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**Environmental Audit Committee Inquiry: The Government’s approach to sustainable development**

Written evidence submitted by Sustain: the alliance for Better Food and Farming. Sustain advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the working and living environment, enrich society and culture and promote equity. We represent around 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local level. Amongst our influential projects and campaigns are:

* **Children’s Food Campaign:** whichaims to improve young people’s health and well-being through: Good food education in every school; protecting children from junk food marketing; clear food labelling. Over 150 organisations support this work.
* **Campaign for Better Hospital Food:** a coalition of organisations calling for compulsory nutritional, environmental and ethical standards for food served to patients in NHS hospitals in England.
* **Sustainable Food Cities:** a network of local food partnerships improving local food systems by bringing together local government, community groups and businesses. It is run nationally by Sustain, the Soil Association and Food Matters and involves over 30 cities across the UK.
* **Beyond the Food Bank:** working to alleviate food poverty by calling on Government to tackle the root causes such as low pay, as well as to improve and protect publicly-funded nutrition programmes.
* **The Big Dig:** a national event programme raising the profile of community gardens and encouraging more people to take part.

We believe that food and farming must be a key consideration within the Environmental Audit Committee’s inquiry as it has one of the largest impacts on the sustainability agenda, including contributing to climate change, biodiversity loss, and people’s health, to name a few key areas. Conversely, better food and farming is part of the solution, providing opportunities for sustainable resource use, good livelihoods, healthy living and community cohesion.

This submission does not represent the detailed views of all of Sustain’s member organisations, some of whom we understand have put in their own submissions. We are keen to see food and farming firmly on the sustainability agenda, particularly in light of what we see as the relatively narrow current focus of Defra on economic sustainability, and far less on environmental and health factors.

**1. What key policies are needed over the course of this Parliament to adequately protect the environment, promote growth in the low carbon sector and improve wellbeing?**

Our document on what Sustain and ourexpert members mean by and promote as ‘healthy and sustainable food’ is available at: [www.sustainweb.org/sustainablefood/](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Ckath%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CMicrosoft%5CWindows%5CTemporary%20Internet%20Files%5CContent.Outlook%5C0XXN9EPY%5Cwww.sustainweb.org%5Csustainablefood%5C)

Government must accept the responsibility to ensure that good food (i.e. safe, traceable, healthy, ethical and sustainably produced) is as affordable, accessible and as well marketed as poor food (i.e. unsafe, poorly traceable, unhealthy, unethical and unsustainably produced). Only when this premise is put at the heart of policy making will we see a more sustainable food and farming system become a reality. From this premise stems many areas of policy making that need to improve, a few of which are detailed below:

* *Public procurement*: public money should be used to ensure the highest standards. There has been progress in recent years in the creation of standards, which now apply across much of the public sector, but some areas are still exempt e.g. academies established before June 2014, which constitute almost half of secondary schools. And even the standards already adopted do not go far enough, for example with little guidance on encouraging less (but better) meat consumption - arguably the most neglected aspect of the UK’s contribution to climate change. In most cases existing standards are not effectively monitored and carry no penalties if breached.
* *Subsidies* – our food system is underpinned by subsidies that often steer producers to contribute to a less sustainable food system. One major element of this is through the application of the Common Agricultural Policy at UK level. The UK Government has an opportunity as part of negotiations around EU membership to overhaul CAP to ensure that subsidies no longer:
	+ go to products proven to damage health (e.g. sugar);
	+ support farming practice that damage the environment – but rather rewards protection of pollinators and biodiversity and reduces damaging chemical inputs;
	+ favour larger farms, where a subsidy ceiling would allow smaller farms to compete and keep more jobs in farming.

Beyond EU subsidies the UK Government could do more to assess its own investment against sustainability criteria. This could build on the nutrient profiling methods which are used for restricting junk food advertising aimed at children. World Obesity Forum tested the application of nutrient profiling against Government investment through the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, the Rural Development Programme for England, and Technology Strategy Board. They found that between 2010–2014 millions of pounds of investment supported unhealthy food production, contributing to ill health.

* *Reviewing taxation*, to promote more sustainable food, including adopting a [duty on soft drinks](http://www.sustainweb.org/childrenshealthfund/) that have added sugar, which we believe should be ring-fenced to pay for a programme to improve children’s health and protect the environment they grow up in.
* *Planning policies*, which need to be reviewed to ensure that at the very least local government has greater powers to shut down existing fast food outlets in areas where there are too many, and to prioritise provision of healthy, affordable food, such as local street markets.
* *Government dietary advice* should be revisited to take into account good nutrition and sustainability. We believe there is no place for the government to be promoting anything that does not support a balanced diet. As such, the segment of ‘foods and drinks high in fat and/or sugar (HFSS) in the ‘Eatwell’ plate should be removed, and referenced in accompanying text as ‘treats’ to be eaten only in moderation. The ‘Eatwell’ plate should also take into account environmental and sustainability considerations.

**2. Does the Government’s current fiscal and legislative agenda accord with the action required and, if not, why not and where might it be improved?**

We do not believe that Government action to date across those issues covered above and more broadly on food and farming meet the pressing need to improve. There is a historic lack of a joined-up approach between Government departments. This is more notable recently, even within departments. For example, Defra are doing separate 25 year plans for nature, and for food and farming, despite agriculture and the food system having perhaps the largest impact on our natural environment and climate change. To treat these two key issues in siloes ignores the often complex inter-relationship between the two, and will fail to identify those policies that best meet all needs of protecting the environment, supporting the economy and improving the health of our society.

**3. Where should responsibility lie in Government for ensuring the sustainable development approach is adopted by all Government departments?**

In order that this agenda is taken seriously it needs to be led from the top, and we would venture that Cabinet Office and the Treasury have more influence over multiple departments than any single department (for example, Defra) in getting others to help meet national priorities.

**4. What metrics could the Committee use to monitor the Government’s performance on sustainable development over the course of the Parliament?**

There are a number of powers commanded by central Government, and moreover the public sector, that impact on the sustainability of our food and farming system. We believe that Government has the responsibility, not only directly in the public sphere, but also in its role to influence business, the general public and the country as a whole to strive for high standards. The indicators suggested below are all areas that through direct purchasing or policy, Government can and does have an impact.

* Bee/wildlife population – species numbers (as affected by Defra farming policy e.g. neonicotinoids)
* Fish population –The Government is legally obliged to fully implement the Common Fisheries Policy, including;
	+ Phasing in a total ban on discarding
	+ Managing all fisheries at Maximum Sustainable Yield
	+ Setting fishing quota at scientific levels, as advised by ICES

However, to better manage fisheries, and protect our marine ecosystems beyond what the Common Fisheries Policy is designed to do, we believe that Government should also be measured on:

* The number of fisheries that have achieved Marine Stewardship Council Certification
* The number of fish-farms that have achieved Aquaculture Stewardship Council Certification
* The number and combined area of UK Marine Protected Zones (MPZs).
* Increase in farm land with sustainability certification e.g LEAF, Pasture Fed Livestock mark, Organic or Biodynamic.
* Increase in consumption of food with sustainable certification e.g. Organic, Fairtrade, Marine Stewardship Council logo, in a) public procurement, in b) general public purchases through retail, and in c) commercial foodservice.
* We would also suggest Sustainable Development Indicators, and commend the excellent work on this by the disbanded Sustainable Development Commission.