

Government food strategy 2022

INTRODUCTION

The government published its long-awaited Food Strategy in June 2022. After the enthusiasm that greeted the publication of the Henry Dimbleby-led independent National Food Strategy (NFS) in 2021, the government's actual strategy has been greeted with a much more muted response.

It is either silent or does not support many of Dimbleby's key recommendations. Dimbleby has said that "it doesn't set out a clear vision as to why we have the problems we have now and it doesn't set out what needs to be done."

Views of the strategy will probably come down to personal views on the existing food and farming industry. If you think that the current system works well, then you will probably support the strategy, as it is largely a status quo.

If you – like Henry Dimbleby – think that significant change is needed, then you are likely to be very disappointed. There are almost no firm commitments, targets or standards. The Green Alliance suggests that it was as if the government liked the outcomes of the Dimbleby strategy but did not like how to achieve them.

This document was written before the change to the Liz Truss-led government and it is not clear yet what the new government's position on a food strategy is.



FOOD PRODUCTION

One of the few organisations that has been warm in its response is the National Farmers' Union. It said that the strategy was "a clear milestone", with the government recognising the importance of domestic food production and maintaining English farms' productive capacity.

This is not a change as the government has been consistent in its commitment to food production and raising productivity, which has been a common theme in almost all of George Eustice's speeches. However, there is little detail on how it might happen or what the vision is.

HEALTHY DIETS

The government acknowledges in the strategy that there is a need 'to shift diets' but it is almost completely silent about what to do and how to do it.

To the relief of many livestock farmers, there are no references to reducing meat or dairy consumption, as was recommended by Dimbleby, and the government has said, repeatedly, that it does not want to tell people what to do. However, the government promised that it would return to the issue in its forthcoming health disparities white paper, although this is now more uncertain given the change in Prime Minister.

THE BEGINNING OF A CONVERSATION?

The strategy says that this is the 'beginning of a conversation', building upon the independent review and existing work.

Dimbleby's final recommendation was to "set clear targets and bring in legislation for long-term change." So far, the government has not done that but, hopefully, it will be part of the conversation to come.

BREAKDOWN OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE FOOD STRATEGY

The section overleaf summarises the main measures under each of the government's objectives for the strategy.

¹ The Week reports that of Dimbleby's 14 recommendations, seven were ignored, three partially implemented and four adopted (of which two have already been announced).

OBJECTIVE 1

A PROSPEROUS AGRI-FOOD AND SEAFOOD SECTOR THAT ENSURES A SECURE FOOD SUPPLY



Production and productivity:



Broadly maintain the current level of food produced domestically, through productivity gain.



Support farmers in building more resilient, sustainable, and diversified farm businesses, using 'targeted vehicles' like the Sustainable Farming Incentive.



Innovation will be a key component to sustainably boost production and profitability. This will be supported by funding through programmes like the Farming Innovation Programme.



Support to grow the alternative protein sector, which the strategy says can 'complement traditional livestock sectors' and does not have to 'displace traditional sectors'.



Work with growers to develop a world leading horticulture strategy for England.



Review the planning permission process for new industrial horticulture developments.

S&P *comment:*

Farmers do need support in building more resilient, sustainable businesses, but based on our discussions with many clients and farmers we do not expect the take up of the SFI to be very high.

Funding for the Farming Innovation Programme is also less than £40m per year, so a small proportion of the overall budget and there is almost no assessment of how much the funding changes productivity on the farms that receive it.

It is worth noting that Dimbleby's recommendations, opposed by the NFU, for reducing consumption of meat and dairy and using up to a fifth of farmland for woods and wildlife are not mentioned by the government. Dimbleby had argued

that, as 50% of the meat eaten in Britain is in the form of processed mince, much of it could be replaced by alternative proteins.



Workforce and skills:



Develop a 'What Works' Centre to provide farmers with evidence that supports the adoption and on-farm take up of new innovations. This builds on the experience of the existing What Works centres for the public sector.



Commission an independent review to tackle labour shortages in the food supply chain.



Release the additional provision of 10,000 visas under the Seasonal Worker Visa Route, including 2,000 for the poultry sector, so that 40,000 visas will be available for seasonal workers in 2022.



Review existing skills programmes, identify improvements, and tackle barriers that currently prevent uptake.



Confirmation that the new Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture (TIAH) will launch in 2023.



Engage with industry to understand and address barriers to uptake of risk management or other farming insurance products.

S&P *comment:*

Farming and processing organisations have called for much higher numbers of seasonal workers to be allowed to enter the country. It appears that the government is trying to balance current demand for workers with their aim to reduce the country's reliance on overseas workers.



Environment:



Target land-use change at the least productive land.



A call for evidence of the use of feed additives to reduce methane emissions from livestock.



Regulation:



Create a new, simpler regulatory regime for technologies such as gene editing.



Ensure regulation is outcome-focused, proportionate, and clear.

S&P *comment:*

The pledge to ensure regulation is outcome-focused and proportionate was the recommendation of the Stacey Review of regulation published in 2018. There is no mention of where the regulatory baseline will be set, which is a crucial issue.

OBJECTIVE 2

A SUSTAINABLE, NATURE POSITIVE, AFFORDABLE FOOD SYSTEM THAT PROVIDES CHOICE AND ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY PRODUCTS THAT SUPPORT HEALTHIER AND HOME-GROWN DIETS FOR ALL



Land use linking to diet:



Publish a land use framework in 2023 to ensure we meet our net zero and biodiversity targets, and help our farmers adapt to a changing climate, whilst continuing to produce high quality, affordable produce that supports a healthier diet.

S&P *comment:*

Most commentators were pleased to see the commitment to publish a land use framework, which it is hoped includes clear recommendations and national and local targets.

It will be interesting to see what influence, if any, the Dimpleby report has on this document. It argued that a combination of following its recommendation to cut meat

intake, reducing food waste and improving farm yields, would allow the same amount of calories to be produced on 30% less land.



Healthy diets:



A programme of trials to develop evidence on value for money interventions to encourage and enable healthier and more sustainable diets.



Halve childhood obesity by 2030.



Further research on ultra-processed foods.



Work towards developing large-scale and long-term policies to shift diets.



£5 million to deliver a 'school cooking revolution', with an ambition that children leaving secondary school know at least 6 healthy recipes.



Consult on extending the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services to cover the whole public sector and introducing an aspirational target that at least 50% of food spend must be on food produced locally or to higher environmental production standards.



A shared responsibility to identify the solution to obesity.



Launch a Food Data Transparency Partnership, to provide people with the information they need to make more sustainable, ethical, and healthier food choices.

S&P *comment:*

In contrast to the Dibley report, there are few firm commitments on the complex issue of improving diets. The independent NFS proposed a costed plan for changing the way the nation eats. It argued that it will be impossible for Britain to become carbon neutral or reverse rising obesity rates without

fundamental change in food production. Dibley's estimates were that fruit and vegetable consumption will have to increase by 30%, and intake of foods high in sugar, salt and fat will have to fall by 25%. To achieve this, he recommended a sugar and salt reformulation tax (which would have been used to subsidise healthy

food for poorer families) and reductions in meat consumption. None of the ideas were included in the government's strategy and there is not much detail on how a shift in diets will be achieved, but it may be covered in the forthcoming health disparities white paper.

OBJECTIVE 3

TRADE THAT PROVIDES EXPORT OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSUMER CHOICE THROUGH IMPORTS, WITHOUT COMPROMISING OUR REGULATORY STANDARDS FOR FOOD, WHETHER PRODUCED DOMESTICALLY OR IMPORTED



Trade agreements and Global Britain:



Publish a statement on the animal health and production regime for food imports, that delivers an equivalent level to our domestic standards.



Consider options to address risks of carbon leakage within the food system.



Seek to include provisions supporting co-operation on antimicrobial resistance in trade agreements, where possible.



Appoint 10 agri-food attachés across the world to support UK food and drink exporters.



Promote climate-resilient, sustainable food systems globally, whilst accelerating green growth.

S&P *comment:*

The NFS recommended defining minimum standards for trade and a mechanism for protecting them.

However, the government has consistently shied away from doing this and, to date, its trade agreements have included different levels of standards, reflecting its priority to get deals agreed. It is also reported that

the government removed commitments to make it easier to import food with high animal welfare and environmental standards from the published draft.



Regulatory standards:



Maintain high standards for food consumed in the UK, wherever it is produced.



Publish a report to monitor progress against the food strategy goals, at a frequency that allows trends to emerge.

S&P *comment:*

The ambition to maintain high standards for food consumed in the UK has been criticised widely as being rhetoric and not being supported by details of how it will be done. There is also wide criticism of the lack of oversight and input that parliament and other groups have on trade agreements before they are signed.