A new food strategy for England

**Subtitle...**

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The environment secretary has commissioned for England “an independent review to help the government create its first National Food Strategy for 75 years. **[reference? Probably best to use website https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org]** Reflecting the current trend in Westminster for independent advisers, Henry Dimbleby has been commissioned to carry out the review. He is a co-founder of Leon restaurants, co-author of the School Food Plan, and a non-executive director at DEFRA.

The strategy

The reference to “75 years” presumably refers to the activities of the Ministry of Food during the second world war.[1] The press release claims that this is a “once in a generation opportunity to shape our food system for the future,” which ignores the 2008 report *Food Matters***,[Reference?** Cabinet Office. Food Matters Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century. London: Cabinet Office 2008.**]** launched **[by whom? the then PM Gordon Brown ]** as a strategy for the 21st century. This latter strategy got lost in the subsequent elections and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition.[2]

The purpose of the strategy is to develop an overarching scheme to tackle health and environmental issues and to inform existing bills and strategies under areas such as health, agriculture, fisheries, industry, and environment. This is important at a time when our food system needs better linking to environmental issues of production, manufacturing, and distribution.[2]

DEFRA has issued a call for evidence to inform the strategy [https://consult.defra.gov.uk/agri-food-chain-directorate/national-food-strategy-call-for-evidence/]. This is supported by a series of activities that include the establishment of assemblies, site visits, and focus groups. All of this represents potentially exciting developments as it seeks ideas to link disparate areas of food and build involvement at different levels. A review of these responses are due in summer 2020 and will result in a white paper within six months, with further evaluations to follow. An advisory group will support the process.

Policy scepticism

So what’s not to like,? Policy scepticism emerges at five levels.

Firstly, and perhaps most concerning, the industry representative Food and Drink Sector Council will be “a source of close advice and counsel.” We know from the **previous responsibility deal,** **which involved a partnership between government and the food industry,** **[what’s this? Readers won’t remember. A brief reminder would be helpful]** that such engagement with industry is fraught with danger and requires careful management to keep public health targets on the table.[3]

Secondly, There is a general problem of government ~~insouciance~~ [meaning?] **stalling on** existing commitment and plans. Questions arise as to what happens while the strategy is under development **[okay? YES ]**, with initiatives such as climate change, **existing public health commitments** **[which public health initiative? public health cuts? Could use and insert the DHSC ref Department of Health and Social Care. Prevention is better than cure: our vision to help you live well for longer. 2018. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/753688/Prevention\_is\_better\_than\_cure\_5-11.pdf]** and welfare policies such as universal credit. For example, the Department of Health and Social Care committed **[when?]** **in 2018** to setting out steps towards reducing salt consumption by Easter 2019, but **a concrete plan [or recommendations? okay? YES ]** has yet to appear.[4] **And insert DHSC ref here as well**

Thirdly the call for evidence is focused on ideas and what works at the micro policy level, with formal evidence being relegated to a supporting position. This focus on downstream initiatives runs the danger of “localism” and a belief that small business and community alternatives can outcompete big corporations and lead to reform in the food system.[7] **Community and small business initiatives are part of the solution they are in essence necessary but not sufficient to bring about population change. Such change cannot be achieved without regulation of the major companies**. [**can you explain this a bit more, please is this okay could support with the following ref** Shill J, Mavoa H, Allender S, et al. Government regulation to promote healthy food environments – a view from inside state governments*. Obesity Reviews* 2012;13:162-73 doi:10.1111/j.1467-789X.2011.00937.x.] There is little acknowledgment of the work by bodies such as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) or evaluations of community interventions. [5][6] ~~This~~ Such previous work should help set and establish the parameters for the new review; instead such evidence will be examined only after submissions have been received. Linked to this is the danger that processes—not outcomes—will act as indicators of success.[8] Overwhelming evidence indicates that regulation is the best way to effect change in the food sector **[correct? YES** ].[9]

Fourthly the [House of ? **Yes** ] Commons’ environmental audit committee highlights government complacency over the risks to food supply caused by Brexit, climate change, and the current lack of integration of food across departments. **[current lack of integration across government departments with respect to food policy? YES ]** [10] To improve public health in the UK while improving the environment will require data sharing and cross departmental working.[10] The evidence points to a need for **an audit [of what?]** **of existing food policy** activity across Whitehall departments.

Finally the government has been starving local government of the resources to prioritise prevention, with £72.5 million less spent on public health in 2019-20 than in 2018-19.[11] This is mirrored in cuts to education and welfare budgets.[12] All this despite the fact that spending on public health by local government results in returns that are four times greater than those from comparable spending on the NHS [check meaning] .[13] [needs a ref **13 is the ref to both sentences**] Yet the NHS budget is protected and prioritised while local government public health budgets are cut.[13]

Next steps

Looking to the future, it is often instructive to look to the past. In 1939, le Gross Clark and Titmuss set out the basis for national security.[14] There is much to be learnt from both world wars, when a series of up to 2000 local committees were established to feed back **to the government [correct?]** on food issues and this provided a communication channel with local communities.[15][16]

DEFRA’s call for evidence to inform a new food strategy for England is certainly worth while and the linking of public health and environment welcome. However, evidence already exists that can help shape food policy. A more urgent need is for evidence on how ongoing underfunding of services will affect delivery. **[meaning ok?]**

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Provenance: Commissioned, not externally peer reviewed.

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