

11 March 2021

George Freeman MP
Member of Parliament for Mid Norfolk

Dear Mr. Freeman

Institute of Food Science and Technology represents the UK's leading food science and technology professionals, supporting advancement of food science and technology for public benefit.

We positively support the creation of a focused taskforce on innovation, growth and regulatory reform addressing the whole of the UK.

The sectors outlined in your letter do not address the food sector post-farm gate – despite this being a critical sector for national security and public health.

IFST proposes that the entire integrated and interdependent food system is addressed by this taskforce, not just agriculture. The bulk of the £120bn+ UK food industry is in food manufacturing and supply. For our own food security and to make British food a major export internationally leveraging our recognised high standards of safety, quality and sustainability, inclusion of food per se alongside those sectors which will provide the enabling technologies to support its recovery and growth is key.

The UK food system is one of the most sophisticated in the world and we have an opportunity to lead and grow our export trade.

Sustainable safe and nutritious food provision is reliant on the essential supply of both foodstuffs and of other vital resources (energy, water, suitable soils, skilled labour), as well as access to new scientific and technological developments. New digitisation and information technologies gives the potential for the Task Force's desired 10%+ productivity gain within the next 2-5 years, as well as quantum improvements in food safety and quality, in this huge UK industry. There are big net gains to be had from catalyzing innovation in an industry likely to account for 20% of UK manufacturing for the foreseeable future.

To globally maximise the opportunities for British food and the enabling science and technology, there is a need for significant increase in public and private investment in food research to achieve world-class innovations in food and nutrition. For example, food industry is currently lagging behind in Industry 4.0 implementation compared to other manufacturing sectors. Positive support for technology implementation is needed across the UK - to move forward the cross-sector digitisation necessary to allow application of new information technologies, and the productivity initiatives required to progress sustainable intensification approaches for agri-food production, reuse of surplus and potential waste and overall more efficient use of resources. Only then can the UK support both local UK market needs for high quality, safe food as well as growing food exports beyond the current £23.6 billion value exported in 2019.

Targeted investment alongside appropriate enablement mechanisms are particularly needed to unlock the potential of innovation for primary processors post-farm gate and for the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises who make up 97% of total number of UK food businesses.

UK has always been a leader in regulatory innovation. New developments such as planned adaptive regulation need to be developed to support innovation in short timelines while continuing to improve consumer protection. The current lack of alignment in government departmental policy relating to food and decades of inadequate investment in both research and education for the food sector have created barriers to innovation and implementation of new scientific developments and technologies.

A strategic focus on food by UK government at the highest level is urgently needed to assure food sector resilience and growth. A similar high-level focus on food and nutrition at the new science agency ARIA is needed in order to unlock the potential of scientific developments for the UK food sector.

It is our considered view that a paradigm shift in behaviour across food system actors and stakeholders is also needed to establish the level of collaboration and cooperation required to unleash the potential of UK FOOD. A forum to facilitate this new way of working would provide balance and consistency across policy, positions and communications.

IFST is happy to provide any further details that may be helpful to your discussions, and to supporting this work with insights from our professional members to help create an innovative UK food sector operating to high standards of quality, safety and capability.

Many thanks and Kind regards

Your sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jon Poole', with a large, stylized initial 'J' on the left.

Jon Poole
Chief Executive

Email: j.poole@ifst.org