



## **Chapter 1**

The National Food Strategy: Part One – July 2020

# **Purpose**

The COVID-19 pandemic has put the global food system under severe strain, at a time when the UK was already going through major constitutional change. The purpose of this interim report is to do two things.

First, to identify where the worst cracks have appeared during the pandemic and recommend some immediate Government actions to help those most affected.

Second, to prepare for the end of the EU Exit transition period on 31st December. We will consider how to maintain the UK's high food standards, while also becoming a champion of free trade.

Much more will need to be done, beyond what is set out here, to create a food system that restores our health and our environment. These issues will be addressed comprehensively in Part Two of the National Food Strategy, to be published in 2021.

**B**EFORE the pandemic turned everyone's lives upside down, I was working on a National Food Strategy. The aim of this independent review, commissioned by the Government, was – and still is – to rethink how the whole food system should work, from farm to fork. (See Terms of Reference in Appendix C.) I was due to publish an interim report in April 2020, setting out a diagnosis of the system – what good it produces, and what harms and why – but no recommendations of action. They were to be left for the final report.

Then COVID-19 hit the UK, and put our food system through its biggest stress test since the Second World War.


Supermarket shelves were stripped bare by people stockpiling as the virus began to sweep through the country.<sup>†</sup> Existing supply lines were already struggling to keep up when the Government exhorted the nation to "stay at home". This led, overnight, to the shutdown of the entire "out of home" food sector – restaurants, cafes, takeaways, and pubs – which had previously supplied 20-25% of the UK's calories.<sup>††</sup> Only a few takeaways remained open.

The whole supply chain had to realign itself, fast. Defra set up a group called the Food Resilience Industry Forum, whose job was to ensure that the nation got

fed. Every morning I sat in on the 8.15 conference call between civil servants and leaders in the food system: wholesalers, logistics companies, supermarket chains, farmers and food producers. You could almost hear the gears crunching as the machinery of supply and distribution was forced into a new mode of operation.

Food from the wholesale supply chain, which should have gone to restaurants, was donated in huge quantities to local authorities and charities, rather than see it rot.<sup>†††</sup> The UK's largest wholesalers worked with Government to deliver food to the shielded,<sup>8</sup> while others scrambled to offer their services to consumers. Flour factories that were used to churning out huge sacks of flour for wholesale now had to work out how to sell to individual consumers instead: a seemingly simple switch that actually meant reconfiguring factory lines, finding packaging suppliers capable of producing thousands of smaller bags at speed and getting the new product into the shops.<sup>9</sup> The fact that this logistical log-jam coincided with a boom in locked-down home baking explains why flour became one of the more conspicuous missing items on supermarket shelves.

The strain on the system was compounded by other worries: that the short straits between Calais and Dover (across which a quarter of our imported food is transported by ferry and tunnel) would be closed



by the French government; that social distancing rules would mean long-distance lorry drivers working alone instead of in pairs, so they would have to stop en route to rest instead of taking turns to drive; or that so many workers would be off sick that food processing factories might be forced to close in large numbers.<sup>10</sup>

At one point there was a sudden spike in the price of lemons coming into the UK. A rumour spread that drivers were being held at the border between Spain and France and told they would have to go into quarantine for a week. If true, this could have caused much bigger problems. 60% of our fruit and vegetables come from continental Europe in March (when the UK harvests are still a long way off).<sup>11</sup> But there had been no threat of quarantine from the French or Spanish governments, and GPS trackers on the vehicles of the major hauliers showed only about one hour's delay at the Spanish border.<sup>1111</sup> So what had happened to the lemons?

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<sup>10</sup> The peak demand spike was ~40% above normal, in the week immediately before lockdown.

<sup>11</sup> 20% if you include only food categories where it can be reasonably assumed that consumption is from the out-of-home (OOH) sector; 25% if you include food categories that are likely to include items purchased out of home (from the OOH or retail sectors) and items brought from home. Source: National Diet and Nutrient Survey Years 1-9, 2008/09 – 2016/17.

<sup>1111</sup> FareShare received 1,092 tonnes of food in donations from the Food Service sector between January and May 2020, a 237% increase in food donated compared to the total for 2019. In April alone, the sector donated 494 tonnes of food, equivalent to 1,176,214 meals. Source: FareShare.

<sup>11111</sup> Poland and Croatia did shut their borders for short periods.

It turned out that manufacturers of hand-sanitisers had bought up huge quantities to scent their products. There are so many moving parts in our food system, you can never be absolutely sure where the next threat will come from.

The team that had been working on the National Food Strategy was redeployed to work on three urgent issues: ensuring mainstream food supplies; getting food to the clinically shielded and other vulnerable groups; and getting help to those people whose finances would be so severely affected by the lockdown that they might struggle to feed themselves.

The team has recently regrouped; and, in the light of what we have seen and learned, I have decided to change the nature of this report.

In many ways the food system has proved extraordinarily resilient during this crisis. In difficult circumstances, it has continued to bestow on us a huge variety of reasonably-priced food that would have been unimaginable to previous generations.

But the pandemic has also brought about structural and behavioural changes that may last a long time. Many businesses will not survive the economic fallout. The hospitality industry has been all but obliterated – putting enormous pressure on the wholesalers, producers and farmers who supplied it. The road to recovery will be gruelling.

Many workers in the food system will lose their jobs, joining a great wave of the recently unemployed from other sectors. Some will face a daily struggle to feed their own families – something that would have been inconceivable to them at the start of the year.

The Government is right to focus its efforts on economic recovery. If we cannot create the jobs people need, everything else falls apart. But the economy we rebuild – the food system we rebuild – must reflect the lessons we have learned.

This crisis has created what educationalists call "a teachable moment": an unplanned window of opportunity when it suddenly becomes easier to learn

something. COVID-19 has brought into painful focus some of the flaws in our food system; not least its effect on our physical health.

The pandemic also happens to have coincided with urgent trade negotiations as the UK prepares for the end of the EU Exit transition period. The deals we make now will shape the food system of the future, affecting everything from the livelihoods of our farmers to animal welfare and climate change. The issue of how to strike trade deals without lowering food standards needs to be addressed now, before it is too late.

What you are reading, therefore, is not a diagnostic interim report. Instead, I have divided the National Food Strategy into two sections. Part One – this part – deals with the most urgent questions raised by both COVID-19 and EU Exit, and contains recommendations as well as analysis.

These recommendations tend towards the pragmatic and specific, rather than the grand and sweeping. They fall largely within the scope of Government and often use existing schemes and mechanisms to get things done. When time is of the essence – as it is for all the issues addressed here – it makes sense to pull the levers that already exist, and those that are known to work.

There is a great deal I haven't covered here. Part One does not provide a full diagnosis of the food system. It doesn't present a comprehensive vision for the future of farming or consider what a UK land strategy might look like. There is nothing on the carbon footprint of meat production or the role ruminants might play in restoring our soils. It does not address how different government departments intervene in the food system, or what structural changes are required to make these interventions more cohesive. I do not discuss here the different ways of defining "productivity", or consider in depth the central tension of the food system: how to resolve the link between the cost of food and the harm it does to our health and to our environment.



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I do not examine whether debates on the edge of nutritional science – about ultra-processed foods, for example, or the microbiome – are fads or the way of the future. There is much more to say about diet-related disease in general, and about the role of science, research, innovation, and data across the whole system.

All these topics will be covered in detail in Part Two, to be published in 2021.

There is a lot of work to do if we are to rebuild a food system that delivers safe, healthy, affordable food to everyone; that is a thriving contributor to our urban and rural economies; that restores and enhances the natural environment for the next generation; that is built upon a resilient, sustainable and humane agriculture sector; and that is robust in the face of future crises.

**This work must start now.**