

Developing a comprehensive plan for transforming the food system - Address to the Westminster Food & Nutrition Forum policy conference

FSA Chief Executive Emily Miles called on Government and the food industry to become less reliant on consumer power to push the food system into providing healthier and more environmentally sustainable food.

She was speaking on Thursday to the Westminster Food & Nutrition Forum policy conference: Developing a new National Food Strategy for England. Transcript of the speech as follows:

Introduction

I'm very pleased to be back at the Westminster Food and Nutrition Forum.

April, May and June brought into sharp focus a food system that is good at delivering cheap food, consumer choice, and immediate availability. It was those strengths that we scrambled to protect, and the public demanded we maintain.

But now, as news of vaccines bring some hope, I think it is time to refocus on how we can achieve a food system that maintains the robustness and resilience of the current system, but also delivers on a vision for a healthier and more sustainable supply of food.

These are my thoughts on where consumers, industry, and government fit in to a comprehensive plan for transforming the food system.

Consumers

It is essential that consumers are at the heart of any modern food system, it is our health and our planet that is at risk if we get things wrong. But consumer power only gets you so far. Consumer choice affects business behaviour. You can see that from the way that retailers in the last two years have been working to take out plastic from their supply chains, and the pressure they feel over the use of child labour.

Consumer power is also the driving force behind our own Food Hygiene Rating Scheme. Hygiene ratings are the green and black stickers you see in restaurants and cafes that allow consumers to see how well food businesses are doing on hygiene standards. This allows the public to vote with their feet and the evidence is, this pushes businesses to raise their game. In 2013, 53% of food businesses achieved the top rating of 5, this had increased to 73% by 2020.

The scheme was voted the 13th most effective public health intervention for last 100 years by the Royal Society for Public Health, alongside the indoor smoking ban and the HPV vaccination for boys and girls. I am pleased to say we are celebrating the 10th anniversary of the FHRS this

week.

But leaving it entirely up to consumers' individual transactional choices to push industry into providing healthier and more environmentally sustainable produce is putting too much burden on consumers.

The evidence shows that most people know what they need to do to have a healthier diet but struggle to do it. In Hilary Cottam's book, *Radical Help*, she reported on a project which found that almost everyone engaging with a wellness programme knew what they should do (five portions of fruit and veg a day, more exercise, less alcohol, etc), but struggled to implement the good practice.

We also know that labels only go so far.

1. On average, one-third of spend on food is out of home so does not have food labels (on average the portions of food or drink that people eat out or eat as takeaway meals contain twice as many calories as their equivalent bought in a shop)
2. According to FSA research, nearly three-quarters of consumers do not pay attention to nutritional information or ingredients labels on shopping and 10% of consumers say they never think about nutrition.
3. Our research has also found that consumers find food labels confusing (you need your calculator and your reading glasses) and tend only look at them when they have a specific dietary requirement or to check use-by dates.
4. There is no choice information available on labels for environmental questions. Other than the 'organics' indicator (which many don't understand, and only about 10% of people actively choose to eat organically), there are few other uniform ways of informing choice.

This is why I think consumer choice only gets you so far as a policy mechanism. Consumers pay taxes so that these difficult issues, some beyond their individual influence, are dealt with in their interests.

Food Industry

We need the industry to work with government to make it easier for consumers to choose food that does them and the planet good.

The nine largest grocery retailers represent 95% of the market share. These are impressive businesses. They manage global supply chains, relate to thousands of businesses and product lines, work across the four nations of the UK, and care a lot about their customers. Government needs to provide greater clarity about what is needed from them, and aim to improve food standards as a joint endeavour.

We must not assume that the food industry is a 'bad actor' – I disagree with what I call the 'public health mindset' who think of them like the tobacco industry. The food industry should be rightly proud of the way it feeds the nation and we need to be appreciative of it.

It is essential to think in a joined-up way about how to incentivise, not just instruct, food businesses to do the right thing. But we must do this across systems, rather than product-by-product, establishment by establishment. One of the central aspects of the FSA's regulatory reform programme is exactly this – looking to treat the big industry actors as one entity, rather than many establishments.

But the FSA currently majors on food safety. I would like to see a situation where there is one joined-up 'Crown' relationship with these businesses, where regulatory requirements can be

bolted on as appropriate. At the moment, there are different conversations going on from different parts of government, and indeed from different governments, with the same players: conversations on single-use plastics, bottle deposit return schemes, food allergies and labelling, food safety, export and import certification, marketing standards, product formulation, salt and sugar voluntary targets, and so on. We should aim for one joined up regulatory conversation with each major industry player.

Government

You may understandably question who in government is responsible for ensuring the food system provides healthy and sustainable food. The responsibility for food policy – labelling, safety, nutrition, sustainability – is spread across multiple government departments and agencies, across all four countries.

There needs to be structural change in the system. It's clear that the arrangements over the last decade have not worked. Nearly two-thirds of us are overweight or obese. In terms of sustainability, the UK ranks only eighth out of ten European countries in the Global Food Sustainability Index. On 'sustainable agriculture' impacts, the UK ranks 20th out of 34 countries. We need to do better.

I would like to see the next part of the National Food Strategy make an institutional proposition that tackles this. The institutional arrangements need to have a clear collective mission - that our food does good. Food that is good for our health; and food that is good for the environment.

The arrangements should ensure a strong independent role for the FSA and must make it possible that we work seamlessly within government and with the food industry. Along with a shared goal, there should be a pooling of responsibilities into a smaller number of actors, coupled with a widening of the governance to ensure legitimacy. We need an active four-country approach, with shared ambitions and action plans where each of the four sets of health and food ministers work more closely together.

Conclusion

I want to be clear, this is not about the 'nanny state' and creating a fierce, intrusive government, or taking away choice from consumers in a denial of delight and fun. In fact, this is not about more or less regulation. It's about the right regulation and the right, constructive relationships between Government and the food industry.

My vision for how the food system works in the future is one where government uses its powers and knowledge on behalf of the people of the UK, so that they can trust that their food does good. It should make it easy for people to choose food that is good for them and for the environment, and make it easy for businesses to produce food that is good for people and the environment. It's one where businesses can make a profit in keeping with the country's values; taking care of us and the environment.

Everything we know about making a difference tells us that when we pull together, across governments, private sector and people, we can move mountains. The whole country's response to the first wave of COVID-19 showed us that. We owe it to ourselves, our families, and the planet, to have food that does good.