FOOD ACT!VE

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POSITION STATEMENT:

SUSTAINABLE DIETS

KEY MESSAGES

- The current food system, dominated by highly processed food and drink, is unsustainable and threatens public health and our environment
- Adherence to the Eatwell Guide, which is predominantly plant-based, would reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases, such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and cancer
- More must be done to ensure equitable access to a healthy, affordable and sustainable diet is achievable for all groups in society.

Overview

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) defines sustainable diets as "those diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations [1].

Food systems have the potential to support human health and environmental sustainability, yet the current food system threatens both [2]. Global food production has kept up with population growth but puts pressure on climate stability [3] and many people still lack sufficient quantity and quality of food and consume either low-quality diets or too much food [1; 4], which has resulted in high rates of non-communicable diseases such as obesity.

The UK government's 'Eatwell Guide' [5] outlines recommendations on healthy and sustainable eating. It supports public and planetary health by promoting consumption of fruits, vegetables, grains and fibre and suggests limiting sugar and processed meat intake.

However, adherence to the Eatwell Guide is currently low [6]; only 28% of adults and 18% of children consume five or more portions of fruit and vegetables per day. Saturated fat, sugar and salt intake exceed recommendations [7] and as well as having a significant impact on our environment, these ultra-processed foods can lead to excess energy intake. Price is a major determinant in creating and sustaining dietary change, as the cost of fresh produce has risen considerably in the past decade, pushing more low-income families into food insecurity, increasing micronutrient deficiencies and obesity rates [8].

What does the evidence say?

- Food production is one of the largest contributors to climate change, biodiversity loss, land and freshwater use; 32% of total greenhouse emissions are from the agricultural sector [2].
- More than half of food emissions come from animal products, particularly beef and lamb [4].
- Meat production has major consequences for land and water use – it uses more freshwater than any other human activity [9].
- Plant-based proteins, such as pulses produce 70x less greenhouse gas emissions than an equivalent amount of beef and use 150x less land [10].
- Changes needed to the national diet by 2032 to meet health, climate and nature commitments include +30% more fruit and veg; +50% fibre; -25% HFSS foods and -30% meat [14]
- Estimates suggest that dietary emissions would fall by 45% if the UK population adopted a diet in line with the Eatwell Guide [11].
- Although healthy, not all plant foods are sustainable. For example, avocados aren't sustainable due to the way they are exported and almond production requires huge amounts of water [4].
- Research has shown that UK diets compliant with the Eatwell Guide and WHO dietary guidelines offer considerable benefits to both health and the environment [9].

• To meet the Eatwell guide recommendations, the poorest 10 per cent of UK households would need to spend three-quarters of their disposable income on food [12].

• A survey found that 58% of shoppers are willing to change their eating habits to be healthier and more sustainable, although the perceived higher cost of sustainable eating remains a barrier [13].

Policy context

The National Food Strategy acknowledges the legal commitment the government has made to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2050 and ensure that 30% of our land is protected for nature by 2030. The Government are due to respond to these recommendations in a Food White Paper within six months of publication. The National Food Strategy also recommends expanding the Healthy Start voucher scheme to all households earning under £20,000 with pregnant women or children under five [14], which would result in an additional 612,000 people benefiting from the scheme. This recommendation is in line with the Eatwell Guide and would support increased fruit and vegetable consumption among low-income families.

The Government have established six sustainable food system indicators to measure progress of themes outlined in the 'Food 2030 strategy' [15].

The UN Sustainable Development Goals, intended to be achieved by 2030, recognise that tackling climate change also requires addressing social needs including health, education and food poverty [16].

Similar to the UK's Eatwell Plate, EAT-Lancet Commission planetary health plate was developed to set universal scientific targets for healthy diets and sustainable food production, acknowledging the environmental impacts along the entire supply chain from production to processing and retail [2].

Our position and what we will do

Policy change: Food Active's Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight includes a commitment to consider how Councils can support carbon reduction plans and strategies, address land use policy, transport policy, circular economy waste policies, food procurement, air quality etc., in addressing climate change and reducing the prevalence of overweight and obesity. We will continue to support local authorities to adopt the Declaration to bring together these two important agendas; and continue to support those who have adopted to meet these commitments.

Advocacy: We will support and promote these converging agendas c that align sustainability and public health messages; i.e. World ReFill Day, Walk to Work Day, National Growing for Well-being Week etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government must ensure a nation-wide shift to sustainable diets through long-term investment, along with commitments from other agencies responsible for the food system.
- Utilise the recommendations in the National Food Strategy which are geared around the following four themes; breaking the junk food cycle; reduce diet-related inequality; make the best use of our land and create a long term shift for food culture.
- The food industry should be held accountable for contributing to environmental damage on a mass scale and encouraged to discover new and innovative ways to lessen their impact on the climate.

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