The Time is Right for a Food Strategy

Having worked on several food strategies in my time at the BRC, from Food 2030 to the Green Food Project, I have always been sceptical that they could have much impact. Food issues are complicated, spanning several Whitehall Departments, the market is always evolving at a speed which policy makers struggle to appreciate and food policy has never garnered much support as a hot topic at the heart of Government.

However, I believe the environment has changed and there couldn’t be a better opportunity for delivering a comprehensive policy to meet the challenges of the years ahead and retailers would be right to pay attention to developments across the UK Governments.

Firstly, our exit from the EU gives the Government much more scope to be bolder and decisive in its interventions. It can dictate conditions for trade to meet consumer demand whilst not penalising UK producers; the recent Trade and Agriculture Commission’s report captures this well and also reminds Government of the need to set trade in the wider context of food policy. It also enables a more progressive approach to regulation of food; labelling requirements can more accurately reflect the key issues for consumers and we can take a more progressive approach to new technology to deliver more sustainable agriculture, always accepting the need to ensure public confidence in our supply chains.

Secondly, covid has highlighted the need for Government to take food much more seriously. Whilst the pandemic highlighted the robustness of our supply chains, it also highlighted how inequality impacts access to affordable, healthy food for every citizen. The pandemic also highlighted why we must urgently address the major challenge for the UK, addressing the obesity strategy.

Thirdly, we are finally seeing a true understanding of the impact of diet and food production on climate change. We will not meet ambitious targets for carbon reduction without a focus on how we produce and consume food.

The timing is right for Government to deliver a comprehensive food policy that sets the framework for changes that make a real difference to our health, our communities and our planet. It needs, however, to be UK wide, engage and given appropriate priority by all relevant Government departments and based on a pragmatic approach, working with those who can deliver change. Unfortunately too many food strategies have been academic reports, based on the views of a small clique of advisers, creating aspirational papers with little chance of success. We need a partnership with the food industry to make the changes necessary and policies which are pragmatic and practical accounting for the challenges in changing consumer behaviour.

Whatever happens there is no doubt the focus on food, the way it is produced and consumed, will only increase. Retailers know this and have sustainable, affordable food at the heart of their own strategies but there is an opportunity to go much further and create a food system which is genuinely world leading.