

Executive Summary

WHAT you are reading is Part One of a two-part National Food Strategy. It does not present a comprehensive plan for transforming the food system: that will follow in Part Two.

Instead, it contains urgent recommendations to support this country through the turbulence caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to prepare for the end of the EU exit transition period on 31 December 2020.

Our food system has just endured its biggest stress test since the Second World War. As COVID-19 swept through the UK, the entire machinery of supply and distribution had to be recalibrated, fast. The fact that, after a wobbly start, there were no serious food shortages is a testament to the flexibility and entrepreneurialism of so many food businesses, and the resilience of the system as a whole.

There have, however, been heavy losses. Workers in the food production and retail sectors have suffered some of the highest death rates from COVID-19. Those in the hospitality sector have taken the biggest economic hit, with a higher proportion of furloughed staff (and expected redundancies) than any other profession. Across the wider population, the wave of unemployment now rushing towards us is likely to create a sharp rise in food insecurity and outright hunger.

At the same time, the virus has shown with terrible clarity the damage being done to our health by the modern food system. Diet-related illness is one of the top three risk factors for dying of COVID-19. This has given a new urgency to the slow-motion disaster of the British diet. Even before the pandemic, poor diet was responsible for one in seven deaths in the UK (90,000 a year).¹ That is vastly more than the death toll from traffic accidents (1,780 a year)² and almost as fatal as smoking (95,000)³. This is a medical emergency we can no longer afford to ignore.



My recommendations cover two main themes:

- Making sure a generation of **our most disadvantaged children** do not get left behind. Eating well in childhood is the very foundation stone of equality of opportunity. It is essential for both physical and mental growth. A poorly nourished child will struggle to concentrate at school.⁵ An obese child is extremely likely to become an obese adult,⁶ with the lifetime of health problems that entails. It is a peculiarity of the modern food system that the poorest sectors of society are more likely to suffer from both hunger and obesity.⁷ In the post-lockdown recession, many more families will struggle to feed themselves adequately. A Government that is serious about "levelling up" must ensure that all children get the nutrition they need.
- Grasping the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to decide what kind of trading nation we want to be. The essence of **sovereignty** is freedom – including the freedom to uphold our own values and principles within the global marketplace. In negotiating our new trade deals, the Government must protect the high environmental and animal welfare **standards** of which our country is justly proud. It should also have the confidence to subject any prospective deals to independent **scrutiny**: a standard process in mature trading nations such as the United States, Australia, and Canada. If we put the right mechanisms in place, we can ensure high food standards, protect the environment and be a champion of free trade.

I was intending to include recommendations on limiting the advertising and promotion of unhealthy foods. But just as I was about to press "send", the Government unilaterally proposed the same policies as part of its New Obesity Strategy. I am delighted to have been pipped to the post. And because these policies are liable to cause protests in some quarters, I have kept the supporting arguments for them in Chapter 3.

Furthermore, I welcome the Government's invitation to consider ways to improve public sector procurement of food and drink. This is long overdue. In Part Two, I will include a comprehensive recommendation on what the government can do to ensure that the food the state pays for directly – for example in schools, hospitals, prisons, and in government offices – is both healthy and sustainable.

In Part Two of the National Food Strategy, to be published in 2021, I will examine the food system from root to branch, analysing in detail the economics and power dynamics that shape it, the benefits it brings

and the harms it does. There will be much, much more on health and on the interwoven issues of climate change, biodiversity, pollution, antimicrobial resistance, zoonotic diseases and sustainable use of resources.

The Government has committed to publishing a White Paper six months after I publish Part Two, and has asked me to review progress six months after that.

But the crisis we face right now requires immediate action.

These recommendations are urgent, specific and carefully targeted. In this period of acute crisis they could save many thousands from hunger, illness and even death. They will also help shape a more sustainable future for this country through enlightened trade deals.

Collaboration with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

MOST of the governance of food and health falls under the aegis of the devolved administrations. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each have their own food strategies (see Appendix D). My remit is predominantly to create a strategy for England.

However, the food systems of the UK are so tightly interwoven as to be indistinguishable in many ways. Almost 600 farms straddle the borders of Scotland and Wales to take one small example[†].

Collectively, we face many identical challenges. In addition, trade policy is not devolved, so the trade recommendations I have made would – if adopted – apply to every member of the union.

Throughout this process I have shared my thinking with the teams working on food strategy in the devolved administrations. I am thankful for their time and have learned a great deal from the dialogue. I look forward to much more of it as I move on to Part Two.

Summary of Recommendations



Our Most Disadvantaged Children

One of the miserable legacies of COVID-19 is likely to be a dramatic increase in unemployment and poverty, and therefore hunger. The effects of hunger on young bodies (and minds) are serious and long-lasting,⁸ and exacerbate social inequalities. The Government must move quickly to shore up the diets of the most deprived children using existing, proven mechanisms.

1. Expand eligibility for the Free School Meal scheme to include every child (up to the age of 16) from a household where the parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits).
2. Extend the Holiday Activity and Food Programme to all areas in England, so that summer holiday support is available to all children in receipt of Free School Meals.
3. Increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers to £4.25 per week, and expand the scheme to every pregnant woman and to all households with children under 4 where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits

I am delighted that in the last week the CEOs of the Co-op and Waitrose have agreed, in principle, to supplement these vouchers with additional free fruit and vegetables. Most of the other major supermarkets and convenience stores (with support from the Association of Convenience Stores) are keen to follow suit and we are in discussions with them to explore mechanisms for delivery.

4. Extend the work of the Food to the Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force for a further 12 months up until July 2021. It should collect, assess and monitor data on the number of people suffering from food insecurity at any time, and agree cross-departmental actions, where necessary, to support those who cannot access or afford food.

In Appendix B we have also devised and evaluated a set of food guidelines for those school caterers who are supplying free school meal parcels over the summer. This will help them ensure they provide the nutrition that our children require.



Sovereignty, Standards, Scrutiny

Britain's exit from the European Union means that, for the first time in nearly half a century, we can – and must – decide for ourselves how we want to trade with the rest of the world.

UK farmers and food producers have some of the highest environmental and animal welfare standards in the world. This is something to be proud of. There is justifiable concern about opening up our markets to cheaper, low-standard imports which would undercut our own producers and make a nonsense of our progressive farming policies.

But negotiating trade deals is hard. Any blanket legislation requiring other countries to meet our own food guidelines would make it nigh-on impossible. We already import many food products from the EU that don't meet UK standards. A blanket ban would make it impossible to continue trading even with this most closely aligned of partners.

There is a subtler mechanism we could use to put in place specific trading standards[†], without requiring a universal ban.

5. The Government should only agree to cut tariffs in new trade deals on products which meet our core standards.^{††} Verification programmes –along the lines of those currently operated by the US Department of Agriculture to enable American farmers to sell non-hormone-treated beef to the EU – should be established, so that producers wishing to sell into the UK market can, and must, prove they meet these minimum standards. At a minimum, these certification schemes should cover animal welfare concerns and environmental and climate concerns where the impact of particular goods are severe (for example, beef reared on land recently cleared of rainforest). The core standards should be defined by the newly formed Trade and Agriculture Commission.

6. The Government should adopt a statutory responsibility to commission and publish an independent report on any proposed trade agreements. The Government should decide whether this impact assessment function requires the establishment of a new body – similar to those which exist in many mature trading nations, including Australia, Canada and the USA – or whether it could be performed by an existing body or by independent consultants (as is the case in the EU).

Scrutinised decisions are likely to be better decisions. The scope of the impact report should include: economic productivity; food safety and public health; the environment and climate change; society and labour; human rights; and animal welfare. The report would be presented alongside a government response when any final trade treaty is laid before parliament. It is important that government decisions – especially those with such profound consequences as new trade deals – should be properly scrutinised.

7. The Government should adopt a statutory duty to give Parliament the time and opportunity to properly scrutinise any new trade deal. It must allow time for relevant select committees to produce reports on any final deal, and allow a debate in the House of Commons.

