

NATIONAL HEART FORUM'S REPOSE TO

DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD & RURAL AFFAIRS CONSULTATION ON: SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND FARMING: WORKING TOGETHER

18 June 2002

INTRODUCTION

1. The National Heart Forum warmly welcomed the Policy Commission's report on the Future of Farming and Food, and has been delighted that the Government has taken action on this report in setting up a working group and carrying out this further DEFRA consultation on Sustainable Food and Farming.
2. The NHF firmly believes that in order for UK food and farming to be sustainable it must have human health and well being at its heart. The end result, and most important aspect of farming and food is, and must remain, good health - obtained through the provision of nutritious food. Sustainable farming and food in the UK has the potential to have great impact on the health of the current and future UK populations.
3. Coronary heart disease (CHD) is the UK's leading single killer, claiming the lives of over 125,000 people every year and causing illness and disability for many more: currently in the UK about 1.3 million people have had a heart attack, and a further 2.1 million people have or have had angina, and 760,000 have heart failure. It is estimated that between 75-80% of CHD could be preventable by addressing the major modifiable risk factors of poor diet, inactivity and smoking.
4. Although death rates from CHD have been declining since the 1970s the social class gap in coronary heart disease is widening, the disease is increasingly associated with social disadvantage and deprivation.
5. Food is fundamental to CHD: poor nutrition is a major factor in the development of CHD and is possibly the main cause of 'general susceptibility' among lower income groups. In the UK the diet is high in fat and low in fruit and vegetables. A diet rich in fruit and vegetables has been shown to have a protective effect against heart disease, stroke and some cancers. However, it is in the consumption of these that the greatest inequalities are seen. In order to reduce the high rates of cardiovascular disease in the UK, the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy recommends a 50% increase in consumption of vegetables and carbohydrates and reductions in saturated fat and salt intake. The farming and food sectors are excellently placed to help achieve these goals, and hence lower the incidence of cardiovascular disease.
6. DEFRA must assist the food and farming sector to work with government and 'play its part' to help achieve the pledge to cut deaths from CHD by at least 40% by 2010 (Department of Health white paper on public health 1999: Saving Lives). In achieving this goal and the goal of sustainable food and farming with human health at its heart, the government will also help to prevent an epidemic of heart disease for future generations.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL HEART FORUM

7. The National Heart Forum (NHF) is the UK alliance of over 46 national organisations working to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease in the UK. Member organisations represent the medical and health services, professional bodies, consumer groups and voluntary organisations. Members also include many individual experts in cardiovascular research. Government departments have observer status.
8. The purpose of the NHF is to work with and through its members to prevent disability and death from coronary heart disease in the UK. In order to achieve this, the National Heart Forum has four main objectives:
 - To provide a forum for members for the exchange of information, ideas and initiatives on coronary heart disease prevention
 - To identify and address areas of consensus and controversy and gaps in research and policy.
 - To develop policy based on evidence and on the views of member organisations
 - To stimulate and promote effective action.
9. The NHF embraces professional, scientific and policy opinion on current issues in coronary heart disease prevention. It co-ordinates action to reduce heart disease risk through information, education, research, policy development and advocacy.
10. The NHF would be delighted to offer DEFRA further assistance in its work - drawing from the expertise and multidisciplinary background of its membership. Further information can also be obtained from our website www.heartforum.org.uk.

YOUNG@HEART

11. Young@heart is the NHF's major current initiative for a life course approach to heart disease prevention. Its aim is that every child born in the UK should be able to live to at least the age of 65 free of avoidable heart disease. Heart disease is largely preventable. Many of its origins lie in early life exposure to the major modifiable risk factors of poor diet, a sedentary lifestyle, smoking and the impact of poverty. If current knowledge about the causes and prevention of heart disease were turned into effective policy action focusing on children and young people, death and disability from coronary heart disease among people under 65 could be eliminated. The food and farming sector has a huge potential to help tackle some of these risk factors.

FARMING AND THE FOOD CHAIN

Paragraphs 4.1 to 4.10

12. The NHF supports DEFRA's proposals to consult on the Agriculture Development Scheme to help farmers get closer to consumers and improve their marketing performances and competitiveness, and strongly recommends that proposals are drawn up in close collaboration with the Department of Health and the public health groups in order that the scheme appropriately addresses public health as a key consumer concern.

13. The NHF expects the countryside, farming and the food sector to provide nutritious, affordable, adequate and accessible food. To obtain this now, and guarantee this in the future, methods and practices in these sectors must be sustainable. Central to sustainability is responsibility - including good governance and investment – to: local communities, the land, diversity (including variety) and research and development.
14. This view is also purported by consumers. UK consumers need confidence in the food supply, not just for safety but nutritional quality too. Consumers are becoming more and more health conscious as seen in the increases in organic and health food sectors. They want more healthy food, and this market should be provided by the UK food and farming sector.
15. Business and Government must support expansion of the range of healthier products. NHF's young@heart initiative recommends that the Government should work with the commercial sector to improve the availability of fruit and vegetables. Agreements should be developed between national and local government and the food industry to support the production, promotion, sale and accessibility of those foods that would constitute a balanced diet. This should include a dedicated national programme to promote the consumption of fruit and vegetables, supported by government, and should look at introducing pricing policies which aim to offer discounted prices on more nutritious foods, especially fruit and vegetables (where margins are often highest).

REFORM OF THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY

Paragraphs 4.38 to 4.45

16. The NHF agrees with DEFRA and the Policy Commission that insufficient emphasis is placed on the environment and other outcomes which people want, especially health outcomes. The NHF strongly supports the views expressed in the European Commission's communication on sustainable development (2001) that the mid-term review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in 2002 should reward healthy, high quality products and practices rather than quantity. The NHF recommends that the government support the European Commission's views.
17. The NHF also strongly urges the Government to support the European Commission's proposal that following the 2002 evaluation of the tobacco regime, it is adapted to allow for the phasing out of tobacco subsidies.
18. If the government is going to live up to its aspirations that the UK is and will continue to be a key player within the EU then it should show clear leadership in the reform of the CAP. This is essential following the BSE and foot and mouth crises.
19. The proposed new EU public health strategy requires the health impact assessment of all EU policies, including the Common Agricultural Policy. As key members of the EU, the UK through DEFRA and the Department of Health, should ensure that health impact assessment is carried out on all national and European policies.
20. DEFRA needs to undertake a stocktake of UK government has commitments on health and linked policies such as sustainable development at the international level with WHO and the EU.

HEALTHY EATING

Paragraphs 4.71-4.80

21. The key goal of sustainable food and farming must be to provide nutritious, affordable, and accessible food. In order to achieve this the NHF strongly recommends that Government implement a comprehensive national nutrition strategy. DEFRA should work closely with the Department of Health to draw up and implement a national nutrition strategy.

Fruit and vegetables

22. As stated in the NHS Plan increasing fruit and vegetable consumption can considerably help reduce the risk of cancer and heart disease. Currently in the UK average consumption is only two thirds of what it should be. Increasing levels of consumption of fruit and vegetables are goals in both Saving Lives and the NHS Plan. DEFRA is in an ideal position to both support the farming industry and to increase these levels of consumption.

23. Twenty per cent of the UK population consume none, or only one piece of fruit or portion of vegetables each day. The promotion of fruit and vegetables must therefore be a major food and health goal for the UK.

24. The food and farming sectors should:

- Work with the Department of Health to help roll out the piloted National School Fruit Scheme and to extend it from 4-6 year olds to all children of school age.
- Become key players in local strategic partnerships (LSPs) in drawing up local food strategies to increase access to shops and affordable healthy foods in collaboration with Local Authorities, Strategic Health Authorities and the voluntary sector.
- Increase the investment in social marketing and synchronise supply and demand of the "5 a day message". Each year the UK spends about 0.5 million pounds on the marketing of fruit and vegetables compared to the whole UK food marketing budget of 0.75 billion pounds.

25. The UK currently has an annual deficit of £7 billion due to imports of fruit and vegetables. This has major economic implications for the UK. There is a huge potential to turn a health crisis into a commercial opportunity. Food and farming policy should be directed towards the increase and support of planting, growing and consumption of fruit and vegetables - to raise supply and demand. Import standards should also be raised.

Fat, salt and sugar

26. As set out in the NHS Plan, the government pledges to work with the food industry to improve the overall diet. DEFRA is well placed to assist the farming and food sector to play a central role in improving the quality of processed and pre-prepared foods - in particular to reduce the levels of salt, sugar and saturated fats.

27. The food and farming sector must continue the work started by the Food Standards Agency and some retailers such as the Co-op to review food labelling with a goal of comprehensive, easy to read and understand information on fat, calories and salt levels on the front of all food packets and full nutritional information on the back.

28. The Government should consider introducing controls, which may include legislation and differential taxation, to control excessive and unfair advertising and promotion of foods high in fat, salt and sugar to children.

Children and young people

29. A child's diet has an important influence on his or her growth and development and on the risk of chronic disease - including coronary heart disease - in later life. Fetal under-nutrition, as a result of the mother's inadequate diet, may lead to small size and altered body proportions at birth and increase susceptibility to later coronary heart disease. Poor nutrition in girls, particularly in adolescence, increases their likelihood of having low birth-weight babies and so the risk is carried from one generation to the next. Better nutrition in both mothers and children can improve long term health.
30. A healthy balanced diet (based on the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy (COMA) guidelines) should provide at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. Total fat should not contribute more than 35% of total dietary energy and salt should not exceed 6g per day. The status of British children's diets and the impact of poor nutrition on their health is a cause for serious concern. Data from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey showed that British children are eating less than half the recommended amounts of fruit and vegetables to protect their health. Iron intake among teenagers (which is associated with poor cognitive function) was below recommended levels. One in four teenage girls was receiving less than the minimum recommended levels of calcium at the critical age for bone mass development. Both iron deficiency and calcium deficiency have important health consequences for both this generation of young people and the next. Many young people depend for a significant proportion of their total intake of energy on three foods - chips, cakes and biscuits - at the expense of more nutritious options.

Food in schools

31. It is estimated that 30% of children do not go home to a cooked meal. School meals are for many children the only substantial meal of the day. The potential for school meals to build health in children cannot be underestimated. Improving the nutritional quality of school meals will support joined-up government policy to improve children's health and education, tackle the burden of chronic disease, and reduce inequalities. The farming and food sector has great potential to influence the nutritional quality of school meals through the reduction of fat, salt and sugar. The NHF recommends that DEFRA ensure that the food industry supports and encourages the improvement of the nutritional quality of school meals.
32. The food industry should work with schools to review codes of practice to ensure responsible promotional activities of food manufacturers and retailers in schools.
33. The NHF urges the government to introduce minimum national standards for school meal providers for both the quality and expenditure on school meals. Food producers and providers should also be encouraged to support this proposal which could increase demand.
34. Food and farming representatives should work with the public sector to introduce pricing policies in school canteens which discount the healthier options.

Children's knowledge and attitudes about food

35. There is a widely supported theory that food preference and habits are developed and established in childhood. Children's awareness of the social and cultural factors around food develops from as young as 2 and 3 years.

36. A high proportion of advertising during children's television programming is for foods high in salt, fat and sugar. DEFRA should encourage the food industry to develop a responsible attitude towards children and food advertising, and the government to introduce tighter controls in this area. The ban of advertising during children's television programming in Sweden is an excellent example of good practice.
37. Food culture could be changed by improving the retailing and marketing of food to children, and what children learn about food and nutrition.
38. There has also been a decline in cooking skills in schools. The food sector should work with schools to encourage and develop nutrition, cooking and practical food skills within broader parenting / life skills learning, for example Waitrose sponsoring a Cooking Bus with the Royal Society of Arts. The government should make this a statutory part of the national curriculum in PSHE and citizenship classes.

Food Poverty

39. A major obstacle to achieving a healthy diet is food poverty. This occurs when access to a healthy diet is hindered through lack of availability and affordability. Although low income and where a person lives are key factors in food poverty, the farming and food industry has a huge capacity to work with other sectors to eliminate this through increasing access to nutritious food and making it more affordable.
40. The farming and food industry should work with national and local government to develop a concordat(s) to support the production, promotion, sale and accessibility of those foods that would constitute a healthy diet. (see para 14) This should include a dedicated programme to promote the consumption of fruit and vegetables and should look at introducing pricing policies which aim to 'discount' healthier foods, especially fruit and vegetables (where margins are often highest). It could also include measures to assist in the development of farmers' markets and projects to develop cooking skills. Food plans should be included in local strategic partnership strategies and planning.
41. Food poverty does not only affect those living in towns, but also those in rural areas where access to shops and healthy food can be severely limited. The Commission should insist that any measures to address food poverty apply equally to rural and urban poverty.