

Why we need a food strategy

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The current cost of living crisis, coming as it does on the back of the impact of the covid crisis, before recovery was beginning to bring things back to normal, is having a significant impact on the living standards of almost everyone.

This is true if you are on average incomes: it is very much more true if you are surviving on basic state pension, or universal credit. There is real poverty out there already and on every credible prediction, this will get worse this year, with a million or more people being thrown into severe poverty.

We are already seeing the consequences of this: and I don't mean just the individual impacts on the poorest, and the impact on their health and wellbeing. Increasingly we are seeing a lot of very angry and tense and sometimes vicious rows about food and the response to it, such as the issue of free school meals in holidays that led to bitter exchanges and comments across multiple media in Northampton this week. Nationally we are seeing the rows and conflicts over MPs unhelpfully suggesting all the poor need to do is learn to cook and make healthy meals on 30p a day, or councillors and foodbank staff laughing as they celebrate the opening of a new foodbank. The anger and spite we see over these comments and stories and in the reactions to them create more fog and let in less light into an issue that can be solved by working together.

Food is life and food affects everything. It is often said that the kitchen is the heart of the home. The economy has a huge food element; food poverty is now rampant, with its broader impacts on mental health, school performance and so much else. The production, consumption and disposal of food is an environmental issue, where food waste is a significant contributory factor. The use of land for food production, even via allotments and public space as well as in terms of farmland is a land use and an environmental issue. Lastly food is really important to physical health: to diet and obesity.

Yet despite the impact food has on almost every aspect of our lives, there is no joined up approach to food in our area. It is handled separately and in a disconnected way by almost everybody with power to join it all up. Work on economic policy is disconnected from work on food and its impact on health; the role of school meals disconnected from wider public health; the link to food waste and the impact on the environment is not joined up with engagement with local farmers and producers.

There is an alternative way and it is one that can be embraced across the political spectrum, across policy makers in health and the local authority; with business and the charitable sector.

This is to treat food systematically, in a joining the dots kind of way. To think about all the elements of food and join them up in co-ordinated planning and thinking. This will make sure that when we think about planning decisions for takeaways, we join it up to the growing obesity crisis: in thinking about economic development we recognise the contribution of the food industry as an employer and consumer of resources. To explore how we make the food system work to feed everyone – including those in food poverty.

For the last couple of years there have been attempts to join these dots through something that I have been chairing, called the West Northants Sustainable Food Place group –

WNSFP for short, but we need more traction. We need the people who can really make a difference to focus and see the potential of food to really drive improvements in our community, whether this is health or economics, tackle poverty or how we live in our towns and cities that encompass productive food spaces.

The result of disconnecting these things is real food poverty and bad diets, increasing obesity and poor quality food.

But we can do better. Supporting the development of SFP, and making food the centre of joined up efforts can make a real difference to our town. This is a call to action. A call for policy makers. A call for political leaders, not to take it over, but to support it. To invest. To join up the dots and make all our lives better.