Images of collective care and action: Free Food at Grenfell; Fast food workers on strike

Blog by Dr Sharon Noonan-Gunning July 30, 2021

National Food Strategy
Omits the Right to Food

'The Plan' is insufficient to tackle England's growing nutritional crisis

This focuses on reasons why the recommendations will do little to tackle England's household food insecurity, food and health inequalities and growing nutritional crisis. The authors of The Plan come from a 'kinder capitalism' standpoint and want to reduce diet-related health inequalities. Yet we have a government that is not going in that direction.

Kinder capitalism?

For decades, neoliberal policies have created poverty and hunger, and privatised, charitised and hollowed out vital community and public health nutrition services. Now, we face removal of £20 week from universal credit, tax increases, squeeze on working conditions, increases in fuel and food prices, and crisis this winter.

Well-meaning efforts in the recommendations are constrained by its key problems and omissions. We cannot have any illusion that the government's white paper - in 6 months – will do any better to tackle the food poverty that millions of working-class families face.

Right to food and food democracy

In the face of government's ongoing assault on working people we should build a movement from grassroots around the Right to Food, based on our food and health workforces, communities, and linking with trade unions and civil society. At local level local authorities (LAs) should support Right to Food and adopt a rights-based approach linking with grassroots to build meaningful food democracy. We need a government with a collectivist ideology – strong social welfare, redistributive policies – to build on, for example, the *Right to Adequate Food* that was enshrined in the Brazilian constitution in 2010 under the Workers Party and

based on the struggles by CONSEA, its Food and Nutrition Security Council. This brought together a movement for food democracy and food sovereignty.

The Plan: a short introduction

The National Food Strategy (NFS) independent review proposes The Plan. It is research and information rich and provides rationale, cost-benefit analysis for a set of recommendations that aim to transform the UK's food system. It takes a broad approach drawing on systems thinking. It focuses on 4 strategic objectives: *1. Escape the junk food cycle to protect the NHS. 2. Reduce diet-related inequality. 3. Make the best use of our land. 4. Create a long-term shift in our food culture.* It acknowledges the role of ultra-processed-foods in harming health as the 'unintended consequences' of the food industry. 'Obesity' provides a link between junk food cycle and protecting the NHS. To reduce diet-related inequality it focuses on children's health and community. The role of food businesses and the public sector in food provisioning and proposals for new governance tools run throughout. It makes a range of recommendations for increased state intervention and new governance arrangements. It is based on free-market principles. The Plan follows Part One that amid the pandemic and UK leaving the EU, reviewed food insecurity and trade in July 2020.

Problems

Recommendations to tackle household food insecurity are weak because they ignore:

- austerity
- funding cuts to local authorities (LAs)
- impact of disinvestment on nutritional health and public health/community food services.

There is a shift towards increased state intervention but tackling health inequalities remains controlled by market forces and competition that lead to fragmentation of services, postcode lottery in access and maintains inequalities.

Prevention

It suggests the prevention focus is lost but does not say how or why (e.g., austerity, disinvestment and market forces). To rebuild, investment and a comprehensive plan, are needed.

The Plan relies on behavioural change as substitute for structural change, for example research about people 'eating fast' in UK. But what drives this, if not short lunchtimes and breaks, and pressures driven by performance and targets?

Means testing

There is continuation of means testing food and nutrition for mothers and children through voucher schemes that is stigmatising.

The increase of threshold for eligibility for free school meals from £7k to £20k leaves too much 'wriggle room' for Government.

Community

Community eat-well recommendations are based on contentious approaches – the medicalisation of food, prescriptive methods, stigma and competition.

Responsibility for community nutrition seems to shift from LAs to the Primary Care Networks (PCNs) with no explanation.

There are no recommendations about how to remove 'food swamps' from areas of deprivation.

'Obesity'

The Plan's discussion on diet-related illnesses focuses on 'obesity', that continues to be framed as the major problem, burden on society and rooted in lifestyle i.e. 'individual' choices. A framing that produces blame and stigma.

It carelessly uses stigmatising language. Despite a seeming shift in narrative towards 'diabetes', 'fat' people remain the problem.

- It uses potentially fear based messaging
- Its cost comparison with cancer treatment ignores research that has shown this as highly problematic, illustrating stigma in health system
- It continues an alarmist, stigma creating narrative by suggesting that tackling 'obesity' will protect the health service.
- Weight stigma research is omitted
- 'Obesity' should not be the problem, instead its inequalities

Market failure

Food at school remains open to competition and market forces. What is needed is a comprehensive and universal approach to food throughout the school day and role of food in schools.

Procurement proposals for public sector food builds on existing failings of free market in procurement.

Lack of investment, centralised plan are substituted by market forces that will continue fragmentation, 'post-code' lottery and push more responsibility into our communities to fill the gaps

Omissions

- That the Right to Food be enshrined in UK law.
- Real living incomes and strong welfare system e.g., a cash first approach, basic universal real living incomes.
- Impact of austerity and spending cuts on local government.
- 'Obesity' stigma as health harming and a contributor to health inequalities.
- Diets and health of older people.

- Universal Free School Food.
- Rich history of community-based, social and public health nutrition
- Voices and experience of public health nutrition workers: 'formal' – nutrition health professionals and 'informal'- experienced lay workers
- Role of local authorities.
- Role of communities and workforces.
- Investment, investment, investment

Food democracy is also omitted. How is the public - citizen caregivers, young people, workforces, diverse communities – to be involved in decisions that change our diets?

- Removing meat from school food standards
- New reference diet
- Developing protein alternatives

Actions

Adopting the Right To Food not only provides legal means to hold UK governments to account but also a vehicle to build a united food movement that can deliver fundamental change throughout the food system. The potential for a social movement was seen before and during pandemic as communities and workers came together to feed all in need. The right to food is linked with food democracy and can meaningfully contribute to transforming food system to end food and nutrition insecurity and inequality. Organise to feed people in need this winter.

To read more please see https://food-whosechoice.com/national-food-strategy/

What to do next

Support the Right to Food Campaign:

https://www.ianbyrne.org/righttofood-campaign

Adopt the logo:

Get active with Food Inequalities Rebellion
https://foodinequalitiesrebellion.wordpress.com/

Get organised, and help feed people in your locality

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