

Royal Society for Public Health response to the IPPR Environmental Justice Commission call for evidence on nature, food and farming

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) is an independent health education charity, dedicated to protecting and promoting the public's health and wellbeing. We are the world's longest-established public health body with more than 6,500 members drawn from the public health community both in the UK and internationally. Our External Affairs team develops policy and campaigns to promote better health and wellbeing on issues including obesity, food, and healthy environments.

Our work on food and farming has developed over the past few years, and our Chief Executive, Shirley Cramer CBE, is a Commissioner on the RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission.¹ Food systems determine both public health and environmental outcomes, and we need a system that prioritises human and planetary health. As an organisation we are engaging with the National Food Strategy² to ensure that public health and wellbeing is a focal consideration for the new food system, alongside protecting the environment.

We know that a diet that is good for health is also good for the planet – according to the EAT Lancet Commission,³ we should be eating less and better meat, and more plants – the 'planetary health diet'. Given our public health expertise, we feel best placed to respond to the sustainable food and diets section.

How can Government (and others) champion a reduction in consumption of carbonintensive foods and promote sustainable diets in a way that is accessible for all?

Reduction in consumption of carbonintensive foods

By carbonintensive foods we are referring more broadly to meat, highly processed food, and food that is high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS), as these types of food are often damaging to human and planetary health.

Fiscal measures have proved successful and could be utilised for reducing consumption of carbonintensive foods. The tax on cigarettes and other tobacco products has raised the monetary cost of smoking, which is partly responsible for the reduction in smoking rates. The Soft Drinks Industry Levy used tax as a lever to encourage product reformulation;⁴ although this may not have had a direct impact on consumption, to avoid paying the tax manufacturers changed their products to contain less sugar.⁵ A tax on meat, ultra-processed food, and HFSS products could either reduce consumption by raising the price, or could encourage manufacturer reformulation to contain less taxable elements, in order to avoid paying extra costs. The result of either outcome could mean an overall reduction in consumption of carbonintensive foods, but this idea needs further exploration and a full impact assessment to ensure it would not exacerbate health inequalities.

Advertising restrictions could be enforced for carbonintensive products, in a similar manner to the current advertising ban for HFSS products during television programmes aimed at children under 16.

¹ <https://www.thersa.org/action-and-research/rsa-projects/public-services-and-communities-folder/food-farming-and-countryside-commission>

² <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/>

³ <https://eatforum.org/eat-lancet-commission/>

⁴ <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1003025>

⁵

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/832618/Sugar_reduction_summary_of_progress_2015-2018.pdf

RSPH supported the UK Government consultation proposing to introduce further advertising restrictions for HFSS products on TV and online, as there is a clear link between advertising exposure and consumption behaviour in relation to food.⁶ If the aim is to move the dial away from foods that are bad for health and the environment, advertising can play a role in shifting the balance in favour of the planetary health diet.

If we draw comparisons with smoking, labelling is another potential lever to reduce carbonintensive food consumption. Cigarette packets are covered with warnings about harm, with an aim to reduce smoking, and Chile has applied this model to food. In 2016, warning labels were introduced on the front-of-pack for HFSS products, and the result has been a significant drop in sales and consumption of beverages with these warnings⁷ (data is currently not available for other products). We could adopt this style of labelling, demonstrating not only the cost to human health but also to the environment.

Promote sustainable diets in a way that is accessible for all

A common barrier to accessing healthier food (including plant based products such as fruit and vegetables which are also less demanding on the environment) is the price; unhealthy foods, which are often carbonintensive, are on average three times cheaper than healthy foods.⁸

Consumers may need to be incentivised to adopt the planetary health diet. As part of our own research into UK supermarkets, we found that 61% of the public want supermarkets to have more offers on healthier products such as fruit and vegetables, while 46% want fewer promotions on unhealthy products. Subsidies could be put in place as an aid to moving towards a more plant-based diet.

Additionally, schemes such as Healthy Start should be promoted more. Healthy Start entitles pregnant women and low-income parents to free vouchers for milk, fruit and vegetables and infant formula.⁹ It was reported last year that 130,000 families missed out on these vouchers.¹⁰ If we want to promote sustainable diets in an accessible way, we should begin by utilising the systems already in place designed to achieve this.

Finally, we need to change the narrative to normalise the planetary diet, and educate on its importance for health and the environment. We all need to be talking and acting on this; there is a role for healthcare professionals, the Government, educators and industry to discuss having a sustainable diet with patients, the public, children and the workforce. To have a meaningful impact on health and the environment, this needs to be on everyone's agenda.

⁶ <https://www.rsph.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/41ac8703-5612-4be2-8334d41e3c9e34a0.pdf>

⁷ <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1003015>

⁸ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Broken-Plate.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/>

¹⁰ <https://inews.co.uk/news/healthy-start-families-lose-out-on-free-food-501126>