British Psychological Society response to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

National Food Strategy - Call for Evidence

The British Psychological Society, incorporated by Royal Charter, is the learned and professional body for psychologists in the United Kingdom. We are a registered charity with a total membership of just over 50,000.

Under its Royal Charter, the objective of the British Psychological Society is “to promote the advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of psychology pure and applied and especially to promote the efficiency and usefulness of members by setting up a high standard of professional education and knowledge”. We are committed to providing and disseminating evidence-based expertise and advice, engaging with policy and decision makers, and promoting the highest standards in learning and teaching, professional practice and research.

The British Psychological Society is an examining body granting certificates and diplomas in specialist areas of professional applied psychology.

Publication and Queries
We are content for our response, as well as our name and address, to be made public. We are also content for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to contact us in the future in relation to this inquiry.

Please direct all queries to:-
   Joe Liardet, Policy Advice Administrator (Consultations)
   The British Psychological Society, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester, LE1 7DR
   Email: consult@bps.org.uk   Tel: 0116 252 9936

About this Response

The response was led on behalf of the Society by Saskia Perriard-Abdoh, BPS Policy Advisor.
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Your views
Remember, this process will be used to discover actions and policies both big and small to help transform the food system. This might include ideas that:

- help citizens make informed decisions about the food they eat,
- increase access to and affordability of high-quality food;
- help prevent diet-related disease;
- make food production more environmentally sustainable, and help prevent climate change;
- create a flourishing countryside rich in wildlife;
- support farming, fishing and food businesses and communities thrive, benefitting employees and the wider community;
- promote the highest standards of animal health and welfare;
- put our food system at the forefront of innovation

We would like to understand the rationale behind your idea and study any accompanying evidence. For example, it might be an innovation that is already working well in your home, neighbourhood or business and could be scaled-up; or perhaps it is already happening in other countries. It could be a policy which could take a smaller idea to scale, or make a big idea a reality. We are also open to new ideas that might not have been tested but which you think have the potential to improve the system.

Please enter your response below

- More Information about how to respond
  (1,000 words or fewer)

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We welcome the government’s recognition of the importance of embedding a National Food Strategy across government departments. Improving our relationship to food cannot be addressed through single interventions undertaken in isolation of one another. A whole system approach is required to both enable change and avoid the diffusion of responsibility whereby our relationship to food risks becoming nobody’s top priority or responsibility. It is important that specific approaches and department commitments embedded in the forthcoming National Food Strategy (i.e. food education, procurement etc.) are accompanied with clear processes and indicators that measure their impact.

As outlined in our recent Psychological Perspectives on Obesity report, environmental and genetic factors both influence an individual’s predispositions towards the food choices they make (British Psychological Society, 2019). Psychologists looking at behavioural change also demonstrate that individual policy levers or solutions are less effective if they are deployed in isolation of one another (Swinburn, B., et al., 2012; Michie, S., et al., 2014).

Food and Mental Health:

Food and emotions are linked. People use food to respond to both positive and negative emotions – such as celebrating after a good day or to feel better after a bad day (Chao et al., 2017). For example, emotional eating such as restrained eating, which is heavily promoted in the media as a method of weight loss, can be psychologically and physically harmful as well as being reliably associated with weight gain over time (Polivy et al., 1988).
On the other hand, in our current obesogenic environment, anyone who is not conscious of their diet is at risk of gaining weight due to hidden energy content and excessive portion sizes. While education about healthy eating is important, we must move beyond simply introducing measures aimed at education, given that modern food supply, production methods and advertising have made energy dense foods cheap, highly palatable and widely available. Government, private businesses and food manufacturers all have an important role to play (Elks, et al., 2012).

The BPS would support the position that government has a responsibility to encourage businesses to make food manufacturing and marketing decisions which improve the nation’s health. It is also worth noting that protecting the national health has, in the past often required businesses to be forced through legislation, rather than simply encouraged, to change their business practices (see for example the tobacco industry) (Public Health England, 2018).

**Mental Health:**

While the relationship between mental health and diet is complex, the experience of mental health problems often increases the risk of having a negative relationship to food. For example, adverse experiences in childhood such as abuse, stress, mental illness, trauma, and family conflict have all been associated with behaviours that are associated with an increased risk of developing an unhealthy relationship to food because of chronic activation of the body’s stress response system (Hughes et al., 2017). Indeed, up to half of adults attending specialist obesity services are estimated to have experienced adversity in childhood or adult life (Felitti, et al., 1998; Hemmeringsson et al., 2014).

**Social and Environmental influences:**

Twice the number of children in the poorest 10% of the population are classed as obese compared to the richest 10% (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2017). This disproportionate burden reflects the greater ‘obesogenic’ environmental pressures they faced among lower socioeconomic groups. Energy-dense foods tend to be cheaper and more prevalent in areas of deprivation. For example, there are more fast food outlets in more deprived areas (Cummins et al., 2007). Energy dense food is therefore more ‘salient’ in deprived neighbourhoods which is often compounded by the lack of access to healthy food options. These socioeconomic challenges all shape individuals’ food choices.

**Communications and Marketing:**

Psychology can inform social marketing that successfully advises and encourages without being perceived as controlling or fostering stigma. For example, by using approach rather than avoidance goals (e.g., eat 5 pieces of fruit and vegetables a day versus avoid high fat foods) that are shown to be more effective. Psychological involvement in the design of public health initiatives is needed in order to ensure that increased awareness is accompanied by higher levels of engagement. Many psychologists have also highlighted that a risk of standard social marketing approaches is to construct diet-related behaviours as an individual problem and personal choice (British Psychological Society, 2019). In the same way that it took years for cigarette companies to take responsibility for the effects of their products, the narrative of personal choice enables manufacturers of food with high levels of fat, sugar and salt to refute their role in perpetuating poor health outcomes at a population level (Alexander, 2015; Moss, 2015).

**A Psychology Informed National Food Strategy:**

Biopsychosocial approaches account for the fact that individuals and environments both have an important role to play and influence each other. By focussing attention on the causes of behaviour, and not simply the behaviour itself (i.e. unhealthy eating), biopsychosocial approaches successfully integrate these many complex influences within a single framework. It is therefore essential that psychologists are included in the development of a National Food Strategy which is effective, evidence-based and sustainable.

Psychologists not only have a contribution to make in the design, delivery and evaluation of individual measures and interventions, but psychological evidence can provide important insights at a macro policy level by helping governments and public bodies to understand people’s reactions to regulation and legislation, thereby creating more effective marketing campaigns, designing better universal...
prevention approaches and increasing the efficacy of community-interventions.

In order to do so, psychological evidence should be incorporated at all levels in the government’s National Food Strategy including:

- Understanding attitudes and tackling weight and diet-related stigma.
- Creating more effective marketing and social-marketing campaigns aimed at promoting better health outcomes.
- Helping citizens make informed decisions about the food they eat and increase access to and affordability of high-quality food, and help prevent diet-related disease.

References


End.