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Day of Celebration and Action

On the 20th July, food partnership coordinators are coming together in the Houses of Parliament to meet MPs, celebrate the achievements of food partnerships and call for action on food to address the rising cost of living.

We support a **Food Bill in every nation, underpinned by an independent body to champion action and scrutinise progress, and a food plan and food partnership in every local area** to ensure collaboration working across the food system to address today's most pressing social, environmental and economic issues.

This is an opportunity for MPs to hear directly from food partnerships about the importance of having a food partnership and plan in every local area, addressing the rising cost of living, and having more investment in food and in local food governance mechanisms as part of the levelling up agenda.

Why now

Food policy developments across the UK nations are putting the spotlight on the work of food partnerships:

- **The Scottish Parliament passed the Good Food Nation Bill in June** after Stage 3 debate. This world-leading approach will create links between policy at the national and local levels, with Government, local authorities and health boards all creating good food nation plans. Those plans will set out clear outcomes, indicators, and policies across a range of areas relating to food including the environment, health and the economy. A Food Commission will also be established for scrutinising and making recommendations in relation to the good food nation plans and progress reports; conducting research; and providing advice to Scottish Ministers and relevant authorities in carrying out their duties under the Bill.
- **In England, the recent Government Food Strategy includes a recognition of the value of food partnerships** but no commitment to a national food bill or local food plans: *“Local Food Partnerships have already brought together councils and partners from the public sector, voluntary and community groups, and businesses to reduce diet-related ill health and inequality, while supporting a prosperous local food economy. We will learn from their approaches and work to understand and identify best practice in addressing food affordability and accessibility to healthy food. As part of our levelling up mission to narrow the gap in healthy life expectancy, government will identify the areas most in need of this insight, and Defra will work with local authorities and food charities in these priority areas.”*
- **In Wales, a private members Bill was tabled last year** to ‘establish a more sustainable food system in Wales to strengthen food security, improve Wales’s socioeconomic well-being, and enhance consumer choice’ and is projected to go into public consultation later this year. It will put a duty on Welsh Ministers to produce a Food Strategy, to establish a Wales Food Commission and for local authorities and other public services to develop community food plans to strengthen public procurement. The Welsh Minister of Social Justice has also announced £3 million of Welsh Government funding to support the development of cross-sector food partnerships in response to the cost of living crisis.
- In summer 2019, in the absence of Ministers in Northern Ireland, it was agreed that DAERA would begin to explore food with the Department for Economy, and other NI Departments and interested parties, the merits, scope and content of a possible **Food Strategy Framework which will develop strategic alignment across NI Departments and help shape a future food system for NI**. The proposed Vision for the Framework is: *“A transformed food system that protects natural resources for future generations, is economically and environmentally sustainable and provides safe, nourishing, accessible food to people, who make informed healthy choices.”* It recognises the interconnected nature of food issues, it uses an innovative food systems approach, based on the SFP model, to set a long-term vision, high level principles and areas for strategic focus, which will seek to optimise cross departmental working on food matters to deliver Programme for Government and departmental objectives. We need our Northern Irish politicians to sign the framework off and enable progress when they have an opportunity to return to work.

Who we are

The Sustainable Food Places (SFP) network is one of the fastest social movements in the UK. We are a growing movement of 80 food partnerships in cities and other places across the country. Through these cross-sector food partnerships, local authorities and other public bodies are working together with third sector, business and academic organisations to transform their local food system with the aim of improving public health and wellbeing; fostering community connection and resilience; building prosperous and diverse local food economies; and helping to tackle the critical sustainability issues of waste and the climate and nature emergency.

Our vision for a better food system

We are living through an unprecedented cost of living crisis and local authorities need backing from national governments to support those most in need through building resilient food systems. Food partnerships, alongside local authorities and other local organisations are playing a pivotal role in driving and coordinating effective community food responses to ensure nobody is left hungry in the face of ever rising food prices. But these local efforts need to be matched with action at the national level. We need a food system that enables everyone to eat well. Getting our food system right could help us not only reduce food insecurity but tackle obesity and disparities and meet our climate and nature targets. With smart investment, standards and the right food laws, the Government could also unlock innovation, drive economic growth and provide jobs.

1. National and local food policy

Scotland's Good Food Nation Bill sets a brilliant example and Governments in other nations should follow suit in setting frameworks for long-term change, to break the cycle of ill health and food insecurity. A Food Bill needs a cross-Government approach – bringing together all aspects of policy making into a coherent, integrated whole; and because what gets measured gets done, a food bill should set long-term statutory goals and enable monitoring of progress against metrics.

Similarly, at a local level, a food plan devised by the community and for the community needs a cross-stakeholder approach and food partnerships are ideally placed to lead the process.

2. Proper benefits and a living wage

The best strategy to ensure everyone has access to healthy food at a time of rising costs is not through food banks but to ensure incomes and benefits rise in tandem with inflation. We need to move away from emergency food parcels and aid towards properly calculated, adequately financed and dignified solutions to household food insecurity. Some local authorities are taking action, but national Government has yet to catch up.

Benefits need to cover the cost of living and the cost of raising children so that they can eat, grow and learn well. At the same time, some of the really big costs in people's lives

need to be controlled – housing and energy. These are all the job of good government. An inadequate social security safety net puts an unbearable strain on everybody.

One in six jobs in the UK (17 per cent) pay below the Real Living Wage with inadequate wages more likely to be paid to women, Black people and people of colour, who also disproportionately experience household food insecurity. Securing Real Living Wages is the bedrock of household food security and health equality. Business models predicated on poverty wages and hunger must no longer be acceptable, nor should they be permitted or facilitated by either government or company policy.

All levels of government, national, local, mayoral need to ensure they are Real Living Wage employers and to require their suppliers to follow suit. A national expectation for larger companies to pay the Real Living Wage, and to report on this transparently, should also be a priority.

It is worth noting that supermarkets are the largest private sector employers in the UK, so the wages they pay are a big part of achieving household food security.

3. Universal free school meals

Just under two in five children living in poverty in England (or 800,000 children) are not eligible for free school meals. In order to be eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and the Holiday Activities and Food Programme, children in England must be in families on qualifying benefits and earn less than £7,400 after tax. This means many fall through the cracks.

It is different in Wales and Scotland where the devolved governments are committed to providing free school meals for all primary school children, as well as more generous breakfast provision. Northern Ireland is exploring options including universal provision but there's been no such commitment to offer the same opportunities to children in England.

We need a move towards Universal Free School Meals in every nation to avoid eligibility complexities, remove stigma associated with free school meals and ensure a nutritional safety net for every child in school.

In the meanwhile, all eligible children should be automatically enrolled for FSM. The funding formula for all school meals (UIFSM and benefit-entitled meals) must be adequate to ensure healthy and sustainable procurement of food.

4. Investment in Healthy Start

The Healthy Start programme is a highly targeted way to support low-income young families to eat healthily. However, the restrictive eligibility makes it available to a very small number of families. Furthermore, there are children falling through the gap in support between eligibility to Healthy Start and Free School Meals – which is why we recommend increasing eligibility to all families on Universal Credit and equivalent benefits with children under 5 years old. We would also like to see it extended to families with no recourse to public funds. Children should not go hungry in the 5th wealthiest nation on the planet.

Take up of the programme remains stubbornly low which is why we recommend a promotional drive. Finally, inflation is outstripping the value of the allowance. The cost of infant formula, for example, has increased for some products by as much as 14% - more than double of the average increase in food prices. We call on government to increase the value.

5. Better public sector procurement

Every year, £2.4bn is spent on food for schools, hospitals, the armed forces and other public institutions. Currently, public sector caterers are asked to follow government buying standards for food (GBSF) but are allowed to get round the rules to avoid “significant increase in costs”. They are supposed to meet higher environmental and animal welfare standards, including verifiably sustainable fish, and must promote healthier eating, but many don’t.

We want the Government to introduce legally binding government food buying standards for the public sector to ensure the one in four people who eat in the public sector every year receive a healthy, sustainable meal. Government could facilitate shorter supply chains by enabling more contracts to be given to sustainable British farmers, who would receive more for their produce than they currently get by supplying the retail sector. Shorter supply chains feed more money into communities and help local authorities and the UK meet climate goals. Legally binding contracts could also do more to drive higher standard menus that prioritise less but better meat buying, and better vegetable and pulse choices.

6. Investment in local food systems

The UK Government could level up our food system by investing in a local food fund that would pay for local infrastructure like processing plants, markets, retail and distribution hubs. This would allow more money to be kept and invested in farm innovation as well as circulated in local economies. This needs to be coupled with support for building local networks of people (producers, food enterprises, communities, partnerships) where trusted relationships unlock and empower local food systems routes to market for producers.

In the meanwhile, existing pockets of funding, such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund or Levelling Up Fund, should be geared towards supporting innovation and local infrastructure like processing plants, markets, retail and distribution hubs to level up our food system.

7. Protect local funding

Public health funding has been cut by 24% per capita in real terms since 2015-16, and areas with the highest levels of deprivation have been particularly badly affected. This has prevented councils from being able to run services, to meet the growing health needs and health inequalities. It has led to vital interventions on child obesity being restricted to pilots in a few areas, and the withdrawal of £100m for weight management services after 1 year. This is despite obesity costing the NHS £6B a year and being one of the major drivers of

health inequalities. We need long term funding for local government public health to safeguard their important role at the forefront of tackling health inequalities.

The Household Support Fund should continue as a discretionary fund for local authorities to support the most vulnerable households over the long term. The current allocation criteria limit the options available to local authorities in terms of how they can spend the fund. Local authorities can identify with much more accuracy the families most in need and should be allowed to make decisions on the allocation to households based on local population needs.

8. Protect our farmers and food producers

The Government should formally commit to upholding animal welfare and environmental standards in all post-Brexit trade deals to protect British farmers against unfair competition by third countries.

British farmers have one of the best standards of animal welfare, antibiotics use, and pesticide use in the world. They will be undercut by trade deals which offer market access to farmers who only commit to voluntarily adopt similar standards. Countries like Australia have very poor surveillance of on-farm antibiotic usage and still permits the use of antibiotics as growth promoters in livestock production (banned in the UK since 2006).

Free trade deals without proper safeguards risk lower standard produce to be used in UK settings and products where country of origin information and method of production labelling is not required, such as cost-sector catering, school and hospital food, and processed products such as ready meals. Allowing imports that raise consumer concerns about the safety, quality, traceability, antibiotics stewardship, pesticide use and residues, animal welfare and other personal and ethical implications of what they are eating would be a huge step back.

9. Halve child obesity

All children should be able to grow up healthily no matter where they're from, but that's not the reality for many across the UK right now. Despite the Government introducing many strategies over the years, much of the action promised has been delayed or disappeared.

Government committed to ban the sale of energy drinks to people under the age of 16. We are still awaiting the legislation more than four years later. The Prime Minister has U-turned on his promise to introduce a 9pm watershed and online ban on junk food adverts and limit unhealthy multibuys that nudge us to buy more than we planned. It's not too late for the PM to reconsider, cut the delays and bring in these 'oven-ready' policies as soon as possible.

After the success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) which saw eight out of the top ten companies reduce the sugar content of their products by at least 15% and led to households reducing sugar intake by 30g per week, the Government haven't put this to good use to encourage more reformulation. Government should introduce fiscal measures

on high sugar and salt products, building on the evidence and progress from the SDIL. Currently there are voluntary reformulation targets on products most eaten by children, but without consequence for those who don't meet them, very little sugar has been removed. This clearly indicates the need for mandatory measures to be introduced.

10. Address the climate and nature emergency

Food production and consumption is one of the main drivers of climate change globally but is also one of the best ways to tackle the climate and nature emergency because the solutions will improve our health and tackle inequality and poverty. A specific strategy with clear targets for achieving net zero for the food and farming sector is urgently needed. It should include measures for making healthy and sustainable food more affordable and accessible, making public sector food exemplify a sustainable diet, clear messaging on climate friendly diets, and targets for less and better meat in our diets, starting with requiring businesses to report on what they sell. In the absence of national action, local areas are leading by example and using their control and influence to source climate and nature friendly food for schools, care homes and staff; transitioning to agro-ecology in the land they own or manage; taking action to prevent and manage food waste and supporting food businesses.

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