

“So, what do we really want from food?”

Citizens are hungry for change:
Starting a National Conversation about Food



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Why this conversation? Why now?

Of all the elements of our economy, one of the (very few) things we just can't do without is food. It is a basic human need, at the heart of many of our most significant social and cultural moments – and now at the crux of some of the biggest challenges we face. Headlines about food security, diet-related ill health, food production's impact on nature and climate, food bank usage (and more) dominate the media and daily discourse. Yet, governments have struggled to grasp the nettle on food system policies. In this country, attempts to change anything about the system – most recently with the National Food Strategy – have floundered in the face of a pervasive narrative that 'people don't want a nanny state telling them what to eat' and 'all people want is cheap food'. But is this narrative even true?

What do people *really* think about food?

This summer, we set out to explore this in depth. We commissioned a robust qualitative research process, starting in Birmingham and Cambridgeshire, as well as national polling, to explore the impact of food on multiple aspects of life – food and health, farming and land use, climate and nature, and trade and justice. Consistent with public dialogues exploring the climate and nature crises, we started with the premise that the problems of the food system need to be tackled and asked citizens to review many of the reports and policy proposals published in the last ten years.

Everyone has a stake in the food system and brings diverse perspectives from their experiences. Very quickly, a conversation about food reveals a great deal about shared values and opens a broader conversation about the world we want to live in. This first phase of the National Conversation was our 'proof of concept'. We want to continue to explore these and other questions with citizens throughout this coming year.

Headlines

Citizens want government intervention in the food system and reject excuses for inaction. This is consistent across all political lines and is reflected in both the conversations and national polling. Citizens want swift and wide-reaching action on food to protect health, nature and the environment. They demand radical change that involves all actors in the system. And their thoughts about the food system tell us a great deal about the society they want – one that is fairer, healthier and greener, with government and business leaders taking the hard decisions that put people and the planet first.

Citizens tell us they want:



A healthier, greener food environment, including restrictions on junk food advertising, higher standards for catering in spaces like schools and hospitals, and tighter controls on the availability and marketing of ultra-processed foods (UPFs)



Support for farmers to farm more sustainably, going beyond existing policies with more investments and incentives to do the right things



Taxes and regulations to hold big food businesses to account – such as adopting the polluter pays principle for environmental harm – and to reduce production of unhealthy foods



Practical help for citizens to eat more healthily and sustainably – for example, the redistribution of revenues from taxes/fines on food companies so those on low incomes can afford healthy and sustainable food, better information campaigns about the impacts of the food system, and better labelling



Visible political leadership when it comes to food, and a plan of action that brings together the different parts of government, building on the National Food Strategy

How citizens see it

In our conversations with citizens, they are very clear about the role that food plays in their lives – they see it as a way to nurture children, bring together families, connect with friends and build community. Because food plays an integral part in their lives, people feel passionately about the risks of allowing the food system to become so unhealthy and unsustainable.

This response crosses political lines, even among those who might otherwise resist government intervention – this is the case in the polling too. And they are clear about the urgency of the situation, pointing to inequalities in the system for citizens and farmers, and environmental and health impacts – particularly those long-term impacts affecting the health of children and future generations.

“We believe this is a national emergency. It is as serious as the climate emergency. As such it needs: rapid, collective action; an agreement that food/the food system is important”

CITIZEN FOOD MANIFESTO, BIRMINGHAM

“We want urgent action that prioritises health and wellbeing over profit, through government policies which shift where power is in the food system to make it fairer for farmers and others across society”

CITIZEN FOOD MANIFESTO, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Nationwide polling confirms that citizens want change in the food system and see it as a mechanism to create a fairer society: 68% of Britons say it is important that the food system helps to resolve inequalities within society, 82% say it is important that we are producing food without harming the planet, 87% say it's important that everyone in society has enough healthy food, and 88% think it is important for farmers to be paid fairly for their work.

Participants are specifically concerned about rising food bank use, intensive farming's damaging impacts on climate and nature, pollution in rivers, and UPFs. They are surprised that a small handful of companies control large parts of the food system and that farmers take such a small share of what customers pay at the till. They are concerned about the extent of the impact of industrial chicken farming on the health of UK rivers like the Wye. They feel hoodwinked by UPFs and puzzled by the fact that food in hospitals and schools wasn't chosen because of its healthiness or sustainability.

What can be done?

Exploring food's relationship with health, farming, land use, climate, nature, trade and justice brings a recurring question: who holds the power to make change? Citizens recognise that they have some power as consumers and community leaders, but conclude that the power to lead meaningful change sits largely with governments and businesses (and this is echoed in the polling data).

Participants overwhelmingly reject the argument that government intervention in food would lead to a 'nanny state'. In fact, the idea of a 'nanny state' is something they welcome in the context of food policy. Many people feel that the idea that 'people don't want a nanny state' is just an excuse for inaction from politicians.

"Don't be scared to regulate and mandate [...] The government [is] scared to be seen as a nanny state. I think that's a cop out. They need to regulate, and under that can be education standards and all that but yeah, first and foremost, there needs to be policy."

PARTICIPANT, BIRMINGHAM, WORKSHOP 4

This is strongly supported by the polling data which shows that **most citizens want the government to take more action on food to protect health, children and the environment**. 75% of the public think that the government is not doing enough to "ensure that everyone can afford healthy food", compared to only 3% who say that they are doing too much. Similar percentages applied across every government intervention we asked about: "protecting children from unhealthy food and drinks" (67%/5%), "stopping farms from releasing animal manure and harmful chemicals into rivers and the sea" (62%/6%), "minimising the environmental impact of the food we eat" (60%/7%), and "ensuring that shops and public places (like hospitals) have healthy food options" (59%/5%).

Interestingly, these reactions to government intervention are consistent even among those who characterise themselves on the right or ideologically opposed to 'big state' politics. There is widespread agreement, even within this group, that government intervention is warranted because of the negative externalities created by the food system (such as the cost to the health system or of cleaning up pollution). Moreover, some of these participants support correcting market failures, such as the growth of monopolies and rising inequalities.

"I don't like the idea of government becoming involved in every aspect of our lives, but where food production is damaging people's health and the taxpayer is funding the health service, then I think government should step in."

PARTICIPANT, RECOLLECTIVE ONLINE PLATFORM

Not only do citizens want governments and businesses to take action on food, but they also want it done urgently, strategically and for the long term. They are concerned that governments and businesses focus on short-term fixes, 'sticking plasters' that do not support the significant change needed. Most participants had not heard of the 2021 National Food Strategy for England, but on seeing its recommendations, question why they have not been implemented.

"If Britain and its food crisis were a business, there would be a mission statement, policies, forecasts, and risk assessments in place. Does government have one? We should all want to see and know what this is."

PARTICIPANT, BIRMINGHAM, WORKSHOP 4

Policy asks

Citizens in Birmingham and Cambridgeshire, and in the online poll, agree that the food system needs restructuring through policy and practice change. Many participants are disappointed about the pace and extent of government action to improve the food system, and **citizens agree on several policy actions** (see p.10).

Citizens tell us they want:

- **Using a 'polluter pays' approach** to reduce the environmental damage of intensive farming and health damage of unhealthy foods
- **Supporting farmers** across all sectors to produce food more sustainably through additional financial incentives
- **Action on UPFs**, for example through a tax on UPF businesses
- **Ending junk food advertising**, calling for restrictions beyond the proposed 9pm watershed

However, many citizens are also clear in their desire for **government and businesses to think outside of the box** – including exploring alternative economic models that bring farmers and communities closer together. They see this approach as a way to establish fairer returns for farmers, improve the availability of healthy and sustainable products for everyone, and deliver positive environmental outcomes.

In the nationwide poll, there is extremely strong and consistent support for policies to improve the healthiness of the food that we eat. Importantly, there is support from across every population segment, generation and political party affiliation.

- 84% think there should be stronger standards for the food provided in hospitals and schools
- 79% want the government to support people on low incomes to have enough healthy food
- 74% would like to see a target set for reducing UPFs in shops and on the high street
- 68% would like junk food advertising to be banned on TV, streaming services and social media

There is also strong support for policies to reduce the environmental impact of the food that we eat. And here again, support is universal across all groups of people polled.

- 79% think food producers that pollute the environment should be fined ('polluter pays')
- 78% would like there to be tighter regulations to protect against types of industrial farming that harm nature and the countryside
- 72% want government to provide more information so that shoppers know which food choices are having the biggest impact on the planet
- 71% think the government should incentivise environmentally friendly agriculture and food production through subsidies or investment in farmers



POLICY AREA

Create a healthier and more sustainable food environment

SPECIFIC POLICIES

Ban junk food advertising across multiple platforms

"Banning junk food advertising before 9pm is pointless if it's just completely on television. Because young people are not watching television, they are on streaming services or social media. So, this kind of measure will only work if it's a ban on advertising on all these outlets."

PARTICIPANT, BIRMINGHAM, WORKSHOP 4

Set nationally agreed high standards for health and environment in public sector catering, with action taken against those who don't meet the standards

"I think the government needs to put in place better control of what goes into schools, and what goes into the [public] sector. But if like any business, if there's no rules, they'll do whatever they want to get the cost down to get the contracts."

PARTICIPANT, BIRMINGHAM, WORKSHOP 3

Limit the availability and marketing of UPFs and make minimally processed foods more available and affordable

"There should be the UPF tax that's paying for that, paying for support to reduce meat intake and education schemes to help farmers move across to other methods. That money should be ring-fenced for the same area, so tax UPF and use the money for better food."

PARTICIPANT, BIRMINGHAM, WORKSHOP 4

POLICY AREA

Use taxes and regulations to hold big food companies to account

SPECIFIC POLICY

Adopt the 'polluter pays' principle, ensuring punitive action is taken

"The collective optimistic vision would be that the companies that are doing the damage are paying for it."

PARTICIPANT, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, WORKSHOP 4

"I'd be very interested in having a tax on the producers of artificial nitrogen fertilizers, and with that tax encouraging more farmers to keep their soil healthier, or to produce more organic vegetables."

PARTICIPANT, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, WORKSHOP 2

"There should be the UPF tax that's paying for that [...] That money should be ring fenced for the same area, so tax UPF and use the money for better food."

PARTICIPANT, BIRMINGHAM, WORKSHOP 4

POLICY AREA

Enable citizens to eat healthily and sustainably

SPECIFIC POLICIES

Redistribute revenue from 'polluter pays' taxes or bring in subsidies to ensure those on a low income have enough healthy and sustainable food

"There should be the UPF tax that's paying for that, paying for support to reduce meat intake and education schemes to help farmers move across to other methods. That money should be ring-fenced for the same area, so tax UPF and use the money for better food."

PARTICIPANT, BIRMINGHAM, WORKSHOP 4

Use a widescale education campaign for everyone to learn how the food system works and how food can impact health, climate and nature

"So when they go into supermarkets and they look for the cheapest chickens, because that's what they're, you know, willing to pay. You know, do they understand what's led to that cost being so low in terms of farming? [...] if people were educated, that could lead to significant change in their decision making process."

PARTICIPANT, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, WORKSHOP 2

POLICY AREA

Support farmers across all sectors to farm more sustainably

SPECIFIC POLICY

Incentivise environmentally friendly agriculture, animal husbandry, food production, transportation and distribution

"Farmers also have [...] the power to choose how they farm, or they can make changes to how they farm which could be incentivised by government in certain ways [...] they could farm their land in a way that better supports nature and biodiversity. And that could be supported by the government."

PARTICIPANT, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, WORKSHOP 1

POLICY AREA

Provide visible political leadership across government

SPECIFIC POLICY

Create an independent ombudsman for food, holding the government to account

"There are something like 16 different departments. Could there not be a possibility of a Ministry for Food or minister for food to coordinate it altogether? The right arm seems to hit the left arm and the right leg seems to kick the left leg."

PARTICIPANT, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, WORKSHOP 4

Balancing the hard decisions

Throughout the process, the facilitators highlighted the interdependencies in the food system and prompted citizens to consider the pressures on the government to balance many competing needs. Citizens recognise this challenge and appreciate that a change made in one area could affect others. Ultimately, they are clear that policy makers and businesses need to make the hard decisions to improve the food system. They do, however, accept that there are considerations that need to be balanced so that everyone can benefit.

"We want government to make brave decisions (that might be unpopular at first but will show through results that they're the right decisions) including taxes for what we don't want and subsidies for what we do."

CITIZEN FOOD MANIFESTO, CAMBRIDGESHIRE



FOOD PRICES

Despite worries about food prices – which are significant given the cost-of-living crisis – participants are largely willing to consider higher prices *if they facilitate better food and farming practices*. They are open to paying more for good quality, locally and sustainably sourced food. Citizens want to see more sustainable and less damaging practices across all sectors of farming, including meat and dairy, arable and horticulture. They are willing, for example, to limit themselves to meat that is better quality, less damaging to the environment and offers farmers a fairer deal.

These results are mirrored in the national polling. Despite worries about food prices, the public are not willing to sacrifice standards to make food cheaper. 77% say that the government should aspire to high standards on health, whereas only 15% say that the government should lower health standards to lower cost. On paying British farmers fairly, 77% support this, compared to 13% who do not; on animal welfare 75% support aspiring to high standards, compared to 14% who do not; and on environmental protections, 71% support aspiring to high standards, compared to 20% who do not.

“If we’re looking to build an ideal system we might along the way [need] to make some trade-offs. For example, so we might accept less choice or eat less meat in order to have more sustainable farming practices.”

PARTICIPANT, BIRMINGHAM, WORKSHOP 4

“Meat maybe needs to be more expensive so that people just buy quality. And again, the idea of quality meat, well looked after meat, not the idea that meat is just a throwaway commodity.”

CAMBRIDGESHIRE, WORKSHOP 4

FOOD TAXES

Citizens debated at length the potential impact of new taxes to raise some food prices. **Most support using taxes to influence the food system**, especially if they adopt a 'polluter pays' model and target businesses instead of individuals or specific food items. Participants are concerned about how government would use revenue from taxation. Many suggest that money raised should be ring-fenced to incentivise farmers and producers to adopt best practices and to support those on low incomes to have healthier, more sustainable food.

"If you sell fast foods, then you put a tax that goes into the health system, or you know, it goes into investing in biodiversity. Because [those] costs exist, they're just being diverted."

PARTICIPANT, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, WORKSHOP 3

"I think it would be a fairer trade-off if there is a slight tax on ultra-processed food that is then used to subsidise the healthier food."

PARTICIPANT, CAMBRIDGESHIRE, WORKSHOP 4



FOOD CHOICE AND AVAILABILITY

Overall, citizens are willing to accept **less food choice to achieve a fairer, more sustainable food system**. In particular, they say that UPFs and foods that are not ethically or sustainably produced should be limited – especially those intensively produced. Participants feel strongly that UPFs have hoodwinked citizens, and they want more information and restrictions to reduce the harms of UPFs. They say that we need to grow more food sustainably in the UK and be less reliant on food imports, and they will trade food choice for locally produced food.

Participants argue strongly for food policies, and related social policies, which **encourage people to prioritise healthy food** in their busy lives. They are clear that convenience is an important driver of behaviour and want the offering in shops to be healthier – especially in convenience shops and high street restaurants. Participants wonder why local government doesn't take more action to restrict the licences given to such businesses and prioritise shops and businesses that sell healthy and sustainably produced food.

“To be honest when I started these workshops, I remember saying that it was important that if I wanted to go to a garage at two in the morning and buy a bottle of wine and some chocolate, then that was entirely up to me. But now I've changed my mind. From everything we've heard, I think there should be more restriction on what can be bought, what's available to people.”

PARTICIPANT, BIRMINGHAM, WORKSHOP 4

“We absolutely accept less food choice. We might accept that we can't have strawberries in December. And we've got less choice, because we want to make sure we're not shipping strawberries from (around the) world. We might accept eating less meat, if the meat we do have is of better quality. So it's a special occasion thing. We will accept more expensive chicken, if that means there would be less impact on the environment from chicken farmers.”

PARTICIPANT, BIRMINGHAM, WORKSHOP 4

So, what now?

This is only the start of this conversation, yet citizens are already conveying a clear message – they want the government to take action on food seriously.

People want a fairer, greener, healthier food system and are dismayed that more action isn't being taken to limit harms to health, environment and nature. They challenge the taken-for-granted tropes – like 'nanny state' – that get deployed to stop or delay action. They understand that the issues are too big, too complex and too interconnected to be resolved by consumers acting alone, because exercising 'choice' in a food system as it is currently configured isn't really a choice at all. They recognise government's role to set standards and a level playing field for all businesses to be able to operate profitably by doing the right thing.

Most importantly, this is consistent across all demographics and political views and in nationwide polling. Food is a unifying topic. The policy makers and business leaders who want to meet citizens' aspirations for the future will benefit from joining this conversation.



About the process

We have started with a proof-of-concept phase in two distinctive and representative locations (Birmingham and Cambridgeshire). We expect that the value of this first phase of work will be strengthened when we take this across the country, testing sentiment in all parts of the UK. Involving citizens in the conversation is important. There is widespread agreement that food systems need to change, even among business leaders and farmers' groups. The question is how they change – and it's on this thorny question that we want to hear citizens voices.

In four meetings over three weeks, people in Birmingham and Cambridgeshire explored a range of policy solutions to solve challenges in the food system – across food and health, food and farming and land use, food and climate and nature, and food and trade and justice. They listened to experts with different perspectives and discussed the potential pitfalls and trade-offs of different policy proposals. The citizens were representative of the population in their area, with different age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, political leanings and ethnicities, recruited through an independent Sortition Foundation selection process. These qualitative findings are strengthened further by a nationwide poll of 2,044 people, conducted in August 2023 by More in Common.

The dialogues started with an overview of how food gets onto our plates – using a well-established 'food system' framing – and looked at how some people might find it hard to get healthy food. Citizens considered how the food system could be fairer for citizens and farmers and discussed how poverty affects people's food options. They moved on to farming, climate and nature, and how some types of farming currently damage the planet and nature – while others could help restore them. They looked at how food impacts health, considering how things like advertising, food in hospitals and schools, and UPFs could be changed to improve health.

All of this information came from speakers and case studies presenting the latest evidence from authoritative bodies on the state of the food system, and through examining what policy solutions had already been proposed previously – from sources such as the National Food Strategy, the United Nations, academics, and other charities and NGOs.

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The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission focusses on food and farming, climate, nature and the public's health, for a just transition to a greener, fairer world. With partners in governments, businesses and communities, we generate radical ideas and practical actions to transform our countryside and our economy. We help convene collective leadership on the difficult questions and resource communities to become more resilient and adaptable for the challenges ahead.