

# Let's Talk About Food

The power of community-led  
food conversations



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# What we did

To open up The Food Conversation and support community-led conversations, we created an online toolkit and developed a package of support including online learning events and small grants to cover some of the cost of hosting conversations.

The toolkit makes it easy for anyone to host a conversation, whether in person or online. It includes:

- Detailed session plans in different formats for full-day, half-day and 90-minute sessions, to be hosted in person or online
- Tips on how to run an effective, fun and inclusive session
- Slide decks and activity templates
- An introductory animation, 'Opening the chicken wrap', and 16 short films of food system experts presenting on topics such as ultra-processed foods, food and climate, and food policy, with perspectives from across the four nations
- A simple and short template for conversation hosts to tell us what they talked about and the key recommendations for change coming from their conversations
- An invitation for all participants to stay involved in The Food Conversation

The toolkit is freely available on the FFCC website and The Food Conversation microsite, and we continue to share it widely through all of our communications channels. We have also encouraged everyone who participated in the in-depth deliberations to host a conversation of their own.

To help get the conversations off the ground, we partnered with a small number of organisations with good reach into local communities, and offered microgrants of £500–£1,000 to local community groups from a total budget of £40,000. Community groups used the money in different ways, for example to hire venues, provide food and drink, pay for participants' travel, print materials, promote the event and cover organisers' time.



## Sustainable Food Places

A network of over a hundred local food organisations



## Amazing Communities Together

A network of hyper-local community groups representing communities all over England emerging from the Big Local programme

## Community Organisers

### Community Organisers' Social Action Hubs

Grassroots organisations across England committed to building community power through community organising



## The Felix Project

The London-wide charity fighting hunger and food waste

We ran webinars regularly over nine months to introduce the toolkit, answer questions and offer advice – and also to help make connections between community groups. We designed and ran a second series of webinars over a similar period for people who were either in the middle of planning conversations or had recently completed them, to share ideas, tips and insights. In between, The Food Conversation team provided hands-on support, through email contact, calls, briefings and even attending or hosting events themselves.

So far, we have recorded 74 separate community-led conversations taking place, involving 1,279 people, in 45 locations – and the number is increasing all the time, as plans are made and funds raised to host more. Just over half of the conversations we have heard about were 90 minutes long, just under half were half-day conversations and a small number lasted a full day or more. Nearly all have taken place in person, with just three taking place online.

Our numbers are a minimum estimate, because although we ask anyone hosting a conversation to let us know about it, they are not obliged to. Neither do we oblige conversation hosts to feed back how the conversations went once they have taken place – however, many have. Each conversation has had its own distinct character, influenced by who was in the room, what issues were most relevant to them and how they chose to structure their discussions. Some took place in small, informal gatherings around kitchen tables, where neighbours shared personal stories about food access, shopping habits and family meals. Others were larger, structured community events bringing together dozens of participants, including local businesses, farmers, policymakers and residents. Some were deeply personal, focusing on lived experiences of food insecurity or the loss of traditional food knowledge, while others tackled policy-focused discussions, examining how local authorities and businesses could take action.

We have learned so much from this process: about the toolkit and how it has been used, what participants are saying about the food system, and the impact that this part of The Food Conversation project has had.



# What we've learned about community conversations

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**“We had great attendance as we already had a pre-existing community group set up which made it easier to fill the room... We especially liked the intro material on ‘what is the “food system”’ to define at the start. People were really engaged by the chicken wrap video. People were really enthusiastic talking about food, everyone cares about food and has strong views about it.”**

**BRADFORD BIRTH TO 19,  
WEST YORKSHIRE**

## **MICROGRANTING**

So far, we have provided small grants of £500–£1,000 to 41 community organisations who wished to host a food conversation. The money has generally been spent on venue hire, staff time and catering, and for many organisations this has made the difference between a conversation being possible or not.

We ask partners to tell us approximately how they will use their money, but not for detailed reports and expenses. Where possible we have paid the grants in advance. We know many community organisations operate on a shoestring and depend on the commitment of volunteers, so we want to minimise the administrative burden for them. This has been possible in part because the organisations are members of national networks, providing a level of built-in accountability.

**“I have completed your wonderfully brief and simple online form (thank you for that)”**

**GREATER LINCOLNSHIRE FOOD PARTNERSHIP**

## **A MODULAR TOOLKIT**

The toolkit has a clear structure, reflecting the design of the deliberations, but it is modular so that hosts can adapt it to suit their needs, their communities and the time they have available. We describe it as a resource to draw from, rather than a prescriptive set of instructions.

As far as we know, few conversation hosts are using the toolkit in its entirety without deviating at all from the suggested structure. Hosts are adjusting activities, adding or removing sessions, making conversations more physical, visual or interactive, and often invite local speakers or add focused conversations on local issues. We welcome this as long as we know a conversation is happening and will include discussions about what could change in the food system.

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“Eight young people aged 11–17 took part in the food conversation. The conversation started by asking them to discuss with their neighbour whether they thought the food they had been offered for lunch was healthy and how it compared to what they normally ate. We then asked whether they thought it was easy for young people to eat a healthy diet and what issues they thought got in the way, leading into a discussion of what needed to change. They expressed concern that they did not have much control over food at home or at school, about the effect of being surrounded by unhealthy choices all the time and peer pressure.

**SHROPSHIRE GOOD FOOD PARTNERSHIP**

“We adapted the food conversation half day plan to make sure we included information about the crisis support we deliver at the centre.”

**OUR SALE WEST, TRAFFORD, GREATER MANCHESTER**

“We tied this into the launch of the Waltham Forest Food Partnership. We watched the film about The Chicken Wrap and used the plan provided with adaptations to make it more borough specific. We gave participants a lot of opportunity to shape the themes themselves and education / linking food growers to educational settings was a big theme as was waste.”

**WALTHAM FOREST FOOD PARTNERSHIP**

## **PROVIDING FOOD**

We are surprised by how few community-led food conversations have been held online. Of the 74 conversations reported to us so far, almost all have been in person, many of them providing food to help attract participants and to get the conversation started. Sharing a meal helps make the conversations feel more personal and meaningful, and often leads to deeper conversations about people’s own food cultures.

*“We had an absolutely brilliant conversation – people were really engaged ... We decided to spend a bit more on food, and provide lunch for everyone, which was well worth it; it was so popular we had to turn people away because of room capacity.”*

**GREATER LINCOLNSHIRE FOOD PARTNERSHIP**

“We found that the best format was a community potluck – it generated a community co-productive spirit which laid the groundwork for an excellent conversation in Llanelli”

**BWYD SIR GÂR FOOD, CARMARTHENSHIRE**

“We were working with young people so providing food was the way to get their time – the meal was provided by a food surplus café, so that started a great conversation about what was on the plate.”

**SHROPSHIRE GOOD FOOD PARTNERSHIP**

“We successfully held our Food Conversation event on Tuesday 22nd Oct here at Sale West Youth and Community Centre. 40 people attended consisting of reps from local VCFSE organisations, local PCN, Mental health charities, council officers and councillors. There was a real buzz in the room and a lot of good conversations.”

OUR SALE WEST (BIG LOCAL COMMUNITY ORGANISATION), TRAFFORD, GREATER MANCHESTER

*“We went to where people were already meeting, for example a women’s group, where afterwards we all sat and had lunch together”*

OCTOPUS COMMUNITY NETWORK, ISLINGTON

## FOCUSING ON ACCESSIBILITY

The food system and related issues are complex and conversations about them can be full of jargon. At the national in-depth deliberations, participants had plenty of time to absorb information, ask questions and discuss issues directly with experts. We know this can’t always be the case in community-led conversations, and so we tried to make the materials and content as accessible as possible. This is why we made our animation ‘Opening the chicken wrap’. It provides an accessible and engaging introduction to thinking about food as a system, and some of the issues relating to how food is produced and consumed in the UK. It has been used widely and in different contexts, and although it was created for the community-led conversations, we also have used it at the beginning of our in-depth deliberations.

*“The chicken wrap film was very effective and we used it in schools and other settings”*

BWYD SIR GÂR FOOD, CARMARTHENSHIRE

Some groups have told us that the animation and the expert videos still contain a lot of jargon and are hard for participants to follow. Even if the language is clear, the content can be conceptually dense. This is a lesson for us in the need to work hard to remove all barriers for people to engage with important conversations, and to increase our engagement with target audiences from the beginning when developing content.



IMAGE CREDIT: GREATER LINCOLNSHIRE FOOD PARTNERSHIP



# What people are saying

We ask anyone who completes a community-led food conversation to tell us their top priorities for change in the food system. Although different groups have used different entry-points for their conversations, there is a high level of consistency in the messages we are hearing back. We have heard a lot of passion – even outrage – about the current situation and a powerful call for change. The priorities strongly echo those in The Food Conversation Citizens’ Manifesto, adding even more weight to the call for change.

**“Policy makers should be informed by our voices”**

**SUSTAINABLE FOOD SOMERSET**

**Many are calling for the government to intervene and regulate to make healthy food more accessible.**

**“When is fruit and veg going to be cheaper than junk food? We have an obesity crisis too, and yet a punnet of strawberries costs £2 but a big bar of chocolate £1 – which are struggling families going to buy?”**

**CommUNITY LITTLE HULTON, MANCHESTER**

**“Supermarkets should actually listen to the communities they serve and not just pay lip service, they should be more about health and value and less about lining the pockets of their shareholders.”**

**COMMUNITY ROOTS, GLOUCESTERSHIRE**

**“Cap supermarket profits and emphasise paying workers and producers more fairly”**

**RIVERSIDE COMMUNITY HEALTH, NEWCASTLE**

**Food insecurity and poverty are prominent themes in a majority of the community-led food conversations.**

**“... food donations should still be good quality, not just unhealthy or inedible items.”**

**OCTOPUS COMMUNITY NETWORK, ISLINGTON**

“More attention needs to be paid to accessibility around dietary needs – not only around health conditions (such as excessive and hidden sugars and the impact with regard to diabetes) but also cultural needs.”

COMMUNITY ROOTS, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

“Guarantee our essentials and end the need for food banks”

SHROPSHIRE GOOD FOOD PARTNERSHIP

**Participants feel strongly that there should be more support for local and community-led food systems to grow and thrive.**

“More local food on local plates – reduce cost by improving efficiencies and cutting out middle men.”

HIGHLAND GOOD FOOD PARTNERSHIP

“That land is made available for community food growing and farming opportunities – including both public and privately held land.”

BWYD SIR GÂR FOOD, CARMARTHENSHIRE

“Community and individual empowerment through increased access to green spaces.”

SUSTAINABLE FOOD SOMERSET

**A priority for many is ensuring that the farming community is able to prosper and become an attractive prospect for new entrants.**

“Action to make farming a more reliable source of income, with better guarantees for payment, contracts and conditions.”

ARUN & CHICHESTER FOOD PARTNERSHIP

*“Fair pay from supply chains, and government subsidies for farmers to steward the countryside for diverse food production and nature recovery.”*

BWYD SIR GÂR FOOD, CARMARTHENSHIRE

*"All farmers deserve a truly just transition to meet net zero"*

NOURISH NI, DONAGHADEE

**Participants emphasise the need for people to know more about where their food comes from and how to maintain a healthy diet.**

**"Better food education at every level – but particularly in schools – to increase knowledge, confidence and skills in terms of sourcing, preparing and budgeting for healthy nutritious meals 'from scratch'."**

FOOD PLYMOUTH

**"Create trustworthy labelling with clear standards and definitions, including 'Free Range', UPFs, GMOs, what is given to livestock and fish including hormones, and clarity on what chemicals are sprayed on food. Give people the information to make an informed choice."**

ARUN & CHICHESTER FOOD PARTNERSHIP



IMAGE CREDIT: WALTHAM FOREST FOOD PARTNERSHIP

# How the conversations spark change

“Conversations are a massive deal politically. What our friends and family think has a huge impact on how we vote. Conversations can bridge divides, too: the biggest factor in the seismic shift in US attitudes on equal marriage was people having gay friends or family members. And change-makers are increasingly recognising – and harnessing – this power. The last decade has seen many incredible examples of how conversations can unlock political change.”

**LARGER US**

Finding out what people from diverse locations and backgrounds think about food is only one objective for the community-led conversations. Inspired by examples like [Larger Us’s Climate Conversations](#), Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s [Collective Imagination](#) project and [Huddlecraft](#)’s vision of the power of peer-led learning, we also hoped that the conversations would have an impact both locally and nationally. The feedback we’ve received shows that this is exactly what is happening.

**Conversations bring people into the debate about how food is produced and consumed, and what needs to change.**

“It was a really interesting event in that the town it was held in has no real food hub or regular community food discussion. The participants were a real mix of people who varied between just interested parties to one guest being an NHS health advisor.”

**FOOD CONVERSATION HOST, KINCARDINE, FIFE**

“The Food Conversation project provided us with a valuable opportunity to engage with diverse audiences about food chains and their far-reaching impacts ... Across all three sessions, it was evident that these discussions sparked a strong interest in where and how our food is sourced, with participants eager to continue the conversation and explore the topic further.”

**GOOD FOOD OXFORDSHIRE**

“In a rural farming area, the project has informed those who don’t have links to the farming community about the complex economic and sustainable issues surrounding food production.”

**HEREFORDSHIRE FOOD ALLIANCE**

## Conversations build connections and strengthen relationships locally, important for increasing social capital.

*"It has given us a frame within which to encourage conversations across a range of platforms and encouraged communication amongst groups who do not usually engage with one another."*

CALDERDALE FOOD NETWORK

"It has enabled us to bring local community food projects together to meet and talk around these issues and brought new people and organisations into our sphere."

SUSTAINABLE FOOD SOMERSET

"We discovered several useful links where needs could be met by offers brought to the table – A local producer wanted to share knowledge and now is going into the local prison to help teach them growing skills as they were searching for expertise. The prison also wanted a way to share their produce with the community as a way to give back, and a food bank organisation is now going to take the produce and distribute it to people in the area."

HIGHLAND GOOD FOOD PARTNERSHIP

## Conversations connect local groups and citizens to a national-level debate, and help people feel part of high-profile, national-level political advocacy.

*"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 because they were coming through to FFCC."*

SHROPSHIRE GOOD FOOD PARTNERSHIP

"Our food conversations went really well – if anything, as an organisation based in 2 food establishments, we would like to be more involved in these conversations locally, regionally and nationally."

STARTING POINT COMMUNITY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP, STOCKPORT,  
GREATER MANCHESTER

## Conversations help develop ideas for local food strategies

“This is such brilliant work – thank you FFCC for developing this approach. We have recently run some food conversations in Carmarthenshire, and it’s invaluable for feedback to policy makers, but also for focus setting within our Sustainable Local Food Partnership for the county.”

**BWYD SIR GÂR FOOD, CARMARTHENSHIRE**

“It has enabled wider participation and engagement in the development of our food strategy”

**CALDERDALE FOOD NETWORK**

## Conversations create a platform for further work and funding for local groups

*“We decided to hold 2 further food conversations with students at Bradford College as we felt our original conversation didn’t have enough views from young people. We have also decided to have a ‘spin off’ local action around green spaces (mapping, mobilising local schools and communities, planting and growing)”*

**BRADFORD BIRTH TO 19, WEST YORKSHIRE**

“This initial funding has helped kick start things and apply for more. Funders don’t want to fund conversations but they do want to fund community meals or actionable things so that’s how we will go forward.”

**SHROPSHIRE GOOD FOOD PARTNERSHIP**

“The good news is we have secured some extra funding to do our planned roll-out of more conversations between January and March!”

**FOOD CARDIFF**

“Just to let you know that the report I created from our food conversation event is being fed into the West Northants Sustainable Food Network. I am presenting on Monday and also have been invited onto the Food plan steering group. It has been part of the linchpin for launching our Countryside classroom. We will be launching the Countryside Kitchen Classroom in July and will use some of the feedback to leverage the facility”

**NO FUSS MEALS FOR BUSY PARENTS, NORTHAMPTON ACRE**

# Some further reflections

**“The process was as important as the outcome”**

**BWYD SIR GÂR FOOD, CARMARTHENSHIRE**

The community-led food conversations show just how important food is to people, and how passionately people feel about the injustices in today's food system.

## **FOOD AS A GATEWAY AND A BRIDGE**

The topic of food is a great way to bring people through the door: everyone has a stake, everyone has a view and people want to talk about it. This reinforces the findings of research FFCC conducted with Local Trust in 2021, published in 'Food Builds Community', describing how grassroots community groups across England use food to bring people together and support community development. We have also seen how food conversations inevitably lead onto other topics, including many of the most urgent and important topics of our time, such as inequality, climate change, human health, governance and democracy.

**“We focused attention on the Bengali gourd, Khodu, and opened the conversation about where people get theirs – imported, or grown from seed, and then this led onto all sorts of directions – pesticides, industrialised agriculture, colonial relationships of imports to Britain, the right to grow food, how to grow food, short supply chains affecting food quality and the environment, and more!”**

**WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK, TOWER HAMLETS FOOD PARTNERSHIP**

**“The conversation was extended as we had further conversations on the direct impact food has on health and certain health conditions and also on the lack of accessibility to local food, coupled with the expense of fresh food compared to less healthy options. There was further discussion on the fact that our area is a food desert with one shop owner having a monopoly. We continued the conversation for an additional 90 minutes (over lunch) and the group have decided they wish to continue the conversation further and link into the food conversation happening across the city through the Nourishing Gloucester forum.”**

**COMMUNITY ROOTS, GLOUCESTERSHIRE**

## **THE HUGE DESIRE FOR CONNECTION**

These conversations reveal a huge, unmet need for connection within and between communities, and a desire at the grassroots to be connected to national-level policy debates. But we can't expect connections to happen without support. Relatively small amounts of money, offered with minimal barriers, have been key to enabling community groups to participate in The Food Conversation. We are astonished by how far people made the money go, holding not just one but multiple conversations in a range of settings.

We are also struck by how powerful it is when conversation hosts from different communities across the UK come together. FFCC have held around 20 events online, creating space for the conversation hosts to share their experiences and ideas. One session in November 2024 brought together around 20 people from the different corners of the UK including the Western Isles, Bradford, Liverpool, Sussex and Somerset, and from a range of backgrounds. These sessions were incredibly rich and enjoyable conversations, with ideas, inspiration and contact details shared liberally.

## **THE CALL FOR CHANGE**

The community-led food conversations tap into a strong dissatisfaction with the status quo. Unlike the 12 deliberative sessions, which were designed to be representative of the wider population, these conversations are more likely to attract people who are already engaged or interested in food issues, but even so, the strength of feeling is striking. Many conversation hosts report people expressing anger and outrage at injustices in the food system, especially the lack of access to healthy food, poor welfare of animals and the ongoing challenges for the farming community.

**“The one that surprised everybody was the actual lifespan of the chicken that goes into the chicken wrap, you could hear the gasp of the people in the room once the stat came up. This started a very interesting conversation. Why is this happening, how could we change it? There's a conversation happening with local high schools in January and we're wondering whether we should show the video – we think yes”**

**OUR SALE WEST, TRAFFORD, GREATER MANCHESTER**



## WHERE NEXT?

The power of the community-led food conversations is to invite people into the debate about the future of food, creating the opportunity to discuss a much wider range of critical issues; to help connect people to the policy advocacy and policy-making process, creating a space for them to express their feelings about how food is currently produced and consumed; and to build more and stronger local connections, creating social capital and supporting long-term projects in communities.

To date, we have only scratched the surface. Too many people across the UK are excluded from having meaningful conversations about their futures, and a food system that doesn't include the voices of citizens is not sustainable. The Food Conversation has created a platform for doing this, but much more needs to happen to connect people of every background within and between communities to national-level change. We now want to scale and deepen this work, removing barriers and creating the conditions for a truly citizen-led food system to emerge.

IMAGE CREDIT: GREATER LINCOLNSHIRE FOOD PARTNERSHIP



# Appendix

The report has been prepared by Jess Thomlinson-Blount, Simon Billing and James Goodman. Thank you to all the people and organisations that have worked with us to run community-led food conversations, including:

Amazing Communities Together  
Arun & Chichester Food Partnership  
Blackburn with Darwen Food Alliance  
Bradford Birth to 19  
Bradford Organic Community Services  
Brink!  
Bwyd Sir Gâr Food, Carmarthenshire  
Calderdale Food Network  
CommUNITY Little Hulton  
Community Roots CIC, Gloucestershire  
Coventry Food Network  
Community Organisers  
Devon Community Foundation  
Feeding Liverpool  
Felix Project  
Food Plymouth CIC  
Food Sense Wales, Cardiff  
Good Food Oxfordshire  
Grassland Hasmoor  
Greater Lincolnshire Food Partnership  
Haringey Community Food Network  
Herefordshire Food Alliance  
Highland Good Food Partnership  
Inn Churches, Bradford  
Leicestershire Council  
Lewes District Food Partnership  
No Fuss Meals for Busy Parents CIC, Northamptonshire  
North Birkenhead Development Trust  
Northern Lincolnshire Food Partnership  
Nourish NI  
OASES, County Durham  
Octopus Community Network, Islington  
Our Sale West  
Riverside Community Health, Newcastle  
ShefFood  
Shropshire Good Food Partnership  
Social Farms & Gardens, Carmarthenshire  
Starting Point Community Learning Partnership, Stockport  
Stonegrove Community Trust, Northwest London  
Strabane Community Project  
Sustainable Food Places  
Sustainable Food Somerset  
Tower Hamlets Food Partnership, Women's Environmental Network  
Waltham Forest Food Partnership (The Hornbeam Community Café)



IMAGE CREDIT: GREATER LINCOLNSHIRE FOOD PARTNERSHIP

## MORE ABOUT THE FOOD CONVERSATION

The Food Conversation was commissioned by the Food, Farming & Countryside Commission (FFCC) to find out what people really think about food.

In March 2023, citizens involved in the People's Plan for Nature published their recommendations, setting out the urgent actions needed to protect and renew nature. Among them was a call for a national conversation on diet to better support nature. FFCC responded to this with a plan to hold a national conversation on food, asking people what they expect from government and business when it comes to food – and how the food system can deliver more for health, nature and climate.

The Food Conversation consists of three elements. The first is a methodologically robust process based on the public dialogue form of deliberation, allowing citizens to interact with evidence from academics, scientists, policymakers and practitioners to consider issues relevant to future decisions. The second is a large number of community-led food conversations using a toolkit drawing on the deliberation process and content, adapted by community leaders for their own local contexts. The third is a public policy advocacy campaign connecting the voices and views of citizens to decision makers in positions of power in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and London.

<https://thefoodconversation.uk/>

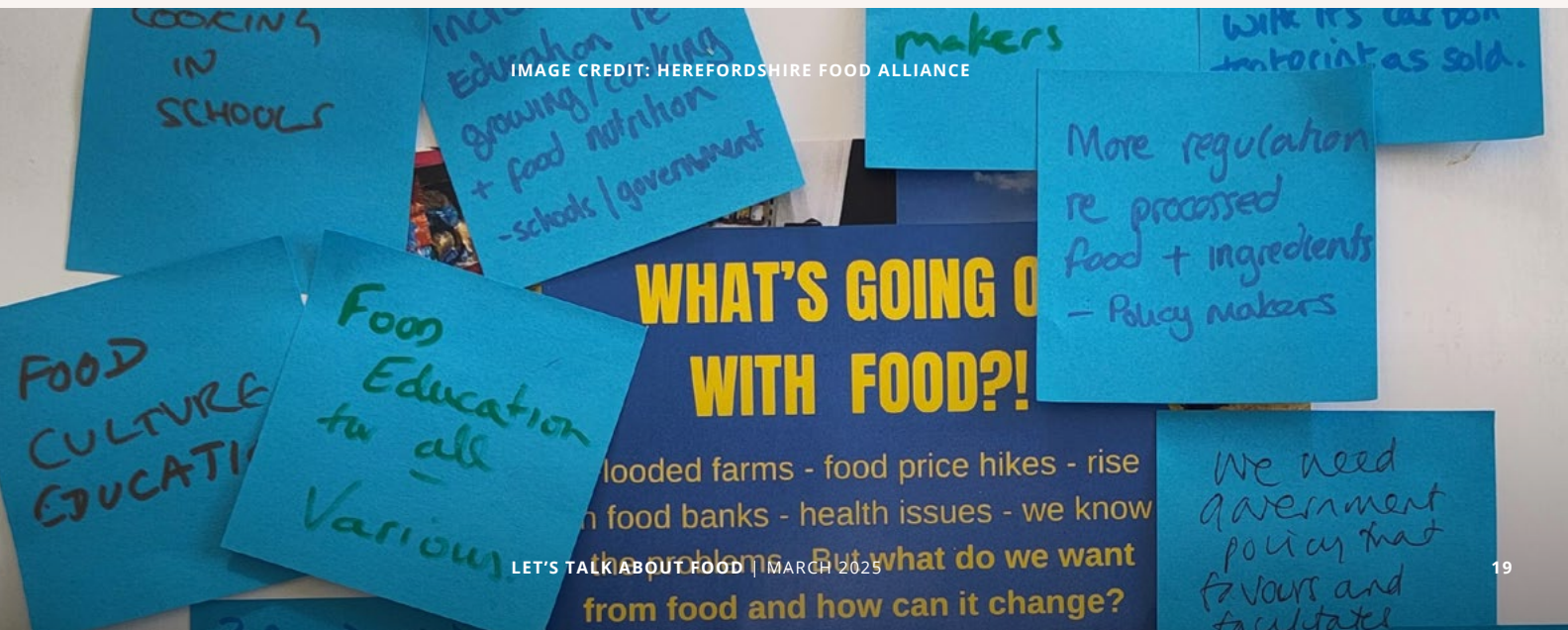
Access The Food Conversation toolkit at

<https://thefoodconversation.uk/host-a-conversation>

View the food system explainer 'Opening the chicken wrap' here <https://thefoodconversation.uk/host-a-conversation-films/opening-the-chicken-wrap-an-introduction-to-the-food-system-1>

Access other Food Conversation reports, including detailed reports from the 12 deliberations and the Citizens' Manifesto at <https://ffcc.co.uk/publications>

Get in touch with us at [foodconversation@ffcc.co.uk](mailto:foodconversation@ffcc.co.uk)



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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.