

Changing the Conversation



The UK's largest conversation about food

Food matters to everyone. It is at the heart of a resilient, thriving economy and healthy, prosperous communities. The UK food industry is worth over £100bn, yet many children go to bed hungry, many farmers are struggling to survive, and the cost of diet-related ill health is spiralling. Globally the way food is produced contributes significantly to the climate and nature crises.

Governments have struggled to grasp the nettle on food system policies. Attempts to change anything about the system have floundered in the face of disagreement about what we're told people want from food - and aggressive push back from those with a vested interest in maintaining it as it currently is.

The Food Conversation is the UK's largest-ever citizen deliberation on food systems. Citizens' assemblies have taken place in all four nations, involving more than 300 citizens. The Food Conversation aims to provide a well evidenced view of what citizens really think about food, exploring how citizens understand the complexities of the issue and the necessity for trade-offs.

Citizens conclude that the current food system is unfair, unhealthy and unsustainable. They want the government to put measures in place to improve leadership across the system, address power imbalances, ensure learning and collaboration, get a fairer deal for farmers, and unlock the power of local areas.

6,600+

HOURS SPENT BY CITIZENS IN DELIBERATION

118,000+

INVITATIONS SENT

345

CITIZENS INVOLVED IN THE ASSEMBLIES

70+

COMMUNITIES HOSTING THEIR OWN LOCAL FOOD CONVERSATIONS SO FAR

70+

EXPERT SPEAKERS FROM ACADEMICS, LOCAL LEADERS, POLICYMAKERS, FOOD BUSINESSES AND MORE



How citizens see the food system

Supermarket shelves are full of food, what's the problem? If people are getting ill by eating that food, and if nature and climate are rapidly declining because of the way that cheap food is produced and sold, then it's up to consumers to make better choices. Or so the arguments go...

This is a pervasive food narrative, and a profoundly damaging one. For decades, this narrative has been cultivated and asserted by those with a vested interest in keeping things as they are, slowing or preventing any meaningful action in the food system. This has come with a big impact. Citizens describe a food system that is confusing, unhealthy, unsustainable, unfair. They are worried about health in the UK and the NHS, about people on lower incomes and their access to food, about future generations and the food system they will inherit in years to come.

When asked about who is responsible for leading change, they don't use phrases like 'nanny state!' about government responsibility and the need for intervention – quite the opposite in fact. When shown the evidence about the food system, they see the range of issues that need coordinated action. They want government to see it from the citizens' perspectives.



FOOD

Citizens are concerned about the power of global food corporations, which has led to the dominance of unhealthy ultra-processed food (UPF). They describe this dominance as having 'crept up on us' and feel tricked into funding huge profit through their purchases. They worry about people on lower incomes and how UPFs are much more accessible and affordable. They see this as deeply unfair.



FARMERS

Citizens see that many farmers are caught in a cycle that rewards mass production of commodities for food companies, using intensive methods to meet demands. They recognise that many farmers operate with unjustifiably low returns.



CLIMATE

Citizens were shocked by the contribution of production to greenhouse gas emissions. They talk about the impact of unsustainable global farming practices on soil health, land clearance, and pollution, as well as the farming sector's impact on – and resilience to – climate change. Without adaptation, as climate change progresses, farmers would need to deploy increasingly intensive methods leaving them in a catch-22 situation.



NATURE

Citizens tell us how wrong it is that demand from corporations and resultant intensive food production has contributed to a decline in wildlife and biodiversity. They see how reliant food production is on chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and the impact of industrial farming on waterways.



LAND USE

Citizens point to inefficient land use which does not balance farming, food growing, nature and development. Citizens living in urban areas describe feeling 'overrun' by fast-food outlets, and their surprise that town planning regulations do not automatically prevent this. Those in rural areas conversely describe long journeys to supermarkets and food outlets, with little access to local healthy food.

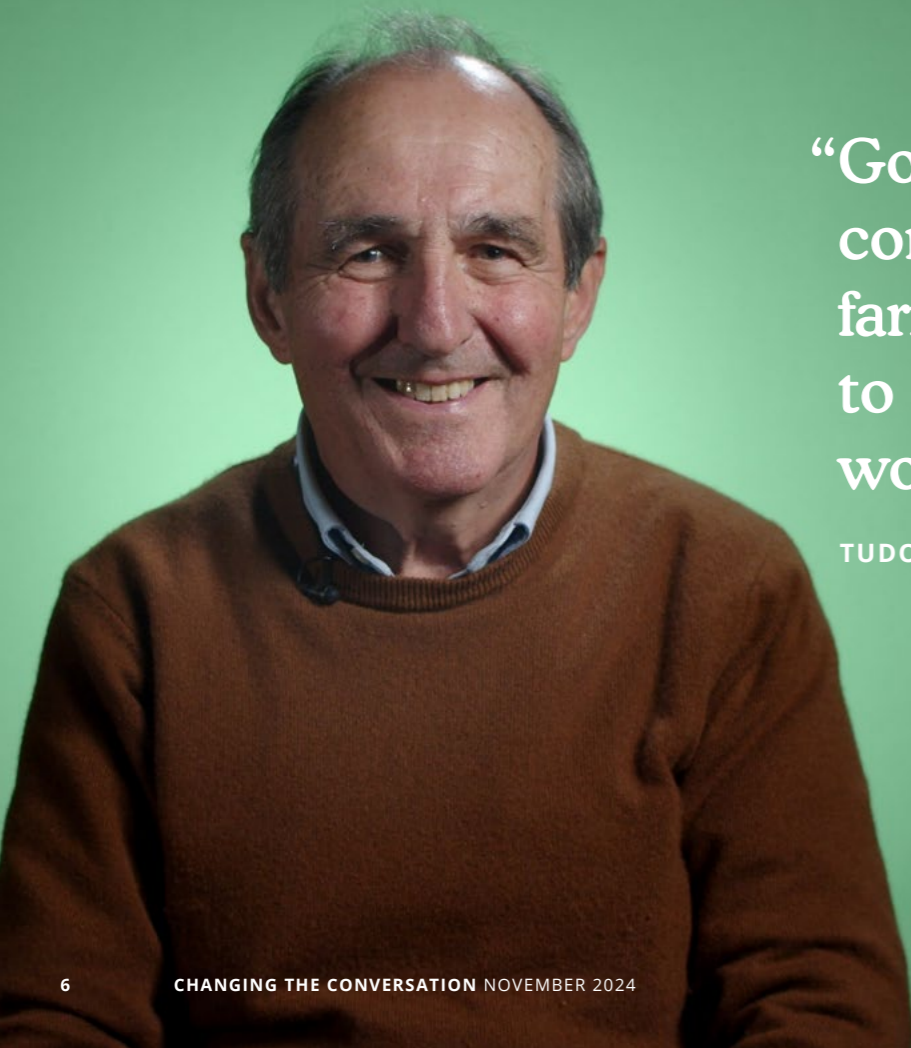


“I would ask a politician to view food as more than a commodity that’s bought and sold”

SOPHIE, MANCHESTER

“I think it’s very important that the government put a lot more effort into improving school meals”

NICKY, NORTH WALES



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

TUDOR, NORTH WALES



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

TAHREEN, HALIFAX

Appetite for government intervention

While citizens have deep rooted concerns about the food system, they are inherently solutions-focused in their thinking. The design of The Food Conversation has enabled them to consider many potential ways forward. Throughout the process, citizens have considered a raft of policy solutions that have been proposed previously – from sources such as the National Food Strategy, the United Nations, UKRI funded research, and other charities and NGOs.

They have assessed and ranked each policy as:

- Do it**
I support this proposal and think we just need to get going and do it
- 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
- Test it**
I like this proposal but suggest we start by trialling it to assess its effectiveness
- Don't do it**
I do not like this proposal and do not wish to see it taken

ABOUT THE RESULTS

There's nuance behind the numbers. For example, when it comes to restricting advertising, around two in three citizens supported restricting ads for unhealthy food on TV. But some citizens chose not to select 'Do It' for this policy because they felt restrictions should be tougher and broader, covering all media and online platforms as well. Views were mixed on a transition budget for farmers, as several citizens felt a transition budget guaranteed to 2029 would not give farmers enough time to make use of the budget. Similarly, opinions on taxation were varied. Some citizens chose 'Do It', but many more chose other options, believing that the tax would not be implemented well and food corporations would simply find loopholes, or that costs would be passed directly to consumers.

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.



Transition budget

Set a guaranteed agricultural budget until 2029, to give financial support to farmers so they can 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.



Windfall tax on food companies

Pay for schemes that increase access to healthy food through a windfall tax for big food companies who profit the most when prices rise.



Food standards in public institutions

Set legally binding nutrition, sustainability and environmental standards for food served in hospitals, and other public institutions.



Impact assessments

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



Farmer advice

Make sure every farmer can get trusted, independent advice by trained peer mentors and support networks.



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.



Changing the conversation

Citizens can see a way forward to a food system that works better for them, while also giving more space and profit to small and medium scale farmers and producers, enabling more sustainable production methods, and giving more power to communities to build thriving local food systems. They want governments to lead the way to a system that works for everyday people.

Far from being blue sky thinking, their solutions are realistic and achievable. Indeed, it is striking to see the alignment between what citizens want and recommendations from a range of policy experts and committees. Many solutions are already in place in some form – and taken for granted – in other cornerstone policy areas such as energy, education and housing.

In Professor Tim Jackson's paper, *The False Economy of Big Food... and the case for a new food economy*, the economic arguments for a new food economy support citizens' thinking: rooting the right to good food in leadership and legislation, regulating to rebalance power, and redirecting money to where it needs to be.

1 ROOT

- **Leadership:** Citizens want government to appoint a 'Food Systems Minister' with responsibility and accountability. They think a Bill or a strategy should be implemented which sets out a plan for how everyone will have enough nourishing, affordable food, with legally binding targets to ensure accountability.
- **Community:** Citizens want more people to know how the food system works, and investment in building a food culture to generate a sense of pride in a healthy, sustainable UK food system.
- **Collaboration:** They want a principle of collaboration embedded across government, which should also involve citizens through public dialogues.

2 REGULATE

- **Address power imbalance:** Citizens support policies that protect child health, including expanded bans on misleading marketing of unhealthy products, and mandatory nutrition standards for schools, hospitals and early years settings.
- **Protect the environment:** Citizens welcome strong regulations to stop the practices of global corporations damaging the environment, and to address food waste and excessive packaging
- **Unleash the power of local:** Citizens see the potential in their communities. They want national governments to devolve more responsibility to local authorities, along with resource and investment, to enable local leaders to build infrastructure and work in partnership with communities to build thriving local food systems.

3 REDIRECT

- **Use taxation wisely:** Citizens support taxes on unhealthy products and polluter pays fines linked to environmental damage. They want the money raised to support better food and farming
- **Fair outcomes:** Citizens want to make sure that, regardless of their income, everyone has enough good food in the short term while structural changes bed in.

“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



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

MARIA, WEST LOTHIAN



“I want the government to start viewing food policy as a really important area”

NAT, SHEFFIELD



“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



About the process

The Food Conversation is a UK-wide, cross-cutting project to understand what people really want from food. Over 18 months, we set out across the four nations in 2024 to understand the public perception of food systems and their appetite for change. We held citizens' assemblies in Birmingham, Cambridge, Northumberland, West Yorkshire, East Kent, North and South Wales, Cornwall, South London, Northern Ireland, the Lothians, and Caithness, Sutherland, Ross, Orkney and Shetland.

We designed a gold standard process, with the help of a highly experienced advisory group. We worked closely with Sortition Foundation to gather citizens who broadly reflected the political leanings, socio-economic backgrounds, and ethnicities of their place, and who were not expected to have any prior knowledge or views about the food system. Over 118,000 invitations went out aiming to recruit up to 30 citizens in each location attending workshops.

We commissioned experts Hopkins Van Mil and TPXimpact to design and facilitate the deliberative process. Citizens spent over 20 hours together in workshops online and in person.

They explored a range of policy solutions to solve challenges in the food system – in academic terms, a 'meta review' of policies proposed in recent research covering food and health, farming and land use, climate and nature, and justice and power. They listened to experts with different perspectives and discussed the potential pitfalls and trade-offs of different policy proposals. Through their deliberations, they produced manifestos for change.

We are also building partnerships with organisations who can help extend the reach and scale of the project, using our local Food Conversation toolkit to lead discussions about the food system in their communities.

In this report, we've presented some findings from the process, focused on areas of consensus across all four nations. But these are just headline results; in later reports we will explore findings in depth, homing in on areas of debate and consensus, differences across locations, and citizen stories and reflections.



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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Registered in
England and Wales

Company no. 12562770

Charity no. 1195790

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