



NATIONAL  
HEART  
FORUM

**NATIONAL HEART FORUM RESPONSE TO  
THE POLICY COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF FARMING AND FOOD'S  
CONSULTATION:  
FARMING AND FOOD - THE FUTURE**

November 2001

**SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- a) UK food and farming must have human health and well being at its heart.
- b) The countryside, farming and the food sector should provide nutritious, affordable, adequate and accessible food.
- c) Concordats should be developed to support the production, promotion, sale and accessibility of those foods that would constitute a healthy diet.
- d) There should be a dedicated programme to promote the consumption of fruit and vegetables.
- e) Food plans should be included in local strategic partnership strategies and planning.
- f) Measures to address food poverty should apply equally to rural and urban poverty.
- g) The promotion of fruit and vegetables must be a major food and health goal for the UK.
- h) Increase and support the planting and growing and consumption of fruit and vegetables - to raise supply and demand.
- i) Food labelling should be reviewed.
- j) Excessive advertising and promotion of foods high in fat, salt and sugar to children should be controlled.
- k) Minimum national standards for school meal providers for both the quality and expenditure on the meals should be introduced.
- l) Nutrition, cooking and practical food skills should be made a statutory part of the national curriculum in PSHE and citizenship classes.
- m) Access to the countryside is essential for health and well being; this must be maintained, supported and encouraged.
- n) The Policy Commission should pursue bilateral links with Sweden who have successfully implemented a national strategy with medium and long term goals.

*In particular the food industry and farming sector should:*

- a) Work with the Department of Health to help roll out the piloted National School Fruit Scheme. It should be extended from 4-6 year olds to all children of school age.
- b) 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 LAs, Strategic HAs and the voluntary sector.
- c) Increase the investment in social marketing and synchronise supply and demand of the "Five fruit and vegetables a day" message.
- d) Support and encourage the improvement of the nutritional quality of school meals.
- e) Work with schools to review codes of practice to ensure responsible promotional activities of food manufacturers and retailers in schools.
- f) Develop a responsible attitude towards children and food advertising. The government should introduce tighter controls in this area.

## INTRODUCTION

1. The National Heart Forum (NHF) congratulates the government on establishing the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food and welcomes the opportunity to respond to its consultation on *Farming and food - the future*.
2. **UK food and farming 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. The future of 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 140,000 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.**
4. Food is fundamental to CHD: poor nutrition is a major factor in the development of CHD. 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 and some cancers. 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 CHD incidence.
5. The Policy Commission must urge 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*).

## ABOUT THE NATIONAL HEART FORUM

6. The National Heart Forum (NHF) is the UK alliance of over 40 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.
7. 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:
  - a) To provide a forum for members for the exchange of information, ideas and initiatives on coronary heart disease prevention
  - b) To identify and address areas of consensus and controversy
  - c) To develop policy based on evidence and on the views of member organisations
  - d) To stimulate and promote effective action.
8. 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.

9. **The NHF would be delighted to offer the Policy Commission 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](http://www.heartforum.org.uk).**

### **Young@heart**

10. Young@heart is the NHF's major new 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.

### **Vision and strategic direction for food and farming in the UK**

11. In this document we seek to set out our comments on, and recommendations for, the future of food and farming in the UK. We do so in the context of the following vision from the public health perspective. UK food and farming policy should:
- a) Have as its central goal the promotion of human health and well being.
  - b) Recognise the current health crises: the epidemic of preventable non-communicable diseases, like heart disease and cancer.
  - c) Address issues of food poverty and modern malnutrition that cause huge damage to the health prospects of children and young people.
  - d) Ensure that all those involved in the food supply chain have a key role to play at a population level - all major improvements in public health have been achieved through a population approach.
  - e) Set clear national nutritional goals and targets focused at population (national and international) and individual levels.
  - f) Consider a nutritious food supply as an investment for health. A cheap food policy has high extrinsic costs for the health of the population and the consequential economic impact on the nation.
  - g) Invest in developing a new food culture on food and health with sophisticated social marketing strategies.
  - h) Consider common solutions to the various crises of farming, rural poverty, environment, tourism etc. Here public health offers some clear strategic directions.

### **WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT OF THE COUNTRYSIDE, FARMING AND THE FOOD SECTOR?**

12. **The NHF expect 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.**
13. This view is also supported 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, this market should be provided by the UK food and farming sector.

14. The following recommendations would help the farming and food sector fulfil NHF and consumer expectations.
15. In line with young@heart (see above), children and young people must be seen as a priority consumer group. **The NHF recommends that the Commission considers all its recommendations to government in the light of the impact these will have on the health and well-being of children and young people.**

### **Food and nutrition**

16. Food is fundamental to all human health. The government's white paper on public health *Saving Lives* asserts the fundamental role of diet throughout life, and the NHS plan reinforces this clearly stating the health benefits of nutritious food. The farming industry has a huge influence on the provision and supply of nutritious food. **The NHF urges that human health be given the highest priority in the Commission's recommendations to Government.**
17. **The NHF has long been calling for a national comprehensive nutrition strategy with clear goal and targets.** We believe this is fundamental to steering the strategic direction of the farming and food sectors who have a lot to gain from such a strategy, for example through increased demand for fruit and vegetables, and we urge them to support this call.
18. However, the NHF is concerned that current UK food and health policy focuses exclusively on food safety and ignores the role of nutrition and diet in health. But for each premature death from food poisoning there are an estimated 400 deaths from diet related cardiovascular disease. **We believe that the Policy Commission has an excellent opportunity to address this imbalance within farming and food policy and urge the Commission to support recommendations which protect UK populations from their biggest killers - heart disease and cancer.**

### **Food Poverty**

19. 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.
20. **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. 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.**

21. 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.**

### **Obesity**

22. In February this year the National Audit Office published its report *Tackling Obesity in England*, which found that obesity had trebled over the last five years - nearly two thirds of men and over half of all women are overweight or obese. The NAO estimate this is costing the NHS £0.5 billion a year and in excess of £2 billion to the wider economy. The NAO attributes this rise in obesity to an increasingly energy-dense diet and a rise in sedentary behaviour.
23. The NAO report recommended that a high priority must be given to implementing nutritional initiatives included in the NHS Plan to improve the balance of the diet in schools and the general public.
24. The government is expected to respond to the NAO report on obesity in the near future. **The Policy Commission might be able to advise the Government on some aspects of its response.**

### **Fruit and vegetables**

25. 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 is implicit in both *Saving Lives* and the NHS Plan. **The Commission is in an ideal position to recommend to government ways in which they and the farming industry can help increase these levels of consumption.**
26. 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.**
27. **The food and farming sector should:**
- a) 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.
  - b) 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 LAs, Strategic HAs and the voluntary sector.
  - c) Develop concordat(s) between national and local government and the food industry to support the production, promotion, sale and accessibility of those foods that would constitute a healthy diet. 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).
  - d) Increase the investment in social marketing and synchronise supply and demand of the "Five 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.

28. 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 demand and supply. Import standards should also be raised.**

### **Fat, salt and sugar**

29. As set out in the NHS Plan, the government pledges to work with the food industry to improve the overall diet. The Commission is well placed to insist that the farming and food sector 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.
30. The Commission should recommend that 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.**
31. The Commission should also recommend **the government introduce 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**

32. 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 mothers 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.
33. 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

34. 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 the Commission ensure that the food industry supports and encourages the improvement of the nutritional quality of school meals.**
35. **The food industry should work with schools to review codes of practice to ensure responsible promotional activities of food manufacturers and retailers in schools.**
36. The NHF urges the Commission to **encourage 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.
37. 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

38. 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 two and three years of age.
39. A high proportion of advertising during children's television programming is for foods high in salt, fat and sugar. **The Policy Commission should urge 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 to children in Sweden is an excellent example of good practice.**
40. **Food culture could be changed by improving the manufacturing, retailing and marketing of food to children, and what children learn about food and nutrition.**
41. 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. The Commission should urge the government to make this a statutory part of the national curriculum in PSHE and citizenship classes.**

## International dimensions

42. The NHF agrees with 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 Policy Commission urge the government to support the European Commission's views.**

43. **The NHF also strongly urges the Commission to insist that the Government 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.**
44. 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.
45. 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 should ensure that health impact assessment is carried out on all national and European policies.
46. **The Commission needs to undertake a stocktake of what the UK government has committed to on health and linked policies such as sustainable development** at the international level with WHO and the EU.

### **Sustainable development and the countryside**

47. Sustainable development should and must be the basis for farming and food. As set out in *A better quality of life*, the UK's strategy for sustainable development - is about a healthy environment and healthy communities. Therefore it is imperative that health is integral to farming and food.
48. **The NHF urges the Policy Commission to put forward recommendations as outlined in this document for action now to achieve long term gain.** If nothing is done now to prevent CHD risk factors - like poor nutrition - being established in childhood we will be fuelling a public health time-bomb for our future generations. The prevalence of CHD could explode as our children increasingly eat too many fatty, sugary and salty foods and too few fruit and vegetables. There is much that can be done in the short term which can have long term gain.
49. It is essential that recommendations are not used as or seen to be quick fixes, but are viewed as essential investments in sustaining human health as well as sustainable food and farming policies.
50. **Access to the countryside is essential for health and well being, this must be maintained, supported and encouraged.** There is increasing evidence to show the benefits of physical activity such as walking and cycling to health.
51. The effects of transport and pollution on the environment must also be considered by the Commission. A reduction in 'food miles' would have significant environmental benefits. There are huge opportunities for farmers and growers to market their own produce and sell them directly to consumers via farmers markets and box schemes therefore shortening the supply chains and also distance travelled by produce.



### **Future infrastructures and follow up activity**

52. **The NHF recommends that more investment in independent research and development in food and farming is needed.** Currently most of this is being carried out and funded by the food industry.
53. The NHF is keen to know what the outcome of the Commission's report to the Government will be. Will this result in green and white papers?
54. It is crucial that if past mistakes are not to be repeated the Government must ensure cross-governmental and cross-sectoral working to develop and implement policy. How does the Policy Commission see this being achieved?
55. Will the Policy Commission describe in its report how it will feed into the discussions on CAP reform in 2002 and the Common Spending Review next March?
56. Finally, the NHF would recommend the Commission pursue bilateral links with Sweden which has successfully implemented a national strategy with medium and long term goals.