

## FSA Our Food Future – Event Discussion Summary

Participants across the break-outs discussed with vigour the nature of the role that central government should play in Our Food Future. Participants emphasised the importance of a collaborative, whole system approach that joined up food and farming policy with health policy, with joint working across government departments to bring the whole system together under a shared goal. In several rooms attendees suggested that one body or department should have cross-departmental responsibility to provide leadership and set the agenda by establishing overarching food policy. Across rooms, participants generally assumed that this body would work across FSA, PHE, Defra and the DoH. In some rooms, it was suggested that the FSA could and should play this role.

Common elements of responsibility for a central government authority included:

- (continued) **regulation** of the farming and food industries;
- stricter controls on the **marketing** of unhealthy food;
- changes to **public sector procurement** policies to improve the healthiness of meals, including school meals and social care meal services;
- support for **innovation** in the farming and the food industries and new agricultural technology to make food more affordable and sustainable;
- banning of imports of unsustainable foods such as palm oil; and,
- education and the provision of information to the public to support healthy food choices.

### Health and quality versus price

Echoing the results of the research, stakeholders identified a range of barriers to people eating more healthily, including:

- a (perceived or real) lack of **time**;
- the greater **cost** of healthier food;
- a lack of **skills**, knowledge and interest in cooking from raw ingredients; and,
- that shopping and cooking was an **isolating** rather than social activity so that it was perceived as boring and a chore.

Participants felt retailers were key potential players in helping consumers to eat more healthily, although there was an assumption that government support would be required for change. For example, they recommended that:

- There should be regulation of retailer **discounts and promotions** that reward bulk-buying which we know can be more wasteful, and which consumers feel promote poor diet choices;
- Discounts and promotions should not promote **unhealthy** foods, particularly for children;
- The food industry should agree on **best practice** and be independently monitored on how they adhere to such standards, with '**naming and shaming**' of companies that perform badly and publicly available league tables of retailers and manufacturers.

Suggestions of how to overcome these barriers included:

- **skills sharing** in the community for people to learn cooking skills together;
- **subsidies and price promotions** for fresh fruit and vegetables;
- **education** in schools and public information campaigns to promote balanced diets;
- the use of **technology**, including mobile apps that provide meal plans or a nutrition calculator, or online retailer websites that filtered healthier options such as 'no carbs'.

However, as was identified across all themes, a perceived limitation of any digital solution was the digital divide, meaning that digital solutions might not be accessed by those who were hard to reach and instead would only be used by those already taking an interest in healthy eating.

### **Information, education and transparency**

Participants felt that current **food labeling** information lacked clarity and needed to be improved in Our Food Future to support consumer empowerment.

Participants highlighted several types of labelling they thought the public might find confusing, or even found confusing themselves – included labelling around country of origin labelling, ‘natural’, and ‘fair trade’ ‘use by’ versus ‘best before’ dates. Confusion between ‘use by’ and ‘best before’ dates were also raised. In other rooms, there was also passionate discussion around sugar labelling, with many participants feeling this is unclear currently, despite the ‘total sugars’ labelling. This seemed to be due to consumer lack of awareness around what might constitute sugar when scanning through a food ingredients list.

For example, labeling information around country of origin and the rules that apply to this information, ‘natural’ and related marketing terms, the difference between ‘use by’ and ‘best before’ dates and ‘fair trade’ labelling were all highlighted as current points of potential confusion for consumers.

Suggestions for how labelling information could be improved included:

- making labelling more **graphic**. Simple visuals and graphics such as teaspoons to indicate sugar content were considered to be clearer and easier to understand than information conveyed by numbers and words, and were used as examples of best practice that should be adopted for all types of labeling.
- Labelling information should be more **‘honest’**, for example by making it easier for consumers to identify the many different versions of sugar in ingredients lists.
- Adjusting labelling to provide more holistic **sustainability** information. For example, ‘fair trade’ and information on water use and air miles do not separately indicate overall environmental impact. It was therefore suggested that a ‘sustainability label’ was needed to provide consumers with an overall method of comparison between products. An industry-led and agreed sustainability label or pledge was suggested, with auditing of manufacturers’ adherence to the standard. The audited sustainability label used by Unilever was cited as an example of good practice in this area, as it helped the company to build relationships with consumers as part of good CSR practice.

Attendees recommended that **education** on healthier eating should:

- focus on teaching **skills as well as knowledge**, including educating consumers about the link between healthy eating and sustainability, and:
- involve a **bottom up, grassroots education campaign**, including cooking classes and shared meals with groups such as parents and elderly people, using existing spaces to gather to cook and eat as social events. This was suggested as a way to address the perceived lack of skills in cooking and healthy eating and the perception that cooking was unsociable and therefore uninteresting.

Participants recognised that information on healthy eating is already available, yet often not accessed. They thus felt a ‘pull’ needed to be created to change social norms in order to

encourage people to eat more healthily. Opinion formers such as celebrities were suggested as being potentially influential in any social marketing campaign.

### **Power, trust and empowerment**

Participants were eager to support consumer empowerment, and to shift a perceived imbalance in current power and control of the food system.

Key elements of an empowerment strategy included:

- Engagement activities, including:
  - targeted engagement with those who are **hard to reach**, such as lower socioeconomic groups, to improve healthy eating choices;
  - tailoring of engagement approaches to different audiences;
  - local engagement - as participants felt that currently there was no obvious local platform for people to discuss or represent themselves on food issues;
- Easier access to information about food issues such as health and sustainability, including:
  - a 'one stop shop' where people could express their views and receive advice.
  - Stakeholders imagined this could contain information from past and current information campaigns, expertise from all sources, and publicly available data that enhanced the transparency of retailers and manufacturers, such as the ingredients of processed food products. This was hoped to address the perceived current problem that sources of information on food were disparate and disjointed;
- Visible checks and balances against 'big industry', via
  - certification schemes and recognition for good performance and improvements made by retailers in terms of healthy eating promotion, sustainability, or minimizing food wastage
  - Promotion of primary producers by making their identity more visible at point of sale;
- agreement on common standards that underpin and indicate sustainability, so that sustainability could be more effectively built in to consumer interests and drive product development, and:
- Potentially, a reduction in the complexity of the global food production system:
  - Participants hoped that science and technology could help simplify complex food production systems so that they could be better understood by the public, thus enhancing their transparency.
  - They also suggested that the public should be involved in setting priorities for primary research, which should be independent from commercial interests and supportive of local agriculture.

### **Plenary survey responses from participants**

Of the key themes discussed, health and quality versus price was most likely to be considered the most challenging and the most important to address, with 43% of participants considering this to be the most challenging and 31% considering it to be the most important to address. However, power, trust and empowerment came a close second in terms of importance, with 30% considering it the most important theme to address, and 26% considering information, education and transparency the most important to address.

These results were reflected in the discussion in which many of the suggested actions were expected to address multiple and overlapping themes.

When asked who has the biggest role to play in bringing about the changes required to help empower consumers to make informed choices about their food future, the most common response was consumers themselves, with 33.7% of participants choosing this option. This was followed by corporations (26.1%) and governments (19.6%). This was reflected in the ensuing discussion in which the focus was on how to motivate and empower consumers to make more informed choices about their food future.