



Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment

Corrected oral evidence: Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment

Tuesday 5 November 2019

10.40 am

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Members present: Lord Krebs (The Chair); Baroness Boycott; Lord Empey; The Earl of Caithness; Baroness Janke; Baroness Parminter; Baroness Osamor.

Evidence Session No. 3

Heard in Public

Questions 17 - 29

Witnesses

I: Jenny Oldroyd, Deputy Director Obesity, Food and Nutrition, Department of Health and Social Care; Julia Gault, Deputy Director Labour Market, Families & Disadvantage, Department for Work and Pensions; Sarah Lewis, Director System Leadership and Strategy (Early Years and Schools) Department for Education; Alison Ismail, Acting Director for Agri-Food Chain Directorate, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

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Examination of witnesses

Jenny Oldroyd, Julia Gault, Sarah Lewis and Alison Ismail.

Q17 The Chair: I would like to welcome our witnesses and thank them very much for agreeing to appear at this rescheduled session. Due to various goings on in Parliament, this was cancelled earlier in the autumn. Thank you very much for coming. I should say, for the sake of those who are observing in the room here or on the Parliament channel, because this session is being broadcast on the Parliament website and on BBC Parliament, that Members of the Committee have declared their interests. A transcript of the meeting will be taken and published on the Committee website, but you will have a chance to make any corrections to the transcript before it is published. Before I proceed to the first question, I would like to invite you to very briefly for the record introduce yourselves, perhaps starting with Sarah Lewis.

Sarah Lewis: I am director at the Department for Education and, among other things, I am responsible for school food.

Alison Ismail: I am acting director for agri-food policy at Defra.

Julia Gault: I am deputy director at the Department for Work and Pensions and I have policy responsibility for families and child poverty.

Jenny Oldroyd: I am from the Department of Health and Social Care, where I am deputy director for obesity and food and nutrition.

The Chair: Without further ado, I would like to kick off with a very general introductory question to which each of you perhaps could provide a response. Some of the later questions will be targeted at a particular department, but this one is for you all. As you know, our inquiry is concerned with how we can ensure that everybody in this country, of whatever age and from whatever region and whatever their status in terms of income, has access to a healthy sustainable diet. We would like to learn what your four departments are doing to address that challenge—and we understand from written evidence we have received that it is a considerable challenge. Perhaps you could also say, in addressing this set of issues, whether you find that there are lessons that can be learned from the strategies of other countries, including the devolved parts of the United Kingdom. Sarah, would you like to kick off?

Alison Ismail: If your Lordship and the Committee are happy, we thought I might begin with a few opening remarks on behalf of us all. I will be very brief. On behalf of us all and our departments, thank you very much for having us here today. We are really pleased to have a chance to contribute to your very important inquiry. We look forward this morning to assuring the Committee that we have very much a shared ambition to ensure that our food system delivers healthy and affordable food that everybody can access and that it is built on resilient and sustainable agricultural and wider food production sectors.

We recognise that the systems face unprecedented challenges. The way we produce and consume food, global changes, including population growth, and climate change are having an impact on our food security, our health and our environment. Obviously, the food system affects many areas of citizens' lives, so, although I represent a department that happens to have "food" in its title, we all work on and with the food system, and it is closely incorporated into all our departments' work—and indeed that of other departments not represented here today.

We all recognise the huge importance of taking a joined-up and co-ordinated approach to food policy across Whitehall. There are many examples of where we are doing that successfully, although, undoubtedly, we need to make a lot of further progress. I am sure that we will be talking this morning about the national food strategy, which is intended to be a cross-Whitehall strategy that will come out in 2020, which will further enhance all the joint working between us. That is what I wanted to say by way of preamble.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that, Alison. Would others like to come in and say particularly what is going on in their department?

Sarah Lewis: Shall I come in next, because you invited me to, Chair? Primarily we are focused on the provision of healthy lunches for children in schools. That is free school lunches for all children on free school meals by reason of disadvantage—1.3 million—and free school lunches for all infant school children, which is currently about 1.4 million. We also have the refreshed school food standards which were reintroduced in 2015. That is about ensuring that the food children eat at school is healthy, nutritious and balanced. At the moment we are revising and updating those.

More recently, my department has moved into wider work on food, including provision of breakfast clubs in schools. We are doing a programme around that at the moment, and around holiday activities and food to ensure that disadvantaged children during the school holidays are able to access healthy food and a broad range of healthy activities. We do several other things, but that is our primary focus.

The Chair: Julia, do you want to tell us about your department?

Julia Gault: The DWP's focus in this area is very much on the families in the benefits system—families which may be more financially insecure. We have an important role in providing the strong safety net of the welfare system, making sure that families which might need extra support, because they are in particular hardship over and above that, have access to things such as hardship payments, benefit advances and budgeting loans. We oversee a benefits system that is trying to more strongly incentivise families and individuals to enter work, because there is clear evidence that you are far less likely to be in poverty and have a better income if you are working and are in full-time work, so we have a benefits system that supports that.

One of the key things that has happened very recently around this is that yesterday the Secretary of State made the Written Statement around uprating, ending the benefit freeze, so benefits will start to rise in response to indexes, as they have done in the past.

The Chair: We are going to delve into some of these matters in more detail as we go through the session this morning, but I am just trying to get an overview at this stage. Finally, Jenny, would you like to tell us what your department is doing?

Jenny Oldroyd: Certainly. The Department of Health has worked with other government departments to publish three chapters of our childhood obesity strategy. If I think about some of the key points—and I can talk more about these points later—we have introduced the soft drinks industry levy and a sugar reduction programme, and we are developing reduction programmes on calories and salt, and sugar and salt in infant foods.

We have consulted on a range of policies that aim to support in this area. That includes restricting advertising on television and online of unhealthy foods to children, restricting promotions by price and location within store, and looking to introduce calorie labelling in restaurants and cafés in out-of-home settings. We have committed to launching a consultation later this year on the very successful front-of-pack labelling scheme and how we can build on that. We have committed to a consultation early next year on the marketing and labelling of infant foods so that we get the presentation of foods right for the youngest children in this country.

We also have ongoing work. We have our Healthy Food programmes, including our Healthy Start vouchers. We are doing work to modernise those to make it easier to apply for the vouchers and easier to spend the vouchers in store. That is the kind of work we are taking forward at national level, but this is both a national and a local question, and getting both systems right is really important. We have also launched a Trailblazer programme where we have over 170 members in our learning network, and we have five local authorities taking forward specific pieces of work on some of the challenges that exist at local level and trying to unpick those. That works in addition to the work that Public Health England does to put out toolkits both at local area level, supporting Healthy Places, and to the public through its various social marketing programmes, to encourage healthy diets and healthy living.

Your second question was around where we learn internationally and where we work with the devolved Administrations. As we talk through this session, I am sure you will recognise there is learning in there from programmes in the Trailblazers and other parts of our policy that is both international and from our work with the devolved Administrations. We look quite closely at the international progress. Amsterdam is one of the really interesting places in this sense, where they are making progress on reducing childhood obesity rates. We have learning on both national policy and our local support from Amsterdam.

We also take international learning on policies such as calorie labelling, front-of-pack labelling and soft drinks taxes. On those kinds of policies, too, we learn from international evidence.

We work quite closely with the devolved Administrations, having both formal and informal discussions around where we can progress on policy by learning from each other. It is fair to say that with the progress we have made on some of our legislative policy we are driving the course there; we are pushing ahead. As I talk through all that progress it comes together as one of the more forward-thinking international obesity strategies from around the world. Last month UNICEF published a report which set out that the UK is paving the way to ensure that all children grow up in a healthy food environment. That came out at around the same time as the World Obesity Federation's report that said that the UK is doing better than most other countries in this space. So we are really proud of the progress we are making, although with reports we have commissioned, for example from the Chief Medical Officer, we recognise that we have further to go.

The Chair: May I pick up on a couple of points? First, on the learnings from other countries, I am pleased to hear you say that you study what is going on in other countries. Could you give us some examples, not necessarily comprehensive, where you think other countries have done things that are particularly effective that we might adopt in this country to address these questions?

Jenny Oldroyd: Amsterdam is a really interesting one. It is a city-wide example, not a national example, and we need to appreciate the differences there. But what it shows is the kinds of results you can get if you start to look at the whole of the system. That is why it is really important at a national level here that departments work together, and that you have all the departments represented today. If I give one example from there, and there are lots, they have looked, by working voluntarily with supermarkets, at the retail environment, and how you can start to change the retail environment.

The Chair: Sorry, where was this? I missed that.

Jenny Oldroyd: In Amsterdam. And how you can start to change the retail environment to change shoppers' habits. There are interesting examples of specific policy there. Equally, certain states and areas of the US use calorie labelling. I should say that there are already companies in this country which calorie label, from which we can draw. On front-of-pack labelling, there are other systems internationally. There are systems within France and across Europe as well as other systems being tried in other parts of the world—Chile and other places.

There is a lot for us to draw on, but it tends to be really good examples of certain ideas that can work well. We are very clear that if you want to reduce obesity there is no single policy that will work. There is no silver bullet that will make the difference here. We need to recognise that the right direction of the obesity strategy here is to recognise that lots of

things influence what people eat and their weight. We need to learn across those policies from across the world to make a difference.

The Chair: I have one other follow-up question. You mentioned the childhood obesity Trailblazer programme, which is in the written evidence that the Government submitted. It says that five successful authorities will get £100,000 a year over three years. How much is that per child?

Jenny Oldroyd: We have not broken the programme down by child because it does not operate in that way. Perhaps I can give you one example of a project that I visited in Bradford. Imams are working through the mosques, asking, "How can we influence whole families through the kinds of materials we produce within the mosque and through the teachings we give that will really make a difference? How do we work with businesses?" If you tried to break that down per child, it would give you quite a false presentation of what can be achieved within a local area by supporting and working with particular areas. We have Lewisham looking at advertising. Again, if you break that down by child, I am not sure what it would tell you, because it is not the intention of Lewisham to direct that money towards individual children but to change the whole advertising environment within the area.

The Chair: Are these interventions, including the one you mentioned, evidence based?

Jenny Oldroyd: We have research going alongside the Trailblazers to make sure we take the learnings from them.

The Chair: Are they set up as properly designed experiments?

Jenny Oldroyd: Absolutely, and if you have an interest in that—

The Chair: In the case you gave, what would be the control for that?

Jenny Oldroyd: They are absolutely set up.

The Chair: What would be the control for that case you talked about in Bradford?

Jenny Oldroyd: We are not running another city where we are deliberately not intervening. We were really impressed that, when applications for the programme came forward, we had 102 local authorities apply.

The Chair: How can you be gathering scientific evidence if you do not have a control for the intervention?

Jenny Oldroyd: There are clearly lots of authorities that are taking the same approach to Bradford. I would not like to suggest we have done it on an RCT approach. We have put in evaluation alongside the programmes to gather the learning from them. We are taking baseline data for each area and we are working with the area to understand the difference that they are making.

The Chair: I am going to move on to the next question, but I have a final point. You said earlier that there were some international commentaries that had said the UK was at the forefront of tackling obesity. Is there any evidence that childhood obesity is declining in this country?

Jenny Oldroyd: No, that evidence is not there at the moment.

The Chair: Is there any evidence that it is increasing?

Jenny Oldroyd: It is slowly moving up. We measure this at reception and year six.

The Chair: So although we are world leaders, we are still going backwards?

Jenny Oldroyd: The important words there are "paving the way". We are absolutely not saying that we have sorted this and that we do not have a problem in this country. The reason we have our obesity strategy is because we recognise that obesity in this country is a very serious concern. We are pulling policy together in quite a comprehensive way compared to other parts of the world, and that is where people are looking to us and saying, "When you pull together that whole system at national level, what difference does that make?"

The Chair: If one were being cynical, one could say that we are very good at process but not very good at outcomes.

Jenny Oldroyd: We have to start by getting the policy right and start by getting the process right and measure the extent to which that takes us toward the outcomes.

Q18 **Baroness Janke:** You have talked about things such as the sugar reform programme, sugar and salt in food, restriction on advertising and calorie labelling in restaurants. Do you feel that you were given enough power to introduce these policies? Are the Government giving you the teeth, the strength and the leadership that you need to ensure that these things are happening?

Jenny Oldroyd: I am really proud that all chapters of the childhood obesity plan have been signed off by Cabinet and have been very deliberately published as government documents. They do not belong just to the Department of Health, because they represent the policy that departments across government are taking forward. In that sense, yes, we have the sponsorship.

Baroness Janke: I am sure that the intention is there, but when children are constantly bombarded with the kinds of adverts we see on television, and the food manufacturers in their virtue tell us that we ought to eat fat-free food but they are adding sugar to make it taste better, and with the content of sugar in some ready meals, to some of us on the outside it does not feel as though the Government are very serious about introducing measures to restrain the food manufacturers.

How much is that a barrier?

Jenny Oldroyd: Our food environment is a complicated and complex one to try to get into. I cannot say it differently—we are bringing together a range of policies.

Baroness Janke: Should the Government be giving more leadership to some of the external factors that would influence your policies?

Jenny Oldroyd: We have set out very clear leadership through the childhood obesity plan in the chapters that we have published.

Baroness Janke: But you do not have any comment on the external factors.

Jenny Oldroyd: Sorry, what external factors?

Baroness Janke: External factors such as advertising and the things you have mentioned, sugar reduction and so on. They are all very much available unless we stop them. I know that the Government have introduced the soft drinks levy, but there is still the availability and the prevailing amounts of sugar and salt and so on and the advertising. Do you not feel that these are making your job much more difficult and require more decisive action?

Jenny Oldroyd: We have been very clear on the role we think we can play in changing them. I also think it would be very useful as we get into next year and the food strategy to see, as you look at this again from a slightly different angle across government, how that system can be shaped and what the future might look like for that system. I do not sit here today pretending that we have the right food environment in this country and that it is all sorted, but I think we are taking some good steps towards it through the policy that we have introduced.

Alison Ismail: If we fulfil our ambition to produce a cross-government food strategy next year, we will have an opportunity, as Jenny says, to look at the overall environment. Obviously, there may well be further opportunities to act on the supply side as you describe, but I think it has come out in the written evidence and other evidence you have already received that there are strong factors around choice and demand and education. I am really hopeful that the food strategy will provide us with an opportunity to set out more integrated options that bring those two together.

The Chair: That leads us neatly to the next question from Baroness Osamor.

Q19 **Baroness Osamor:** We have heard in evidence that we have already received that the issues of food insecurity, poor dietary health and food sustainability are interrelated and therefore need to be tracked at a cross-departmental level. What level of co-ordination is there on these issues between the departments represented today?

The Chair: Alison, you kicked off by saying that you were working across departments, so perhaps you could elaborate and tell us how on the ground that operates.

Alison Ismail: I am happy to say a bit more. It is tempting to dive in to describing structures and committees and things such as that. The first thing I would stress is that we are lucky enough to have informal relationships between ourselves and our teams, so there would be very frequent interactions just by picking up the phone and making sure that we have the same line of sight on developments and testing things informally with each other. That is really important, but I would also reference our developing plans for a food strategy, which is absolutely in its terms of reference set out to be a cross-Whitehall endeavour, owned by all of us, and indeed by other departments. We have a governance infrastructure around that, including a group supported by Permanent Secretaries, where directors-general represent each department to ensure that we have that absolute senior level buy-in and support for what we are bringing together.

I can give a little more detail. Jenny mentioned Public Health England, for example. The Food Standards Agency is another very important player here, including with Defra when it comes to our responsibility for food as a critical national infrastructure sector or for any emergencies that come through food supply. I mention that to reflect the wide range of broadly food-related topics that we might be engaging with each other on. Another one I might mention is our colleagues at MHCLG who have a strong interest in food policy as it affects local areas and local communities.

The Chair: What about Ministers; is there a ministerial group? I am impressed by the way you work together as a foursome. Do your Ministers correspondingly have regular discussions on these issues?

Alison Ismail: There is not a formal ministerial group at the moment, but I would say that there is very frequent informal communication between our Ministers on these issues.

Jenny Oldroyd: Ministers have a number of times been together and discussed these issues at the Social Reform Committee as well, so there are groups that take a view, not just on this policy admittedly but across the piece, where Ministers are involved. There are also quite strong programme management arrangements around the childhood obesity strategy. We have formal quarterly meetings where we bring together the contributions of departments and assess progress across that. Alison mentioned the importance of the informal relationships and we also have a monthly working group that brings that together. There are lots of government departments with a contribution to make to this across government, so those arrangements are really important.

Q20 **Baroness Boycott:** One of the witnesses at one of our last sessions, Anna Taylor, gave evidence to a House of Commons Select Committee about a year ago, and the issue came up of who was responsible for

hunger in the UK, accepting we have such a thing as hunger, and the ball was dropped and no department stepped up to the plate and said, "This belongs to us". That was a year ago. Do you have any thoughts? Has that progressed in some way?

Jenny Oldroyd: That is why those formal working arrangements are really important. That is why the Social Reform Committee for our Ministers and senior officials and the programme arrangements we have together are really important.

Baroness Boycott: I completely understand that they are really important, and so did Anna at the time of this Committee. I wanted to know if there had been progress made towards somebody holding on to this one area.

Jenny Oldroyd: I think genuinely that rather than three or four departments stepping back, you find them stepping forward, and that they are doing so in a co-ordinated way. I would worry about any system that said that this belonged to only one department, because I think some of the progress we have made has come clearly from making sure that there is more than one department that feels this area is its very strong responsibility.

The Chair: Let me ask this question and then I will come back to Baroness Osamor. To follow up Baroness Boycott's question, if I said which Minister is ultimately accountable for the question of hunger, or of food insecurity, what is the answer?

Alison Ismail: My reflection is going to be, slightly to paraphrase Jenny's point, that if you are thinking about governance, this is an area where there is a bit of a trade-off between accountability in the sense of one named Minister or department and genuinely shared ownership of a problem or a phenomenon. Food insecurity is with Defra. It is probably a bit of a philosophical question as to whether food insecurity is an exact synonym for hunger. That would be an interesting question to get into. I would not want to overstate the progress made on that particular question since it was last considered by you. It is a good challenge for us to take away for this time next year, to see whether we have a clear story on whether that particular issue is jointly or individually owned.

The Chair: So watch this space.

Alison Ismail: I think "Watch this space" could be the headline.

Q21 **Baroness Osamor:** What research is undertaken on the impact of existing food policies supporting access to healthy diets, and how is this research used to inform policy-making?

Jenny Oldroyd: I am happy to talk through that. We have a number of organisations that bring research ability together to help us get into these questions. In 2017 we launched the Obesity Policy Research Unit, which is a unit we fund that looks specifically at research around obesity and the food environment, food policy and the economics of obesity. It takes

forward different projects. It has done projects on deprivation, for example, on advertising on front of pack and on different policy levers. That is the kind of work that enables us to take forward the policy that I have mentioned that we are working on.

There are two parts to this question; one is obesity and the other is a wider public health and inequalities question. We have the Public Health Policy Research Unit as well. A lot of the research of the Department of Health is commissioned through policy units that are focused specifically on building research in different areas. The Public Health Policy Research Unit does quite a lot of work particularly on the socioeconomic factors of inequalities in health.

We also have the School for Public Health Research, which brings together eight different leading academic centres to support practitioners and policymakers, particularly around the application of high-quality research, so we have that flow-through from the development of research into how you take it into practice and how you use it in policy-making in ways that make sure that we take the full value of the research that is available.

We also make funding available through the Public Health Research Programme, which is, effectively, a funding stream that researchers can access for research that would help us move forward in this space. We also put funding into other centres that are in existence. We part-fund the Centre for Diet and Activity Research, CEDAR for short, and other academic units. We tend to take our research from different sources so as to keep the different academic centres involved and have genuinely a spread of research. That investment in the Obesity Policy Research Unit really makes a difference in this space.

The Chair: Do the other departments have comparable research programmes?

Sarah Lewis: We use the research that Jenny just talked through, because that is the gold standard research that is available. Specifically, at the moment we are working with Public Health England on revising school food standards. Public Health England is using the best scientific advice we have through the research that it is able to access to help us decide what changes we are going to make to the school food standards.

Going back to 2013, our School Food Plan had an annexe which had all the research that we used to inform that plan, which has informed so much of our thinking since then that we have been taking forward, which is looking very much at things such as the impact of hunger on attainment, on behaviour and that side of things. There is quite a lot of research evidence around that. From our perspective, the research Jenny talked through is very comprehensive and we use it.

The Chair: Thank you. What about Defra and the DWP?

Julia Gault: I will make some observations about what the DWP does. The DWP role in contributing to this research is in thinking about food insecurity and its relationship to household income. Another of your areas of inquiry is what we understand about that from other sources of research and what we are doing about that. One of the things that is very clear from the existing evidence base is that it is really difficult to get a good handle on that in a robust, analytical way from the data sources that are currently available to us. DWP has led the work to add questions to the Family Resources Survey, which is a big panel survey conducted in this country, which will give us much more consistent year-on-year data about families' and households' experience of food insecurity, which will help us get a much better sense of some of the drivers of that. Current sources of data around it are tantalisingly unhelpful in allowing us to get under the skin of it. We are leading work to support improvements in that aspect of the data into which the other pieces of research dock.

The Chair: You could, if you wanted to be critical, say that it is quite shocking that the Government do not know the basic facts about food insecurity, which is what you are telling us. You have said it is difficult.

Julia Gault: We need to know more, and action has now been taken since April through the Family Resources Survey. We have been collecting more data to improve our understanding.

Q22 **Baroness Janke:** On that point, it seems to me there is an enormous amount of work being done on this by academics in universities and by various think tanks and charities. It surprises me that you do not feel that it is robust or adequate. From the work that I have seen, even if you talk about the existing ones, the Social Metrics Commission for example, which publishes research quite frequently, it seems to me that a forest of trees has been used to produce evidence on this. Again, does the DWP not use that evidence and, if not, why not?

Julia Gault: We do. We are working with the Social Metrics Commission on its work around poverty measures, which was announced not very long ago. That is just one of a whole number of organisations. Regarding the Trussell Trust research that was published today, we have a DWP representative on the steering group for that research to try to make the research as high quality as possible.

Baroness Janke: Surely that is brought together somewhere.

Julia Gault: It is brought together somewhere. Unfortunately, what we need in addition to all these really helpful individual pieces of work is something that looks at the issue from a much more population level of data, which requires the big surveys that only the Government have the wherewithal to run, which is why putting the additional questions around this to the Family Resources Survey was so important to fill the evidence gap.

So, yes, there is lots of evidence, but on your point about where the comparison groups are around all this, a lot of the research that is done

struggles to find comparison groups for this. The Family Resources Survey is done on a representative sample of families and helps us to get more of an insight into why certain families and households choose to do some things around their food choices, and other families and households make different choices. It gives us a different perspective on this which we cannot yet get from the existing data.

- Q23 **Baroness Boycott:** You talk about people's food choices, but if you look at the data that comes from very well-sourced evidence such as that from the Food Foundation, if you are in the bottom 10% you have to spend 74% of your disposable income a week to afford the Government's eatwell plate. This is not fancy; this is just the Government's advice on how to be healthy. I am totally fascinated by the conversations that must go on in your department when you are confronted with a figure like that. Do you think, "We give them too little money, or "There isn't enough money", or "It's their fault because they make bad choices"? What is the thought process behind that bit of information and you looking at the amount of money people have, knowing full well the cost of unhealthy lifestyles to all of us later?

Julia Gault: The way the benefits system is structured, we do not say, "We are assuming you are going to spend this much money on food and this much money on other things".

Baroness Boycott: How do you structure it, then?

Julia Gault: The benefits system is not built like that.

Baroness Boycott: How is it built?

Julia Gault: I am afraid I do not know the answer to that question.

Baroness Boycott: So it does not take into account how to live a decent, modest but healthy life.

The Chair: Perhaps you could send us something in writing.

Julia Gault: I can certainly come back on that.

The Chair: We are going to come back to the question of what proportion of income is spent on a healthy diet if you are in the lowest decile, but, when we have been through all the questions, perhaps you could write something that says, "Here is how the benefits system relates to the questions that you put about food insecurity". Before we move on, very briefly, Alison, could you tell us about Defra's research programme? This is a question about what the Government are doing by way of research to support understanding of the questions that are under discussion.

Alison Ismail: To echo what Sarah said, I would stress that Defra in its policy work will be drawing on all the different sources that might have their centre of gravity in other departments. The one thing I would additionally mention is the UK's security assessment, which is designed to

be a comprehensive analysis of all aspects of food security in the sense of your question about the element of access to food. It draws on a whole range of national and international indicators that are in the public domain to try to get that completely nuanced picture in the way that Julia described. Of its six themes there is one about UK availability and access, and others about supply chain resilience, household food security and consumer safety and confidence. I mention that as an additional work stream, if you like, that adds, we hope, to the picture.

The Chair: I would like to turn now to the next question and Baroness Boycott.

Q24 **Baroness Boycott:** It is suggested that a lot of the things your department promotes around healthy eating are implemented and assessed by local authorities. Do local authorities have enough power and resource? I would like to talk specifically about free school meals in a minute, but it would be very interesting to get a view from you all down the line in answer to that question. Perhaps I can come to Sarah last and we can drill into FSMs a little more.

Jenny Oldroyd: Local authorities have various powers that are relevant and help in this space. They have the power to restrict the opening of new fast food restaurants through planning powers. They have the ability to provide professional training and social media support, drawing on Public Health England's tools, and parenting support and weight management provision through the public health grant. Through their infrastructure plans for cycling and walking they can promote active travel, which makes quite a difference in this space, and they can also create green spaces, so their infrastructure plans can create environments in which exercise is easier and in which there are spaces to exercise.

Those powers are there, but I do not pretend at all that they are always easy and straightforward to use. They face a potential legal challenge, particularly on using planning powers to restrict the opening of fast food restaurants. In some of our work in particular local authorities, whether it is going ahead already in Gateshead and Waltham Forest and the like, or that we are supporting in Blackburn with Darwen through the Trailblazer programme, it becomes really important to try to build the experience and ability of local authorities to use those existing powers well in their areas.

Baroness Boycott: Are you able to help local authorities ban fast food advertising? It has not been entirely successful, but they have done it on the Tube. What about in other local authorities?

Jenny Oldroyd: There are various powers that play into this space. For example, MHCLG has a role to play regarding phone-box advertising. That is the availability of the infrastructure. The advertising exists more at a local level, but we have asked in our consultation on advertising on television and online whether there are other media that we need to consider and do more on in this space. We have given outdoor

advertisers as an example there because, as you mention, it is very important.

Baroness Boycott: A lot of the chicken and chip shops reduce their prices when schoolkids come out and offer 50% off if you come in in school uniform. When I worked with the London Food Board I tried to see whether there was anything we could do about it and I found there was not. Do you have any ideas?

Jenny Oldroyd: Depending on the different kinds of outlet, there are different planning powers you can use, but it is more about businesses that are open late into the evening or temporary businesses.

Baroness Boycott: On the schoolkids bit, the dropping of the price.

Jenny Oldroyd: The dropping of the price?

Baroness Boycott: Yes, they advertise between 3 pm and 4 pm that you get 50% off. That is true in Gateshead and lots of places.

Jenny Oldroyd: The only price promotion we are looking at at the moment is around the retail environment rather than the out of home. We had the CMO's report a couple of weeks ago that sets out different areas we could be looking at in the future. At the moment the price promotions we are focusing on are the multibuy within retail environments.

Julia Gault: The DWP has responsibility for not too many things in this space, but I suppose the most relevant is the local welfare systems, which were devolved to local areas in around 2013-14. There is certainly evidence that those have been much more successful in terms of the sense that a local area has of what local needs are, so they are much more able to respond in an appropriate way to that. I suppose there is no denying that in a climate where local authorities' resources are significantly constrained, local authorities will have made their own choices about whether to use their resources for that sort of activity or not. Some have continued to have quite strong local welfare systems in the current climate and others have chosen to prioritise other things.

Baroness Boycott: Alison, what is Defra's view?

Alison Ismail: I was going to echo a version of what Jenny said, which is our view would be there is quite a range of local powers that can be used, but there is probably more to understand about how readily those are being deployed. Our soft intelligence would back up what Julia has described, which is that in some cases local authorities will have made a strategic decision to focus on other things, whether for budgetary or other reasons.

My other reflection was going to be that this is typical of other cross-cutting policy areas, where we hear, rightly, a call for appropriate powers and a decision-making role for local areas, and we also hear,

understandably, a call for national leadership. Sometimes it can be easier to synthesise the two than at others.

Sarah Lewis: We are working with local authorities in relation to holiday activity and food programmes. Certainly, in the project that I visited this summer it was very clear that the local authority was heavily involved. They are often the lead organisation in those programmes. Also, local authorities have access to our eligibility checking system in relation to children's eligibility to free school meals, which is I think what you want to bring me on to next.

Baroness Boycott: I am thinking about the standards as well. There does not seem to be anyone in the Department for Education who is in charge of ensuring that school food standards are maintained. They are very random. Some are cooked in-house and some come from delivery companies. There has also been an issue about preloaded money on cards not being returned to children at the end of the week. There is also an issue, given how much money is put into this programme, that its management seems to be less than 100%.

Sarah Lewis: We absolutely set the school food standards and specifically to pick up on the point about preloaded money on cards, schools have the ability to give that money back to the children if they wish. We do not say they have to because free school meals are not a cash benefit for that individual child. It is money overall that is given to schools so they can ensure that children can access free school meals while they are in school. It is just set up in a different way.

Baroness Boycott: I know you set the standards, but the question was about the monitoring and keeping an eye on things to ensure they were all right. I know you have standards—I have read them and they are very good—but they do not always seem to be terribly well enforced. I was also interested in your comment on academies which scoot out of your control.

Sarah Lewis: Our comment on academies, sorry?

Baroness Boycott: On the first question about the enforcement of standards, is there someone going around checking it is well done?

Sarah Lewis: No, we do not proactively go round and check whether schools meet the school food standards, in the same way that we do not proactively go round and check whether the schools do the many other things that we ask them to do. We rely on our regulatory system and we want parents to complain to us if they feel that schools are not meeting their statutory responsibilities.

Baroness Boycott: You rely on parents' complaints, do you?

Sarah Lewis: If a parent complains we will certainly look into it.

The Chair: I am going to move on to the next question and Lord Empey.

Q25 Lord Empey: What options does government have to effect changes in the retail food environment, including marketing, labelling, product placement and access to supermarkets, to ensure that it is easier for consumers to make healthy choices? What options are being considered?

Jenny Oldroyd: There are a number of options that we are looking at in this space that were consulted on through chapter 2 of the childhood obesity policy in particular. If I take each of those in turn, as regards marketing, we absolutely know that advertising influences consumption of food by children, both in the short term and in the longer term by shaping food preferences. We already have restrictions on broadcast advertising of unhealthy foods in times of children's programming, but we have consulted on further restrictions to tighten broadcast and online advertising. Those options include a 9 pm watershed and that consultation asks about other media as well as television and online.

Regarding labelling, we have a very well-known scheme of traffic light labelling. It is used by nine out of 10 shoppers to influence their food purchasing. We have said that we will consult by the end of this year on building on that system. We also think we can do more to help support parents make decisions about what they feed their youngest children. We have said that by early next year we will look at honest labelling that is in line with government guidance for infant foods and we will also look at the formulation of those foods and see if we can set out a voluntary programme to reduce the levels of sugar in them.

In addition to that, we are looking at the promotion of food within the retail environment, within store, so we have consulted on our policy on price promotions, where we are concerned that multibuy offers encourage people to buy more food than they intended to buy. People buy about 20% more food when they are purchasing food on promotion. We have some of the highest rates of purchasing food on promotion in this country of any country in Europe. We also know that people do not stockpile the food as they intend to.

Lord Empey: Could you repeat that statistic?

Jenny Oldroyd: In this country we buy about 40% of our food on promotion and that is the highest figure across Europe. People intend to stockpile it, but the evidence shows that they tend to consume it at a faster rate, having bought their two for one or whatever it may be. That is why we have consulted on restricting volume price promotions that encourage people to get a perceived value by buying more food than they intended to.

We have also consulted in the same document on promotion of unhealthy foods at particular points in the store. We know that if soft drinks, for example, are on sale at the end of aisle you will sell about 50% more. We also know that having unhealthy foods around the till creates pester power, which is challenging for parents, and having food at front of store can increase purchasing beyond what people intended to purchase in the first place. Knowing that makes a difference and we have therefore

consulted on restricting location promotions at those points in the retail environment.

Those policies are twofold. I mentioned earlier some of our sugar reduction programmes and the work that we are doing on calorie and salt reduction as well. Those policies I have talked through are important for two reasons. One, they stop the direct drivers that encourage people to buy more food than they were intending to buy and that they require. They also encourage industry to reformulate food to be able to advertise and to be able to promote food in this space, so they have a dual impact.

Lord Empey: You must be aware that you are up against some of the biggest corporations in the world with multi-billion pound budgets to advertise and promote, so is it not really the case that the only tool that you have in your chest is a regulatory, legally binding power to enforce certain things? Could you perhaps outline for the Committee what level of engagement your departments have with the food sector, particularly the large companies? There has been the soft drinks levy and, of course, the salt reduction programme, but Lord Rooker is our expert on that and he would say that while the salt reduction programme has been successful, the sugar reduction programme has been less successful. Would you agree?

Jenny Oldroyd: There are a number of questions in there. Could I start with the first one about engagement with industry? We have answered a number of Parliamentary Questions on this recently, and I would be very happy to share the full list with you, about the health organisations and industry that we have engaged with over the last few years. We have talked to industry directly. We do that at the same time as we talk to others with an interest in this, so we talk to health organisations as well. Some of that is directly through the Department of Health and some of that is through Public Health England, which works with different players to understand how guidelines should and can be developed for some of its programmes. We are very happy to share the responses to those PQs with the Committee.

Your second question was about the reduction programmes and how successful they are. The sugar reduction programme in its second year has achieved an average reduction in sugar of 2.9%.

The Chair: Could you repeat the figure?

Jenny Oldroyd: The average sugar reduction after two years in the foods that are part of the sugar reduction programme is 2.9%. That is lower than the ambition had been, but that is also, as I look internationally—you asked earlier about where we are learning from—there are not other Governments who can demonstrate that kind of progress internationally. We have seen more progress in some categories than others. We have seen very good progress around foods such as breakfast cereals and yoghurts. We have seen less progress around foods such as chocolate and confectionary as regards removing sugar. That programme has not finished yet and we very much want to let that

programme play out and finish so that we give the industry the opportunity to see what it can achieve through reduction. Last week Alison Tedstone, the chief nutritionist, talked the Select Committee through the progress that has been made in different foods and by different organisations as part of that programme.

The salt reduction programme has also made gains in reducing salt in foods. Between 2005 and 2011 we saw salt decrease in foods by 11%, from 8.8 grams to 8 grams per day on average. We saw really big gains in particular foods. Bread, for example: that programme resulted in 40% less salt on average in bread in this country.

I know it has been a while since you did your other sessions, but one of the questions I found quite interesting was about whether we see foods composed differently in this country from other countries. As a result of the salt reduction programme, we know we have lower salt levels in a lot of foods in the UK than you might see in the United States, Canada and Australia.

The Chair: Has the salt reduction continued? You gave the figure for 2005 to 2011. Did you say it was only an 11% reduction?

Jenny Oldroyd: Yes, I did.

The Chair: What is the figure from 2011 to 2018?

Jenny Oldroyd: I do not have that figure on me, but I can tell you that by 2018, 81% of products were meeting the targets that had been set by Public Health England for 2017. I can go away and get that figure for you.

The Chair: That would be helpful.

Lord Empey: I want to make the point that the question the Chair asked earlier was whether rates of obesity are still going up. Clearly, while individual bits of the jigsaw are working, collectively we have not actually reached a point where we are pushing back. I think that is the thing that is worrying most of us around the table.

Jenny Oldroyd: I would not challenge that in that we have lots to do to make progress, absolutely.

The Chair: I think the Earl of Caithness would like to come in, but to pin this down and to follow up what Lord Empey said, Governments have been saying for quite a while, "If voluntary does not work we will consider regulation", and that still seems to be the case. It is always regulation in two or three years' time and it is always two or three years' time. At the moment is there any appetite among Ministers to say the fact that 79% of products displayed in freestanding units in food retail outlets are sugary foods is just as unacceptable? We are not going to make any progress while this stuff is shoved at people. Is there any appetite for saying we have to get tough?

Jenny Oldroyd: In the consultations I outlined—the price promotions, the location promotions, calorie labelling—we are consulting on legislative change to restrict price promotions, location promotions, and to introduce a levy so that cannot happen for foods that are not meeting the nutrient profile model that has been set. Apologies if I had not made that clear.

The Earl of Caithness: I would like to follow up what the Lord Chair has just said. A lot of people are saying there has to be a radical alteration in our diets and if the environment and biodiversity are going to survive, we are going to have to alter our eating habits. From what I have heard, it does not seem that the Government have any concept of the challenge this poses and, as we are on the question of intervention and since intervention has to come initially from the Government, are there any discussions going on on a wider basis as to what the future holds and what has to be done in the next 10 years?

Alison Ismail: I would say that the seriousness of that challenge is very much recognised and shared between us. That is exactly what we hope to address by bringing forward a joint and co-ordinated food strategy next year by looking at the whole system and trying to avoid the trap we often fall into of creating, effectively, policy cliff edges if we do not think in a sufficiently joined-up way. When Lord Empey talked about tools in the toolbox, for me what success would look like in the food strategy would be that we were, in setting out potential responses by government, considering the use of a range of tools, which could include legislation and regulation, which we have talked about, potential fiscal measures, and thinking about what we can do on the demand side regarding early education, behaviour change and public information; generally, a pincer movement to address information asymmetry that might be out there. It would be that sort of suite of interventions that could really help us take a step forward on a cross-government basis.

The Earl of Caithness: Presumably you are in discussion with Mr Dimbleby on what he is doing. If he is going to come up with some quite radical proposals, are the Government ready and in a position to introduce the necessary legislation and the big stick to get this done?

Alison Ismail: First, we are speaking regularly with Henry about his focus. As you will know, he is being extremely comprehensive and taking evidence and views very widely, including from the public themselves, as well as from industry and health bodies and others.

In terms of readiness to respond, I would say that the value of his independent review is that he will, I am sure, set out the full range of his findings at that system level in a way which will transcend the departmental buckets, which, again, we are determined not to find ourselves sinking back into. It will then be for the Government to respond, probably in the form of a Command Paper, next year, to set out the pathway to deliver responses that we might come up with in recognition of what he has set out.

The Chair: Baroness Parminter would like to come in and then I am

going to move on to question 5.

Baroness Parminter: You have talked about a number of the options available to you on packaging and labelling. What you did not mention at all was portion sizing. In fact, you did not mention it at all in your submissions and yet we did ask you about portion sizing. Are the Government intending to do anything about portion sizing? You can control what is in a school or in a hospital, but if they then go and get their takeaway or get a Deliveroo ordered and they have a portion this size that educates their palate. Why are the Government seemingly not looking at all at addressing portion sizing?

Jenny Oldroyd: Portion size is part of our sugar reduction programmes and would be part of a calorie reduction programme, because there are different ways—and I appreciate publicly that would not always come across—in which you can reduce the amount of sugar that is sold within a particular category of food. You can do that by reformulating it technically, to take sugar out of the product, or you can do it by reducing the portion that is provided within the product, or by selling a different balance of your products and marketing more the healthier products. Any of those are completely valid ways in which to reduce it. It comes back to the point about outcomes. We are trying to aim for and to measure the outcome which is the reduction of the product being consumed however you might choose to come to that. We have seen companies respond to that by deciding to limit particularly children's portion sizes of particular products.

Q26 **Baroness Janke:** My question relates to food insecurity/hunger, et cetera. I think one of my colleagues raised the issue earlier about the fact that the Food Foundation has found that those on the lowest incomes would need to spend over 73% of their disposable income on food to meet the eatwell guidance, and I think we have had a response to that, but I would really like to understand what measures are going on, particularly in the DWP, to look into this issue of hunger.

Some of the reports that have documented the situation on benefits in this country are quite shaming for the country, it seems to me. UN rapporteur Alston—it is a long quote in our briefing—says, "Not only does the Government not measure food poverty but a Minister dismissed the significance of food bank use as being only occasional ... and food banks exist in other countries". I feel this eatwell principle is one that we need to embed into our policies on benefits. I would like to understand a little more what can happen to ensure that benefits take account of the requirements and the cost of food. What can we do? You said earlier that you were embarking on a survey, but at the moment we have large numbers of children not having enough to eat, as well as the hard-to-reach groups and the most affected groups, the single parent families particularly. You mentioned that your policies are designed to get people back to work, but one of the largest groups of the poor are the working poor. What needs to happen within the DWP benefits policy that will enable us to ensure that these sorts of issues are built in to the calculation and availability of benefits?

Julia Gault: As you say, there are some very concerning things in the statistics, and we need to do work to understand more about why some families in a particular financial circumstance are able to prioritise food and others will perhaps go to a food bank to access food. It is a complex picture. We are working with organisations such as the Trussell Trust to understand that as best we can.

There is already work going on where jobcentres will work locally with organisations such as the Trussell Trust and other food banks to ensure that families where the DWP has done all it can to ensure that the families or the individual have accessed all they can from the welfare system can access other forms of support, either through the local authority or a food bank or whatever, and to see whether there are individuals and families presenting themselves at food banks who have not accessed the whole of their welfare entitlement and need support to be able to do that. There are practical things being done even now, because not everybody who goes to a food bank has necessarily accessed all the things they are entitled to.

Baroness Janke: You are talking about the symptoms of what seems on the face of it to be a system that takes no account of cost or government policy in eating well and being healthy.

Julia Gault: Also, we have a welfare system where benefits have been frozen for a number years. As I said, an announcement has now been made where that is going to be changed, but that will have had an impact on the income of those families. That is a fact and I cannot argue with that.

Baroness Janke: Are you saying in effect that the structure and engineering of the benefits system do not really take account of government policy on food, healthy eating and accessibility? Are you saying that?

Julia Gault: It is not designed to be structured in that way, no.

Baroness Janke: Perhaps on this Committee we need to ensure that this is part of any benefits system. Are there ways other than tackling the whole basic structure of the benefits system and other than just tackling the symptoms? Are there any particular measures? For example, you talk about loans and emergency payments, but those are loans and usually people have to pay them back. It then makes it harder because they are paying that out of an inadequate income, which is why they have had to borrow it anyway.

Julia Gault: One of the things the Trussell Trust research that was published today showed was that the families and the individuals most likely to access food banks were those who had experienced some other crisis—they had hit a sudden crisis in their life, something else had happened.

Baroness Janke: Is that not the case with benefits anyway? A lot of

people who are on benefits are on benefits because they have had a major crisis in their lives.

Julia Gault: The research was saying that some additional thing had happened to them, so it might not have been the original circumstance—the loss of the job or whatever it was that caused them to be on benefits in the first place—but there had been a further incident in their life. There are also issues around the other forms of informal support that those individuals and families have access to, which the Trussell Trust evidence exposes. Some of that is about issues that have been raised through the loneliness work. These are complex problems. I am not suggesting that money is not one of the really important issues for families at the bottom.

Baroness Janke: There is the system of payments, long delays, et cetera, five weeks' waiting and so on. You talked about not uprating benefits. When inflation is going up, these people are more than not just not keeping up; they are losing substantial parts of their benefits.

The Chair: We probably need to move on.

Jenny Oldroyd: May I add one point?

The Chair: Very briefly, in one sentence.

Jenny Oldroyd: We provide funding through the Healthy Start vouchers, which give low-income families who have children under four vouchers they can use on fruit and vegetables. We are digitising that to make it easier to get the full value so they can carry the value from one week to the next. That is in addition to the support we put in with the Department for Education through the school fruit and vegetable scheme and nursery milk.

Baroness Janke: The point I am making is that we have one major aspect of government policy which seems to be working in direct contradiction with another, so I hope we will be able to pull that out in the report.

The Chair: Before we leave this and move on to Baroness Parminter—and we are going to have to accelerate because we are running out of time—Alison, perhaps you could write to us, and if not you, Julia, to explain these figures. We have this figure from the Food Foundation about the poorest decile having to spend 73% of their disposable income on food to meet the eatwell guidance. In your submission you say the lowest 20% by equivalised income spend 15% of their household income on food. Are you measuring different things? You are measuring a different decile. The Food Foundation also talks about the next decile up from 10% to 20% and the number is still much higher than the 15.2% you talk about. I am not asking you to answer now but I am asking you to write to us and give your analysis of these different figures we have had about the impact of affordability of healthy eating for people in different deciles of income.

Alison Ismail: I am very happy to do so.

The Chair: Thank you. Now I would like to quickly move on to Baroness Parminter.

Q27 **Baroness Parminter:** We have had evidence that more children are coming to school hungry. Are you satisfied that enough is being done to ensure that kids get healthy food in schools? What assessments are you undertaking to follow up on that?

Sarah Lewis: Yes, we are in school, in that we are providing free school meals, free lunches, to every single child who is on that very low income, on benefits essentially, which gives them the entitlement to free school meals. They are able to access a really healthy, nutritious lunch while they are in school. Ditto for all infant school children: they are able to access that, so once they are in school, I am confident that they can absolutely access that.

As I mentioned at the start of my evidence, we have been following the recommendations of the School Food Plan in 2013 and kick-starting more breakfast clubs, primarily in deprived areas, and really focusing those in to deprived parts of the country. We have now reached over 1,700 schools. That is very much about getting those breakfast clubs set up. We are extending that funding for a further year now we have departmental budgets for that for next year.

More recently, we have been doing our holiday activities and food programme, but I am conscious your question was about food, so I will stop there.

Baroness Parminter: That is fine. I think we need to move on to some other areas. The evidence has been pretty clear from the Government on what they are doing.

Baroness Boycott: Is there any plan to change the regulation which means that children of immigrants who are receiving no benefits themselves while they apply for residency do not get free school meals?

Sarah Lewis: As you will be aware, at the moment entitlement to free school meals is entirely linked to the benefits that those children receive and at the moment, as you say, the children with no recourse to public funds do not have access to those benefits and de facto are not eligible for free school meals. We would need to talk to the Home Office about that, but at the moment there are no plans.

Baroness Boycott: It would be very helpful to have a letter back to say where that debate is going.

The Chair: We will move on now to the Earl of Caithness.

Q28 **The Earl of Caithness:** Jenny, you are back in the firing line. What recent assessment has been made of the impact of diet-related ill health on health inequalities in England?

Jenny Oldroyd: A high body mass index is a leading risk factor for the number of years lived with a disability, and for morbidity. We know that

obesity prevalence is much higher in more deprived areas, so children who come from more deprived areas are twice as likely to be obese as their counterparts from the least deprived areas of the country. That fact holds true for women as well as they get older, with less of a curve for men. We know that obesity gives a high risk factor for multiple conditions. It puts you at a higher risk of diabetes, some cancers, such as breast and bowel cancer, liver and heart disease and musculoskeletal problems, which affect that cycle of ability to work as well.

Obesity in itself is an issue but we know that sugar, as well as contributing to obesity by being high-calorie, contributes to tooth decay. Nearly a quarter of children aged five in this country have tooth decay. Again, that rises in more deprived areas, so you are talking about a third in more deprived areas. We also know that salt drives an increased risk of heart disease and stroke.

What you see as a result of that is people in the most deprived areas tend not only to live shorter lives but to spend more of those years in poor health. Women living in the 10% most deprived areas can expect to live about 18 fewer years in good health compared with women living in the 10% least deprived areas. That is why in July we published the prevention Green Paper, which tries to start to close that gap by giving five extra healthy years of life, not just looking at life expectancy but the quality of those years as well.

The Earl of Caithness: Why is tackling obesity so difficult? What are the problems that are preventing progress being made? If anything, it is going up. We have known about it for a long time and we should have been able to crack it by now. Why have we failed?

Jenny Oldroyd: I would not say we have failed. I do not think we are there yet. Obesity is a very, very complex issue. There is not one single factor driving it. There are commercial factors as regards our commercial environment and environmental factors in terms of advertising and the like that we have talked through. There are genetic and social factors. There is a lot here which plays in to one problem. We know physical activity is important and that diet is at the heart of trying to solve obesity. That is where we are trying to make progress. It sounds glib, and I do not mean it to, but when I said earlier there really is not one silver bullet here, we need to make progress on each of the things that influences obesity.

The Earl of Caithness: There is no hope of a sudden change.

Jenny Oldroyd: There would not be a sudden change. This is going to be hard work. This problem has been 40 years in the making and I very much hope it does not take us another 40 years. We have set an ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030, but, no, there will not be a sudden change.

The Earl of Caithness: I have a final question for you. You have done your consultation on the initiatives for children; when are we going to get

some action?

Jenny Oldroyd: We have already taken action with programmes such as the Trailblazers. We have had over 6,000 responses to the consultations on national policies. To be clear, that is not campaigns, so those are not responses where we can tick off a few hundred as one part of the campaign; they are responses that engage with the detail of the impact assessments that we have put out. The teams back at the office are looking at the policy which will underpin legislation in these areas that we need to take forward. At the Health Select Committee last week we made a commitment to publish our calorie labelling consultation response before the end of the year and we have further responses coming out next year. They were not put out as one bunch, they were put out over time and we will look to continue that flow.

The Chair: I would now like to turn to Baroness Parminter again.

Q29 **Baroness Parminter:** This is a question for you, Alison. What are the most significant challenges around improving the environmental sustainability of our food production systems?

Alison Ismail: All our discussion so far this morning reflects how interconnected but diverse and complicated those challenges are. The remit of your inquiry reflects that. It is helpful to bring those questions together. I think an honest answer probably notes that at times there will be trade-offs to consider between sustainable food production and delivering food that is healthy, affordable and accessible, and that supports a thriving food sector. I would personally note that consumers and citizens sometimes can be a bit lost, when we are talking about a population approach.

To mention a couple of the key challenges, being a bit conscious of the time, at a global scale—and I probably noted this in my preamble—there are increasing challenges to food security. As well as increased global demand for food due to rising populations and changing demographics, we have all the challenges in the food system that come from climate change, which increases pressure on that global food system, and the food production itself exacerbates that challenge.

At national level I would highlight the challenges of how we do primary food production more sustainably, which is something that we talk about on a daily basis with our partners and stakeholders, such as the National Farmers' Union, and the Government very much recognise the importance of reducing emissions, for example, from the agricultural sectors. There is a very strong interrelationship there with Defra's 25-year environment plan.

Another one I would mention, thinking about the whole food chain, is around how we use resources more effectively and reduce food waste, which to me is a really good example of where we need to look for actions from producers, retailers and manufacturers and we need to look to households for action because we know that a lot of that waste

happens in the home. The Government are fully committed to meeting the UN's sustainable development goal which talks about halving global food waste at both the consumer and the retail level by 2030. As you will know, Defra has appointed a food waste champion and there is a variety of activity in that area.

The Chair: I have one more follow-up question to Baroness Parminter's. A few years ago Defra published the results of some research which suggested that as a consequence of climate change many parts of the most productive agricultural land in England will be unsuitable for growing food in the next few decades, so mid-century. In the forward thinking that you have referred to, do you factor in the possibility that we may be able to grow much less food ourselves in this country?

Alison Ismail: Absolutely. To step back, I should have mentioned that in our planning for a food strategy next year these are absolutely the tensions and the medium- to long-term view we want to be putting at the centre of it. Regarding how we use our land—and I know as a big picture question that is something you have considered as a Committee—it is part and parcel of the agricultural transition that we are looking to effect, where environmental land management will offer the opportunity for farmers and land managers to produce different kinds of goods, including environmental public goods. For some of them that may mean moving away from more traditional agricultural activity and, indeed, may mean new entrants coming to the market seeking to provide not just, we hope, a full range of environmental goods but potentially different types of agriculture and horticulture from what we have seen up until now. We would very much agree that that all needs to be part of the same big picture. I go back to my point about trying to avoid policy cliff edges. We talk a lot about joining up across government but I never lose sight of the need to make sure that we are joined up within Defra as well.

The Chair: A final question from the Earl of Caithness.

The Earl of Caithness: Following on from your reply to the Lord Chair just now, is it not logical that Defra should produce a spatial land use plan? If there is going to be climate change and we are going to have soil degradation, how we use our land in the future and how we allocate that land must be a priority. It is no good, for instance, planting trees on land that you are going to need for farming in the future to produce agricultural produce. Given that we cannot produce any more land and the problems we have, surely one ought to have a land use strategy.

Alison Ismail: I would absolutely agree with you that it is logical that we should be very clearly focused on the question of land use and set out the short, medium and long-term pictures. Since we have the 25-year environment plan and we also plan to have the food strategy we have discussed, which will also very much include farming and food production, the question will be what the right vehicle is to capture any active policy that is not caught in either of those. However, I would absolutely agree that it is logical that we should be closely focused on that as a question. I

am loath to say, "I promise to produce a plan", but it is obviously an excellent point.

The Chair: I would like to thank our four witnesses very much indeed for their evidence this morning. It has been very helpful to us. In drawing this session to a close, I remind the witnesses that you have agreed to write to us with follow-up points on a number of questions that we have discussed, and we look forward to receiving those. As I have already mentioned, you will have a chance to correct the transcript of the session before it is made public. Thank you very much indeed.