

OUR RESPONSE TO



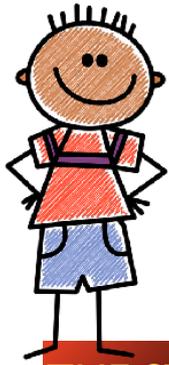
CALL FOR EVIDENCE

on

food and the recovery of nature, communities and livelihoods

**BIRMINGHAM
FOOD COUNCIL**

NOVEMBER 2020



THE STATE WE'RE IN

FOOD

- The global competition for safe, nutritious food, already intense, will only increase.¹ This means much higher prices and price hikes in times of shortages and scarcities.
- Along with the inevitability of more expensive food, there will also be costs in storing sufficient supplies of safe, nutritious buffer contingency stocks necessary for the UK to respond to future food system shocks.

PEOPLE

As with most national food systems across the world, ours is a commercial one. There is no escape from this. Be thankful it exists; it manages to deliver safe, nutritious, delicious tasting food to billions of people.

But it comes at a price. As well as damage to planetary health, human well-being is gravely damaged when people are denied access to a healthy diet if they don't have enough money to buy good food.

If the UK Government is to meet its responsibilities under the [1996 Rome Declaration](#), we argue they should take three courses of action:

- ☑ Ensure that all citizens have sufficient income from employment or the State to buy the food they need for an active and healthy life.
- ☑ Subsidise the provision of safe, nutritious food *and* set up a Food Resilience Levy to fund this and system change for the future.
- ☑ Take action against corporations that make and promote 'food' and beverages damaging to human and planetary health, to include imposing (a) an Excise Duty to, *inter alia*, price their products above those of healthy food and (b) a curb on their promotional activities.²

SHIFTING THE BURDEN



- Unless and until the actions above, or those with similar effect are taken, all we can do is tinker ineffectively at the edges of the system.
- Our most recent project report shows how the UK could be better prepared for future food shocks through [a buffer contingency stock system](#), and that its actuality would radically shift the burden of today's system to better meet both human and planetary health.

CATEGORIES OF FOOD SYSTEM THREATS

1
CHRONIC THREATS

I. Future food system shocks

Covid-19 need not have been such severe threat to our food supplies. Its impact wreaked damage across the system. Good food wasted, the lack of UK preservation, processing and storage capacity exposed, regulations relaxed without review and [millions more UK citizens](#) left without the economic means to buy sufficient food.³

Yet far more severe disruptions are likely soon owing to many threats on the system. They can be categorised thus:

- ⊕ Economic inequality in a commercial system.
- ⊕ Unfettered commercial opportunities to make and promote low-protein, micro-nutrient light, addictive drug-food products.⁴
- ⊕ The impact on human & planetary health by companies that make & promote products carrying UK standard-rate VAT.⁵
- ⊕ People with diet-related morbidities exhorted to change behaviour rather than given support along with action against companies making health-damaging products, as for smokers and tobacco companies.⁶
- ⊕ Malnutrition during an infant’s first 1000 days from conception.⁷
- ⊕ Inadequate food inspection & testing, made worse by Covid-19 regulation relaxation (see 5.1 below).

2
CURRENT THREATS

- ☐ The stresses Covid-19 and lockdowns here and across the world put on the UK supply system.⁸
- ☐ Brexit, whether a poor or ‘crash-out’ trade relationship with EU27.⁹
- ☐ Both of the above happening in winter, the latter mid-winter when the UK heavily depends on imported fresh produce *and* while the pace of the chronic threat of economic inequality is accelerating.

3
GLOBAL THREATS

The global competition for safe, nutritious food, already intense, will increase owing to:

- 🌐 Climate change
- 🌐 Resource depletion & degradation (land, soils, air, water, energy & crop pathogen anti-microbial resistance)
- 🌐 Population pressures

These three factors are compounded by geopolitical responses to them *and* the likely unpreparedness, either here or overseas, for the next pandemic or other food system shock.

2. Justice: Shifting the burden

3.1 The word ‘burden’

We have used the word ‘burden’ in this Response to reflect both [The Lancet’s Global Burden of Disease](#) (in which diet-related morbidities are high) and the burden our [food system places on planetary health](#).

3.2 Shifting the burden of responsibility

Although the evidence of the burden the agri-food system places on human and planetary health is incontrovertible, what is less evident is *how* we can change the system.

History tells us that making the wrong socio-political decisions about the agri-food system can all too easily lead to great human suffering, even famine.

So what do we do and how do we do it?

The food network is a complex adaptive system. Steering any such system in a new direction is a matter of tweaking the parameters of engagement of players in the system, and watching their impact.

This summer, we ran scenario exercises with diverse representatives across the sector, each participating as an individual informed by their particular operational food sector experience, one that had changed so much since the March lockdown.

What emerged were seven parameters or, as we called them, ‘pillars’, fundamental to a system better prepared for future food shocks. These parameters shift the burden of responsibility of action between State and food sector organisations, including corporations, to benefit human and planetary health.

3. Why ^{almost} everything you thought you knew about food is wrong

It’s helpful to explain first, however, that the food system challenges we’re facing are compounded by many common misconceptions about it. Few have an in-depth understanding of the beneficial role the commercial system plays, nor a sense of the scale and complexity required to supply [68m UK citizens](#) with sufficient supplies of safe, nutritious food, let alone for the eight billion global population.

3.1 Remedying misconceptions

The heading for this third section is the subtitle of Jay Rayner’s book [A greedy man in a hungry world](#). His publisher’s blurb (see left) shows Rayner under no illusions as to food supply threats, nor to the scale and complexity of food system network nor, indeed, to common misconceptions many have about it all.¹⁰ We recommend it to you.

3.2 Commercial realities — the agility to turn on a dime

The nature of decentralised intelligence and control within a complex adaptive system means that enough players in the system can turn on a dime when rules change. Reconfiguration happens rapidly.

The Government changed the ‘parameters of engagement’ with the March lockdown when they relaxed key regulations (regrettably without a review process in place).

Now with a new epilogue, the UK’s most influential food and drink journalist shoots a few sacred cows of food culture.

Buying ‘locally’ does no good. Farmers’ markets are merely a lifestyle choice. And ‘organic’ is little more than a marketing label, way past its sell by date. This may be a little hard to swallow for the ethically-aware food shopper but it doesn’t make it any less true. And now the UK’s most outspoken and entertaining food writer is ready to explain why.

Jay Rayner combines personal experience and hard-nosed reportage to explain why the doctrine of organic has been eclipsed by the need for sustainable intensification; and why the future lies in large-scale food production rather than the cottage industries that foodies often cheer for. From the cornfields of America to the killing lines of Yorkshire abattoirs via the sheep-covered hills of New Zealand, Rayner takes us on a journey that will change the way we shop, cook and eat forever. And give us a few belly laughs along the way.

Hence we could state this in our Submission to the [EFRA Commons Select Committee Call for Evidence on Covid and food supply](#):

Commercial organisations and the voluntary sector displayed impressive agility in rapidly reconfiguring their supply chains in response to the evolving behaviours of citizens and organisations in the first few weeks after lockdown.

3.3 Commercial realities vs amoral empires

There is, however, widespread distrust of the commercial sector and its impact on human and planetary health. We argue it is misplaced to blame corporations for the state we're in, or expect them to somehow behave more ethically. Corporations, as any other social organisation including elected bodies, are amoral rather than immoral entities. If socio-political decision-makers curb a potential to be sociopathic (as they have with tobacco companies), "sociophilic" entities will emerge.

3.3 The human and planetary costs of drug-foods

Owing to a quirk in British wartime history,¹¹ the UK VAT system uniquely, systematically and precisely identifies the so-called drug-food products and their manufacturers at the point of sale.

Collectively, these manufacturers cause huge damage to human and planetary health and, as argued in this [recent Rapid Response to a BMJ article on nutrition](#), action to curb their power, similar to that taken against tobacco companies, would have a major impact on reducing the burden of human and planetary damage.

4. The parameters of State and corporate responsibility

Our scenarios exercise enabled us to see that a few changes made by the State would enable socio-*philic* organisations to emerge.

What surprised our scenarios participants, steeped as they are in today's food sector operational realities, that it is indeed feasible for the commercial sector to play a major role in the essential, radically transformational change required for the UK to be better prepared for future food shocks whilst reducing diet-related morbidities and environmental damage.

The onus for such change, we all realised, lies not within the sector, nor with individual behaviour change, but on socio-political decision-makers having the courage and foresight to change the parameters of engagement for the players in the food system.

As stated on page 2, unless and until the Government acts, all we can do is tinker ineffectively at the edges of the system.

5. The IPPR brief: Where the parameters for change lie

Our scenarios exercise over the summer was timely in regard to the IPPR Call for Evidence. The seven kinds of policies and policy approaches asked for in responses to it emerged from our exercise:

I

Using regulation effectively — what should be controlled and how?

Food regulations and their enforcement, once the envy of the world, are fragmenting. The issues are identified in these two documents, and possible remedies proposed: [Our response to the draft London Food Strategy](#) (2018) pp6 & 8 and our latest report [One scenario: Buffer contingency food stocks](#) (2020) endnotes 9a & 30e.

2	Taxation and other financial instruments e.g. levies on damaging products of companies	ibid A Food Resilience Levy, and an Excise Duty on companies that make and promote products carrying standard rate VAT; <i>see</i> p3 pillar #3 + endnotes 16-19
3	Incentivising or investing in better products or practices e.g. subsidising the cost of fruit and vegetables	ibid The monies raised from the Levy and Duty to expand capacity and capability for fresh produce production, preservation and storage facilities plus management and distribution technologies; <i>see</i> p3, pillars #4 and #5 + endnotes 20-26
4	New institutions e.g. local government functions, partnerships or hubs to connect local supply and demand	ibid A Committee on Food Security, an independent body set up by statute; <i>see</i> p3 and this post: Future System Shocks: A Committee on Food Security? (August 2020) ibid A new protected supply chain for retail surplus stocks + wholesale purchases + at-cost buffer stock rotations; a new mass catering role for anchor institutions, professionally equipped and managed community-owned kitchens, click'n'collect storage network for ambient, chill and cold produce et al; <i>see</i> p5 + endnote 32
5	New approaches to government e.g. integrating aspects of policy areas on health, food and environment	<i>see</i> page 2 and section 4 above.
6	Infrastructures e.g. investment in local abattoirs or meat processing, establishing local food markets, digital platforms for dealing with food waste	<i>see</i> row 3 above
7	Competitions policy to ensure diversity in the food sector	With a <i>distributed</i> buffer contingency stock system in place, there would be expansion of diverse SME and third sector organisations across the supply system, including increasing UK food preservation, processing and storage capacity, thereby reversing the worryingly severe decline in such capacity and associated capabilities.

6. To the measurable benefit of human & planetary health

To reiterate the most immediate, most important message of our Response: A UK buffer contingency food system is essential, is feasible *and* would radically shift the burden of today's food system to better meet both human and planetary health.

7. About us

The Birmingham Food Council was set up in 2014 in response to a request from Birmingham Public Health, then part of the NHS. It was then and still is an independent body, a critical friend to socio-political decision-makers and influencers. As a CIC, it has a [Board of Directors](#). We have also recruited a [Panel of Experts](#) upon whom we can call upon for advice.

The development of our thinking is also dependent on many others. We draw upon each of their perspectives as a citizen who also happens to be informed by an operational and/or strategic role within a food sector company or other type of organisation, either directly in production, processing, logistics or the supply systems, or indirectly through the provision of agri-food professional services (including law, banking, investment and insurance) or agri-food research.

Our evidence-based work focusses on three sets of issues we feel do not receive enough attention: the **economics of the food network**, also **food safety, integrity and assurance**, plus the **strategic challenges of food security**.

endnotes

- 1 As reported in our horizon scanning report [Back from the Future](#) (2018), our report [Global risks to UK food supplies](#) (2019), and this post supporting our Submission to the National Food Strategy Call for Evidence #3: [The global competition for safe, nutritious food](#) (October 2019).
- 2 See notes 5 & 6 below.
- 3 The impacts of the first lockdown are outlined in this post [Coming out of lockdown: An account of food system frailties](#), June 2020.
- 4 [This infographic](#) is about low-protein, micro-nutrient light, addictive products and why they, and companies making and promoting them, should be prohibited from buffer contingency stocks.
- 5 Our Submission to the National Food Strategy supporting post #15: [Drug foods and their specific risks to the food supply system](#) (2019).
- 6 As explained here: [Rapid Response to a BMJ article](#) (2020).
- 7 Relevant research is listed in [Briefing the new Mayor Andy Street](#) (2017), p2 note 9.
- 8 Reported in our [Covid-19 commentary series](#).
- 9 Reported by many from the House of Lords EU Committee report, [Brexit: deal or no deal](#) (Dec 2017) to the UK in a [Changing Europe's What no deal would mean?](#) (Sept 2020) and George Monbiot's Guardian article this week: [The British Government's first disaster of 2021? A food shortage?](#)
note: According to this [2018 Gro-Intelligence report](#), the UK currently imports 40-50% of the food we eat, the amount dependent on many factors, including harvests here. In 2016, we imported 30% of our food from the EU, of which 70% was vegetables and 40% fruit and nuts.
- 10 Jay Rayner's arguments are counter-intuitive, often unpalatable to many. Unsurprisingly so. Our ancestors, after all, depended on local food supplies with manifest protection from toxins or predations from others, whether people or living creatures.
 None of the above is to underestimate the challenges in meeting today's needs; see, for example, this post [Food System Transformation #8: The geometry of the box \[we need to think out of\]](#), or this one supporting our Submission to the National Food Strategy #19: [Rights, responsibilities, principles and an elephant](#).
- 11 Explained in [How the UK VAT system identifies vested interests costing us and the earth](#) (2019).

THIS RESPONSE

is made on behalf of the Birmingham Food Council CIC Board of Directors.

We're grateful to our network of experts and specialist informants for their contribution to our work, also to the four independent reviewers of earlier drafts of this Response.

Kate Cooper
 Executive Director
 20th November 2020