



House of Commons
Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Committee

**Food Security:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Seventh Report of
2022-23**

**First Special Report of Session
2023–24**

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 14 November 2023*

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and associated public bodies

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First Special Report

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published its Sixth Report of Session 2022–23, [Food Security](#) (HC 622), on 28 July 2023. The Government response was received on 27 October 2023 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

Government response to the Committee's recommendations

The Government thanks the committee for its report, "Food Security". Food security is a multifaceted issue. The Government takes all aspects of food security very seriously. Several departments have worked together to form the response to recommendations from the committee.

Recommendation 1: *The Prime Minister should chair a dedicated food security summit later this year and this should be an annual event, in line with the Prime Minister's promise. Each annual food security summit should, as a minimum, cover the five statutory aspects of food security as set out in the Agriculture Act 2020, with a particular focus on those of most relevance at the time of the summit.* (Paragraph 12)

The Government takes food security very seriously. The Farm to Fork Summit was focussed on supporting the productivity, resilience and sustainability of our domestic food and drink sector, which is a key pillar of our food security. The Government, led by the FCDO, will be hosting an event in November focussed on global food security, another key pillar. We will consider further events as appropriate.

Recommendation 2: *A fully updated edition of the UK Food Security Report should be published on an annual basis, and a month in advance of the annual food summit. This should be accompanied by an action plan for at least the next 12 months on the steps the Government will take to improve food security. A progress report of the actions taken since the previous year's action plan should be included in the UK Food Security Report.* (Paragraph 13)

The Agriculture Act 2020 requires that the UK Food Security Report (UKFSR) is produced at least every three years. Many of the measures within the UKFSR are already published on an annual basis, via publications such as Agriculture in the UK, Family Food, the Food Statistics Pocketbook, the Family Resources Survey, and the Households Below Average Income publication. We do not have plans to make the UKFSR an annual publication. The next report will be published next year.

We already report regularly on actions we are taking to support food security. The Government Food Strategy set out a range of policy initiatives to secure food supply and boost the health, sustainability, accessibility of diets. At the Farm to Fork Summit in May, the Prime Minister set out the next steps in growing a thriving UK food system. More recently, on Back British Farming Day on 13 September, we announced a package of measures designed to cut red tape, support our farmers to invest in new technologies and

build energy resilience, and boost our vitally important abattoir network. Food security and sustainability is at the heart of what we do, and we provide regular updates on our policies and progress.

Recommendation 3: *The Government should publish the detailed response to each of the National Food Strategy Independent Review's recommendations that it has drawn up within Whitehall as part of its response to this Report.* (Paragraph 19)

The Government fully considered Henry Dimbleby's independent review when developing the Food Strategy. The Government's National Food Strategy and policies announced at this year's Farm to Fork Summit set out the Government's priorities. It is not usual to publish cross- Whitehall policy discussions, which are an important part of policy making within government.

Recommendation 4: *Given the importance of food security, and the need for policy coherence and for strong leadership on this issue, we recommend that the Cabinet Office should undertake a comprehensive review of departmental responsibilities and structures regarding food policy and its various facets, and to publish its findings within 12 months of the date of publication of this Report.* (Paragraph 23)

The Government agrees with the need for policy coherence and for strong leadership on food- related issues. Food supply is one of the UK's 13 Critical National Infrastructure sectors. Defra and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) are joint Lead Government Departments (LGDs), with Defra leading on supply and the FSA on food safety. The Food Standards Agency is a non- ministerial department sponsored by the Department of Health and Social Care. As such Defra works closely with the Cabinet Office and other LGDs ensuring food supply is fully incorporated as part of emergency preparedness, including consideration of dependencies on other sectors. There are clear accountabilities within Cabinet, and attendant Departmental responsibilities, with cross-Whitehall structures enabling coordination.

Recommendation 5: *The Government should, in conjunction with the food supply chain and others such as academics, develop a suite of food security indicators covering both inputs and outputs and set targets for them, which should in turn influence food security policy. The Government should outline its approach to this in its Response and should launch the suite of indicators within 12 months of this Report's publication.* (Paragraph 29)

The UK Food Security Report (UKFSR) contains a suite of indicators linked to the five food security themes outlined in the report. Defra is in the process of preparing the next iteration of the UKFSR which will be published by December 2024. We will consider if any changes are needed.

Recommendation 6: *It is imperative that the Government listens to the Review [in to labour in the supply chain]'s analysis and constructively considers its recommendations. In doing so, the Government must prioritise the country's long-term food security ahead of other considerations to ensure the food supply chain has access to sufficient labour, including from overseas, to allow it to realise its growth potential. Failure to do so places at risk the achievement of the Government's self-sufficiency target and broader food security. The Government must adhere to its stated six-month timeframe to respond to the Independent Review's report.* (Paragraph 35)

The Government is acutely aware of the impact that workforce shortages are having in the food supply chain and works closely with industry to monitor the situation, and help our world-leading farmers and food producers access the labour and skills they need.

The Government thanks John Shropshire for his review. We are currently considering the recommendations and intend to publish a response before the end of the year.

The response will consider how government can support the sector to access the labour it needs, alongside actions to reduce the sector's reliance on migrant labour. This includes work on automation and promoting domestic labour procurement and training.

Recommendation 7: *Given the importance of nitrogen fertiliser to UK food production and food security, the Government should set out how it will ensure its continued production in the UK, including the resumption of ammonia production to help support CO2 supplies. Looking ahead, the Government should take steps to support the increased production of nitrogen fertiliser in the UK, and in so doing examine the incentives offered by our competitors. The Government should produce an action plan addressing these points within 6 months of the publication of this Report.* (Paragraph 39)

With one brief exception in the 1970s, the UK has been a net importer of nitrogen fertiliser for around half a century. Imports have increased steadily since 1980. Typically, 70% of all imported fertiliser goods are from the EU. While CF Fertilisers' decision to permanently close the ammonia plant at its Billingham complex is disappointing, we are confident that the UK's supply of critical chemicals remains resilient. The company intends to continue its fertiliser production using imported ammonia.

We are continuing to monitor the security and stability of fertiliser and other supply chains and are working closely with colleagues across government and the devolved administrations, as well as industry figures, to do so.

We continue to encourage industry to prioritise diversification and resilience, while we work cross-government to utilise recent and upcoming trade agreements to build further resilience into supply chains.

Recommendation 8: *The Government's Land Use Framework should not be overly prescriptive, but it should make clear what the Government's priorities are and how it will help the private sector to achieve them. In particular, the LUF should address the current balance of land use between that used for pastoral and animal-feed on the one hand, and horticulture.* (Paragraph 49)

The Government will publish a Land Use Framework for England this year. The Framework will provide a long-term perspective on the land uses required to deliver growth, Net Zero, climate change adaptation, nature recovery, food security, and economic infrastructure. We have also considered the recommendations from the House of Lords Land Use in England Committee's inquiry while preparing the framework.

We intend for the Land Use Framework for England to help inform how we maximise co-benefits and support the delivery of resilient, multifunctional landscapes, which will be dependent on the local context and national needs.

As the Food Strategy notes, there is not a direct correlation between UK land area farmed and agricultural output. 57% of agricultural output in England comes from 33% of the

farmed area. We are seeking to deliver as much as we can on our limited supply of land, to meet our ambitious targets and commitments to improve the environment, deliver Net Zero and support food security.

Recommendation 9: *It is concerning that the Food Minister is not taking households' ability to access food into account when considering whether this is food security and we recommend that the Government should change its position. If it is unwilling to do, it should lay out its reasons for taking that position in its response to this report.* (Paragraph 56)

Food security is a multifaceted issue. The Government takes all aspects of food security very seriously. The UK Food Security Report identifies five food security themes - (a) global food availability; (b) UK food supply sources; (c) food supply chain resilience; (d) food security at household level; (e) food safety and consumer confidence.

We are in the process of preparing the next iteration of the UK Food Security Report which will be published by December 2024. This report will serve as an evidence base for future policy work.

We monitor food price inflation closely on an ongoing basis and have an ongoing dialogue with the sector, including at Ministerial level. While inflation remains high (12.1% in the year to September 2023), price rises have moderated from the recent high of 19.1% in March 2023 as market conditions have eased.

Defra is taking action to maintain an efficient food supply chain by mitigating against any potential burdens or frictions which could otherwise drive-up consumer food prices.

Through regular engagement, Defra will continue to work with food retailers and producers to explore the range of measures they can take to ensure the availability of affordable food. For example, by maintaining value ranges, price matching and price freezing measures.

Recommendation 10: *The Government should examine whether the totality of support to lower income households, including from central and local Government and charities, is sufficient to ensure household food security without the need to regularly use food aid organisations and publish its findings within six months of the publication of this Report.* (Paragraph 63)

The Government agrees that understanding food security is important, which is why we added internationally used food security questions to the Family Resources Survey in 2019/20. These questions remain in the survey and will allow us to track food security over time. Building on these statistics, this year we published official estimates of foodbank use for the first time.

These statistics, the broader suite of poverty data, and the wealth of academic and campaigner research that exists in this space all help to shape policy considerations.

We are committed to putting more money into the pockets of low-income households, to lift families out of all types of poverty. On 1 April 2023, we increased the National Living Wage by 9.7% to £10.42 representing an increase of over £1,600 to the gross annual earnings of a full-time worker on the National Living Wage. The Government will,

separately, spend around £276 billion through the welfare system in 2023/24 including around £124 billion on people of working age and children and around £152 billion on pensioners (GB, includes non-DWP spend, prices in 23/24 terms).

Income-related benefit rates are not made up of separate amounts for specific items of expenditure such as food or fuel charges. There is no objective way of deciding what an adequate level of benefit should be, as every person has different requirements depending on their circumstances. This Government firmly believes that claimants should be free to spend their benefit as they see fit, in line with their individual needs and preferences, and we do not consider it appropriate to introduce changes that would prioritise one area of household expenditure over the cost of other essential goods and services.

However, the Government does provide additional food-related support to lower-income children and pregnant women to help encourage a healthy diet. The Healthy Start scheme provides pregnant women and children under four and over one each with £4.25 every week, and children under one each receive £8.50 every week. Healthy Start may be used to buy fruit, vegetables, pulses, milk and infant formula and beneficiaries are also eligible for free Healthy Start Vitamins. Also, under the benefits-based criteria, 1.9 million of the most disadvantaged pupils are eligible for and claiming a free school meal. This saves families around £400 per year. Eligibility for free school meals 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 meals. This is further supported by protections that mean that no child would lose their free school meal eligibility throughout the rollout of Universal Credit.

Recommendation 11: *The Government should, as a minimum, undertake a detailed study of the existing literature on the costs and benefits of extending Free School Meals (FSM), which should as a minimum include extending FSM (a) for those children living in a Universal Credit claiming household, the impact of (i) raising the means-test to £20,000 post-tax income but before claiming benefits and (ii) removing the means-test and (b) universal provision. The Government should report its findings to the Committee within six months of the date of this report. In the meantime, the Government should urgently undertake a review with a view to increasing the household income threshold criteria for FSM from the current level of £7,400 (after tax and excluding benefits) so that more children living in poverty become eligible. To reduce the costs of extending FSM eligibility, the Government should consider the link between the FSM and the Pupil Premium for those children living in households above a certain income threshold.*
(Paragraph 66)

The Government spends over £1bn each year on free school meals. The latest published statistics show that around 2 million pupils are claiming free school meals. This equates to 23.8% of all pupils, up from 20.8% in 2021. Together with almost 1.3 million further infants supported through the Universal Infant Free School Meal (UIFSM) policy, over one third of pupils receive a free meal in school. Free meal support is also available to 90,000 disadvantaged students in further education.

We have extended free school meal (FSM) eligibility several times and to more groups of children than any other government over the past half a century. We have permanently extended eligibility to children from all groups with no recourse to public funds and

in 2018, we introduced new eligibility criteria for Universal Credit families alongside protections so that no one would lose their entitlement. These protections were recently extended to March 2025.

Extending Free School Meals eligibility to all families on Universal Credit would carry a very significant financial cost, quickly running into billions of pounds. It would result in around half of pupils becoming eligible for a free meal, with substantial knock-on impacts for the affordability of linked provision – such as entitlement for Pupil Premium. We think it is right that provision is aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged, those out of work or on the lowest incomes. We do not have plans to change the current eligibility conditions for free school meals, but will continue to keep eligibility under review to ensure that these meals are supporting those who most need them.

Recommendation 12: *We support the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food's request to undertake a Country Visit to the UK, and call for the Government to facilitate such a visit before the end of this year if Professor Fakhri is available or, if he is not, as soon as possible thereafter. As part of his Country Visit, we invite Professor Fakhri to assess whether a statutory right to food would be appropriate for England and, if so, what this might look like.* (Paragraph 68)

The UK has a standing invitation to all UN Special Procedure mandate holders. The UK's Mission to the UN in Geneva is in touch with the Special Procedures Branch of OHCHR regarding the visit request by the SR on Food, to find suitable dates.

Recommendation 13: *The UK is in the midst of an obesity crisis and is facing a situation of around 40% of the adult population being obese by 2035. Unchecked, this will have profound consequences for the NHS. Food that is high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) is often considerably cheaper per calorie than healthy food. This helps to explain the paradox that those on low-incomes are more likely to be obese. Indeed, the poorest 20% of households need to spend half their disposable income to eat the Government recommended healthy diet. The National Food Strategy identified health and food as a vital issue and provided expert analysis, yet the Government Food Strategy did not cover the topic at all or set out any actions to break the junk food cycle. Instead, it passed the buck to the Department for Health and Social Care to include in a White Paper that was first delayed, and then cancelled in favour of the as yet unpublished Major Conditions Strategy. The Government should respond to the National Food Strategy Independent Report's analysis on health and food within six months.* (Paragraph 75)

The Government fully considered Henry Dimbleby's independent review when developing the Food Strategy, taking on board several of its recommendations.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) is delivering an ambitious programme of work to create a healthier environment to help children and adults achieve and maintain a healthy weight. New regulations on out of home calorie labelling for food sold in large businesses including restaurants, cafes and takeaways came into force in April 2022¹. Regulations restricting the location of less healthy products in key selling locations in

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/calorie-labelling-in-the-out-of-home-sector>

store and online came into force in October 2022². We are also working with the food industry to make further progress on voluntary reformulation and ensure it is easier for the public to make healthier choices.

Following the launch of the Food Data Transparency Partnership as part of the Government Food Strategy, we continue to engage regularly with industry, investors and civil society, working closely with experts from across the food system to develop recommendations for a mutually agreed set of health metrics for large food and drink companies that support companies to voluntarily report in a consistent way.

On 14 August we published our Major Conditions Strategy: case for change and our strategic framework³. This strategy is intended to tackle the key drivers of ill-health in England, reduce pressure on the NHS and reduce ill-health related labour market inactivity. This includes tackling the principal lifestyle drivers of ill health, such as diet and obesity, and the strategic framework includes a commitment to continue to work with industry on reformulation to reduce sugar, salt and calories in key everyday food and drink. Our intention is to publish the Major Conditions Strategy in early 2024.

We know that healthy weight has a significant impact on people's physical health, and obesity is a major driver of ill health. However, creating healthy lives is not just a matter for Government. It also means empowering and enabling people to manage their own health and engage in healthy behaviours across their lives. We will set out more detail as to how we are empowering people in the Major Conditions Strategy.

Recommendation 14: *The Government should undertake and publish a full impact assessment of the introduction of a sugar and salt reformulation tax, providing analysis based on different, realistic values of the tax and submit this to the Committee within three months of the publication of this Report.* (Paragraph 78)

The Government does not consider that now is the right time to introduce new taxes that will push up the cost of food. The affordability of food, and individuals' access to food, is a key element of the Government's approach to tackling poverty as we manage the impact of cost-of-living pressures.

Recommendation 15: *On mandatory public reporting against a set of health metrics, this should become a requirement within the next six months. Further research on ultra-processed foods as a contributor to over consumption of higher calorie foods should commence at once and at pace, with the findings reported to the Committee within 12 months of the publication of this Report.* (Paragraph 79)

Following the launch of the Food Data Transparency Partnership, DHSC held its first Health Working Group meeting on 21 July 2023. The Group will develop recommendations for a mutually agreed set of health metrics for large food and drink companies that support companies to report in a consistent way. It will consider metrics that incentivise and more

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restricting-promotions-of-products-high-in-fat-sugar-or-salt-by-location-and-by-volume-price/restricting-promotions-of-products-high-in-fat-sugar-or-salt-by-location-and-by-volume-price-implementation-guidance>

3 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/major-conditions-strategy-case-for-change-and-our-strategic-framework/major-conditions-strategy-case-for-change-and-our-strategic-framework--2#:~:text=Alongside%20our%20call%20for%20evidence,serve%20is%20an%20exciting%20one>

effectively measure progress towards improving the healthiness of food and will enable and encourage food companies to demonstrate progress on the healthiness of their sales. Reporting will be voluntary.

On 11 July 2023 the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) published a position statement on processed foods and health⁴. SACN agrees that the association between higher consumption of ultra-processed foods and adverse health outcomes is concerning. It is unclear whether these foods are inherently unhealthy due to processing or because a large majority of processed foods are high in calories, saturated fat, salt and/or sugar. SACN made a number of recommendations to improve the available evidence on processed foods and health. Given SACN's concerns, the committee has added the topic of processed foods to its watching brief and will reconsider the issue at their Horizon scan meeting in June 2024.

The UK Eatwell Guide⁵ already shows that many foods classified as ultra-processed foods are not part of a healthy, balanced diet, and many foods classified as ultra-processed foods are captured by regulations which restrict the placement of products high in saturated fat, salt or sugar in store and online.

Recommendations 16, 17 & 18: *It is regrettable that the introduction of the ban on volume price promotions of food high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) has been further delayed to October 2025. The Government said that these delays were necessary to allow it to consider the impact on consumers and businesses in the light of the “unprecedented global economic situation”. No justification was provided as to why it will take over two years to make this assessment. The Government should set out a detailed timetable for its consideration of how the regulations restricting HFSS food volume price promotions will impact consumers and businesses. (Paragraph 83). We are not convinced that the delay to banning certain volume price promotions for HFSS food will save consumers money, given the Government’s own analysis on this matter. Of less doubt is that it will make the fight against unhealthy eating and obesity even harder. The Government Response should forecast rates of being overweight and being obese had the high fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) food volume price promotions been introduced in October 2022 compared to their planned introduction of October 2025. The regulations restricting discounts on HFSS food should be broadened to exclude all price promotions of HFSS food, to ban meal deals where any element of a meal deal has to be cooked prior to eating, and to extend the regulations’ coverage to all food shops. (Paragraph 84) We welcome the steps taken by Sainsbury’s and Tesco to voluntarily stop offering volume price promotions on HFSS food, and call on other supermarkets and smaller shops to swiftly follow their lead in the continue absence of legal restrictions to help tackle the widespread problem of unhealthy eating. We challenge all food shops to go further and to stop all promotions of HFSS food, including single purchase discounts offered to their loyalty scheme holders, and also cook-at-home meal deals such as for pizzas and convenience foods. (Paragraph 86)*

Given the current challenges caused by higher than expected global energy and food prices, following the pandemic, which have already led to an unavoidable increase in the cost of living around the world, the Government does not want to take action now that could contribute to this rise. We have therefore taken the decision to delay the implementation

4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sacn-statement-on-processed-foods-and-health>

5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide>

of the volume price promotion restrictions by a further two years, so that the volume price promotion restrictions come into force from October 2025. This delay will support businesses and allow them to focus on making food more affordable for families and make it easier to consumers to make healthier choices.

Delaying the volume price promotion restrictions to October 2025 will result in additional years for the health benefits to start to accrue. However, over the long term, we still expect these measures to have a significant impact on obesity. We believe that this is the best approach to tackle the long-term problem of obesity, while recognising the current challenges caused by higher food prices. The volume price promotion restrictions are expected to accrue health benefits of over £2 billion and provide NHS savings of £180m over a 25-year period. The Government welcomes the actions taken by some retailers who voluntarily limiting the promotion of less healthy products before the new regulations come into force.

Furthermore, the location restrictions on the placement of less healthy products in key selling locations came into force on 1 October 2022. The location restrictions are the single most impactful policy at reducing children's calorie intakes. The location restrictions are expected to accrue health benefits of over £57 billion and NHS savings of over £4 billion, over the next 25 years. With the implementation of the location restrictions in 2022, 96% of the expected health benefits of the promotions policy have begun to accrue.

Calorie labelling in large restaurants, cafes and takeaways have also been in force since April 2022. Further restrictions on the advertising of less healthy products before 9pm on TV and paid-for advertising online will come into force from October 2025.

The volume price promotion restrictions are designed to target volume price deals such as 'buy-one-get-one-free' and '3 for 2', where consumers are incentivised to purchase more than they originally intended. Studies show that volume price promotions encourage the over purchasing of less healthy products and result in a greater sales uplift in comparison to simple price reductions. Meal deals are excluded from the volume price promotion restrictions because they are targeted at adults who tend to consume all of the products during the same eating occasion rather than stockpile at home. Meal deals also aim to reduce the cost of a single meal rather than incentivise additional purchases.

Recommendation 19: *The Government should set out details—including funding levels—for the next five years for a programme of informing and educating consumers about healthy choices and how these programmes will interact with other policies to tackle obesity and unhealthy eating.* (Paragraph 90)

The Better Health campaign was launched in July 2020 to help support people look after their mental and physical health. Whether they're looking to lose weight, eat better, get more active, look after their mental wellbeing and quit smoking, by providing free tools and resources.

Better Health campaigns encourage positive changes and direct to free evidence-based apps and tools to support people to make and sustain changes to improve their health, including the NHS Weight Loss app, Couch to 5K and Active 10. Since Summer 2020, over 12 million positive actions have been taken a result of Better Health adult obesity

campaigns, which includes downloads of the NHS weight loss app, self-reported actions to make healthy lifestyle changes such as eating more healthily and increasing physical activity, and sign-ups to partnership offers on the Better Health website⁶.

We are also supporting consumers to make healthier choices through the voluntary front of pack nutritional label⁷, which communicates complex nutritional information, including sugar, salt, fat and saturated fat content, to shoppers in a way they find helpful and easy to understand, and out of home calorie labelling for food sold in large businesses including restaurants, cafes and takeaways⁸.

Alongside these measures, the Government is testing a novel, innovative approach to supporting people to live healthier lives. In partnership with the City of Wolverhampton Council, we are piloting the free digital Better Health: Rewards app⁹, which launched in February 2023. Over 28,000 residents have registered on the app. The app offers financial incentives for completing weekly physical activity challenges (in line with CMOs' guidelines¹⁰) and diet challenges (in line with the Eatwell Guide) to support people to make healthier choices. The pilot is expected to finish in October 2023, and we will evaluate its impact to inform our future approach towards tech-driven health behaviour change.

6 <https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/>

7 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/front-of-pack-nutrition-labelling-guidance>

8 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/calorie-labelling-in-the-out-of-home-sector>

9 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-backs-new-scheme-to-improve-peoples-health-in-wolverhampton>

10 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/832868/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines.pdf