



The Food  
Foundation

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM ENGLAND'S National Food Strategy

National  
Food Strategy  
Independent Review

**THE  
PLAN.**

In July 2021 a National Food Strategy for England was published. It is the most comprehensive review of the country's food system to date. The Strategy, which is an Independent Review, considers the environmental, health, economic and social impacts of our food system, providing policy recommendations for how we can create a food system that works for everyone.

This document lays out the processes and main ingredients that were called on by the Independent Reviewer and his team to develop a National Food Strategy for England. It draws out some of the key successes and lessons learnt during the process so that policymakers in other countries may learn from the UK's experience.

# GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP OF THE PROCESS



**1** The National Food Strategy was initiated in the UK as an Independent Review. This is an approach which is used widely in policy development in the UK and involves the Government asking a specific individual with expertise and convening power on the topic at hand, to review the topic and provide advice to Government on what should be done about it. The relevant Government department provides resources, including human resources, needed to conduct the review, but its publication is not subjected to the same approval processes as a Government publication. The Independent Reviewer is not usually paid by Government. By its very nature, an Independent Reviewer can say things which Government cannot easily say and make recommendations from an expert, independent position which would be difficult politically for a Government to propose. The independent nature of the review means that the team working on it within the civil service is to a large extent insulated from the wider workings of their department for the duration of the process. Independent reviews are usually published in the name of the Independent Reviewer.

**2** In June 2019, Henry Dimbleby was asked by the Secretary of State for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to develop a 'National Food Strategy' in the form of an independent review. Henry Dimbleby was at the time and continued to be throughout the process of conducting the independent review, a non-executive board member of DEFRA.

Government non-executives provide advice and bring

an external perspective to the business of Government departments. They do not have decision-making powers, but this role has meant that Henry has been able to maintain a close view of the areas of DEFRA's responsibility and allowed him close access to senior Government decision-makers. Henry's background is relevant to his role as Independent Reviewer. Specifically, he developed the School Food Plan in 2016 which led to the development of School Food Standards as well as the Government's decision to make school meals free for all children during their first three years of primary school. Henry also co-founded a restaurant chain which focused on developing healthy fast food. Henry's background working with UK Government, as a management consultant specialising in strategy, and his experience of the commercial sector, put him in a strong position to take on the review.

**3** The *Terms of Reference* were published by the Government and these determined the scope of the review. They explain that the purpose of the review is to develop a Strategy designed to ensure the food system delivers a set of outcomes covering public health, environmental protection (including both biodiversity and climate change), as well as considering national food security and the role of the food industry in supporting jobs and economic growth. Its scope was judged to be for England given that many of the policy areas within scope were devolved to Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. When the Terms of Reference were published,

## GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP OF THE PROCESS (continued)

the Government committed to publish a White Paper for consultation within six months of the publication of the Independent Review. White Papers are policy documents produced by the Government that set out their proposals for future legislation.

**4** There are some advantages and disadvantages to developing a strategy through the process of an Independent Review. The key advantage includes the independent nature of the process. This means the whole approach to the review can be determined by the Independent Reviewer and Government has no control over this. The Independent Reviewer can raise funds outside of Government to support the review so even budgetary restrictions imposed by Government can

be worked around. Henry took full advantage of this independent position which has been a real strength in the process of developing the Strategy. The disadvantages mean that while the Strategy may be the best possible blue-print for improving the food system, the Government may only decide to adopt a small sub-set of the recommendations. This poses real risks to the integrity of the Strategy's implementation and its potential impact. It also means that effort to encourage the adoption of the Strategy's recommendation becomes a vital part of the process. Of utmost importance is ensuring the Strategy has, once published, a top-level political sponsor to ensure its passage through Government is smooth and to ensure that the recommendations cannot be ignored.



# STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

**1** Henry Dimbleby was, from the start, extremely committed to hearing as many diverse views about food system problems and solutions. This process was about learning how the system worked as well as hearing from a diversity of people working within it. This engagement was facilitated by several processes:

- a. An Advisory Group was formed that brought together a diverse group of actors in the food system: farmers, businesses, policy makers, academic experts and citizens.
- b. A regular meeting was set up with the Devolved Administrations (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) to allow constructive exchange of ideas and discuss areas of policy that would have implications for the whole of the United Kingdom.
- c. A group of Permanent Secretaries (the top civil servants) was formed from Ministries with responsibilities which touched on the food system. This created a mechanism for Henry to discuss emerging ideas and seek feedback. In parallel, there was continued engagement with civil servants across Government on specific areas of food policy.
- d. Working with existing structures and forums, such as the Food and Drink Sector Council, to hear ideas from business leaders.
- e. Speaking at numerous public events and visiting all corners of the country to see first-hand the food system at work and meet people who would otherwise have little opportunity to speak with decision-makers.

**2** In addition to the consultation which happened on an ongoing basis over almost three years, in Autumn 2019, DEFRA launched a Call for Evidence inviting anyone to submit their views on what could be done to orient the food system to deliver improved health and environmental outcomes. 1,976 submissions were made; these formed a vital part of the content that was considered as the Strategy was developed.

**3** The process of engagement helped to involve a huge network of people in the development of the Strategy. This helped to build demand for an ambitious set of recommendations and established a network of people from various constituent groups who are supportive of its aims. It is hoped that this will help to ensure that groups of people coalesce around the recommendations in the period after publication. However, the primary purpose of this engagement was to listen and develop insight into how the system was working, and why it is delivering the problematic outcomes which we now see. These conversations built an evidence base and depth of understanding among the Strategy team which positioned them well to be able to support Henry when drafting the Strategy itself.



# CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

**1** In addition to involving stakeholders, the process of the Strategy's development placed a major emphasis on listening to citizens from different backgrounds to help understand their values around food, their own aspirations for the food system, and their lived experience of it. Four major approaches were used for involving citizens, these were:

- a. A series of regional public dialogues with citizens from a mix of demographic groups. Citizens were invited to take part in a three-step process which created space for their views to surface. The first of these involved face to face meetings (before the pandemic had struck) with 180 citizens in five regions. These sessions involved diving into specific challenge areas of the food system to build a common understanding of the facts about it. The second step involved online workshops where specific challenge areas were discussed to identify citizens' views on a range of different approaches to tackling these problems. The dialogues are described in detail [here](#).
- b. The Food Foundation raised funds to consult secondary school children on the Strategy. This involved 24 workshops with 426 young people in

schools and youth groups discussing specific food system themes, followed by a weekend of online workshops to start to develop solutions. A **report** was then drafted outlining the key recommendations from the young people, which fed into the final Strategy.

- c. Focus groups were set up to test specific recommendations with groups of the public who had different voting behaviours. Polling was also conducted to test some of the views emerging from the focus groups to understand the extent to which these views were held by a representative sample of the population. The focus groups and polling provided vital insight in the final stages of the Strategy development, and were used to test framing, and build confidence that the recommendations would be well received by the media and the public.

**2** The engagement with citizens was critical to the success of the process. It helped to ensure that the team working on the strategy were connected with the reality of people's lives. This is often a rare achievement in policy development which often occurs behind closed doors in the corridors of power. It undoubtedly helped to ensure that the Strategy spoke to a wide audience (even though its principle audience is policy makers).



# DIAGNOSIS OF THE PROBLEM

**1** There were several different steps which were followed to understand better the problems which we were trying to fix. Throughout this process Henry was keen to challenge perceived wisdom and ensure the best and latest evidence was understood.

- a. There was a process, which lasted at least a year, of analysing data on how the food system worked and how and where its impacts manifested. This involved detailed analysis of data sets e.g., profit pool analysis, to understand where profits were being made in the system, and segmentation analysis of national dietary data, to understand which groups of the population had similar dietary characteristics. This process also involved reviewing the evidence submitted from the Call for Evidence and extensive reading of the literature from a wide range of disciplines.
- b. Throughout the process Henry sought out the world's best experts on specific areas of interest, controversy or debate. He spoke to these experts direct, often connecting them for the first time so they could direct questions to one another and identify knowledge gaps or alternative theories.
- c. The team was made up of a mixture of civil servants and external consultants and advisers. This was deliberate, to draw in a range of skills. All Strategy team members were expected to explore the evidence in depth, critically appraise it and understand its limitations. They were also expected to help formulate insights which draw on the evidence which would help inform the overall diagnosis and help it to be communicated powerfully. Team members also brought their own networks and connections, helping to ensure that engagement covered all key stakeholder groups.

**2** There were inevitably gaps in evidence which could not be overcome. Key gaps on the diet shift work were as follows:

- a. A comprehensive account of the diet impacts on our health. The Global Burden of disease excludes some important diseases (e.g. the muscular skeletal impacts on high BMI, or tooth decay).
- b. The cost of diet related disease to the NHS is also extremely difficult to comprehensively account for, both now and for the purposes of forecasting.
- c. Good quality data on the nutritional quality of food eaten out of the home.

**3** The process of distilling insights which enlighten people as well as help to galvanise their commitment to act is not easy. Multiple approaches were tested until the Strategy team found insights that were genuinely valuable and would help to build support for action. The task was not to simply communicate the evidence but communicate it in a way which changed the way people thought about the problem and in doing so triggered them to take action. Henry drew heavily on work by Donella Meadows on systems thinking which characterises systems and ways of intervening in them. This provided a useful framing for thinking about the food system. The diagnosis presented in the Strategy was based on describing two feedback loops: one reinforcing feedback loop named the 'Junk Food Cycle' and one missing feedback loop named the 'Invisibility of Nature'.



# IDENTIFYING RECOMMENDATIONS

**1** The Terms of Reference for the review defined its scope. However, the boundaries of the food system are not clear cut. For example, household incomes affect their access to healthy food. While the food system can affect the relative cost of different food items, it cannot make up for insufficient income. Making recommendations on the welfare system in the UK was judged to be out of scope.

**2** The diagnosis provided the basis for reviewing a large number of recommendations drawn from an analysis of previous reports and from those submitted through the Call For Evidence. This long-list was scrutinised, and stress tested for alignment with the diagnosis, magnitude of potential impact, and feasibility of “immediate” implementation (within the next 2-3 years). As this list was refined, specific analysis was commissioned on recommendations which required detailed cost and impact modelling.

**3** The specific recommendations were set within an agenda for long term change, articulated by four dietary shifts to be achieved over the next decade. One of the recommendations was specifically aimed at creating institutional arrangements which would embed long-term system change within the business of Government. This included recommending a Food Bill be introduced to parliament which would embed reporting on progress in delivery of the strategy within a non-ministerial department (The Food Standards Agency).

**4** Through the process of developing recommendations, the Strategy team were aware that it would be very easy to develop numerous recommendations but that this would risk only a small selection of them being implemented. The team deliberately tried to make the recommendations few in number (a total of 14) and to be extremely specific about their cost, who should implement them and the mechanism of Government which should be used. The judgement was that this would heighten the chances of adoption.



# DELIVERING IMPACT

**1** The *National Food Strategy* had its own website which provided a platform for a range of communications products: the report itself (released in two parts), a film, a large evidence pack of key data visuals, and event recordings. The report itself received widespread media coverage, which was supported by a PR agency. The report was also discussed in an online launch which gave a large audience the chance to ask questions directly to Henry.

**2** A cross party group of Parliamentarians formed an All Party Parliamentary Group. They convened five

times in the run up to publication of the Strategy in order to consider areas which were within scope. Their events can be viewed [here](#). It is expected that they will form an important group who will support debate about the Strategy in the run up to publication of the White Paper and beyond.

**3** Throughout the process, Henry and the team drew on a wide range of experience from around the world, reviewing strategies which had been drafted by other countries, and policies which had been tested in a range of contexts.

**At the time of publication, the Government had not yet published the White Paper response, though it is due in the coming months.**







# The Food Foundation

International House, 6 Canterbury Crescent, Brixton, London SW9 7QD

[foodfoundation.org.uk](http://foodfoundation.org.uk) | +44(0)20 3086 9953 | [@Food\\_Foundation](https://www.instagram.com/Food_Foundation)

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