

Executive Summary

The research assesses public priorities for research into diet and health which falls within the BBRSC remit. The research represents a 'sense check' for BBSRC, allowing ongoing research priorities to be compared with public opinions on research into diet and health.

The research methodology comprised: desk research, two general public workshops held in Sutton and Stafford in June 2005, and a large-scale UK-wide survey in July/August 2005.

The main research findings are summarised below.

Awareness and Understanding of Research on Diet & Health

There is broad awareness of the different types and applications of research into diet and health. However, there appears to be low awareness of how science works or how scientific excellence should be judged in practice.

This is little recognition of the role of research in the UK economy and the potential economic and institutional benefits of research into diet and health, and distrust of collaboration between UK universities and the food industry.

Priority Research Areas

The following areas of research are seen as most worthwhile for funding:

- Prevention/Protection against illness/disease;
- Tackling obesity;
- Nutritional quality of food.

The least important research areas are:

- Improving the taste and colour of food;
- Appearance of food, including texture.

Assessing Research Projects

Two factors emerge strongly as the most important for deciding which research projects should be funded:

- **prevention** of future health problems; and
- **public benefit/improvements for quality of life**, particularly the treatment of life-threatening or life-limiting conditions such as cancer.

Health education and health promotion are also felt to be a valuable outcome of research.

There is very clear support among the public for ongoing research into diet and health, even if the likelihood of a breakthrough or big leap forward is low.

The contribution to UK prosperity/wealth creation is not widely seen as an important factor for deciding which research into diet and health should be funded. This reflects the lower importance placed on money/financial security compared with having good health.

Both stages of the research highlight the importance placed on research benefiting everyone, rather than particular groups, although a number of groups stand out as beneficiaries: children, those on low incomes, those with/at risk of cancer, heart disease or genetic/inherited diseases/illnesses and those who are obese/overweight.

There was disapproval of the use of public funding for any project that did not have a clear public benefit. Responsibility for funding research that will make food more nutritious, taste better or last longer is laid at the door of food manufacturers.

The workshops showed wide opposition to the use of public funding for research being used for commercial purposes/‘profit-led’ research, such as improving the taste of food, or assisting with the manufacturing process. By comparison, research proposals where the potential public benefits are clear were viewed much more favourably, even if the timescales and possibility of a breakthrough are uncertain.

There is an important discrepancy between the qualitative and quantitative research in terms of the importance of research helping pregnant women. Maternal diet did *not* come out as a high priority area for research overall in the quantitative survey, even among women and those with children, despite scoring highly in the project evaluation carried out by the syndicate groups in the workshops. This difference may reflect the nature of qualitative research (which provide opportunity for dialogue), and the presence at the workshops of a number of parents of young children.

There appears to be a need for further public dialogue on the funding of research into biotechnology and biological sciences, and for communication of how dialogue has been used to steer policies and funding decisions.