector.
3. We recommend that all reformulation programmes, both voluntary and mandatory, should be subject to transparent and regular monitoring. Progress reports need to be carried out on a regular basis by the responsible body and should include details of the companies that have successfully made reductions in the levels of salt and sugar in their products, to aid industry-wide reformulation.
4. We recommend that where voluntary approaches are adopted, the Government should make clear that if the industry does not respond comprehensively and swiftly then regulatory action will follow. Both the sugar and salt reduction programmes are unlikely to meet their stated targets. To ensure that necessary and significant public health improvements are actually achieved, the Government needs to face the reality of the situation and start to plan now for how further progress on reformulation might be delivered. The Government should set out now what mandatory action would look like, if sufficient progress is not made on the existing reformation programmes in the near future. Industry can then prepare. We ask that the Government does this by the end of 2020.
5. Mandatory (fiscal) approaches can be highly successful, as evidenced by the Soft Drinks Industry Levy. As there is a proven mechanism for delivering successful reductions in harmful ingredients, in a way which has not had a significant detrimental impact on the industry, the Government must not delay in exploring the application of fiscal measures (such as further levies or changes to VAT) to other product categories where reformulation is not in line with Government guidance or targets.
6. We recommend that the Government stands by its commitment to review the Soft Drinks Industry Levy in 2020, and commits to extending the levy to other drinks containing added sugar, including sugary milk-based drinks. It should also conduct work to explore the impact of lowering the current sugar thresholds to encourage further reformulation. It should rapidly determine which other food products high in sugar could be subjected to a similar levy.

**Food and the environment**

1. We note that the Government’s transition plan includes a commitment for largely unchanged funding for farmers until at least the end of the current Parliament. During this time, we urge the Government to undertake full and transparent consultation when considering the public goods that will be rewarded under the ELMS.
2. The Government must ensure that every public good outlined in the Agriculture Bill is accompanied by a standardised framework to allow measurements and targets to be clear, consistent and easy to use.
3. The Government must ensure that the ability to stipulate conditions for payments under the Environmental Land Management Scheme is both rigorously and fairly deployed. Where conditions are not met, enforcement action in the form of withholding payment must reliably follow.
4. **The Government’s White Paper on the National Food Strategy** must include a definitive outline of what constitutes a sustainable diet with regards to health, social and environmental impacts. It must be accompanied with a graded action plan and communications strategy to move towards this diet.
5. The National Food Strategy should outline a comprehensive action plan to increase the demand for and consumption of fruit and vegetables.
6. We recommend that **Government should list Public Health as a ‘Public Good**’ under Clause One of the Agriculture Bill. Measures eligible for financial assistance to improve public health should be focussed on (but not necessarily limited to) those activities which increase demand for fruits and vegetables.
7. Food imports must be required to adhere to the same health, environmental and animal welfare standards as food produced in the UK. To fail to do so would make a mockery of our stated environmental values, and irrevocably undermine British producers. The Government must set out how it intends to ensure that current standards are maintained in future trade agreements, and what safeguards will be in place to guarantee this.
8. The Government must provide sufficient and stable funding for research and development into agricultural technology and new ways of farming if sought after progress in increasing farming efficiency is to be made
9. The Government must ensure that the multi-annual financial assistance plans to be published under the Agriculture Bill are stable and not subject to substantive change: providing a sufficient amount of detail to allow farmers to make investment decisions.
10. Any investment in or policy change related to farming productivity, including

investment in agricultural technology or land use must take account of the imperatives to avoid undermining the ability to produce food in the future, and to protect biodiversity and animal welfare.

1. Government must implement a mandatory reporting regime for adherence to clear and consistent sustainability and health metrics, as well as adherence to procurement standards. This should apply to all supermarkets, major food and drink manufacturers, public procurers and their contracted suppliers, and food outlets.
2. Progress in tackling food waste will not be achieved without meaningful action from the retail sector. The Government should embark on a concerted effort to encourage sustainable purchasing behaviour from retailers. Consideration should be given to financial disincentives for retail or purchasing practices which lead to excessive prefarm

gate food waste.

**Governance, accountability and food policy**

1. We recommend that the Government should remain committed to responding to

the National Food Strategy review with a White Paper within six months of the

review’s publication. It should commit to action the review’s recommendations on

publication.

1. In advance of the publication of the National Food Strategy review’s final report, the Government should review levels of reporting on health and sustainability across

the food system, to identify where gaps might exist in the current data sets that are

available.

1. The Government should develop and introduce a standardised set of mandatory

reporting metrics aimed at monitoring the performance of Government departments

and assessing progress made by the industry towards making healthy and sustainable

food more accessible. The Government and the industry should be required to report on progress against those targets on a regular basis.

1. The Government must ensure that the appropriate Whitehall infrastructure is in

place to ensure that the aims of the forthcoming National Food Strategy can be coordinated effectively across Government departments.

1. Given the success of the salt reduction programme under the Food Standards Agency, if industry fails to make the necessary progress against Government reformulation targets, the Government should return the responsibility for nutrition, labelling and reformulation programmes to the FSA, and provide it with the appropriate resources.
2. We recommend the establishment of an independent body, analogous to the Committee on Climate Change, with responsibility for strategic oversight of the implementation of the National Food Strategy. This should include the monitoring and reporting on progress made against the health and sustainability targets outlined in paragraph 538. This independent body should have the power to advise the Government and report to Parliament on progress

**Conclusion:**

At a time of crisis, when Government spending has necessarily and dramatically risen in response to the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, we were conscious of the difficulty of making recommendations which require further demands on the public purse. With this in mind, we have been selective. The recommendations we have made would, if implemented, reduce the many burdens that poor diets place upon the environment, the NHS, and the wider economy. Food policy has an impact on all sectors of our economy, environment, and

society, and the ability to access a healthy diet has a profound impact on people’s health and wellbeing. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the burden placed on the environment, economy and the NHS by the nation’s diet was already unsustainable. The unacceptable inequality in people’s ability to access healthy food also predates the current crisis. The COVID-19 outbreak has pushed more people into economic difficulty, and has had, and will continue to have, a serious negative impact on the nation’s health and economy, an impact that is being felt more acutely by those in deprived areas. It is now, therefore, more important than ever to ensure that everyone can access a healthy, sustainable diet.