

# The Food Conversation

## A Citizen Mandate for Change







# Executive summary

For decades, meaningful change in the UK’s food system has been blocked by a persistent narrative: the public wants cheap food above all else, it rejects ‘nanny state’ government interference in their food choices, and the market will solve any problems. This assumption has dominated policy discussions despite overwhelming evidence of dysfunction: while the biggest retailers and manufacturers are making billions in annual profits, rates of food-related ill health are soaring; wildlife, water and soils have been degraded; and farmers are struggling to stay afloat. Research by economist Professor Tim Jackson estimates that the UK food system generates £268 billion every year in health-related costs alone, borne by the NHS and society as a whole.

The Food Conversation set out to test this assumption by asking a fundamental question: What do people really want from food?

The Food Conversation creates a space for serious, nationwide discussion about food through two complementary approaches. At the core is a methodologically robust deliberation involving 345 citizens from across the UK, selected through sortition (a random lottery-style approach, see Section 2) to ensure they are representative of the population. Citizens have heard directly from experts, explored complex problems and trade-offs, and weighed up potential solutions, across more than 20 hours of workshops. In parallel, a food conversation toolkit of resources has enabled thousands more to participate in more than 70 community-led conversations across the UK. From kitchen tables to community centres, these have brought grassroots perspectives and local context to the national dialogue.

A key insight emerges from both streams: food is a connecting, not a polarising subject. There is consensus from citizens across the country that there is a need for stronger government intervention to create a fairer food system. They recognise that the current system squeezes farmers at one end and shoppers at the other, while generating massive profits for global food businesses.

Participants’ understanding of the complexities of the food system evolved. Initially they thought the solutions required should focus on individuals’ actions and encourage healthier choices. However, in exploring how different parts of the food system interconnect they came to reject simplistic ‘consumer choice’ narratives in favour of systemic solutions that address underlying power imbalances.



The Food Conversation is influencing policy discussions and reshaping the narrative around food. Citizens from both the national deliberations and community conversations have directly engaged with elected representatives across all four nations. They have been cited in parliamentary debates and formal policy reports, including the House of Lords Committee on Food, Diet & Obesity's Recipe for Health report. Senior political figures now acknowledge that the public wants government action, challenging the long-held assumption that the public don't want a so-called 'nanny state'.

Participants themselves are pushing for change. They scrutinise food labels more carefully and choose local producers, when possible, while advocating for their manifesto to be implemented. What began as structured deliberations and local conversations has evolved into an ongoing movement for food system change.

Each UK nation now has its own opportunity to act on the citizens' mandate. England stands at a critical juncture with plans for a comprehensive food strategy, a land use consultation and a 25-year farming roadmap promised in 2025. Scotland can build on its Good Food Nation Act with concrete local actions. Wales can integrate food into its pioneering Well-being of Future Generations Act. Northern Ireland can use its Food Strategy Framework to reset its approach as it emerges from political stalemate.

The message from The Food Conversation is clear: the public wants a food system that works for everyone – families, farmers, communities and the planet. Citizens have a sophisticated understanding of the nuances and complexities around food and are eager to be partners in creating lasting solutions. The groundwork has been laid, the mandate for change is clear, and there is now a powerful opportunity for government and citizens to work together towards a healthier, fairer and more secure food future.

After months of structured deliberation, citizens have developed five clear priorities in their mandate for change:



## Joined up food leadership

Improve food governance across the UK with a holistic policy approach and strong leadership at the highest levels. Limit corporate influence and embed citizen engagement in the development and implementation of policies.



## Real choice for everyone

Ensure everyone has enough nourishing and sustainably produced food, creating healthier food environments for all, and protecting children from harmful marketing.



## Better food, less waste

Set high standards for public food, especially food served in hospitals and schools. Reduce food waste and excessive packaging across the entire food system.



## A fairer deal for farmers

Support farmers with fair pricing and assistance for transitioning to sustainable practices, while preventing domination by large corporations and ensuring more equitable share of risk and reward.



## Flourishing local food

Strengthen local food networks through investment in food hubs, more community growing spaces and education that reconnects people with good food.





## Why this conversation matters now

UK's food system sits at the epicentre of converging crises. The climate emergency, spiralling food insecurity, declining public health and growing inequality are all symptoms of a deeper, systemic problem: a food economy driven by profit maximisation with little consideration for long-term impacts.

The pursuit of ever-cheaper food has come at a high price. Farmers operate on increasingly narrow margins, pushing many to intensify production or leave agriculture altogether. Meanwhile, major retailers and manufacturers continue to make record profits while many of those producing and preparing food are struggling to stay afloat. Waves of farming protests regularly hit the headlines.

The UK spends less of its income on food than almost any other developed nation. Yet this cheapness is deceptive. In a recent analysis, FFCC Commissioner and economist Professor Tim Jackson estimated the hidden costs associated with unhealthy diets at £268 billion annually. These costs don't appear on supermarket receipts but are paid through the NHS budget, lost productivity and diminished quality of life.

The fault lines are most visible where inequality runs deepest. Millions of people now face regular food insecurity. Food bank use is at record levels and many children are arriving at school hungry. The poorest households are also more likely to suffer from food-related ill health; access to nutritious food is increasingly shaped by income, geography and circumstance.

The international context further heightens these vulnerabilities. President Trump's aggressive tariff policies impact global food markets, threatening UK food security and coinciding with changes to established supply chains following the UK's departure from the EU. New trade deals expose UK farmers and companies to direct competition with producers and manufacturers operating under vastly different regulatory standards. This geopolitical turbulence represents a structural shift in the international trade environment upon which the UK food system has grown increasingly dependent. Fresh produce shortages are symptoms of growing weaknesses in just-in-time supply chains.

Despite this, political views around food remain resistant to change. There's a persistent narrative that the public wants cheap food above all else, that consumers don't want government interference in their food choices, and that the market will solve any problems. The narrative of cheap food as a universal shopper need often serves as a convenient mechanism that allows economic systems to maintain affordability in one sector while permitting significant



cost escalations in others, particularly housing and energy, without triggering widespread social critique.

The Food Conversation seeks to test these assumptions by asking a fundamental question: What do people really want from food?

To answer this question, The Food Conversation takes two interconnected but distinct approaches:

### NATIONAL DELIBERATIVE PROCESS

A rigorous, representative engagement of citizens selected through sortition (a random lottery-style approach, see Section 2) across all four UK nations, ensuring demographic diversity and methodological robustness.

### COMMUNITY-LED CONVERSATIONS

A toolkit-enabled network of local conversations that extends the reach beyond formal deliberations, allowing people in communities and grassroots organisations to explore food issues relevant to them.

While these workstreams operate in parallel and reinforce each other, they maintain distinct methodologies and participant profiles, ensuring both representative depth and grassroots breadth. Alongside these, a strategic policy advocacy approach ensures citizen voices influence decision-making, connecting participants directly with policymakers and amplifying their insights through targeted engagement.

The national deliberations have been designed to move beyond simple polls and focus groups that typically inform policy. These methods tend to work with people's existing perspectives which, in this case, are shaped by extensive intervention from the industry, their lobbyists and media sources. Instead of identifying people only as 'consumers' of food, asking only about price preferences and shopping habits, The Food Conversation talks with people as citizens with a stake in shaping the food system that affects many aspects of their daily lives.

The national conversations reveal that the old narratives don't hold up. When presented with evidence about how the food system operates, citizens express frustration at the concentration of corporate power, concern about the dominance of unhealthy products and alarm at the squeeze on farming communities. They demonstrate a willingness to consider trade-offs and a strong desire for government leadership to fix a system they see as fundamentally dysfunctional.

In addition, the community-led conversations activate local networks and existing community groups, enabling a broader range of citizens to engage with the conversations. As one organiser from Shropshire notes, "Being part of a national

programme was really motivating for our team and for people taking part. They could feel confident that their views would be listened to."

This timing of The Food Conversation is significant. When launched, the UK was anticipating a general election in 2024. In the months since the election, the new Westminster government has started consulting on a new food strategy, land use and a 25-year farming roadmap for 2025. In Scotland, the Good Food Nation Act requires the development of national and local food plans. Wales has a pioneering Future Generations framework. And Northern Ireland's government has published its Food Strategy Framework.

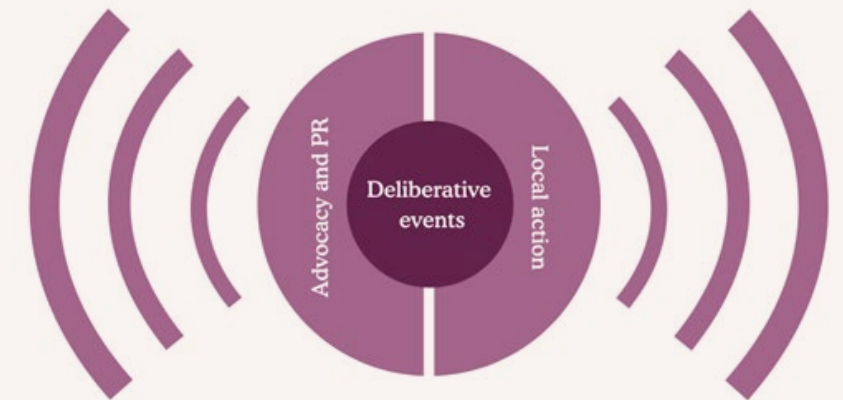
The findings from this project provide a unique opportunity to ensure these policy windows are shaped by considered views of the public. Political debates often create false dichotomies: between rural and urban interests, between affordability and sustainability, between personal freedom and public health. The Food Conversation demonstrates that citizens find these simplistic polarisations unhelpful and want more thoughtful and integrated solutions.







# Designing the conversation



## THE NATIONAL DELIBERATIONS

At the heart of The Food Conversation is a rigorous deliberative process that draws on established principles of citizens' assemblies and public dialogues. To avoid the self-selection bias common in public events, the Sortition Foundation implemented a civic lottery. This process involved over 118,000 invitations going to randomly selected addresses across the UK. From those who responded, 345 citizens were selected using an algorithm that ensured a balance of age, gender, ethnicity, location, socioeconomic background and political views. The result is a 'mini-public' that broadly reflects the demographics of the nation.

This methodology has significant international precedent. Around the world, representative deliberative processes have shown themselves to be effective in addressing complex societal challenges, with the OECD documenting 289 cases across 18 countries. Ireland's Citizens' Assemblies used similar sortition-based recruitment to develop recommendations that led to constitutional amendments on abortion and same-sex marriage. France's Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (Citizen's Climate Convention), Brussel's Assemblée Citoyenne pour le Climat and Scotland's Climate Assembly all convened representative 'mini-publics' to develop climate policy, demonstrating how this methodology can generate authoritative insights and actionable solutions. The Food Conversation builds upon this established global practice, adapting proven methodological principles to the specific context of food systems.



The national deliberations have been implemented in three distinct phases. First, a proof-of-concept phase ran in Birmingham and Cambridgeshire in summer 2023, supported by national polling of over 2,000 people. The findings from this initial work informed a 'Lightning Deliberation' in March 2024, a condensed, intensive discussion with a smaller group of citizens. The main phase of deliberation ran from April to September 2024, in ten locations across the UK:

- Wave 1 (April): West Yorkshire, East Kent, Northumberland
- Wave 2 (May-June): North and South Wales
- Wave 3 (July): Cornwall, South London
- Wave 4 (September): Scotland (Lothians and Caithness, Sutherland, Ross, Orkney, Shetland), Northern Ireland

Each wave follows a consistent structure of four online workshops (each three hours, spread over two weeks), culminating in a final in-person session where participants synthesise their insights and create manifestos for change. Each workshop combines expert presentations, group discussions and interactive activities. The content is structured around four key themes: justice and power in the food system; farming, climate and nature; food environments and health; and food system policy and governance. Experts are selected to represent diverse perspectives, from academia, farming, public health, government, food industry, retail and civil society. They are briefed to present evidence in a balanced way, acknowledging areas of uncertainty and potential trade-offs, rather than advocating for particular positions.

Participants engage actively with the evidence, questioning assumptions and connecting new information to their lived experience. Between sessions, they use an online platform to review presentations, comment on topics and evaluate policy proposals through a 'Do it, Test it, Debate it, Don't do it' activity.

Expert facilitators prevent conversations becoming one-sided and invite alternative perspectives. After each session, the facilitation team reviews how discussions have progressed to ensure all participants and perspectives were heard. To capture findings systematically, sessions are recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. This rigorous approach ensures that the conclusions drawn genuinely reflected the deliberative process, rather than cherry-picking opinions that aligned with pre-existing views. A strategic advisory group – formed of a range of experts from academia, healthcare, industry and advocacy – provided guidance and critical feedback on the design, implementation and reporting of the project.

## THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS APPROACH

Parallel to the national deliberations, a toolkit was launched for community-led conversations about food. These conversations provide a pathway for the many local groups who are already thinking about or working on food issues to contribute to a national conversation. The toolkit includes materials developed and delivered at a national level in order to give a consistent foundation for discussions. However, it is designed to be used in local groups without the need of expert facilitation.

The toolkit makes it easy for anyone to host a conversation, whether in person or online, with ready-made session plans, activities and expert videos. Community hosts adapt these materials to their local context and often integrate food sharing into their events, with many reporting that providing food was the way to encourage participation, particularly when engaging young people or marginalised groups. A reporting template captures key themes and insights.

The Food Conversation enables citizens to develop their understanding of food as a system and then to contribute to solutions. As one participant reflects: "When I came in, before we started, I thought I had all the answers there. This is easy, you know, knock out of the park... And then after the first day, I was so confused. [I thought] there are no solutions. [But] I'm kind of now getting towards the feeling well, actually, we can do this. Maybe not me personally. But we as in the country, the people, we can, we can fix this."







## From consumers to citizens

Participants in The Food Conversation begin their discussions grounded in everyday experiences: shopping within tight budgets, juggling dietary needs, and navigating choices constrained by availability, marketing and time. For many, especially those affected by the cost-of-living crisis, food is first and foremost about making ends meet. The language of ‘choice’ dominates early exchanges, with people talking in terms of what they can (or cannot) afford or find, often reflecting frustration and fatigue. As a participant in South Wales explains, “I’ve talked to so many young families and they want to get the best for their children and they can’t afford it.”

As they do more work together, there is a change in how participants frame food issues. Moving from personal responsibilities and choices, participants discuss industry practices, supply chain power dynamics and policy frameworks – identifying structural and systemic factors that constrain individual choice.

### THE SHIFT FROM INDIVIDUAL TO SYSTEMIC UNDERSTANDING

Three key insights underpin this shift:

First, participants recognise that the ‘choice environment’ is actively shaped by powerful interests. They examine how supermarket layouts, advertising and product formulation influence their decisions in ways they haven’t previously considered. For some, this means questioning why pricing and promotions are structured in ways that they feel makes healthy food harder to buy. As a participant in North Wales notes, “They control availability, they control price, so therefore they control the market, which is us.” Advertising strategies, product placement and the prevalence of ultra-processed foods are similarly discussed as not just commercial tactics, but structural features shaping consumption.

Second, they identify economic constraints on food choices. Many participants share personal experiences of financial pressures forcing them to buy lower-quality food than they would prefer, with some sharing that they have to skip meals due to cost. Others note that ‘time poverty’ also limits options: “The price of healthy food is forcing people to work overtime so they can afford to eat well, but working long hours leaves them vulnerable to defaulting to fast food, ready meals and other convenience offers.”

Third, participants start to make the connections between different parts of the food system that they have previously seen as separate. They track how agricultural subsidies, retail practices and public health outcomes are interconnected rather than isolated issues. This systems-thinking helps them to identify points of leverage for change.



As one participant from Scotland summarises: “I think we’ve moved from talking about ‘my shopping basket’ to ‘our food system’. That’s been the biggest shift for me personally.” This shift reshapes how participants approach solutions. While shopping decisions and household practices feature prominently in early discussions, with more information about how things work, participants gravitate towards examining the system and structures that shape their choices. Citizens develop systemic perspectives they had already instinctively recognised from their lived experiences and explore connections they had not previously had the opportunity to discuss.

Participants candidly acknowledge contradictions in their own positions, advocating for local food while recognising income restraints, or promoting seasonal eating despite geographic barriers. They grasp the limitations of individual action and why meaningful change is complex. They call for opportunities to participate in how food systems are governed, challenging the assumption that the public are only interested in food as consumers concerned with price and convenience. This emerging civic consciousness points towards approaches that engage citizens not merely as recipients of policy but as active ‘problem-solving partners’ in food system transformation.

## Core values underpinning attitudes to the food system

The deliberative process reveals a set of shared values that transcend regional and socioeconomic differences, offering insight into what matters most to citizens about food systems:

### Fairness

Participants are troubled by perceived power imbalances, where some farmers receive minimal returns while some global corporations make huge profits. They note the UK has one of the cheapest food baskets among comparable economies, yet food insecurity and food-related ill health continue to rise. They question framing that suggests shoppers must make a choice between cheap food and good food, instead proposing policies for nutritious, sustainable food providing fair returns for producers. UK policymakers should recognise that policies tackling power relationships to favour public interest would likely gain strong support.

### Care

Participants care about the next generation and for others’ health and wellbeing, showing particular concern about protecting children from unhealthy food and manipulative marketing. Policymakers should note that citizens value food policies that prioritise care for vulnerable populations and create environments where healthy options are easily available to all.

### Responsibility

Participants believe government and industry should be accountable for sustainable practices protecting people, animals and the planet. They value responsible stewardship of land and resources, expressed in practical rather than ideological terms. Citizens emphasise protecting the NHS by addressing food-related ill health. This suggests policy approaches connecting environmental and health considerations to tangible outcomes, with clear lines of responsibility, will gain the most traction.

### Localism

Participants see the importance of local engagement in food systems, with more power and resources invested in local anchor institutions. They respect the value of local skills and knowledge, and want support for local businesses, regional economies and UK food production integrity – and they want this to be reflected in policy and trade. People want more transparent decisions involving communities, respecting local traditions and cultures. Policies backing UK communities, businesses, standards and expertise are seen as key to maintaining trust and pride in the food system.



# Snacks

## Power, policy and the food system

Many participants enter into The Food Conversation with underlying concerns and frustrations about food. They understand that power matters, with power imbalances shaping the food system we have. Their analysis goes beyond frustration with supermarket pricing and availability to examine the deeper structures determining what reaches plates.

### CORPORATE CONCENTRATION AND POWER

Participants connect their existing concerns about retailer dominance with a broader analysis of corporate concentration throughout the food chain. Participants generally see power in terms of money, linking headlines of food industry profits to disproportionate power in the food system. They are wary of ways in which economic power translates to political influence and concerned that food industry lobbying impacts government decisions about food policy.

The conversation consistently returns to transparency as a practical necessity. Once citizens realise how opaque the current system is, they become strong advocates for transparency and for greater information for citizens about how things work.

### FARMER VULNERABILITY AND SYSTEM RESILIENCE

Participants understand that many farmers occupy a vulnerable position, being responsible for food production but having limited opportunities to influence markets or policy. “I think farmers get a pretty raw deal, to be honest. They always say farmers moan about the weather and all this sort of thing, but to not be able to ask the going price for what you produce seems unfair. What’s being done about that?” asks a participant in Cornwall, expressing a widespread concern that producer vulnerability threatens broader food security.

When participants discuss farming practices, they link these to economic pressures created by supply chain dynamics. Their analysis identifies how market concentration upstream and downstream constrains producer autonomy. As they explore connections between farming practices and ecological outcomes, participants think that farmers should benefit from the work they do, improving biodiversity and adopting sustainable practices. Participants also connect these environmental costs to health outcomes, recognising how a food system designed to maximise production of calories rather than nourishment has contributed to diet-related disease.



## BEYOND BINARY THINKING

Throughout The Food Conversation, participants do not engage in simplistic either/or framing. In discussing how local food systems could play a greater role in a fairer system, participants do not adopt a knee jerk rejection of a more globalised system but see localisation as a longer-term solution to a more resilient system, to rebalance how food is produced and purchased. They also see practical challenges in achieving what they're asking for; a participant in North Wales says: "I'd love the idea of local food hubs, but how many hubs would you need when you've got no shops on the high street because the rents from the business rates are too high? ... I just don't see it working without government backing."

The participants draw sophisticated parallels with other regulated industries while simultaneously questioning whether similar interventions would be effective in food systems – "If tobacco can be regulated because of its health risks, why not ultra-processed foods?" Their discussions acknowledge the adaptive nature of corporate strategies and the potential for regulatory evasion, showing an understanding of the cat-and-mouse dynamic that often characterises regulatory efforts.

What is consistent is a desire for a governance structure that prioritises health, fairness, and environmental sustainability, and that includes citizens as contributors to both policy and scrutiny. In this context, power is not only critiqued but reframed as something that could and should be shared more widely across society.







## Practical plans for change

Throughout the deliberations, participants are given policy proposals to consider as solutions. These 38 policy proposals were drawn from authoritative sources including the National Food Strategy, UN frameworks and civil society organisations. The deliberative process allows participants to evaluate specific policy proposals in depth – rather than simply endorsing or rejecting measures, they consider practicalities, potential side effects and implementation challenges. Through a structured ‘Do it, Test it, Debate it, Don’t do it’ activity, participants also quantitatively assess the proposals. There was an average ‘Do It’ agreement of 57% across all proposals with only 7.2% rejecting them, revealing important insights about public support for different approaches.

The discussions about ‘Do It’ often reflect a desire for more ambition, not opposition. For example, advertising restrictions are widely supported, but many participants didn’t choose ‘Do It’ because they want broader bans than the proposals offered (e.g., online and outdoor marketing, not just TV).

The strongest backing is for measures that participants see as protecting public health and targeting systemic failures in the food environment, particularly those related to children’s diets, ultra-processed foods and public procurement. There is overwhelming support for strengthening standards in early years settings and schools, and for expanding nutrition education. Many see these as foundational to long-term health equity. Participants link poor diets in childhood to escalating NHS costs and social disadvantage.

Participants also back phased restrictions on ultra-processed foods, strengthened nutrition labelling and reduction targets. They want to see public food setting the standard, and hospitals and schools are discussed as places where market incentives shouldn’t dominate. Participants speak of their own experience of hospital food, and their concern about what children are eating at school, with a sense of anger about the low quality of what is typically on offer.

There is also great interest in more contentious policy ideas, with lively and engaged debates. Overall, there is consensus that these issues would benefit from involving citizens in more deliberation and debate to find the best policy solutions. Examples of the feedback we heard include:

- Regenerative farming and transition support: most agree that farmers should be supported to farm more sustainably, but views on how to do this vary. While the idea of a transition budget ring-fenced until 2029 is welcome, several participants question the 2029 cutoff, feeling that is too soon to make significant changes.



- **Criminalising environmental harm:** support for making serious ecosystem damage a crime is high, with strong language used to express frustration at lenient treatment of polluters. However, practical enforceability and scope (e.g., what counts as ‘damage’?) require clarification.
- **Redirecting value to farmers:** the sentiment behind proposals such as fair pricing and stronger supplier protections receives support, especially in rural locations. Yet, participants flag the tension between raising returns for producers and keeping food affordable. This trade-off makes them cautious, but not opposed.
- **Welfare reform and affordability mechanisms:** while there is sympathy for improving food access, proposals like Universal Basic Income receive limited support (28% ‘Do It’ support), with many questioning the cost of achieving this at scale. Increasing the value of the Healthy Start scheme has higher backing, particularly as it already exists and targets support to those most in need.
- **Shifting diets to less meat and more fruit/veg:** while there is support for measures that help people afford fruit and veg, the focus on meat leads to more mixed views. Some citizens back targets for reducing meat consumption as being necessary for sustainability, while others are concerned about cultural backlash or nutritional implications.
- **Taxation measures:** many citizens support these in principle, especially when framed as a way to curb corporate power or fund health initiatives. But several flag that without tight regulation, corporations would simply raise prices or find loopholes. “They’ll get round that. That will be all costed into their profit margins and it will just simply put the price of everything else up,” says a participant from South London – a concern echoed in several regions.

In their final workshops, participants in the national deliberations are asked to imagine how the food system would work in 2030 if their recommendations were implemented. Participants want flourishing local food, with greater connections between farming and communities. They see a fair and equitable system where healthy food is affordable for everyone. In this system ultra-processed foods are reduced, nature is regenerated, and a virtuous circle delivers a healthy, well-governed system that benefits society while protecting health and the environment.

Building on their discussions around the policy proposals, the participants develop manifestos of actions that could achieve the change they wanted to see. What emerges is a set of practical and achievable asks of government. Across all locations, five themes are prominent.

● **Do it**

I support this proposal and think we just need to get going and do it

● **Test it**

I like this proposal but suggest we start by trialling it to assess its effectiveness

● **Debate it**

This is a complex issue and I think the pros and cons require inclusive and balanced debate and collective leadership before a decision is made

● **Don’t do it**

I do not like this proposal and do not wish to see it taken

**STANDARDS IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS** Set requirements for nutritious food and drinks in early years settings, such as nurseries.



**FAIR DEALING REGULATIONS** Introduce a regulatory framework that ensures fair dealing between retailers and suppliers/intermediaries and farmers.



**PUBLIC PROCUREMENT WITH LOCAL INPUT** Increase the participation of smaller and local suppliers in public food procurement for schools, hospitals and prisons.



**INCENTIVES FOR FARMERS** Incentivise farmers to change to sustainable farming methods.



**CRIMINALISE ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION** Make it a crime to severely damage or destroy ecosystems.



**UPF TARGET** The government should set a target to reduce how much UPF the UK eats.



**RESTRICT ADVERTISING** Enact the government’s proposed plan to restrict junk food advertising on TV until after 9pm.



**IMPACT ASSESSMENTS** Require climate and environmental impact assessments to get permission to develop new industrial livestock units.



**POLLUTER PAYS** Tax the businesses that profit from polluting, such as companies that make pesticides and fertilisers or encourage intensive meat production.



**NATIONAL GUIDANCE** Add information on reducing UPF to official nutrition guidance.





# Citizen Manifesto to Fix Food

The manifesto reflects what we want from the food system: healthy food available to all that promotes fairness and sustainability. The manifesto is a plea for joined-up thinking and collaboration to address food inequalities, food poverty and food waste, creating a better system for all – from school children eating well, to families being able to afford nutritious food, to farmers being fairly supported.



## 1. Joined up food leadership

Decisions on food need coordinated leadership at the highest level, with cooperation across the UK's nations.

- Create national food strategies with strong leadership to bring together farming, health, environment and the economy
- Strengthen collaboration between governments across the UK, sharing best practice and expanding policies that work
- Set up citizens' assemblies and other forums to give people a voice in shaping policies that affect them
- Put limits on corporate influence so that decisions prioritise what is good for all, not just food industry profits



## 2. Real choice for everyone

Everyone deserves real food choices, not just what is cheapest, the most convenient or will generate the most profit. Children should grow up protected from all unhealthy food marketing, with nutritious meals available regardless of income.

- Regulate ultra-processed food, phasing out the worst offenders and introducing clear warning labels
- Build on upcoming advertising restrictions by shifting all marketing towards fresh, nutritious and sustainably produced food, especially for children
- Cap the cost of healthy foods so that price isn't a barrier to good food
- Coordinate UK-wide food-affordability measures, ensuring that solutions like food vouchers and school meals benefit the most people



## 3. Better food, less waste

Our schools, hospitals and public institutions should set the example with high-quality, nutritious food while reducing waste and excessive packaging.

- Apply high standards for school and hospital meals, ensuring high-quality, nutritious food is the norm
- Tackle food waste from farm to fork, with clear UK-wide targets and actions
- Cut down on excessive plastic packaging, with recyclable and reusable alternatives promoted instead



## 4. A fairer deal for farmers

Farmers deserve fair prices for their produce and support to adapt to sustainable methods.

- Develop fair pricing rules that prevent supermarkets and big food companies from pushing out farmers and small producers
- Support farmers to adopt sustainable practices through financial backing and independent advice
- Regulate food businesses properly, preventing a handful of corporations from dominating supply chains and pricing



## 5. Flourishing local food

Local food networks bring communities together, make fresh food accessible, and reconnect people with the land and the source of their food.

- Invest in local food hubs, enabling more farmers to sell locally and local businesses to thrive – making it easier for people to buy fresh food and keeping more value in communities
- Make more land available for community food growing, helping cities, towns and villages become more food resilient
- Integrate food growing, cooking and sharing into school curriculums and community programmes to strengthen food culture and reconnect people to where their food comes from



## REGIONAL DISTINCTIONS WITHIN SHARED GOALS

While the five priorities appeared consistently across all locations, there are regional variations in emphasis and approach.

In Wales, participants focus on preserving traditional Welsh farming while strengthening local food systems, advocating for food cooperatives, food hubs and local shopping to connect communities with fresh produce.

In Scotland, their requests focus on implementing the Good Food Nation Act with more citizen involvement. In the Lothians, participants call for a 'Food for the Future' framework with lifelong food education from 'womb to tomb'. In Caithness, Sutherland, Ross, Orkney and Shetland, participants prioritise reinstating local abattoirs to reduce animal welfare concerns and address the unique challenges of food access in remote and island communities.

In East Kent and Northumberland, there is a stronger emphasis on supporting local farmers and reconnecting people in urban areas with rural food production. Participants advocate for 'farm to school' initiatives and better infrastructure to get fresh produce into nearby towns and cities.

In Northern Ireland, participants express concerns about food security post-Brexit, the vulnerability of cross-border supply chains, and the challenges facing the province's significant agricultural sector. They call for a national policy for sustainable agriculture and an independent taskforce to monitor government plans and policies.

While these regional emphases reflect local contexts and concerns, the core priorities remain remarkably consistent, demonstrating that food system reform has potential to unite rather than divide communities across the UK.

The community-led conversations often took this practical focus even further, with participants developing local initiatives and actions that could be implemented without waiting for national policy change. This dual approach – working for systemic policy reform while investing in immediate local action – emerges as a key strategy for food system transformation.







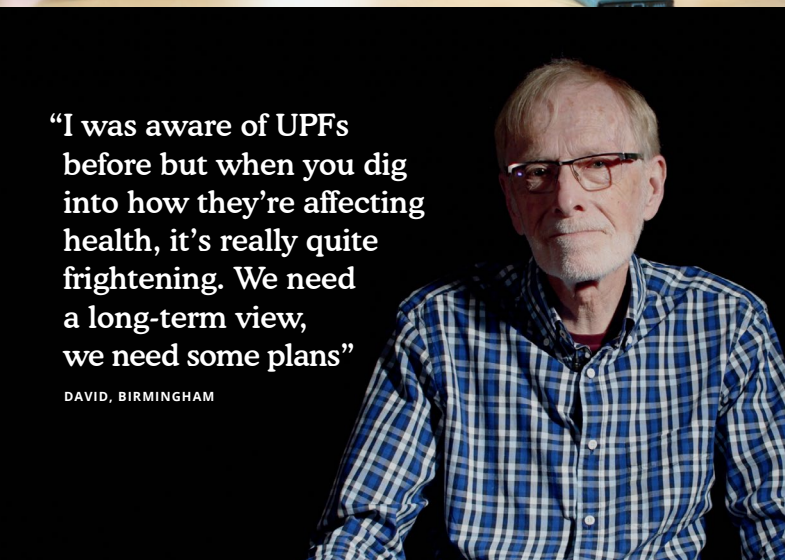
"I think it's very important  
that the government put  
a lot more effort into  
improving school meals"

NICKY, NORTH WALES



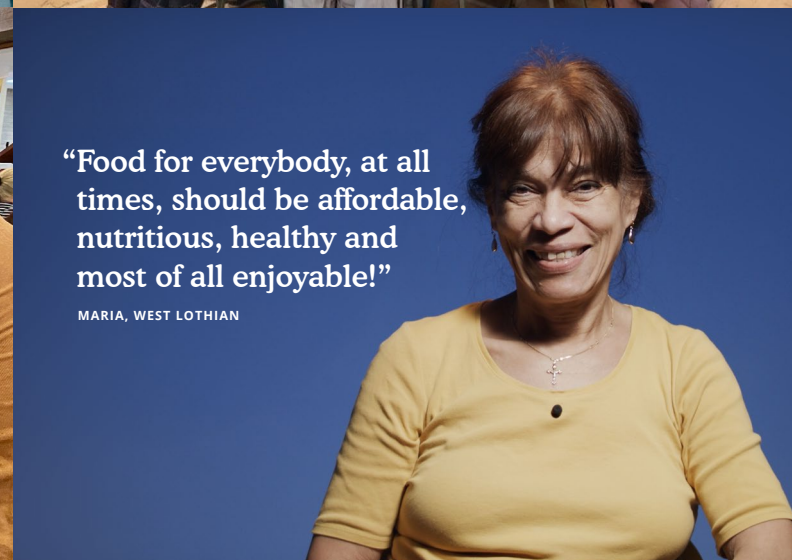
"I now look at food  
differently... how much of  
the profit is going to the  
farmer? How much is going  
to the supermarkets?"

FAISAL, BIRMINGHAM



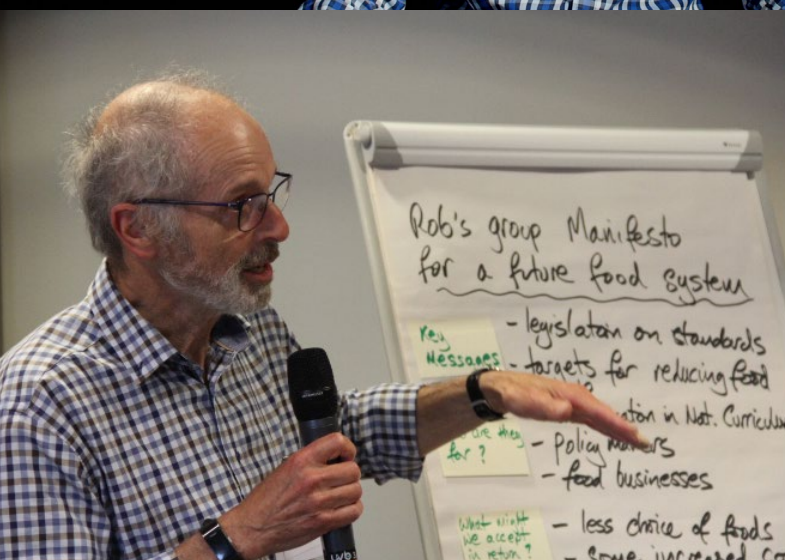
"I was aware of UPFs  
before but when you dig  
into how they're affecting  
health, it's really quite  
frightening. We need  
a long-term view,  
we need some plans"

DAVID, BIRMINGHAM



"Food for everybody, at all  
times, should be affordable,  
nutritious, healthy and  
most of all enjoyable!"

MARIA, WEST LoTHIAN



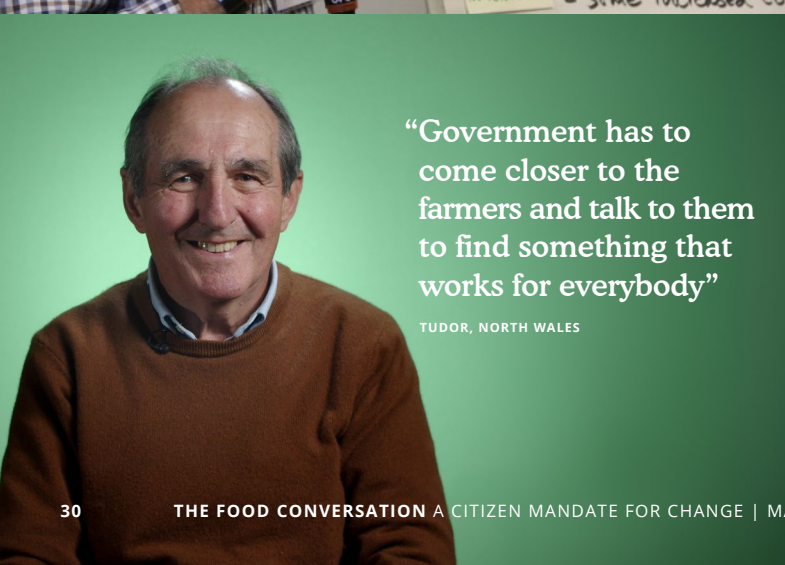
"There needs to be  
government initiative.  
They need to put  
health before profit"

TAHREEN, HALIFAX



"I would ask a politician  
to view food as more  
than a commodity  
that's bought and sold"

SOPHIE, MANCHESTER



"Government has to  
come closer to the  
farmers and talk to them  
to find something that  
works for everybody"

TUDOR, NORTH WALES



"A lot of people  
know how bad ultra-  
processed food is for  
them, yet these things  
are readily available  
at affordable prices  
to everyone"

SAM, CAMBRIDGESHIRE







## What this means for decision makers

The Food Conversation presents policymakers with a challenge and an opportunity. Across all locations and demographics, participants expressed profound concern that the current system is unfair, unhealthy, broken, expensive and unbalanced. Instead, they want policies delivering a system that is fair, healthy, sustainable, affordable, balanced and equitable. Decision makers across government, business and civil society now face a critical choice: continue with business as usual and risk the frustration and anger growing, or respond to this call for serious and ambitious reform.

### CHALLENGING ESTABLISHED NARRATIVES

The Food Conversation reveals that citizens do not simply want cheap food above all else. They are concerned about many aspects of the food system, sharing their everyday experiences in the discussion. As a participant in Northern Ireland shared: “At the minute, [young parents] are not so much feeding their children as stopping them from going hungry”. Community conversations reinforce these challenges to the orthodox narratives, providing on-the-ground examples of how citizens are already taking action in their local food systems. These local initiatives demonstrate both the appetite for change and the practical possibilities for a different approach to food.

Contrary to assumptions about public resistance to ‘nanny state’ interventions, citizens across political leanings called for stronger government leadership and regulation. They recognise food as too important to be left to under-regulated market forces. Citizens also have a sophisticated understanding of complex food system dynamics, often more nuanced than policymakers with specific interests. People have to navigate the interconnections – and the gaps between – policy silos every day. This suggests a citizen ability to readily ‘see systems’.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Each UK nation has distinct opportunities to respond to citizens’ priorities through current and upcoming policy processes.



## England

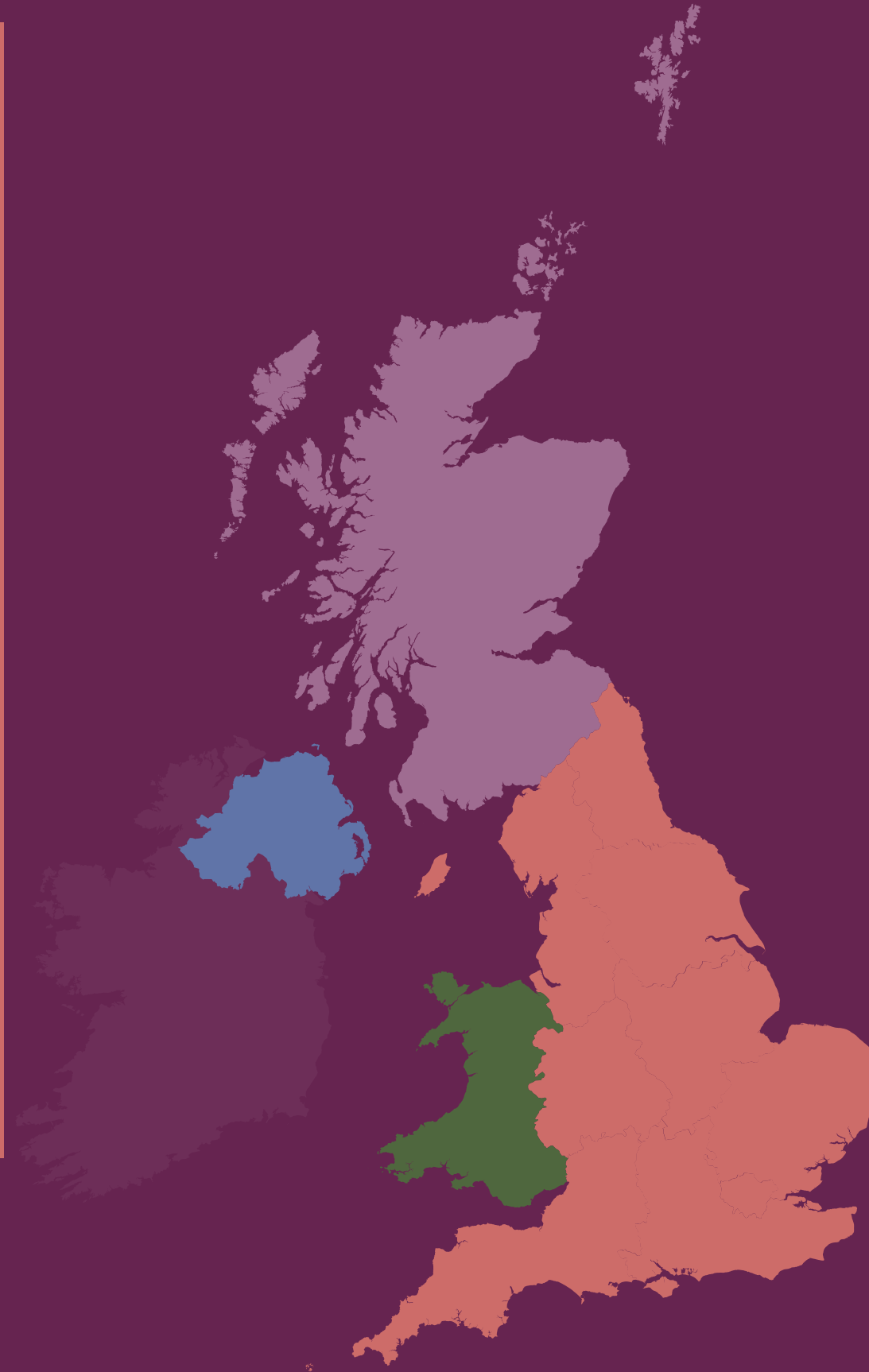
England stands at a critical juncture for food policy. The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) has announced plans for a comprehensive food strategy, a land use consultation in March 2025 and a 25-year farming roadmap due in late 2025.

Citizens' priorities from East Kent, Northumberland, West Yorkshire, South London and Cornwall offer clear direction for these initiatives. The food strategy should explicitly address the problem of 'cheapness' identified by participants, acknowledging that decades of downward pressure on food prices has come at significant cost to health, nature and farming communities.

The fragmentation of responsibility for food policy across government departments requires urgent attention. Participants called for high-level coordination with authority from the Prime Minister's office to ensure coherence across health, agriculture, environment, education and trade policies.

### Specific opportunities include:

- Using the food strategy to establish cross-departmental governance with clear accountability
- Setting core standards in trade deals that align with domestic farming standards
- Establishing new models for local food infrastructure through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- Redesigning agricultural payments to support transitions to producing food in harmony with nature, fairly and equitably
- Implementing stronger standards for public food, particularly early years settings



## Wales

Welsh participants emphasised the need for strong and coordinated leadership on food policy, with a particular focus on the country's distinct needs and strengths. They called for a cross-party National Food Plan for Wales, a dedicated government department or an independent body for food system change, and a Cabinet Minister for the Food System who is accountable for delivering holistic change.

Wales has a unique opportunity to further integrate food system reform with its pioneering Well-being of Future Generations Act, which already establishes a framework for sustainable development and where food is at the core of the latest 7-year Cymru Can strategy.

### As highlighted in the Welsh deliberations, this could include:

- Embedding food system outcomes more explicitly in the Well-being of Future Generations Act implementation programme
- Developing a comprehensive, cross-party National Food Plan for Wales
- Establishing a Cabinet-level Food System Minister with specific accountability for targets and outcomes
- Supporting the transition to sustainable farming through the Sustainable Farming Scheme
- Investing in local food infrastructure, particularly food hubs and cooperatives
- Expanding free school meal provision with stronger nutritional standards and cooperatives



## Scotland

Scotland has established strong foundations through the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act, which places a duty on Scottish Ministers, local authorities and health boards to produce Good Food Nation Plans addressing health, sustainability and economic strength. A statutory Scottish Food Commission will also be set up to scrutinise and make recommendations in relation to the Good Food Nation Plans. This framework aligns well with citizens' call for joined-up governance.

Citizens in the Scottish deliberations emphasised the importance of turning these legislative frameworks into practical action. The Lothians participants emphasised good governance, including a Scottish Minister for sustainable food, and inclusive decision-making that involves citizens, farmers, crofters and rural communities. Participants in Caithness, Sutherland, Ross, Orkney, and Shetland wanted to see the Scottish Government create a communications and engagement strategy to support participation in decision-making.

### Specific opportunities include:

- Embedding citizens' priorities in the forthcoming National Good Food Nation Plan, and involving citizens in the development of local plans
- Using public procurement processes to drive demand for Scottish produce in public food settings
- Strengthening connections between urban and rural areas through local food networks and Regional Food Groups
- Implementing the recommendations of the Scottish Food Commission



## Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's food policy landscape has been significantly affected by political instability over recent years. However, in November 2024 the Northern Ireland Executive approved a Food Strategy Framework, setting a long-term direction for the region's food system.

Citizens in Northern Ireland expressed concerns about food security post-Brexit, land ownership and agricultural reform, environmental protections and local supply chains. They saw the framework as an opportunity to build resilience in Northern Ireland's food system. They called for effective government leadership, and well-planned and coordinated interventions by the UK and devolved governments working together.

### Specific opportunities include:

- Using the Food Strategy Framework to establish cross-departmental leadership
- Strengthening local supply chains to reduce vulnerability to import disruption
- Building on Northern Ireland's significant agricultural sector to improve self-sufficiency
- Addressing the environmental impacts of intensive livestock production, particularly pollution of waterways



## IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

While national policy frameworks are essential, much practical implementation happens at local level. Local authorities have significant powers that could advance citizens' priorities:

- **Planning policies that support local food retail, restrict proliferation of fast-food outlets and protect land for food growing**
- **Procurement rules that prioritise healthy, sustainable food in schools and other public services**
- **Economic development strategies that invest in local food infrastructure**
- **Community engagement through food partnerships and growing initiatives**

In locations in the north of Scotland, participants emphasised the need to address the lack of local abattoirs, making food production more accessible within island communities. In the Lothians, participants called for a local production and consumption framework encouraging NGOs, markets and community spaces to work together.

Pioneering examples already exist. Preston's community wealth building approach has directed more public procurement towards local suppliers. Brighton and Hove's Planning Advisory Note on food growing provides guidance to integrate food production into development plans. London's boroughs have used planning powers to restrict new fast-food outlets near schools.

Citizens want to see these innovations become standard practice, with consistent support from national governments to enable local action.

Community conversations often focused specifically on local government action, with participants developing proposals for how their councils could support local food systems. These grassroots initiatives provide valuable models and momentum for wider local government action.

## BENEFITS FOR BUSINESS AND A GOOD GROWTH FUTURE

The Food Conversation has significant implications for food businesses as well as government. Companies that align with citizens' priorities have opportunities to build public trust and meet growing demand for healthier, more sustainable products.

Progressive businesses are already demonstrating that different approaches are viable, building successful models based on high standards, fair supply chains and transparent practices. Citizens expressed frustration with corporate lobbying against public health measures, misleading marketing claims and the extraction of value from farming communities. They called for stricter regulation of harmful practices and more support for businesses creating genuine public benefit.

## BUILDING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR CHANGE

Participants see The Food Conversation as the beginning of a process of participation, involvement and engagement across society. They want to embed meaningful engagement with citizens, farmers and other food system stakeholders throughout the system into the implementation of policies. This collaborative approach is seen as essential for food system change.

The deliberations and community conversations have demonstrated how people with different political perspectives, from urban and rural communities, across age groups and social backgrounds, can find common ground. Any significant reform will face resistance from interests that benefit from the status quo. But politicians who frame food policy as a choice between consumer freedom and government interference, or between affordable food and sustainable production, are creating false dichotomies that citizens themselves reject. The Food Conversation shows that honest conversations about challenges, evidence-based discussion of options and respect for diverse perspectives can generate solutions with broad support.





The Food Conversation reveals a clear citizen mandate for change, centred on five priority areas, while also demonstrating support for a much wider range of policies and interventions. This citizen mandate is already driving momentum in food system transformation.

The Food Conversation challenges the dominant narrative that citizens primarily want cheap food and resist government intervention. This shift in public discourse has occurred through multiple channels. The Food Conversation films have been viewed by over 140,000 people at influential events, from the Oxford Farming Conferences to the Labour Party Conference. Professor Tim Jackson's *The False Economy of Big Food* report generated front-page headlines and continues to be cited by policymakers, public figures and academics. Senior political figures, including the Prime Minister, have acknowledged in national media that citizens want government to take a more active role in shaping the food environment.

By bringing citizens directly into conversation with decision makers, The Food Conversation has established new pathways for influence that counterbalance traditional industry lobbying. Citizens have met with elected representatives, and debates and events in Parliament now feature findings from The Food Conversation. The 2024 Citizen Food Summit in Westminster centred citizen voices in policy discussions, with participants speaking directly to policymakers and business leaders. Their testimonies about food insecurity, ultra-processed food and farmers' struggles carry a lived-experience authority that policy discussions often lack.

While national policy is essential, The Food Conversation simultaneously cultivates networks of local leadership driving ground-up change. In Northumberland, findings directly informed a new county food strategy awaiting approval. In Cornwall, cross-pollination between The Food Conversation and existing networks fed into the Cornwall Good Food Summit, where participants shared their experiences with a wider audience.



## TRANSFORMING PARTICIPATION

The Food Conversation has pioneered methods of citizen engagement that transform how food system decisions are made. Recruitment through sortition reinforces how deliberative processes overcome self-selection bias and include voices typically absent from food policy discussions. The toolkit approach has enabled connections across communities. In the Highlands, one conversation revealed several useful links where local needs could be met: a local producer wanted to share knowledge and is now going into the local prison to teach growing skills, while the prison wanted to share their produce with the community and a food bank is now going to take this to distribute to people in the area. Such practical outcomes demonstrate how conversations can spark tangible changes. These combined approaches have attracted interest from organisations around the world seeking to strengthen democratic engagement in policy processes.

## PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND MOVEMENT BUILDING

At the individual level, participation has sparked transformations that ripple outwards through families, workplaces and communities. Many participants describe shifts in their behaviours – reading labels more carefully, choosing local producers and questioning marketing claims. More significantly, many have embraced advocacy roles beyond the formal project. A Northern Ireland participant now regularly speaks with politicians and policymakers, trying to push food reform onto the political agenda. In West Yorkshire, a participant has set up a community garden: “I’m no expert, but I’ve managed to set up a community garden and encouraging people to grow their own vegetables.”

Active food citizens create the foundation for lasting change. As participants share their experiences with wider networks, they extend the conversation far beyond those directly involved in the formal process.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

This report marks not the conclusion but a milestone in an ongoing project. The Food Conversation will continue in several forms: integrating findings into formal policy processes across all four UK nations; maintaining citizen engagement through the toolkit; and sharing methodologies, insight and analysis to enable others to replicate the approach.

Most importantly, The Food Conversation shows that public appetite for change is robust and sophisticated. Citizens understand the complexities and are ready to support bold action. As one participant from Scotland reflected: “I see this food conversation as a very positive thing. I hope whatever comes out of this is taken up to the right levels, followed through, and we’ll keep pushing until the people are heard, policies change, and regulations are put in place.”

What began as a question about what people want from food has evolved into a clear citizen mandate for change. The groundwork has been laid and there is now a powerful opportunity for government and citizens to work together towards a healthier, fairer and more secure food future.







# Acknowledgements

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- The expert speakers (a full list is available at <https://thefoodconversation.uk/faq>)
- The Food Conversation Advisory Group:
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  - Angelina Sanderson Bellamy, University of West of England
  - David Pencheon, University of Exeter
  - Denise Bentley, First Love Foundation
  - Gavin Shelton, CoFarm
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  - Tom Macmillan, Royal Agricultural University

For further details on the methodology and results of The Food Conversation, please visit <https://ffcc.co.uk/publications/deliberation-reports> for the deliberations and <https://ffcc.co.uk/publications/lets-talk-about-food> for the community food conversations.



The Food Farming and Countryside Commission is helping to shape a more sustainable future for food, farming and the countryside – a fairer, greener, healthier future, tackling the climate and nature crises, improving health and reducing inequalities. We bring together leadership across sectors and communities, involving and listening to citizens, seeking out innovative initiatives and seldom-heard perspectives. Partnering with governments, businesses and civil society, we deal with the difficult issues, exploring both the radical ideas and the practical actions that will make a real difference in communities.

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