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Article

Accepted Version

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(2023) The UK government's 2022 food strategy a year later. Nature Food, 4 (10). pp. 824-825. ISSN 2662-1355 doi: 10.1038/s43016-023-00859-x Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/113298/

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s43016-023-00859-x

Publisher: Nature

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The UK Government's 2022 Food Strategy a year later

Bob Doherty[1], Peter Jackson[2], Carol Wagstaff[3], Martin White[4], Tracey Duncombe[3]

The lack of ambition of the UK Government's 2022 Food Strategy (GFS) was evident from the start (2022)[1]. One year on from the GFS[2] publication, the UK food system looks increasingly vulnerable with food prices increasing at record rates, food insecurity soaring[3]; and empty shelves in UK supermarkets due to disruptions in fresh produce supply. The UK is increasingly reliant on imported fresh produce with 54% of our vegetables and 84% of our fresh fruit imported[4]. Furthermore, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affair's (Defra) advisor Henry Dimbleby has resigned and published his own analysis of the problems with the food system[5]. The need for transformative change has never been more evident. However, the Government has abandoned and delayed several of its promises.

Minister Mark Spencer announced in May 2023 a reversing of the decision to develop a strategy for horticulture. Instead, the Government says it now wants to focus on a labour review and a farming innovation programme. Dimbleby's independent review in 2021[6] had set out how UK diets will need to change over the next ten years to meet the government's targets on health, climate and nature. By 2032, fruit and vegetable consumption will have to increase by 30% and fibre consumption by 50%. This U-turn clearly ignores this need.

The GFS promised a Health Disparities White Paper (HDWP). However, the HDWP was shelved in January 2023. Instead, Health Secretary Steve Barclay announced a Major Conditions Strategy (MCS). There is no date set for the publication of the MCS, which is focused on how best to manage dietary related health conditions. Crucially, there has been no mention of health disparities. This has been widely criticised by the health-professions[7].

Children consume around 30% of their daily food and drink during the school day and access to nutritious school food is vital to children's health[8]. Yet, government has invested only £5m to support a 'school cooking revolution'. Furthermore, there has been no movement to extend access to Free School Meals (FSM). In contrast, Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London) announced in February 2023 that all primary school children in London will receive FSM for the next year, and universal FSM at primary level are being launched in Scotland and Wales. In England, as many as 800,000 children in poverty are not eligible to receive FSM[9].There is a real opportunity for decisive action, but the Government again fails to be ambitious on levelling-up.

The GFS promised the launch of the Food Data Transparency Partnership (FDTP) with commitments on mandatory reporting against a set of food system metrics. According to Defra[10], the initial focus of the FDTP programme will now be limited to supporting the food industry on developing a standardised approach to measuring and communicating greenhouse gas emissions. This is welcome, but this approach tackles a single issue and does not join up planetary and human health.

The GFS committed to publish a Land Use strategy in 2023. At the time of writing, there is no news on when the Land Use framework will be launched, and it is rumoured that it will not include a reduction in the area used for livestock farming, as recommended by Dimbleby. In addition, the GFS promised new Public Sector Food Buying Standards to promote sustainability. However, these new standards have yet to be launched. Sensing disquiet, the Prime Minister called a Food Summit in May 2023 to

boost co-operation and promote UK food and farming Despite the rhetoric, there was limited mention of the GFS. In 2024 or early 2025, on the occasion of general elections, the next government will have an opportunity to develop a more coherent food system policy. We propose a five-point plan: (i) a joint food systems cross government commission to bring considerations of population and planetary health together; (ii) HM Treasury to conduct a full economic analysis of the recommendations evidenced in Dimbleby's review versus the full costs to the economy of food system negative externalities; (iii) FSM for all primary school children in England, revolutionising catering in schools underpinned by a new public food procurement strategy; (iv) Integration of mandatory health and environmental metrics into the FDTP; (V) Comprehensive land use framework to reverse our status as the worst performing G7 country in terms of species depletion. We propose this five-point plan to ensure the UK avoids losing its way in transitioning towards a food system that promotes both human and planetary health.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.