



Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

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Dear Lord Gardiner of Kimble

Thank you for your letter of 15th November about the report of the Select Committee on Food, Health and the Environment. The questions raised were broad in scope and my department collected responses from across government. Please find our combined response attached following this letter.

I thank the committee for its work on this report. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions.

Yours sincerely,

Rt. Hon. Mark Spencer MP

Governance, accountability, and food policy

Does the Government have in place the necessary governance infrastructure to ensure the Food Strategy is implemented quickly and effectively?

- The Food Strategy was a high-level document designed to inform progress towards a healthier and more sustainable food system. Defra works closely with other government departments in several areas, including all of those with responsibility to implement the various aspects of the Food Strategy.
- We have committed to report on how we are taking forward our actions under the food strategy alongside the next UK Food Security report, drawing on independent analysis from the Climate Change Committee, Food Standards Agency and the Office for Environment Protection.

Which commitments in the Government Food Strategy have been progressed since its publication?

- The Strategy sets out the significant investments that are already being made across the food system. This includes over £120M joint funding with UK Research and Innovation in food systems research and innovation; £100M in the Seafood fund; £270M across the Farming Innovation Programme; and an £11M investment supporting new research to drive improvements in understanding the relationship between food and health.
- The Strategy also sets out the steps we are taking in driving innovation through creating a new simpler regulatory regime to allow researchers and breeders to unlock the benefits of technologies such as gene editing; and by working with the Food Standards Agency to develop dedicated guidance materials for approval of new alternative protein products while reviewing our novel food regulations.
- Many of the policies announced in the Food Strategy have since been progressed. We are working with other Government departments, including BEIS, DLUHC, and Cabinet Office, to develop the scope of the Land Use Framework for England and will publish in 2024. We have consulted on improved food waste reporting and public sector food and catering policy and launched a call for evidence on methane suppressing feed products and are analysing responses from stakeholders. We have also announced the chair for the independent review into labour shortages in the food supply chain and expect to publish the final report in 2023. Call 4 of the Seafood Innovation Fund opened in Autumn 2022 and more funding was made available in November.
- We will also launch the Food Data Transparency Partnership programme in early 2023. The partnership will be a multi-year program working to improve health, sustainability and animal welfare and support sustainable economic growth in the agri-food sector and will look first at defining a consistent set of published metrics for the food system.

It has recently been announced that the Government is reviewing the current obesity strategy, why has this review been undertaken? How long is the review intended to take and what are the anticipated next steps?

- Under the previous Prime Minister the Government conducted an internal summary of obesity policies. This was routine work of Government rather than a formal review.

Poverty and food insecurity

Does the Government intend to continue to include food security questions in the NDNS rolling programme moving forward? If food security questions will not continue to be included in the NDNS, how does the Government intend to monitor the relationship between food insecurity and dietary intake?

- Food security questions were included in the NDNS rolling programme from field-work year 15 (April 2022) and will be included in future years.

What progress has the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities made in exploring the options on assessing the cost of a healthy, balanced diet? If no progress has been made, can the Government commit to a time scale within which to carry out this assessment and provide details of what they believe to be a reasonably costed healthy and sustainable diet?

- Public Health England began this work, which has been continued by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. A weekly food basket that meets Government dietary recommendations and is reflective of common food choices in the UK is being costed.
- Next steps are currently being explored including socialising the methodology and results with other Government departments next year.

The Food Environment

Can the Government detail how it intends to review eligibility requirements for free school meals and what the deciding factors would be to adapt the eligibility requirements?

- Under this government, eligibility has been extended several times and to more groups of children than any other government over the past half a century, including the introduction of universal infant free school meals and further education free school meals.
- There are currently 1.9 million pupils eligible for and claiming free school meals, saving families hundreds of pounds each year. Since 2014, a further 1.25 million children in reception, Year 1 and Year 2 have free meals through the Universal Infant Free School Meal programme. Together, that amounts to more than one-third of all children receiving a free lunchtime meal. Free meals are also available to disadvantaged young people in further education.
- In setting an income threshold above which entitlement to free school meals no longer applies, the Government's judgement is that the current level enables the most disadvantaged children to benefit while remaining affordable and deliverable for schools and the taxpayer.
- It is right that provision is aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged, those out of work, or those on the lowest incomes. We do not have any plans to extend provision at this time but we will continue to keep all free school meal eligibility under review, to ensure that these meals are supporting those who need them most.

Both the Committee and the Review recommended amended eligibility requirements for the Holiday Activities and Food programme and recognised the need for changes to the Healthy Start vouchers scheme, which were not taken onboard. Can the Government detail how it intends to review eligibility requirements for both programmes and what key factors will be considered in any change to the eligibility requirements?

- Eligibility for the Healthy Start scheme aligns closely with the eligibility for other passported benefits across Government. The Regulations were amended in June 2019 to add Pension Credit beneficiaries, who have children in their care, to the eligibility criteria. There are currently no plans to further change the scheme's eligibility.
- In 2021, we significantly expanded the holiday activities and food (HAF) programme to reach all local authority areas in England. We are now investing over £200 million per year in this programme, which provides free holiday club places with healthy meals and enriching activities for children from low-income families.
- Based on reporting from local authorities, over 685,000 children and young people attended the programme in the 2022 summer holidays. Of these participating children, over 580,000 were funded directly by the HAF programme and over 475,000 were receiving benefits-related free school meals.
- Local authorities are required to target the programme primarily towards children who are in receipt of benefits-related free school meals. However, local authorities can use up to 15% of their funding to provide free or subsidised places for children who are not in receipt of benefits-related free school meals but who the local authority believe could benefit from HAF provision. We are confident that our eligibility criteria target the programme's funding towards the children who are most in need of support.

The Committee also recommended changes to the eligibility requirements for the National Schools Breakfast Programme, which were not adopted in the Food Strategy. Can the Government detail how this programme will be reviewed and what deciding factors will be considered when assessing eligibility requirements?

- The government is committed to supporting school breakfast clubs and we are investing up to £30 million to continue our national programme until July 2024. This funding will support up to 2,500 schools in disadvantaged areas, meaning that thousands of children from low-income families will be offered free nutritious breakfasts to better support their attainment, wellbeing and readiness to learn.
- In January 2022 the eligibility criteria for schools to join the programme was extended. The updated eligibility criteria allows schools to apply to the programme if they have 40% or more pupils that meet bands A-F of the Income deprivation affecting index (IDACI). This change enabled over 10,000 schools to be eligible for the programme and therefore more disadvantaged pupils to benefit from free breakfast food.
- Over 2100 schools are currently participating in the programme, and our supplier, Family Action, is continuing to recruit more schools. Family Action has estimated that 270,000 children are having a breakfast from the programme on an average school day.
- Alongside our national programme, there are also a number of organisations providing valuable support to schools with breakfast provision such as Greggs, Magic Breakfast and Kellogg's.

Due to the COVID- 19 pandemic the Government paused work on updating the School Food Standards and instead focused on enforcing the current standard. Does the Government intend to recommence its work into reviewing and updating

School Food Standards? If so, can the Government provide details of how this review will be conducted and the time frame for this review to be completed, reviewed and the findings implemented?

- A review of the School Food Standards is not currently planned. We believe that the current standards provide a robust yet flexible framework to ensure that pupils in England continue to receive high-quality and nutritious food, that builds healthy eating habits for life.
- The department's current focus is on promoting compliance with the School Food Standards and we will keep this under review. In February 2022 the Levelling Up White Paper outlined a number of things the department is doing to strengthen adherence, including piloting work with the Foods Standards Agency, investing up to £200k in a pilot Governor Training Scheme and encouraging schools to complete a statement on their school websites setting out their whole school approach to food.

Pilot schemes were due to take place from September 2022 to support and assure compliance with School Food Standards. Can the Government provide details of the mechanisms being trialled and the timescale for completing, reviewing and implementing the outcome of the pilot?

- We are working with the Food Standards Agency, with support from the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, to test whether Food Safety Officers carrying out food hygiene inspections are able to ask additional questions and make observations related to the School Food Standards to identify possible non-compliance. We will also test whether, where instances of possible non-compliance have been raised, appropriate teams within local authorities will be able to work with schools to make improvements. We are running a pilot across 18 Local Authorities in England, from September 2022 to July 2023.
- Prior to the pilot launching, we conducted initial discovery work to help design the pilot in a way that minimises the burden on participating authorities. We gathered insights on the school food landscape across the breadth of authorities involved in the pilot, including the questions Food Safety Officers will ask and observations they will make, can support compliance with the School Food Standards.
- The pilot is expected to run the full academic year, from September 2022 to July 2023. Research findings will be published in accordance with Government Social Research guidelines.

What is the time frame for providing a response to the consultation and to implement further revisions to the GBSF?

- We received 126 responses to our recent consultation on proposals to update government's public sector food and catering procurement policy. To allow us to carefully consider these responses, we are delaying the publication of the summary of responses and government response until later in 2023. In the meantime, we are reviewing the responses received and will be considering how best to update the current policies for public sector food and catering, including the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services (GBSF).

Does the Government intend to set a review date to determine the success of the changes made the GBSF?

- Defra will develop an evaluation plan in parallel with any policy updates, to ensure we have a clear understanding of the impact of updates to the GBSF and wider public sector food and catering procurement policy. The

evaluation plan will also monitor the progress of changes over the coming years.

Would the Government consider reviewing the extent of the delays and commit to an earlier date of implementation?

- Restrictions on the promotion by location of products high in fat, salt or sugar came into force on 1 October 2022 and mean that less healthy products in scope of the restrictions will no longer be promoted in key locations, such as checkouts, store entrances, aisle ends and their online equivalents.
- The location restrictions are the single most impactful obesity policy at reducing children's calorie consumption and are expected to accrue health benefits over the next 25 years of over £57 billion and provide NHS savings of over £4 billion over the same time period.
- Government took the decision to delay the volume price promotion restrictions by twelve months in light of the unprecedented economic situation. The volume price promotion restrictions are set to come into force in October 2023.

The Government recently conducted a further consultation on online advertising. Does the Government anticipate this consultation will result in any further changes to restrictions on advertising HFSS food?

- The consultation on online advertising was conducted in 2020, and the consultation response to this, and the first consultation from 2019 was published in June 2021.

Could the Government provide a revised timetable for the publication of the White Paper and if possible, any further information on the plans for food and drink labelling and any other food related aspects of the White Paper?

- In 2020 the UK Government held a four-nation evidence-gathering consultation on our front of pack nutrition labelling scheme to consider whether improvements were needed. We are currently considering results from the consultation and will publish a consultation response as soon as possible. If changes to front of pack labelling are required, we will consult again on proposed policy changes.

Reformulation and regulation

Why did the Government decide not to pursue a sugar and salt reformulation tax, and how will this decision be reviewed in the future? What is the Government actively doing to review the need for fiscal measures to ensure reformulation targets are met?

- The SDIL remains in place and as with all taxes, the Government keeps SDIL under constant review and welcomes representations from stakeholders to inform policy development.
- Having a fit and healthy population is essential for a thriving economy and addressing obesity remains a priority for the Government. The Government will continue to monitor the impact of the SDIL in line with public health objectives, such as tackling obesity and remains committed to helping people live healthier lives.

The final report on the sugar and reformulation programme was due in 2021, but it was then announced it would be published in early 2022; however, the report remains unpublished. Can the Government provide an update on when this report will be published?

- The fourth progress report for the government's voluntary sugar reduction programme was published 1 December and is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sugar-reduction-programme-industry-progress-2015-to-2020>. It covers the foods included in the programme, as well as drinks subject to the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL). The report also includes the second year of data for juices and milk-based drinks, which are included in the sugar reduction programme as they are excluded from the SDIL.

Does the Government intend to conduct a review of the Soft Drinks Levy? When will the Government next consider the exemption of sugary milk and milk substitute drinks from the Soft Drinks Levy?

- The fourth progress report for the sugar reduction programme was published on 1 December 2022. It includes a second assessment of the changes made to sweetened milk-based drinks, which encompasses milk substitute drinks. This shows that retailers and manufacturers have continued to make good progress in reducing the average total sugar per 100ml in milk-based drinks. Less progress has been seen by the eating out of home sector.
- The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities have shared these results with HM Treasury. The final assessment of industry's progress against the ambition to achieve a 20% reduction in the sugar content of milk-based drinks by 2021 is expected to be published in 2023. HM Treasury will then consider whether any action is required on sweetened milk-based drinks in relation to the Soft Drinks Industry Levy.
- The Government is conducting an internal review of obesity policies, which is ongoing. The status of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy exemption for milk-based and certain milk substitute drinks will next be considered after the Office for Health Inequalities and Disparities (OHID) completes its voluntary sugar reduction reporting programme, expected in 2023. We will provide an update in due course.

Food and the environment

Can the Government provide further information on the Environment Land Management Scheme (ELMS) National Pilot including details of how the ELMS is being piloted, an update on progress and how the pilot is being assessed? Does the Government anticipate the original timeline for the pilot will be met? DEFRA has confirmed there is a review being undertaken on the ELMS, can the Government confirm what impact this will have on the pilot, and if there will be any anticipated delay? What is the scope of the review and is it expected that ELMS will be replaced or fundamentally changed?

- No decisions have been made – we are pressing ahead with our Environmental Land Management schemes and fine-tuning them to make sure they help to deliver our ambitious outcomes on the environment and support a thriving farming sector. We will be providing more details in due course.
- There is no single national pilot. Instead, we are testing our schemes through both pilots and tests and trials.

- Our review includes looking to build on the lessons learned from the 849 farmers in our Sustainable Farming Incentive pilots, our test and trials, the first 22 Landscape Recovery projects and the success of the Countryside Stewardship scheme, which over 30,000 farmers are now involved with - a 94 per cent increase on three years ago.
- Through the scheme pilots we are learning about:
 - real world operation of our future schemes – for example, how the scheme works for farmers and how far is it capable of delivering the environmental ambition
 - processes and systems – we will be aiming to make these work much better for participants than existing schemes, for example by providing timely decisions and payments, with a clear explanation of the basis of each payment
- As we roll out the Sustainable Farming Incentive, we will iterate and improve as we go – learning both from the piloting and the roll-out itself. This could include ‘turning off’ some features if we find that they do not work in the real world. It will also include adding new approaches and improvements as they are developed and tested.

The Food Strategy did not set out what is considered a sustainable diet to be, but committed to undertake a programme of randomised control trials of interventions in the food system over the next three years to "encourage and enable healthier and more sustainable diets for all". Can the Government provide more detail on the intended control trial interventions and how it anticipates these will inform a sustainable diet?

- The interventions to be trialled will be decided during spring 2023, and will focus on a range of food environments. The interventions will be developed by a research team and delivery partners Economic and Social Research Council, in collaboration with partners across government. Funding was secured from the Evaluation Accelerator Fund and government partners to support this programme. Evidence from the programme will increase our understanding of the effectiveness of interventions in encouraging healthier and more sustainable diets for all. This will support policy and spending decisions.

What is the time frame for the Government to produce a revised sustainable diet guide and communicate this to the public after the completion of the trials?

- This programme of trials is not intending to produce a revised sustainable diet guide. Further information is provided above about the trials.

Does the Government intend to continue to use the Eatwell Guide until the trials are completed, despite the unrealistic cost of the Eatwell Guide for low-income groups highlighted by the Committee, or will revised guidance and information be provided prior to the trials being completed?

- This programme of trials is not intending to revise guidance around the Eatwell Guide. Further information is provided above about the trials.

The Food Strategy acknowledges that many people in the most deprived groups are not eating enough fruit and vegetables but does not include details on how to improve this. The Government committed to reviewing the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme; could the Government provide an update on when this review will take place and the resultant actions implemented? This Scheme is solely for children.

- DfE and DHSC are developing the scope and content of the review of the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme, which will report in due course.

Could the Government explain how it intends to tackle deficiencies in fruit and vegetable consumption in older children and adults? The Government has committed to pilot mechanisms to improve diets through the Community Eatwell programme, can the Government provide more information on the detail of this pilot and the time frames for completion?

- The Levelling Up White Paper announced a trial of a 'Community Eatwell' programme through which GPs will be able to prescribe fruit and vegetables, as well as food related education and social support, to those suffering or at risk of diet-related illness or food insecurity.

Both the Committee's report and the Review highlighted the importance of maintaining our health, environmental and animal welfare standards in any future trade deals. The Government Food Strategy committed to publishing a statement on the animal health and production regime that will inform negotiations. This statement is yet to be published; when does the Government intend to publish this statement? Will the statement detail standards below which any food imports cannot fall?

- The Government's approach to trade is clear. We are committed to realising the benefits of greater trade, whilst upholding high environmental, food safety and animal welfare standards, and ensuring that our approach works for UK consumers, farmers and businesses.
- Trading partners wishing to access the UK market will need to objectively demonstrate that their animal health and food production regulations deliver an equivalent level of health protection in relation to our domestic standards. All agri-food products imported into the UK under existing or future free trade agreements will, as now, have to comply with our import requirements.
- We have always been clear that the UK will take its own approach to SPS, putting in place controls that work for our consumers and businesses. The UK's approach will continue to be science-driven and based on an assessment of the risks. This approach is transparent, evidence-based and supports timely decision-making.

Can the Government provide more information on the progress of the Farming Innovation Programme across its three funds (the 'industry led R&D partnerships fund', the 'farming futures R&D fund' and the 'projects to accelerate adoption fund')? What is the breakdown of how the funding will be distributed across the years of the Programme? What assessment has been made of the progress of the Programme? Has the uptake of the funding available been as expected and what outcomes have so far been produced?

- Defra has invested £70.5 million so far across 9 competitions. On the 'Industry-led Partnerships Fund', we have launched 7 competitions and committed £45.5m so far. On the 'Farming Futures Fund' we have launched 2 competitions and committed £25m to date. The next competition focusing on automation and robotics is due to launch in January and is worth £12.5m. For the Projects to Accelerate Adoption Fund, £67.5m is committed, with work currently underway on fund design and delivery in preparation for launch in Summer 2023.
- Over the summer, an update note was provided to HM Treasury on the progress and impact of the Farming Innovation Programme. It was based on the application data available from the first competitions that launched in October 2021. This note will be followed by a more detailed report by March 2024 following a detailed 'Checkpoint Review' to assess early delivery and achievements of the FIP.
- Demand for the FIP competitions has been strong. All but one of the competitions has been oversubscribed. We have offered £68m in grants across the competitions. There have been 510 eligible applications, which have sought £348,684,895 in funding. 1054 unique organisations have been on the applications.

A breakdown of the funding is included below:

FIP £m	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28	28/29	Total
Fund 1	0.00	6.89	16.98	19.41	20.93	20.20	13.10	5.23	102.74
Fund 2	0.00	0.00	5.67	12.50	21.00	27.69	19.97	13.18	100.01
Fund 3	0.00	0.10	8.83	13.67	13.67	13.67	10.73	6.84	67.50
Total	0.00	6.99	31.48	45.58	55.60	61.56	43.80	25.50	270.25
RDEL	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
CDEL	0.00	6.99	31.48	45.58	55.60	61.56	43.80	25.50	270.25

Further to recommendations from both the Committee and the Review the Government has committed to launch a Food Data Transparency Partnership to consider mandatory reporting requirements against health, sustainability and animal welfare metrics. When does the Government anticipate the Partnership will be established and what progress has been made to date? What organisations will be involved in the Partnership? What is the anticipated time frame for a decision to be reached on mandatory reporting?

- We will also launch the Food Data Transparency Partnership programme in early 2023. This will be a multi-year programme working to improve health, sustainability and animal welfare and support sustainable economic growth in the agri-food sector. The programme will be a partnership between the UK government, including DHSC, Defra, the Food Standards Agency, Food Standards Scotland, DAs and representatives from across the whole food supply chain and civil society. We plan to consult on a first set of programme outputs by the end of 2023.