

## Birmingham Food Council submission to the Call for Evidence National Food Strategy

### I Our three recommendations

We make three recommendations to inform the National Food Strategy:

- 1 The Government sets up a **UK Food Security Institute**, or similar, ideally led by senior members of the MoD or the intelligence community with specific remits regarding food risk and resilience.<sup>1</sup>
- 2 The Government sets up a **new statutory funding body**, similar to the Arts Council or Sports England. Its purpose would be to enable **engaging, informed debate** about the food security challenges we're facing *and* to generate a myriad of unexplored and as yet unimagined **ideas for different actual and potential food systems**,<sup>2</sup>
- 3 The Government sets up a **Public Inquiry led by a senior Judge**. Its concern would be to advise on the authority body we need to ensure food system players **act ethically** in the protection, promotion and maintenance of sufficient supplies of safe, nutritious food for the UK population.<sup>3</sup>



### 2 Government responsibility

The United Nations (UN) puts the responsibility for food security firmly on governments: *Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for a healthy life . . . Each nation must adopt a strategy consistent with its resources and capacities to achieve its individual goals and, at the same time, cooperate regionally and internationally in order to organize collective solutions to global issues of food security.*<sup>4</sup>

In 2015, the UK Government committed to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>5</sup> It has, however, been criticised for not doing enough to achieve these goals, including combatting hunger and food security at home.<sup>6</sup>

**It's important the National Food Strategy states the Government has ultimate responsibility** for the food security for every citizen in the UK.

The food we eat has a global footprint, brought to us via a complex network of operations,<sup>7,8</sup> nearly all driven by a commercial imperative and highly responsive, as are most households, to just-in-time (JIT) logistics. Besides any other due consideration, they are not equipped to take on the responsibility, individually or collectively, for supply chain capacity and capability to deliver food security for everyone in the UK.

<sup>1</sup> A UK Food Security Institute: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/13/national-food-strategy-16-a-uk-food-security-institute/>

<sup>2</sup> A statutory funding body: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/18/national-food-strategy-17-a-statutory-funding-body/>

<sup>3</sup> A Public Inquiry led by a senior Judge: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/22/national-food-strategy-20-an-inquiry-led-by-a-senior-judge/>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Food and Agriculture (FAO) 1996 Rome Declaration: <http://www.fao.org/3/w3613e/w3613e00.htm>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2018) <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environmental-audit-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/sustainable-development-goals-follow-up-17-19/>

<sup>7</sup> A simplified fresh produce supply chain map: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/09/national-food-strategy-7-a-simplified-fresh-produce-supply-chain-map/>

<sup>8</sup> Supply chain permutations are endless: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/09/national-food-strategy-8-supply-chain-permutations-are-endless/>

### 3 Responding to existing and future food security risks

Our first recommendation is about a **Food Security Institute** tasked with assessing food system risk and resilience.<sup>9</sup>

The global competition for safe, nutritious food is already intense. It can only increase,<sup>10</sup> owing *inter alia* to climate change, resource depletion, population pressures and increasingly volatile geopolitics,<sup>11,12</sup> and the pernicious and growing influence of drug-food companies which presents specific risks to planetary as well as human health.<sup>13</sup>

For the last few decades, the UK food system has been reasonably robust in the face of occasional failures in the system. The failures we've had recently, however, illustrate its fragility.<sup>14</sup>

As well as our grave concerns about the reliability of national responses to actual and potential risks, the capacity and capability of local responses to existing food insecurity are inadequate,<sup>15</sup> as is local risk and resilience planning for sudden food system shocks with associated shortages and scarcities occurring locally.<sup>16,17,18</sup>

No-one throughout human history has any experience of the threats posed by climate change, resource depletion, population pressures and associated geopolitics. Our inability to respond is compounded by a widespread gap in the knowledge or understanding about the current food supply system between farm gate and retail outlet, even among many socio-political decision-makers,<sup>19,20</sup> let alone any possible future systems.

New ideas, new ways of thinking, new systems are all required about our current situation, as well as for future scenarios. Hence our second recommendation for a **new funding body** to contribute to meeting this gap.<sup>21</sup>

### 4 Ethical decision-making

Our current way of responding to many ethical issues about and within the food system is ad hoc and fragmentary.

Our intuitions about what's right or wrong isn't appropriate for the complexity of today's food system.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the ethical principles applied within, for example, the medical profession are necessary but unlikely to be sufficient in most if not all food sector contexts.<sup>23</sup>

There is therefore a need for a qualitatively different kind of authority for food system ethics.

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<sup>9</sup> A UK Food Security Institute: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/13/national-food-strategy-16-a-uk-food-security-institute/>

<sup>10</sup> The global competition for safe, nutritious food: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/07/national-food-strategy-3-the-global-competition-for-safe-nutritious-food/>

<sup>11</sup> Global risks to UK food supplies: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/07/national-food-strategy-5-global-risks-to-uk-food-supplies/>

<sup>12</sup> UK resilience to global risks to food supplies: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/07/national-food-strategy-6-uk-resilience-to-global-risks-to-food-supplies/>

<sup>13</sup> Drug foods and their specific risks to the food supply system: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/13/national-food-strategy-15-drug-foods-and-their-specific-risks-to-the-food-supply-system/>

<sup>14</sup> As for example, in three scenarios described here: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/09/national-food-strategy-9-two-scenarios-and-their-risks-to-the-supply-chain/>

<sup>15</sup> City level responses to food insecurity: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/11/national-food-strategy-11-city-level-responses-to-food-insecurity/>

<sup>16</sup> Local risk and resilience: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/12/national-food-strategy-12-local-risk-and-resilience/>

<sup>17</sup> We are, however, uncertain whether or not there is any value in having a local food strategy, our reasoning outlined here: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/13/national-food-strategy-13-a-local-level-strategy/>

<sup>18</sup> Risk categorisation: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/13/national-food-strategy-14-risk-categorisation/>

<sup>19</sup> Briefing note: [https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Briefing\\_RiskResilience\\_Spring-2019-.pdf](https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Briefing_RiskResilience_Spring-2019-.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> The space between farm gate and food outlet: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/10/national-food-strategy-10-the-space-between-farm-gate-and-food-outlet/>

<sup>21</sup> A statutory funding body: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/18/national-food-strategy-17-a-statutory-funding-body/>

<sup>22</sup> The price of plums and other social exchanges: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/20/national-food-strategy-18-the-price-of-plums-and-other-social-exchanges/>

<sup>23</sup> Rights, responsibilities, principles and an elephant [in the room]: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/20/national-food-strategy-19-rights-responsibilities-principles-and-an-elephant/>

Hence our third recommendation for the Government to set up a **Public Inquiry** to advise on the structure of a body to inform, engage and independently examine the ethics of decision-making by all players within the food system.<sup>24</sup>

## 5 About us and how we drew up this submission

The Birmingham Food Council was incorporated as a CIC in March 2014 with initial funding from Birmingham Public Health (BPH). It is independent from any other organisation, including the City Council and BPH.

It is governed by a Board of Directors.<sup>25</sup> Our work is informed by many experts, including our Panel of Experts.<sup>26</sup>

We currently put our limited resources to work on three broad areas: food & the economy, food safety, integrity & assurance and the strategic challenges of food security.<sup>27</sup> We also communicate our work through arts projects.<sup>28</sup>

We called a special meeting about how we should respond to this Call for Evidence. This was a facilitated workshop for Board members and invited participants.<sup>29</sup> The workshop outputs, plus work we've previously carried out, informed a series of blogposts<sup>30</sup> on the matters under consideration to include in this document, which itself has been reviewed by our Board and invitees to the workshop.

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<sup>24</sup> A Public Inquiry led by a senior Judge: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/2019/10/22/national-food-strategy-20-an-inquiry-led-by-a-senior-judge/>

<sup>25</sup> Our Board of Directors: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/about/who-we-are/the-board-of-directors/>

<sup>26</sup> Our Panel of Experts: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/about/who-we-are/panel-of-experts/>

<sup>27</sup> More about what we do and how we go about it is on-line here: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/about/what-we-do/>

<sup>28</sup> These arts projects are all part of our Narrativium programme: <https://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/about/what-we-do/our-narrativium-projects/>

<sup>29</sup> The other invitees were: A senior supermarket executive, the Operations Director of one the UK's largest independent fresh produce wholesalers, a banker who is global relationship manager for the agri-food sector and a long-standing senior professional in environmental health.

<sup>30</sup> The blogposts were continuously amended in the light of comments by workshop participants and others during the process of compiling this submission. They are all listed [on-line here](#).