Food (Scotland) Bill

SMaSH (Scottish Managed Sustainable Health network)

Recent legislation has proposed the establishment of Food Standards Scotland. The call for evidence on this legislation includes a request for comments on the scope of the objectives of the proposed Food Standards Scotland agency, including whether these objectives would support sustainable development in Scotland. Description of the legislation highlights that the proposed objectives for Food Standards Scotland are deliberately wide in scope, and could allow the agency to contribute to policies on food sustainability and food poverty. Health is also a key focus of the proposed objectives.

SMaSH welcomes the consideration of food sustainability and food poverty issues in this proposed legislation. These issues, alongside health and the reduction of health inequalities, are considered by SMaSH to be crucial challenges, of increasing importance, for Scotland.

Food sustainability is a broad, complex and global issue. The UK food system could have a sizeable impact on climate change - it has been estimated that it contributes approximately 18.5% of total greenhouse gas emissions in the UK.¹ Improvements in sustainability, such as reductions in food waste, have significant potential to reduce this environmental impact.² Alongside this, food poverty may be increasing in Scotland, with evidence of substantial increases in the use of food banks in recent years.³ These examples – the fact that food is wasted whilst many people struggle to afford to eat well – highlight conflicting aspects of our current food system but also the potential for shared solutions that a single agency may be well placed to develop.

Importantly for SMaSH, both food sustainability and food poverty have links to health. This could occur through the impact of food production on climate change, or through methods of food production impacting on the price, accessibility and nutritional value of food.

These links emphasise how important it would be for any agency concerned with food and health to also prioritise food sustainability and food poverty. An ideal system would protect and promote health and sustainability whilst reducing health inequality, although it is likely that tensions could arise from attempting to achieve all three of these aims.

A broad range of food policies is likely to impact on health, food poverty and food sustainability, including policies that initially appear to be unrelated to these issues. It may therefore be appropriate for Food Standards Scotland to consider formally assessing the impact of the majority of, if not all, food policies on health, sustainability and inequalities.

Successfully improving the sustainability of our food system and tackling food poverty whilst promoting health would be extremely valuable to Scotland. However, the complexity of the issues involved means that it would be challenging work that would require a long-term, collaborative approach. A number of organisations are already working on these issues and it would be important for Food Standards Scotland to actively engage with them. Not least, with the NHS in Scotland and members of SMaSH.

Health Protection Scotland, part of NHS National Services
May 2014