

Consultation response

Welsh Government

Our ambition to further develop Wales' food and drink sector

Which? is the largest consumer organisation in the UK with more than 1.3 million members and supporters. We operate as an independent, apolitical, social enterprise working for all consumers and funded solely by our commercial ventures. We receive no government money, public donations, or other fundraising income. Which?'s mission is to make individuals as powerful as the organisations they have to deal with in their daily lives, by empowering them to make informed decisions and by campaigning to make people's lives fairer, simpler and safer.

Summary

Which? welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government's consultation on developing the food and drink sector.

We agree with many elements of the proposals, but think that there needs to be a much stronger focus on consumer needs and expectations within the vision and mission. This includes basing the future development of the sector on high standards, in line with people's expectations. 95% of people in Wales think that it is important that food standards are maintained after the UK leaves the EU. Consumer confidence is crucial to the future success and growth of the sector.

Although the need to benefit people and society is one of the three aims of the mission, there needs to be a much stronger focus on how the sector can be developed in a way that is sustainable and enables consumers to make healthier and more sustainable choices.

The opportunity for a much more joined up approach to food and farming policy must be taken. There therefore needs to be much greater ambition to tackle the challenges facing the food system, and therefore consumers in Wales, basing the growth of the sector on a system that delivers healthy, sustainable, safe, as well as affordable food choices.

Introduction

Which? welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government's consultation on its ambition to further develop Wales' food and drink sector.

The UK's exit from the European Union (EU) presents both risks and opportunities for the sector and for the consumers that it serves. Food, agriculture and trade policy, as well as regulation, has been closely inter-twined with EU membership. As we re-shape the policy landscape, as well as wider trade in food, it is essential that consumer interests are paramount. The sector has had repeated experience of the impact loss of consumer confidence can have on its success, most notably as a result of the BSE and horsemeat scares.

The opportunity must be taken to develop a truly joined up policy that recognises the fundamental global challenges facing the food sector, as well as those closer to home. A siloed approach has been taken to food and farming policy, with aspects such as productivity, trade, agriculture, health, environment and food standards dealt with through different policies and departments. There now needs to be a joined up approach that is focused on common objectives that deliver a healthy and sustainable food system that enables consumers to make healthy and sustainable choices.

Which? has already submitted comments to the Welsh Government's Brexit and our Land consultation on how future agriculture support needs to be better aligned with supporting healthy, safe and sustainable choices, for example. Which? research has also found that 7 in 10 (69%) of people think that the government should provide financial support to farmers. A slightly higher percentage of people in Wales think this (71%)¹. But when we asked people what this support should be based on, animal welfare, food safety and animal health were people's top priorities.

The consultation document sets out a positive vision for the growth of food businesses in Wales, but it currently falls short in setting out the joined up and consumer-focused approach that is needed. Our response therefore focuses on the issues that our recent research has shown are most important to Welsh consumers and how these need to be a central part of the vision and mission.

Consumer expectations

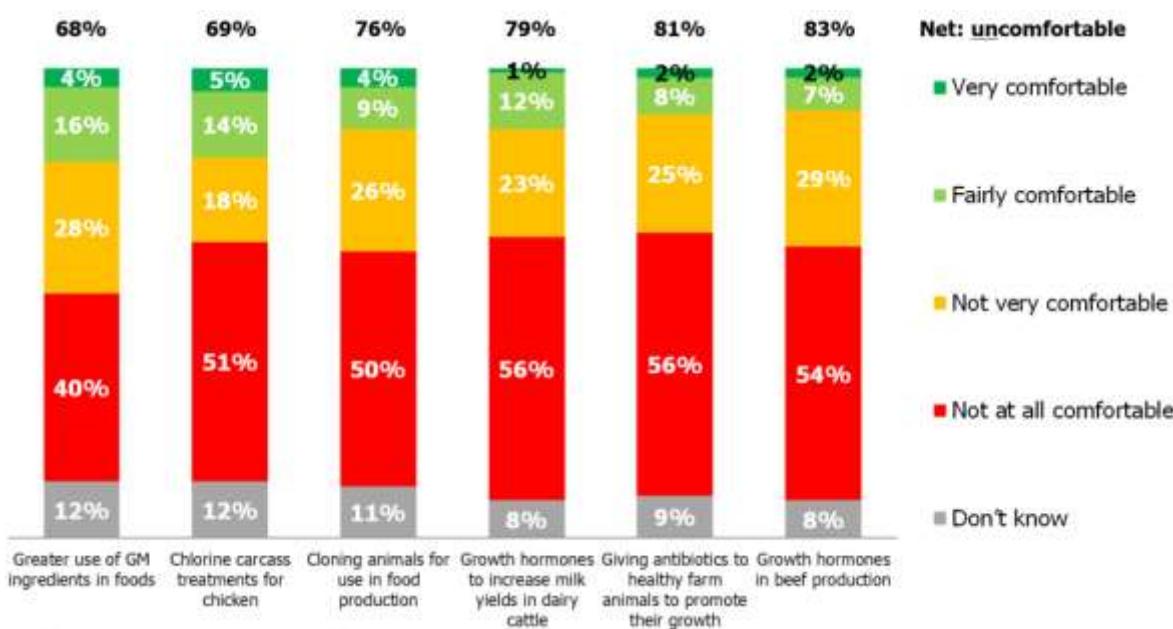
People in Wales have high expectations of food standards². 95% of people think that it is important that food standards are maintained after the UK leaves the EU. Not only do Welsh consumers care about how food is produced within the UK, they also care about what food is for sale in the UK. Just over 7 in 10 (73%) of Welsh consumers say food produced in other countries with lower standards should not be allowed in the UK.

Our consumer research also shows that the production methods used to produce food matter to people in Wales. We asked people specifically about production methods that are used in other countries, but are not currently permitted in the UK. We wanted to understand what people thought about these methods as they may be a focus of discussions as the UK

¹ Populus, on behalf of Which?, surveyed 2100 UK adults online between 19th and 20th September. The data were weighted to be demographically representative of the UK population

² Populus, on behalf of Which?, surveyed 2269 UK adults online between the 17th and 18th July 2019. The data were weighted to be demographically representative of the UK population. We also interviewed an extra 80 consumers in Wales, making the total number of Welsh consumers interviewed 217. The Welsh data in this report is weighted to Welsh demographics.

negotiates trade deals with other countries. The chart below shows the percentage of consumers in Wales who would feel uncomfortable eating food produced using six methods. Around 8 in 10 would be uncomfortable if use of antibiotic growth promoters or growth hormones for beef or dairy production were allowed. Around 7 in 10 feel uncomfortable about the use of genetically modified (GM) ingredients (68%) and chlorine carcass treatments in chicken production (69%), while 76% feel this way in relation to animal cloning.



This research highlights why it is important that the Welsh Government, as well as the UK government, takes a strong stance on these issues and ensures that there is no compromise on food standards in order to reach an agreement with countries that have different approaches and levels of consumer protection. Any loss of consumer confidence could also affect the domestic food industry.

While our research shows that most people have a limited understanding of how the UK trades with other countries, the majority of people want to support domestic producers. This is particularly the case for meat and dairy products.

Consumer views therefore need to be taken into account more generally when considering the type of approach that is taken to develop the food sector in Wales – and particularly the emphasis on productivity throughout the consultation paper. This is an important factor, but cannot be considered without understanding issues relating to consumer acceptability, people's expectations of food standards and the importance of ensuring a healthy and sustainable food system.

Vision and mission

The vision and mission currently focus on building a strong and vibrant Welsh food and drink sector, with a global reputation for excellence and one of the most environmentally and socially responsible supply chains in the world.

The strategic aims focus on growing scale, value and productivity; benefitting people and society; and creating and communicating a global reputation for Wales as a Food Nation.

We agree with these aims, but think that there should also be a much stronger focus on how the food and drink sector can meet consumers' needs. Productivity has to be achieved in a way that meets the high standards consumers expect.

Almost 60% of adults in Wales are currently overweight or obese³. Over a quarter of children in Wales are overweight or obese and Wales has an even higher percentage of adolescents who are overweight or obese than England and Scotland. Related to this, less than a third of children in Wales self-report that they eat a portion of vegetables once a day. Sugar intake is also three times higher than the recommended value for adolescents and twice as high for children and adults.

We know from our consumer research that people are supportive of actions to help them and their families eat more healthily. A Which? survey⁴, representative of the UK population, conducted in 2018, found for example that people wanted the government and food sector to do more to make it easier to make healthier food choices. The top actions wanted from supermarkets were for example to include more healthier choices in promotions and offers and to make healthier options cheaper. For manufacturers, it was also to make healthier food cheaper, as well as to make food with less fat, sugar and salt and provide a greater range of healthier choices. The top actions that people wanted from the catering sector were also to cut down on the amount of fat, sugar and salt in foods on offer and provide more healthier choices. A recent Which? report "Sugar in disguise" (September 2019) highlighted how use of different names for sugar and confusing labelling can make it difficult for people to know what they are eating.

Our consumer research has also reflected the increasing interest people have in making more sustainable choices. This includes reducing the environmental impact of their choices, as was reflected in a series of deliberative dialogues that Which? organised on food system challenges, including one held in Cardiff⁵. People wanted government and the food sector to take greater leadership and to better equip them to make both healthy and sustainable choices. Recent Which? investigations, such as reports on the way that animal welfare standards for poultry vary ("The truth about supermarket chicken", May 2019) and different policies on use of plastics in the food sector ("What are supermarkets doing to wrap up the plastic problem", July 2019), have highlighted areas where greater ambition is needed across the food sector.

This is central to the three core areas of the mission, but needs to be given much greater prominence. Promoting Wales as a food nation, Benefitting our people and society and Developing our businesses, all have to be done in the context of meeting consumers needs and enabling healthier and more sustainable choices. Aspects of a more sustainable food

³ Obesity in Wales, Public Health Wales Observatory, 2019.

⁴ Research Now, on behalf of Which?, interviewed 1003 adults residing in the UK online, between 12th and 17th January 2018.
Data were weighted to be representative of the UK population

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/food-system-challenges-public-dialogue>

system, including health, safety, animal welfare and environmental impact need to be set out more explicitly within the targets (page 13).

There also needs to be a strong commitment to the growth of the sector being built on high food standards that are in line with consumer expectations – and built on on-going consumer engagement.

Which?
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