

Submission to Labour's NPF Consultation on sustainable food

The co-operative movement has long been concerned with access to quality, affordable food for ordinary people. The first retail co-operative in Rochdale in 1844 saw ordinary textile mill workers come together in response to the expensive, poor quality food available from private businesses, to provide the community around them with decent food they could afford.

Co-operative retail societies continue to lead the way on food justice, through partnerships with food charities like the Trussell Trust and Fareshare; innovative work on tackling food waste; by keeping shops open in areas that other food retailers have written off as unprofitable; through local sourcing and supporting British farmers; and by leading the fight for Fairtrade. The wider co-operative movement, too, is taking action on food justice, through allotment co-operatives, community food partnerships, co-operative councillors taking action on holiday hunger, and community fridges and kitchens.

However, hunger cannot be solved through community and co-operative action alone – it requires a robust legislative framework, with measurable and enforceable targets, to ensure physical and financial access to adequate food.

Food sovereignty

1. Are these the right principles on which to build our food policies?

2. Are there other core principles we should adopt?

3. What form should a right to food take?

There are two main options available: a legally enforceable social right to food embedding the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights into UK law, or incorporating Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG2), “zero hunger by 2030” into domestic legislation.

We submit that Labour’s right to food should be based on SDG2 on the basis that the Global Goals are more widely understood than the Convention, that SDG2 focuses specifically on hunger which the Covenant does not, and the SDGs already feature in a number of Single Departmental Plans so would be easier for Departments to embrace as civil servants have already begun to understand their impact.

There are two key relevant SDG 2 targets which need to be on the face of any Bill:

- By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round.
- By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons.

5. Should we establish in law a universal right to healthy food or should we first prioritise the rights of access to healthy food for certain population groups, such as school children; expectant mothers; elderly and vulnerable people receiving care?

To end hunger, a right to food needs to be universal. In practice the state already provides access to food for particular groups: those in hospital, those serving in the armed forces, 5-7 year olds and those entitled to free school meals, and prisoners for example. Additionally, there are schemes such as Healthy Start which seek to address the nutritional needs of some pregnant women and young families.

Adopting SDG2 would result in some prioritisation in practice as it does specify particular groups namely infants; adolescent girls; pregnant and lactating women; and older persons, and therefore a future Labour & Co-operative Government could initially build on existing schemes which address these groups first. However, any new legislation should be universal

in coverage if it is to be successful in ending hunger as there are other vulnerable groups outside those specified by SGD2.

6. Should there be a duty to provide food or should the duty be to avoid hunger, or malnutrition?

It should be a duty to ensure physical and financial access to adequate food, not a duty on the state to provide food. We have around one million people living in food deserts; and the cost of public transport is prohibitively expensive for many. We need to raise living standards, particularly for those on benefits, make public transport affordable, have greater regards to food in planning, support food retailers in food deserts, and work hard to design out food deserts.

7. Is there a need to review and reform land law and public land management systems in order to underpin a sustainable food system?

8. Should we establish a Land Commission to conduct a review and make legal recommendations and, if yes, what should its remit be?

9. Should we seek to integrate our vision with that of the devolved administrations which operate under different systems?

10. What should a sustainable land policy look like?

Our submission focuses on the right to food, but as the consultation recognises by starting off with the principles of food sovereignty, it is difficult to address the food system without the considering issues of land ownership, community rights, and producers.

Our 2017 housing policy states that there should be a “public benefit principle” applied to the disposal of any public land. In that context it enables co-op and community led housing but quite easily be extended to food.

Food production and distribution

11. What are the national and international barriers, legal, commercial or administrative, that might constrain our development of sustainable, healthy and efficient food systems?

Brexit poses significant challenges for food producers and consumers alike, and it would remiss not to address these here however briefly. A recent paper, which the Co-operative Party’s conference in 2018 adopted as policy (*Britain’s relationship with the European Union*), included the following recommendations:

- straightforward and transparent processes for seasonal visas for EU and non-EU citizens
- a clear post-Brexit agricultural strategy

- Public food procurement policies should be shaped to favour buying local, seasonal British produce, as explored by our paper *Six Steps to Build Community Wealth*.

12. What measures should we take first to ensure local food production is environmentally and economically sustainable?

13. What most constrains the economic and environmental sustainability of food producers?

14. How can we best tackle food waste?

Many co-operatives work closely with FareShare to distribute unsold food. Central England Co-operative's partnership with FareShare EastMidlands stands out from other schemes as the retailer uses its own distribution vehicles to collect and deliver store level surplus to FareShare depots rather than waiting for collections from charities themselves which allows easily perishable goods to be distributed. The long-term goal is to see 100 % of best before goods that have not been sold redistributed and put to use by good causes. This initiative could with support form the basis of a national scheme which together with other scheme significantly reduce food waste.