

Royal Society for Public Health

RSPH response to consultation on 'Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit'

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) is an independent, multidisciplinary charity dedicated to the improvement of the public's health and wellbeing. We have a membership of over 6000 public health professionals encompassing a wide range of sectors and roles including health promotion, medicine, environmental health and food safety. Our vision is that everyone has the opportunity to optimise their health and wellbeing, and we seek to achieve this through our qualifications, conference and training programmes and policy and campaign work.

Shirley Cramer, CEO of RSPH, is one of the Commissioners of the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission.

(Are there any other public goods which you think the government should support?)

The 'Health and Harmony' report is a promising start towards a food and farming policy in the UK that promotes the public's health and wellbeing. Primarily, the move to reward the provision of public goods is excellent and long overdue. By rewarding the production of public goods, which the market does not pay for, public money can be used to help shift farming towards sustainable practices that benefit the environment and human health and wellbeing.

However, public health should be considered a public good in itself. Whilst many of the public goods listed do improve public health – for example the promotion of better access to the countryside, the reduction of pesticide use, and the promotion of clean air and water – it is vital that public health is recognised as a public good and that food and farming policy explicitly moves towards rewarding practices that improve the public's health.

Public health is inextricably linked with food and farming policy in many ways, and this is especially the case as the obesity crisis and antimicrobial resistance pose serious threats to the public's health and the NHS. Food prices in the UK have been influenced by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) as it has intervened in food markets, subsidising sugar and cereals and contributing to the affordability of unhealthy foods. This has exacerbated health inequalities as healthier foods have been shown to be consistently more expensive than less healthy foods, leading to inequality in access to a healthy diet [1] [2]. Growers of fruit and vegetables in the UK have not benefited from CAP subsidies to the same extent and horticulture has declined in the UK. Antibiotics use on farms also has drastic implications for human health, as the routine use of antibiotics in intensive livestock farming contributes to the emergence of antimicrobial resistance. There are countless other links between food and farming policy and public health from water pollution to pesticide residues to access to the countryside.

There are several specific ways in which food and farming policy could support public health through considering it a public good. Firstly, healthy diets can be encouraged by reducing the gap between affordability of healthy and unhealthy food. The production of more and diverse fruit and vegetables in the UK can be supported through subsidies, whilst there should be a shift away from producing cheap sugar. Whilst this measure may face challenges – from powerful agro-food companies, for example – it would be a much-needed step towards tackling the obesogenic environment from the supply-side. Improving the nutritional profile of food products should also be encouraged – for example by rewarding the production of less highly processed grain and flours and fresh fish with healthier fatty acid profiles – to further improve healthy diets. Other public health outcomes that should be supported include continuing the reduction of antibiotic use on farms, as well as the public goods mentioned above, including access to countryside and promotion of clean air and water.

Risks to public health must also be addressed in this transformative time: international trade agreements pose risks to public health as the possibility of cheap food with lower standards is increased. This could lead to increased foodborne disease, increased antibiotic use in our food and poor animal welfare. The use of antibiotics in the US, for example, is many times higher than in the UK [3]. Therefore, public health must always be considered as food and farming policies are considered.

Overall, the 'Health and Harmony' report is a positive step towards a food and farming policy that benefits the environment and the public's health. The biggest step that could be taken to improve the proposed policies is to explicitly include public health as one of the public goods that farmers will be rewarded for producing.

References

- [1] N.R. Jones, A. Conklin, M. Suhrcke, P. Monsivais, "The Growing Price Gap between More and Less Healthy Foods: Analysis of a Novel Longitudinal UK Dataset," *PLOS One*, vol. 9, no. 10, 2014.
- [2] N.R. Jones, T.Y. Tong, P. Monsivais, "Meeting UK dietary recommendations is associated with higher estimated consumer food costs: an analysis using the National Diet and Nutrition Survey and consumer expenditure data, 2008–2012," *Public Health Nutrition*, vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 948-956, 2017.
- [3] Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics, "Comparison of UK and US antibiotic use by farm-animal species," Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics, 2018.