Food security: demand, consumption and waste: Government response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2014–15

Seventh Special Report of Session 2014–15

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The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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The current staff of the Committee are David Weir (Clerk), Clementine Brown (Assistant Clerk), Sarah Coe (Senior Committee Specialist), Sara Priestley (Committee Specialist—Environment), Emma McIntosh (Senior Committee Assistant), Lisa Stead (Committee Assistant), Holly Knowles (Committee Support Assistant) and Nicholas Davies and Rosie Tate (Media Officers).

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The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee reported to the House on *Food security: demand, consumption and waste* in its Sixth Report of Session 2014–15, published on 22 January 2015 as HC 703. The Government’s response to the Report was received on 20 March 2015 and is appended below.

Each conclusion and recommendation made in the Committee’s Report is set out in a bold and numbered paragraph with the Government’s response directly beneath it.

### Appendix: Government response

#### Introduction

The Government welcomes the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee’s second report on Food Security.

#### Consumer choice and food security

1. We do not argue in this report for a regulatory shift towards compulsion over consumers’ food purchasing decisions. We therefore make recommendations for more co-ordinated and focussed actions by the Government, food producers and suppliers, and the third sector to support consumer choices that enhance the ability of all to obtain sufficient safe, healthy and affordable food. We support a robust regulatory framework for the nation's food production and retail systems; consumers must be able to make their choices about what food to buy and from where to buy it knowing that there are strong measures in place to protect their interests. (Paragraph 8)

   The Government agrees with the Committee that consumers should be empowered to make their own informed choices. We also recognise the importance of food security, insofar as British consumers have access to safe, affordable and nutritious food. Defra leads a co-ordinated and focussed approach that ensures food security is a priority across the range of relevant policy areas within Government.

2. We endorse the work of the Government together with farmers, food producers and processors, and retailers to promote UK food to consumers to help ensure the long-term future of national food production. (Paragraph 12)

   Food and farming are hugely important to the UK economy, worth more than £100bn a year and employing approximately 1 in 8 people. We are working with farmers, manufacturers and retailers to ensure the UK has the right climate to attract increased inward investment and to enable UK producers to grow and compete. For instance, in February we announced the first round of successful bids to create Food Enterprise Zones. These will make the planning process easier for ambitious food businesses that want to
expand. We also continue to support industry in enhancing skill levels and increasing education and engagement of schools and the general public with the agricultural sector.

The Government recognises that there is public demand to buy British and we are working with industry to make that easier for consumers. Consequently, compulsory country of origin labelling for pork, poultry, lamb and goat meat is being introduced in April as part of the EU Food Information to Consumer Regulation.

On an international scale, we are helping local food producers to gain European recognition and legal protection against imitation for their quality, history, and links to the local area. Over 60 British foods as diverse as Cornish Clotted Cream, Cumberland Sausages, Arbroath Smokies and Wensleydale Cheese now hold the same quality mark as Parma Ham and Champagne. Since we gave evidence in November, we have made progress on increasing exports to China and finalised negotiations to export UK processed pork to India.

3. **We welcome the co-ordinated efforts of those producing and retailing fresh produce to exploit longer growing seasons for some fruit and vegetable products. Defra, together with the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, should continue to work closely with producers and retailers to develop and widen markets for these products. (Paragraph 16)**

We are pleased with the Committee’s positive observations and will continue to work closely with producers and retailers in this area, building on existing successes.

4. **Despite efforts to promote healthy eating, the UK is still experiencing high levels of health problems linked to poor diet, in particular problems caused by excessive consumption. While we welcome the work of a range of government departments, local authorities and retailers to promote healthy food choices there needs to be greater integration between the bodies, with firm strategic leadership from the Department for Health. The Government must ensure that innovative local approaches are disseminated to enable far greater numbers of councils, supermarkets and local NHS bodies to develop more effective means of targeting messages. (Paragraph 20)**

The Department of Health provides strategic leadership across the public health system and leads on engagement with the food industry to help make the healthy choice the easy choice for consumers. Through the voluntary partnership with industry, significant progress has been made: to reduce calories (including sugars), salt and saturated fat in food; to reduce portion sizes and change the default to the healthier alternative; and to encourage greater consumption of fruit and vegetables. Our recommended voluntary front of pack labelling scheme is popular with consumers, providing easy to interpret nutritional information to help them make healthier choices when purchasing food. But we are not complacent and will continue to work with industry to go further.

Public Health England provides independent advice to government on the evidence for effective interventions in relation to diet and nutrition and works with local authorities to support the implementation and sharing of best practice at community level to encourage a
healthy diet. Local authorities have been given £8.2bn over three years to help them manage public health issues, including obesity.

Change4Life is PHE’s flagship social marketing programme which encourages people to eat well and move more through inspiring a societal movement for change. The national campaign provides a framework for local authorities to follow as well as advice, materials and healthy eating messaging for use in their communities.

5. **Government policies require a robust evidence basis, yet Defra currently uses data that do not reflect consumption accurately. The Department should use data published by Public Health England on nutritional intakes to refine its own estimates so as to take into account food bought but not subsequently consumed.** (Paragraph 22)

The Defra and PHE surveys need to use different methods to ensure their data are reliable for their purposes. Defra’s Family Food data estimates household expenditure and purchases of food and drink. Nutritional intake estimates derived from purchased quantities take account of the inedible part of foods, but not of avoidable food waste. However, long term trends in intakes are considered to be valid.

PHE’s National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) is still building its trend information, but measuring individual food consumption provides a clearer picture of food and nutrient intakes, in population sub-groups as well as the population as a whole. NDNS focuses on actual consumption by asking people to record in detail the type and quantity of foods they eat. Participants are asked to record what was actually eaten, so food waste, either on the plate or in preparation, is not quantified, as this is not the focus of the survey.

There is no simple and accurate way to calculate food waste by subtracting food consumption measured by NDNS from purchases recorded by Family Food. To refine Family Food estimates to take into account avoidable food waste would require detailed data on food waste to apply to them.

**Supporting effective consumer choices**

6. **Consumers must make a large number of rapid decisions over myriad purchasing decisions every day, so any information provided at the point of sale must be clear and easily assimilated. We recommend that Defra review with retailers the effectiveness of labelling regulations in informing consumers on key provenance and sustainability factors. Price and brand are easy signals to interpret so drive many consumer decisions. We recommend that Defra seek with retailers to provide equally clear, informative and accurate signals on provenance, sustainability and nutrition.** (Paragraph 27)

The Government agrees that any information provided at point of sale should be clear and easily assimilated. Clear, accurate, relevant and substantiated sustainability labelling and claims, in both advertising and on products, are important in helping consumers to understand the environmental, social and economic impacts of products and services, and thus enabling them to make informed choices.
False, misleading or confusing labels and claims have the potential to undermine consumer confidence and lead to unfair competition between businesses. European consumers are protected against such factors by the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (UCPD), transposed into UK law through the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations. The UK Government is working with the European Commission to improve the environmental claims guidance, focussing, in particular, on providing more clarity for businesses on what constitute credible claims.

**Provenance**

The Government agrees that retailers should provide clear, informative and accurate signals on provenance. There are two elements to this; one being that consumers have confidence in the provenance of their food and the second being that consumers should have the choice to buy food based on its origin. In relation to the former, consumer confidence and the integrity of the food chain is primarily the responsibility of industry, as set out in European legislation. The Government has made it clear that all food businesses, including large retailers, need to review their own systems to demonstrate to consumers they are in full control of their supply chains and what they tell consumers is accurate. The Government has also accepted all the recommendations from the Elliott Review. From an enforcement perspective, the Food Crime Unit in the FSA is now operational.

We have pushed hard for mandatory country of origin labelling for meat, which comes into effect on 1 April, and we have made clear that we support moves, where feasible, to provide for better country of origin labelling of milk and dairy products.

**Sustainability**

The Government has set the clear objective of ensuring that a sustainable, resource efficient and competitive UK food and farming sector is supported through The Plan for Public Procurement of Food and Catering Services. The plan includes a ‘balanced scorecard’ that gives clear information about what the public sector is looking for, including sustainability criteria.

We are also working closely with retailers to review the effectiveness of labelling regulations in informing consumers on key sustainability factors. Defra has commissioned a baseline study to enable us to measure the impact of the new EU legislation on Food Information to Consumers. We will evaluate the impacts of a range of aspects of this legislation, including those on sustainability, on consumers’ behaviour. The UK’s work on waste reduction contributes significantly to increasing sustainability. In relation to consumer signalling, we have promoted the use of single date labels to reduce confusion about a product’s lifespan. Details of our work on reducing food waste are included in the ‘tackling food waste’ section.

**Nutrition**

The government’s recommended voluntary front of pack labelling scheme was launched in sept 2013. It provides greater consistency in the provision of nutritional information for
food and drink products than had been previously achieved across the UK market. Research shows that this consistency in labelling information helps consumers make healthier, better informed food choices. Our recommended labelling scheme has been adopted by businesses responsible for more than two-thirds of the pre-packed food and drink market in the UK. It is supported by a large number of consumer and health non-government organisations, who have signed a joint statement supporting the scheme.

7. Further the Department should commission research into the use of sustainability claims on products in order to assess the accuracy of such labelling. Defra should promote the use of accreditation schemes with high levels of quality assurance, such as Red Tractor, since they allow customers to make choices of products based on the scheme brand. (Paragraph 28)

Sustainability claims (including labels) can play a valuable role in demonstrating and communicating the sustainability standards and credentials of different products. However the proliferation of claims and sometimes contradictory advice, can create confusion for consumers and businesses.

In 2011 the Government produced Green Claims Guidance and an accompanying ‘quick guide’, which provide advice to business on making clear, accurate, relevant and substantiated environmental claims on products, services or in marketing and advertising. It also highlights the importance of using reputable schemes with clear criteria, backed up by robust verification processes, including via inspections. Several supporting studies were undertaken to prepare the guidance, including an assessment of green claims in marketing, assessment of green claims on products, and a report on consumer understanding of environmental terms. The findings concluded that claims were widespread, although the studies did not evaluate the validity of claims.

The Plan for Procurement of Food and Catering Services recognises the value of assurance schemes in helping the market verify compliance. Defra is currently working with a range of partners to produce a guide which indicates how a range of existing assurance schemes help to achieve compliance with the Government’s balanced scorecard.

Defra is actively investigating the feasibility of providing comparative sustainability data on fresh and lightly-processed produce to consumers at the point of purchase, either when ordering online or in-store using a smartphone ‘App’ linked to the phone’s barcode/QR scanner.

A Defra-funded research project to investigate the comparative sustainability of agricultural production under different agricultural certification schemes is scheduled to report in March 2015. The project is using lifecycle assessment techniques and available scheme metrics (e.g. on diffuse pollution, resource use) and quantitative and qualitative assessments (e.g. of animal welfare standards, biodiversity and ‘fair-trade’ outcomes) to investigate claims that agricultural labelling schemes can be used to indicate the relative sustainability of individual food products.
8. We recommend that Defra work with retailers and their representative bodies to promulgate best practice on online information provision such as tools to allow customers to search for the healthiest products when compiling an online order. (Paragraph 31)

The Government’s recommended front of pack nutrition labelling scheme is supported by online labelling and explanations of the scheme by a wide range of organisations, including NHS Choices, major food retailers and manufacturers, Which?, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Cancer Research UK, Children’s Food Campaign, British Heart Foundation, the Faculty of Public Health and many others. The availability of such information from a number of online sources is helping to raise awareness of the scheme and increase public recognition.

Supermarkets are also developing online tools to allow customers to search for, or swap to, healthier products when compiling an online order.

**Tackling food waste**

9. Despite reductions in recent years, the UK continues to waste significant volumes of food, and the amount of edible food being disposed of remains unacceptably high. At a time when global food systems are under pressure and the UK faces its own food security challenges, this level of waste is unacceptable economically, socially and environmentally. There is no magic bullet for tackling this; rather measures must be diligently applied across the food supply chain from producer to consumer in order to achieve steady results. (Paragraph 40)

Work in the first two phases of the Courtauld Commitment has contributed to a 15% reduction in household food waste since 2007 and signatories reported a reduction of 7.4% in food and drink supply chain waste since 2010. The current third phase is targeting a further 1.1 million tonnes of food and packaging waste reduction in households and the supply chain by the end of this year. We are also working with the hospitality sector to prevent food waste and improve food waste management in restaurants, pubs and canteens targeting for a 5% reduction in food waste and associated packaging waste by the end of the year. The agreement also has a target to increase signatories recycling rates for food and packaging to 70% by the end of 2015.

These are significant reductions but we agree with the recommendation of the Committee that further action must be taken across the food supply chain to further reduce food waste. We are therefore working with WRAP and the food industry to achieve this.

In order to further reduce household food waste, we’re helping households waste less and save money through “Love Food Hate Waste” which raises awareness of the need to reduce food waste and helps us all take action in our homes. WRAP has dedicated campaigns in partnership with food retailers launched in 10 cities across the UK to offer further support to households to reduce the food they waste. During the launches, WRAP spoke to over 15,000 people and received over 3,000 pledges from city dwellers committed to Do One Thing Differently to act on their own food waste. Since the success of the launches, the Love Food Hate Waste team, supported by its partners, is bringing Cookery Classes, ‘Save...
More’ Kitchen Skill Lessons, a Food Champion Network amongst other initiatives to the 10 cities across the UK.

There are also several projects to support waste prevention initiatives within the food and drink supply chain. Through WRAP, Defra supports the work of the Product Sustainability Forum (PSF). This is a collaboration of organisations including grocery retailers and suppliers, academics, NGOs and Government representatives to measure, improve and communicate the environmental performance of grocery products. In 2013, PSF published the report ‘An initial assessment of the environmental impact of grocery products’, which identified the waste, water, carbon and energy hotspots for the top 50 grocery products. PSF has supported pathfinder projects that emphasise a whole chain approach to resource efficiency on priority products. Defra has also commissioned research to quantify losses of edible harvested or harvestable food (intended for human consumption) on-farm owing to external factors beyond the grower’s control.

Based on the work of the PSF and the success of the Courtauld Commitment, WRAP are developing proposals for a new industry-led agreement—Courtauld 2025—to promote action on grocery products with the highest environmental impact across the whole food supply chain. Reducing food waste will be a key element of these proposals, but the scope will be wider than previous agreements, with wider aims concerning food sustainability and security. This will build on the success of the current voluntary agreements on food waste and will enable businesses to take increased ownership of these issues.

10. It is essential that the Government provides the Waste and Resources Action Programme with sufficient public funding such that, alongside investment from other sources such as trusts and charities, it has adequate resources to enable it to maintain momentum in its food waste reduction programmes. This makes good economic sense even in times of financial constraint, since programmes to reduce food waste deliver both public and private benefits beyond their costs. (Paragraph 42)

Government activities must focus on areas that only Government can and must do, i.e. where there is a clear market failure. With that in mind, the Government continues to support the Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP), essential to support businesses in realising the benefits of resource efficiency and improved resource management.

Food waste remains an area where market failures still exist. Therefore, Defra continues to support WRAP for this work at a level of funding which is broadly similar to that before the review, and an increase in terms of its proportion of overall funding to WRAP. We have ensured that delivery of our food waste objectives remains a top priority for WRAP. Defra continue to work closely with WRAP, seeking views of a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that the activities we fund are targeted at making a critical difference to business performance.
Securing affordable food

11. Charities provided us with their own evidence of a growing number of people accessing emergency food aid, yet there is no national collation of this data nor sufficient analysis on how usage of foodbanks may be linked to rising food prices or constraints on incomes. We recommend that Defra commission further research into why more people are using foodbanks to provide an evidence base to inform and enhance policy responses. We recommend that the Government collect objective and statistically robust data on the scale of household food insecurity, including through the use of questions in the food costs sections of the UK’s Living Costs and Food Survey. It should also monitor trends over time so that the effectiveness of policies can be accurately gauged and any necessary changes made in response to evidence of need. In its response to this report Ministers should set out detailed proposals for how it will work with partners to gather data, the timescale for establishing a work programme and its anticipated outputs. (Paragraph 48)

When Defra published research last year on food aid in the UK, the conclusion was that the provision of food aid ranges from small, local operations to regional and national schemes. The landscape is diverse, reflecting the various communities and organisations that devote their time to helping people in need. Some of these food aid providers take records, whereas others do not. As an obstacle to collecting data on food aid provision, we would be reluctant to oblige communities to collect data on top of the hard work they are already doing.

In respect of the reasons why people are turning to food aid, the issue encompasses economic, social and environmental influences. As the All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry on Hunger and Food Poverty’s Report noted, the reasons why people use food banks can be complex and are frequently overlapping. A single question on food insecurity in the Living Costs and Food Survey would not be able to cover the complexities of the issue and may bias responses to other sections of the Survey in relation to the participant’s outgoings. A more comprehensive set of questions would present continued difficulties with choosing the relevant questions, again considering the complexity of the issue. Though the current Survey includes a question on ‘free food’, the source is not recorded and would not exclusively capture food donated from charity. On a practical level, the Survey sample is relatively small (around 5,500 households p.a.) and only covers the entire private household population, thus excluding the homeless. It is therefore unlikely to produce sufficient data. The ONS agrees with Government that the Survey would not be suitable for collecting food insecurity data.

12. People living in areas, both rural and urban, with few retail outlets can find it difficult to buy affordable, healthy food, particularly if they have limited mobility or travel budgets. It is therefore vital that local authorities work with retailers to ensure that store development plans take into account the needs of all in their communities and that councils are pro-active in using planning to meet their public health objectives. Technological developments such as internet shopping have a role to play in enabling access to affordable food supplies, and it is vital that communities are not disadvantaged by poor broadband service. (Paragraph 51)
We welcome retailers opening more local stores that offer good value for consumers.

The Government also recognises that fast, reliable broadband internet access is essential for all rural homes and communities to benefit from on-line services, including food shopping. Under the £780m superfast rollout programme, the Government is committed to providing 90% coverage of superfast broadband by early 2016 and 95% coverage of superfast broadband by December 2017. All remaining premises will have access to a minimum standard broadband of at least 2Mbps by the end of 2015.

13. Food which is edible but surplus to requirements should not become waste. We welcome the efforts of a large number of charities to redistribute such food to people in need, but little surplus food is being redistributed and the vast majority is discarded. Redistributing food, particularly fresh food, is a logistical challenge: donors need an incentive to provide surplus food in the first place and it must be matched with the right recipients quickly while still edible. We welcome the food donations being made by producers and retailers, but organisations could donate higher quantities if they were more pro-active in finding outlets for surplus food in a timely manner. Retailers should work with charities such as Plan Zheroes who are playing a growing role in finding practical solutions. Moreover supermarkets must ensure all their outlets have a sound understanding of how to make surplus food available safely and legally but without being unduly risk-averse. (Paragraph 61)

See response to point 14 below.

14. We welcome the work of social enterprises such as Company Shop in developing innovative models to provide quality food at affordable prices to those with income constraints. There is considerable potential for these approaches to be scaled up. However achieving a step-change in the level of redistribution requires concerted action that it would be difficult for a diffuse set of largely voluntary organisations to deliver. (Paragraph 62)

Voluntary agreements with the food and drink industry encourage action in line with the waste hierarchy. If surplus food cannot be prevented, the next best option is to ensure it is redistributed for people to eat. The existing supply chain reduction target under the Courtauld Commitment encourages the redistribution of surplus food, which would otherwise become waste.

A resilient supply chain will always have some surplus, and we welcome the redistribution of good quality surplus food to charities that can ensure it goes to people in need. We welcome the actions that charities such as FareShare, FoodCycle, Company Shop and Plan Zheroes are taking to redistribute surplus food to support vulnerable people.

We agree that supermarkets play a crucial role in reducing waste and redistributing surplus food. We recognise that all major supermarkets have signed the Courtauld Commitment and continue to introduce innovative policies to reduce waste and redistribute surplus wherever possible.
15. Whilst approaches must be based on local requirements and driven by local communities, Defra should set up a task force to co-ordinate national work by charities, local authorities, retailers, food producers and manufacturers to establish an effective food redistribution network across the country. This should be a key remit of a Food Security Co-ordinator, who should also ensure that food and waste policies inter-link effectively. (Paragraph 63)

The Government commends the work of the food industry and redistribution charities in their efforts to reduce waste and provide food to people in need. Yet we are committed to doing even more to forge closer links between industry and redistribution charities.

Latest Courtauld 3 figures show that food redistribution has more than doubled since 2011. The increase from 2012 to 2013 was 80%. To build on this, last year we facilitated work by the industry to set themselves guiding principles for prioritising redistribution. Furthermore, we convened a Ministerial roundtable in January 2015, co-chaired by the Defra Secretary of State and Minister for Civil Society, to discuss how more surplus food can be redistributed, including supporting the work of local charities. Following this roundtable, WRAP has coordinated an action plan of work on food redistribution. This includes developing and sharing data to better understand the redistribution landscape and where more surplus food could be obtained for giving to people. Related to this, the action plan seeks to develop a common language and definitions to provide an underlying framework for redistribution. The action plan also considers the possibility of creating a supply chain working group, which would include work specifically on redistribution.

WRAP will be facilitating this work, with industry and charities principally taking ownership to deliver on the action plan. This is preferable to Government leading on this work. Industry and charities are best placed to coordinate this work as they have the operational knowledge to put words into action. We agree that Government has a role to play and we are fulfilling this by coordinating the relevant stakeholders and fostering a collaborative approach to increasing food redistribution.