London Assembly response to Mayor's draft Food Strategy

This response has been agreed by the Environment Committee, with input from members of the Health Committee and Economy Committee. The bulk of the response has been agreed without objection; there are a few points where a minority of the relevant membership dissents from the main text: these are noted where appropriate.

Aims and approaches

We welcome a cross-cutting strategy that captures the impacts of London's food systems on a wide range of outcomes, and the roles of a range of Mayoral and other policy areas in influencing these food systems. We support the focus on health, economy (and particularly food poverty and accessibility in both of these) and on environment. We support the coverage of the settings in which food is accessed: homes; shops and eating out; public institutions and community settings; and maternity, early years, education and healthcare. We note that good food shopping is inextricable from good food at home, and that good food for Londoners' health is a much wider issue than good food in healthcare settings, but this response does not attempt to resolve the tensions between different possible chapter divisions in detail.

We welcome that the strategy begins to bring out the roles of different actors and set out their commitments to support the objectives in their various ways.

The strategy could do much more to detail actions, in particular measurable objectives, milestones and targets. A priority target should focus on tackling childhood obesity in London, by decreasing the promotion and accessibility of unhealthy food, as well as promoting physical activity. We look forward to the development of these in the action plan and final strategy. We heard that it is felt that not specifying targets gives flexibility. We believe that there is always flexibility to explain that a target has been no longer pursued for the sake of some other goal, but to do so explicitly, by dropping some targets and including new ones, is more transparent. Targets should be specified and there should be milestones against which progress can be assessed, on the way to achieving outcomes. We therefore look forward to the publication of the implementation plan; since it is to be in advance of the final strategy, we may seek to respond to the implementation plan with further recommendations for the final strategy.

We note that the GLA has limited resources specifically for food work, including a £144,000 budget for projects and 3 staff (not all full-time) in the team. We would hope that a clear statement and quantification in the final strategy of the wide and important benefits to London of food work might support a case for more dedicated resources and/or for collaborating between parts of the GLA Group to support food-based work with their own resources.

We applaud the intention to communicate the principles of the food strategy to Londoners and provide ways in which they can support the objectives. However, we do not think that the draft has demonstrated that embedding these simple ideas in dozens of pages of strategy-speak is necessarily the best way to get them across to a wide audience. We suggest that it might be more effective to produce separate publications: one or more aimed only at the public; and something separate to guide action by delivery partners and to enable the Assembly and others to hold the Mayor and his partners to account. Sustain pointed to the popularity of its stand-alone Ten Tips document, which may be a good model for a publication for Londoners. If we can't engage parents at home in changing their approach to nutrition then we will make little progress in tackling the growing obesity crisis, especially amongst our children.

We welcome the commitment to lead by example at the GLA, through for example the promotion of healthy, sustainable food in the GLA Group and using procurement to increase

the provision of fresh, healthy meals. However, we would like to see more detail on the GLA's role in promoting healthy food procurement and provision in other public institutions, such as hospitals, to ensure the most vulnerable Londoners are able to benefit.

Food growing, security and resilience

We heard that there could be opportunities to increase London's local food production. We welcome this for its potential environmental, economic and health benefits. It may marginally alter London's sensitivity to international food markets, but will not fundamentally change the situation that London relies on huge and continuous food imports to feed its population. We heard that London only has 3 days' supply of food stored locally and 30 per cent of our food currently comes from the European Union (EU) which could cause problems if any part of the supply chain is interrupted.[1]

We therefore welcome the Mayor's work with the London Climate Change Partnership on large-scale food security and resilience. This should inform not only the food strategy but also work under the Environment Strategy and the Economic Development Strategy. The Mayor should seek opportunities to support London's food growers. This could potentially include Green Belt farmers and other commercial producers, who are currently not emphasised sufficiently in the draft strategy. We are currently undertaking a more in-depth review of food growing in London's Green Belt and urban fringe, expected to be published in the autumn, and will commend this to the Mayor as an input to the development of the final version of the food strategy.

We applaud the work that has taken place to promote urban food growing, including the Capital Growth scheme. We note the suggestion that the priority is now to protect and solidify current food growing spaces, including those recently established under this work. We would therefore encourage work to understand and capitalise on the environmental as well as the community value of these spaces. Environmental benefits include biodiversity, urban cooling, sustainable drainage, healthy travel and others.

We heard at our meeting that London still has capacity for more food growing spaces and recommend that the Mayor does not stop looking for opportunities to establish more spaces where they are of benefit—see the final section of this response.

We note the role of social prescribing in directing users to urban food growing spaces, and would encourage healthcare providers and public health officials to use this model, and space providers to make links with the health sector to tap into this source of users. This is likely to be particularly beneficial for older and more vulnerable Londoners, who are more likely to face social isolation. Similarly, we would encourage work with the social housing sector to the mutual benefit of all the organisations concerned and especially of the residents. Finally, community groups or allotments can play a significant role in tackling social isolation and increasing Londoners' confidence to grow their own seasonal produce, and should be encouraged to hold lessons on planting and how to cook produce.

Healthy food

We welcome the aim to use food as a lever to promote public health and tackle health inequalities.

[1] The GLA Conservatives and the UKIP Group do not consider that exit from the EU poses a threat to London's food supply.

We recognise that individual choices are important determinants of healthy lifestyles, and also that people's choices and habits are influenced by their environment, including the availability of different kinds of food, advertising and promotion. Childhood obesity is a significant challenge for London, which has higher obesity rates than the rest of the country and often has widespread unhealthy food advertising. As we heard in our meeting on the Strategy, nearly 40 per cent of children in London leave primary school overweight or obese. We therefore strongly support the strategy's flagship proposal to reduce the ubiquity of unhealthy food and drink retailing and advertising, including not carrying such adverts on the TfL estate. We welcome the ambition displayed in this proposal.[2]

We heard in our committee meeting about the importance of schools in supporting children to eat more healthily – children all eat at least one of their meals at school, two if they attend breakfast club. Supporting schools to provide healthy food will therefore be vital for tackling childhood obesity and ensuring all children have a balanced diet and do not go hungry. We welcome the Mayor's support of free school meals and strongly urge the Mayor to work with the Government and stakeholders to enable free school meals to be provided to every child in London, so that children from all backgrounds have access to healthy food and do not fall behind on their educational attainment.

Learning about healthy food through the curriculum will help children to gain skills for life on planning and preparing healthy meals. This also means that children who bring a packed lunch to school can benefit from learning about healthy eating.

We welcome the proposal to prevent new hot food takeaways opening within 400m of a school, as we heard in our committee meeting that there is an abundance of strong evidence that measures to reduce children's everyday exposure to unhealthy food is effective at encouraging healthier eating habits. We also welcome the proposal to work collaboratively with boroughs and businesses, to provide support for those seeking to provide affordable and healthy food, especially to disadvantaged communities. However, we would hope to see greater detail about how pilot projects will be delivered.

Alcohol is a major public health issue. Although purchase is legally restricted to adults, attitudes begin to form in childhood, and consumption and its health effects are seen in some older children as well as adults. In our meeting on the Strategy, the Committee heard the strength of evidence that advertising bans are effective at encouraging healthy choices. Although alcohol is to be excluded from the advertising ban, we are not convinced that the rationale for this works well from a public health point of view. The Mayor should review the inclusion of alcohol in the advertising ban.[3]

We also welcome the work throughout the strategy to promote healthy food through availability, awareness, skills and other channels. Supporting healthy food through advertising on the TfL estate would be a positive step.

Food poverty

We welcome that the Mayor is working to assess household food insecurity, and its causes, in the absence of data being collected. We recommend that this be a fundamental part of the final version of the strategy. The strategy should establish a baseline for food poverty or insecurity, and targets for improving this. In particular, there should be a clear goal to eliminate food poverty in London, specifically to be a 'Zero Hunger City', as recommended in a report by the

[2] The GLA Conservatives and UKIP do not support TfL's proposed advertising ban, as advertising on the TfL estate is not targeted at children specifically.

[3] The GLA Conservatives and UKIP disagree with the advertising ban as a whole, as noted above.

London Assembly Health and Environment Committee in 2013. We welcome the inclusion of many of the recommendations from this report in the draft Strategy, including working with partners to establish sustainable free breakfast clubs in schools and monitoring risk factors for food poverty.[4]

It would be helpful to clarify for the general reader the terminology around food poverty, food insecurity and related concepts, and how London's measures relate to national measures and policies. Tackling food poverty must engage families and parents, at home, meaning it is vital that our language is clear and understandable for all groups.

It is widely accepted that low income is a contributing factor to food insecurity and there must be even higher numbers of employers paying the London Living Wage going forward.

We welcome the proposal for the Mayor to encourage stakeholders to donate surplus food to food banks as a more sustainable solution, but further action will be needed to tackle food insecurity fully. A solution that supports food banks to accept perishable food would be beneficial, as we heard that bread is the biggest waste food product in the UK. Supermarkets should be encouraged to work with local community groups, residential homes, schools and food banks and reduce the amount of surplus food.

We welcome the work contained in the strategy to reduce food poverty, and to promote access to healthy food for those in or at risk of food poverty. We welcome the attention paid to children in this work, but would also recommend more detailed plans for supporting older people. In particular, the draft strategy sets out the intention of the Mayor to encourage better coordination and collaboration between local authorities to champion healthy eating for older people. While we welcome the direction given to external partners, we would expect to see more detail as to how this work will be delivered, including measurable targets for improvement, particularly in light of financial pressures on local authorities.

A further opportunity for engaging external partners is to provide information to schools and teachers how the school or local authority can help when they identify students who are facing or at risk of food poverty. Going hungry at school has a significant impact on a child's educational attainment and wellbeing.

However, we heard in our meeting that many children in London are facing holiday hunger. Community groups and local voluntary sector organisations are doing excellent work across London to support children during the summer holidays, but this is far from universal. We commend the Mayor's Kitchen Social project which aims to engage 50,000 children and young people in London by 2020. We would like to see this project extended beyond this point to ensure that no child lacks nutritious food in school holidays.

The strategy should address future food poverty risks and opportunities. Exiting the EU could potentially have a considerable effect on food supply, standards and costs. Leaving the EU without a trade deal would mean that the UK's trade would be on WTO terms, which could well include tariffs on food imports and thus higher prices. Indeed the impact on sterling after the EU referendum has already led to an increase in the price of food. On the other hand, if this feeds through to higher farm gate prices and/or wages, there could be opportunities for increased local production and/or higher incomes for people at risk of food poverty. However, ensuring that Londoners receive the London Living Wage is the best way to protect against food poverty.[6]

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[4] London Assembly Health and Environment Committee, (2013), Zero Hunger City

Further risks of exiting the EU without a deal could include no agreement on food quality standards, including for imports, potentially leading to a deal with the USA allowing products currently not permitted such as chlorinated chicken. They could also include restrictions on the movement of labour, leading to further difficulty for farmers meeting seasonal needs for fruit and vegetable harvesting, and they could include border delays affecting the availability of fresh food.[5]

London's economy

The food sector is an important contributor to London's wider economy, and to the skills and employment opportunities available in the city. If there were to be significant shifts in the market, such as from animal- to plant-based food, from processed to home-cooked, from long-distance imports to lower food miles, or from a supermarket-dominated to a more diverse retail sector, then there could be significant shifts in where those business and employment opportunities are. The Mayor should ensure that there is more modelling and encouragement of these potential shifts, so that London's workers and businesses can see where the opportunities are and respond to them.

It will be vital to engage the full range of stakeholders in order for the final Strategy to have maximum benefit for Londoners. We welcome the commitment to support local businesses to increase their supply of fresh, local and seasonal products, which should hopefully make local food healthier and cheaper for Londoners and support a diverse and vibrant sector. Businesses should make it easy for consumers to find local, sustainable food and healthy food, for example by introducing packaging that clearly informs customers where their food is sourced and how much sugar is in it.

Supporting skills development will be essential for the hospitality and food sectors to overcome future challenges, including Brexit as 35 per cent of workers in the capital's food industry are (non-UK) EU citizens.[6] We support the Mayor's commitment to use the devolution of adult skills funding and employment services support to London from 2019-20 to support skills and education providers to deliver the skills that the food and hospitality industries need to be competitive is imperative to the success of the sector. Businesses should ensure that workers, including those on night shifts, have easy access to healthy food in staff canteens.

Environmental impacts

We welcome the inclusion of environmental issues in the food strategy. Food is very significant in London's overall environmental footprint. We note that food systems that meet health and food accessibility goals are likely also to have lower environmental impacts, by using less animal produce and less highly processed food, and potentially more seasonal and locally-grown food. Cutting food waste also has environmental benefits, for example by reducing the amount sent to landfill and avoiding all the impacts arising from producing food that would then go to waste. We were pleased to hear at our meeting that environmental impacts may be included alongside affordability and health benefits in work with food providers such as schools, and we would encourage this.

[5] The GLA Conservatives and UKIP disagree with these two paragraphs, particularly in so far as they refer to the EU and exit from it.

[6] The GLA Conservatives and UKIP do not consider that Brexit poses a risk to the supply of skills and labour in London's food industry.

We welcome the prospect of setting a target to reduce food waste by 50 per cent by 2030 and encourage the Mayor to do so. In our recent report on waste management[7] we also recommended that all unavoidable food waste should be sent to anaerobic digestion and/or composting. Further, we would like the Mayor to set out clearer plans for how he will continue to work with partners such as WRAP and LWARB on tackling food waste.

We received evidence that food growing spaces have great benefits for urban biodiversity, as well as other benefits common to green space such as urban cooling and sustainable drainage. Further, increasing the supply of local food for Londoners will help tackle carbon emissions as a result of food air miles. We therefore encourage the protection and promotion of food growing spaces in work under the Environment Strategy and London Plan, accounting for the Mayor's programme for London's housing stock. In particular, with parks looking for more diverse benefits and resources, we would encourage local authorities and others to think about the food growing potential of parks and other public green spaces—for example for community gardens, orchards or hedgerow foraging. We were encouraged to hear of work that Sustain is doing with the GLA and others, and look forward to more content in this area in the final strategy. The Mayor in particular could support fruit and nut trees in suitable locations as part of his tree-planting programmes, and promote their planting by partners, community groups and Londoners.

Animal Welfare

We welcome the inclusion of animal welfare standards in the draft strategy's definition of good food and in the actions set out in Chapter 3 and Annex 3. We welcome the inclusion of RSPCA Assured as an animal welfare standard and support the RSPCA's position that products containing meat that has not been pre-stunned before slaughter should be clearly labelled as such to enable the many consumers who do not wish to eat such meat to make their choice. We call on the Mayor to work with the RSPCA and government towards this labelling.

[7] *Wasting London's future*, Environment Committee, March 2018