

CIEH response to Cabinet Office Strategy Unit consultation

"Food: an analysis of the issues"

February 2008.

(Response submitted by email)

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) is at the forefront of environmental and public health.

As a professional body, we set standards and accredit courses and qualifications for the education of our professional members and other environmental health practitioners.

As a knowledge centre, we provide information, evidence and policy advice to local and national government, environmental and public health practitioners, industry and other stakeholders. We publish books and magazines, run educational events and commission research.

As an awarding body, we provide qualifications, events, and trainer and candidate support materials on topics relevant to health, wellbeing and safety to develop workplace skills and best practice in volunteers, employees, business managers and business owners.

As a campaigning organisation, we work to push environmental health further up the public agenda and to promote improvements in environmental and public health policy.

We are a registered charity with over 10,500 members across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The CIEH is pleased to contribute to the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit's analysis of key food and food policy issues. Please find below responses to the questions posed. Further details can be provided if these would prove helpful

What do you think our collective goals or aspirations for food should be?

To ensure all food production, delivery, transport, food preparation and food service is carried out to meet high standards of hygiene, with appropriate controls in place to reduce risks to human health.

To ensure that consumers understand and can apply appropriate food safety measures in the home, to protect their own health and that of their families and dependents

To ensure that all manufactured foodstuffs are produced to meet key nutritional standards that limit risks to health i.e. without unnecessary levels of fats, sugars and salt.

To ensure that where individuals' lifestyles dictate a reliance on convenience foods, long term consumption of such foods should not be harmful to health.

To educate the public in terms of healthy, nutritional and wholesome foods and to assist and enable them to choose, use and easily access such foods, regardless of socio-economic status.

In the longer term to influence behaviour so that healthier foods will become "first choice"

To promote and reinforce healthy eating messages specifically to vulnerable groups i.e. pregnant women, young children, elderly people and carers.

To encourage the provision of healthier foods in all establishments where meals are consumed outside the home

To integrate consideration of environmental impact at all stages of the food chain

To encourage and incentivise action to reduce environmental impact throughout the food chain, from production and supply to waste disposal

What challenges does your organisation face in dealing with the health and environmental issues associated with food and what are the main barriers you face?

A failure to consider food holistically i.e. separation of food safety, diet and nutrition, environmental impact and sustainability. Issues are particularly exacerbated at operational level when responsibilities are allocated to different government departments, although "silosisation" can and does occur within individual Departments.

A lack of recognition of the value that Environmental Health practitioners (EHPs) can add to the public health agenda. EHPs have a unique advantage in that they visit all food businesses in the process of carrying out food safety control activities. This provides opportunities to build on the existing relationship with the businesses and discuss issues of diet and health. For businesses such as small independent caterers, who make up a significant proportion of UK food establishments, EHPs are the only consistent access point to advise on food issues. This key advantage is not exploited widely and indeed in some Local authorities is actively "prohibited" as such work is not a "statutory" duty. This may well be due to resource constraints but appears to be a short term saving at the expense of a long term health cost, when highly trained public health practitioners could make significant contributions to the diet and health agenda for little additional cost

What do you think consumers should be doing differently and how can this change be achieved?

Behavioural change principles e.g. the social marketing approach should underpin all interventions whether at national, regional or local level. This will require additional skills or provision of expertise for those with responsibility for designing and implementing interventions across the food landscape.

Consumers should be empowered to produce safe and healthy food. Where skills gaps exist these should be filled e.g. understanding food, food safety, healthy eating and preparing and producing nutritious and tasty food. Such knowledge and skills should become a core part of state educational programmes.

Consumers should be provided with easily understood information to allow informed choices to be made. Front of pack labelling assists in the process but a single system is likely to avoid confusion. Provision of information in catering outlets should be considered, in the first instance this might be through recognition of the provision of healthier foods e.g. through a national award scheme.

The wider extension of such information provision into areas of environmental impact/sustainability should be considered

Where consumers are not able to exercise choice e.g. institutional catering then enforceable nutritional standards should be introduced

What issues do you think the government should focus on in the future?

The holistic consideration of the food chain, integrating food safety, diet and health, environmental impact and sustainability. This will require analysis of relative impacts but the overriding consideration should be the impact on human health.

Consideration should be given to the best use of the full range of public health practitioners, to ensure that opportunities are maximised to deliver outcomes of greatest health benefit. An example of a failure to capitalise on a skilled workforce with unrivalled access to a key target audience can be seen in the restriction of environmental health practitioners to primarily regulatory interventions i.e. food control, rather than maximising opportunities to contribute to the diet and health agenda.

Empowering individuals to make and apply informed choice in relation to all aspects of food i.e. safety, health and nutrition and environmental impact interventions designed to achieve sustained behavioural change outcomes.

What other trends have you identified that may be of interest to this study?

A recent study of Food Poverty in NI carries within it a specific recommendation which both underpins and corroborates much of the preceding commentary regarding the need for local authorities to engage much more substantively than at present with the food industry in terms of food composition and labelling in the

interests of better diet and nutrition for not only vulnerable groups but the entire population.

Evidence from several studies analysed within the scope of the research project coupled with the primary evidence from those interviewed as part of this study shows that convenience foods make up a significant part of many peoples diet for a whole range of reasons including lifestyle factors, lack of cooking skills and lack of access to fresh foodstuffs in some instances.

Failure to utilise the considerable opportunities that exist to positively influence food composition, labelling, and distribution through the interface that exists between the local authority regulatory service and the food manufacturing and retail sector will be a significant opportunity wasted.

In light of the considerable evidence that indicates a serious looming public health issue for the UK in terms of obesity this issue must be seriously considered with a view towards harnessing the potential capacity and opportunity presented within the local authority sector.