



Faculty of Public Health

of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom

Working to improve the public's health

FPH response to Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit
May 2018

1. About the Faculty of Public Health

1.1 The Faculty of Public Health (FPH) is a registered charity and membership organisation for nearly 4,000 public health professionals across the UK and around the world. Our role is to improve the health and wellbeing of local communities and national populations.

1.2 We do this by professionally supporting the current public health workforce and the development of a future workforce, encouraging and promoting new public health research and policy, and improving public health practice at a local, national, and international level by campaigning for change and working in partnership with local and national governments on specific public health projects.

2. Summary and introduction

The FPH welcomes the consultation document, *Health and Harmony*, and is grateful for the focus on health. As Michael Gove said recently, “food is ultimately about health” and it’s an indication of the Government’s commitment to health that health is mentioned in the title of the consultation document: Health and Harmony. Despite this, the FPH believes there are areas where the relationship between agriculture and health could be more explicit and the potential scope for agriculture improving health strengthened.

Health and Harmony strongly supports the basic premise that public money must be spent only on those things that provide value to the public as a whole: public money for public good. However, in its current iteration, the consultation does not mention human population health as a public good, and this is an omission that we wish to be corrected. Population health as a public good in fact, should underpin and inform all aspects of the agriculture bill.

To achieve this and make meaningful changes required to improve health outcomes, we strongly recommend the Agriculture Bill:

1. Considers a **whole systems approach to agriculture and human health**.
2. Places **human health at the centre of the bill** and throughout the bill.
3. Delivers **clear benefit for population health across the socioeconomic gradient**.
4. Prioritises animal welfare practices that **minimise need for use of antibiotics**.
5. Focuses on agriculture practices that **support a healthy environment** and minimise impact on our natural ecology and biodiversity.
6. Reflects a **global view**.
7. **Aligns with key international goals** of which the UK is a signatory (e.g. SDG)

Contained within the above there are three key areas where the agriculture bill must consider human health:

- Healthy diets for all and improving health inequalities
- Antimicrobial resistance and links with animal welfare
- Links between health, the environment and sustainability

3. Healthy diets for all

As Rt Hon Michael Gove MP said in his speech opening a consultation event, “We produce food not to ensure that individual businesses are profitable, but we do it for human health and function”. This highlights that one of the most important roles of agriculture is provision of healthy, nutritious food for our entire population and therefore this must be a key aim for the agriculture bill. While export and trade must be considered in terms of benefit and risk to local and national economy, these considerations should not supersede the consideration of whether our national agriculture policies support the provision of healthy foods that are affordable and available to all segments of the UK population.

Low intake of fruits and vegetables is a significant risk factor for cardiovascular disease and cancers, and poor dietary practice is the number one behavioural cause of excess mortality in the UK. Only around 26% of the UK population consumes the recommended 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day, and only 16% of children aged 5 to 15. There is, therefore, potential for significant growth of the market and for improvements in health for all.

It is our contention that provision of affordable fruit and vegetables should be a key aim of the agriculture bill. There should be a particular focus on provision of affordable, indigenous fruit and vegetables to all segments of the population as a key priority with an aim of reducing health inequalities. One mechanism for this may be targeted funding to support growth and distribution of indigenous fruits and vegetables at an affordable price, so that everyone in the UK can afford a fresh and varied diet. This ‘vegetable subsidy’ could be paid for through a ‘fat tax’.

By encouraging domestic farming of lentils, peas and beans the agriculture bill can support both human health and the environment. These foods provide a high quality and healthy source of protein and fibre into the diet, and also benefit the soil by fixing nitrogen which reduces the need for artificial fertilizers. There is potential economic benefit as well, as meat consumption decreases, and consumer demand for alternate protein sources grows. This may involve support for ongoing development of new seed varieties that grow easily in the UK climate.

Supporting production of these foods at an affordable price will support procurement and catering within the public sector, thereby supporting wider provision of healthy foods within schools, prisons, hospitals and government bodies. The FPH would welcome government support to require public sector institutions to provide fresh, healthy and sustainably produced food via procurement measures.

4. Health inequalities

The disparity in life expectancy and health outcomes along the gradient of socioeconomic groups in the UK is well documented and the FPH would support a greater focus on ensuring the inequality gap is reduced, rather than exacerbated, through this policy, especially because it has such close links to human health. Evidence demonstrates that availability and affordability of healthy fruit and vegetables is limited within certain segments of the UK population. Children in the most deprived areas of the UK are twice as likely to be obese compared to children in the least

deprived areas and adults with no qualifications consume, on average, 50% less fruit and vegetables than those with a degree.

The agriculture bill should ensure that healthy foods are affordable and available to all, including the most deprived communities. Within less deprived communities the pricing of organic foods and healthier cuts of meat may not be a deterrent to purchasing patterns, and efforts to label foods to indicate production methods may effectively influence consumer choice. However, the affordability and impact of these measures on lower socioeconomic populations must be considered as well.

5. Antimicrobial resistance (AMR)

The agriculture bill describes a need to reduce the use of antimicrobials within animal-based farming practices, and notes that if resistance to antibiotics increases that this will place additional burden on the NHS. It is our view that this need is understated.

The McNeill Report on AMR in 2016 reviewed the link between animal agriculture and AMR and found out of 134 scientific peer-reviewed papers on the issue, 75% of them concluded that use of antibiotics in the livestock sector has a direct influence on the increased resistance to antibiotics (O'Neill, 2016). The report also estimated that the current 700,000 excess deaths globally which are attributed to AMR will grow to 100 million if practices remain on the current trajectory.

Decreasing use of antibiotics in the livestock sector is a critical step to saving our antibiotics for human use in the future. Measures to increase welfare standards for animals that will increase their natural resistance to disease must be included in the bill, in order to prevent use of antibiotics to the highest extent possible.

6. Environmental sustainability – Local and global

Consideration for the environment is included in the current bill, however its impact on human health is not included and must be emphasised. Climate change and other global boundaries are being stressed by the global agriculture sector, which in turn 'pose serious threats to human health and well-being' (Myers 2017).

The agriculture sector contributes approximately 25% to all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (GHGE), with the livestock sector responsible for approximately half of these. In three decades, emissions related to agriculture and food production are likely to account for about half the global 'carbon budget', or the limited amount of carbon dioxide and its equivalents that can be poured into the atmosphere if we are to hold global warming to no more than 2C. (Garnett 2017).

Use of nitrogen-based fertilisers has a direct impact on the health of our water systems. Pesticide use puts stress on ecological systems and threatens our biodiversity; pollinators are especially at risk of neonicotinoid pesticide use.

The UK imports over £2 billion worth of feed for the livestock sector annually (Parliament 2017). At the same time, we are importing the deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions related to growing these feed crops that is occurring in other parts of the world. While these effects may not be immediately felt within UK borders, the impact on climate change and other planetary boundaries is of global concern and reduces the sustainability of the global food system. The UK agriculture bill should consider its impact not only on the local environment, but should also consider knock-on effects on the global food system and the wider impact on planetary health.

Evidence suggests that healthy eating habits are also more sustainable (Tilman and Clark 2014).

The agriculture bill can support these co-benefits through policy and financial incentives that encourages farming of indigenous fruit, vegetables and plant-based proteins (e.g., legumes, beans, peas).

7. Recommendations

The Government has an opportunity to build upon the great efforts of those working and campaigning for environmental sustainability to support a food system where the health of people and the environment can thrive. To achieve this and make meaningful changes required to improve health outcomes, we strongly recommend the Agriculture Bill:

1. Considers a **whole systems approach to agriculture and human health**. Addressing the complex causes and consequences of human health and environmental damage requires the agricultural sector and public health sector to closely align goals and considerations related to population diet. Linking with public sector catering, national dietary guidelines, and public health professionals to support and encourage production, provision and consumption of UK grown foods that support local business, human health and the environment.

Healthy diets for all and reducing health inequalities

2. Places **human health at the centre of the bill** and throughout the bill. The food we eat is a fundamental driver of our health, and the agriculture bill should be underpinned by the aim of achieving clear public health outcomes. This requires support for more horticulture to encourage production of health-promoting foods at prices that are affordable for all segments of the population.
3. Delivers **clear benefit for population health across the socioeconomic gradient**. The greatest health burdens fall on the most vulnerable and deprived in our communities. The agriculture bill should be implemented to mitigate this by ensuring the realised benefits are distributed fairly. This requires support to ensure healthy produce is affordable and available to all segments of the population.

Antimicrobial resistance

4. Prioritises animal welfare practices that **minimise need for use of antibiotics**. Use of antimicrobials at a sub-clinical level must remain prohibited.

Health, the environment and sustainability

5. Focuses on agriculture practices that **support a healthy environment** and minimise impact on our natural ecology and biodiversity. Organic farming practices, no-till methods, grass-feeding and other measures should be identified that minimise reliance on pesticides and over-use of nitrogen and phosphorous based fertilisers.
6. Reflects a **global view**: environmental issues related to agriculture do not respect national or international boundaries. The causes of environmental damage are global, as are the impacts. The Agriculture Bill has a role to play in shaping the UK's role in the international

food system, and as a member of the global community to support agriculture policy that will enable sustainable food systems into the future.

7. **Will align the Agriculture Bill with key international goals** of which the UK is a signatory: we recognise the importance of long term international agreements and goals. As various aspects of agriculture have a direct impact on climate change and international food provision, the Agriculture Bill must support progress against both **The Sustainable Development Goals** and **The Paris Agreement**.

Conclusion

We encourage the Government to create an Agriculture Bill that places human health as a primary focus; one that will support public health as a public good, encourage local production of indigenous fruit and vegetables for provision at affordable prices, reduces the environmental impact of UK farming practices, and strongly disincentivises producers from using antimicrobials within routine farming practice.

We hope the government will work with city-leaders across the UK and globally to widely encourage and support healthy, sustainable farming practices, share learning, and ultimately support a sustainable global food system that can support the human population well into the future.

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