

Net Gain or Net Drain?

A citizen-inspired approach to assessing
the value of the UK agri-food industry

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Foreword

What does it tell us when a Labour MP hosts a 60th birthday party for KFC in Parliament and a Conservative MP declares that she had a “cluckin’ good time” there? Cross-party support is almost impossible to achieve these days. So this was a real win for the company who’s been serving up battered chicken to the national palate for more than half a century.

Needless to say, KFC is not the only food company stalking the corridors of Westminster. PepsiCo, McDonald’s, Coca-Cola and the Food and Drink Federation have all been recent visitors there, staking their claim to the moral and economic high ground. These celebrations all strike a discernibly similar tone: our company brings jobs, investment and growth. We’re a massive boost to the economy and a force for good in the community, so ‘mess with us at your peril’ is the implicit (and sometimes explicit) message.

But is that the whole truth? What’s not being said in those private gatherings? Nobody at that KFC bash was dwelling much on the massive rise in food-related chronic disease that’s happened on the company’s watch. Back in 1965, fewer than half a million adults were obese and childhood obesity was virtually unknown. Today a staggering two thirds of adults are overweight or obese. One in four kids is obese. Twelve million people now suffer from diabetes or prediabetes, and rates of diagnosis have doubled in just 15 years. These conditions are debilitating in their own right. They’re also the precursors to heart disease, strokes and a heightened susceptibility to respiratory disease and cancer.

Turning a blind eye to the expensive downsides of cheap food has developed into something of an art form in recent years. But the social and environmental costs of doing so are rapidly becoming unpayable. My own report for the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission put the cost of food-related chronic disease at £268bn each year. Lost lives, lost health, lost productivity: these are the legacy of a burgeoning fast-food industry with enough lobbying power to turn the heads of unwary politicians.

My point is this. What looks like a positive contribution to the UK economy – fast food for those who can barely afford to live, and economic growth to the Exchequer – may well turn out, on closer inspection, to be a massive false economy. But how should those who had a “cluckin’ good time” in Westminster be expected to know this when the voices loudest in their ear are those who stand to gain from the imprudence?

How are we (and our politicians) to know whether the industry’s claims to the economic high ground are valid or invalid? Against which criteria should we judge the benefits and the costs of a sector that appears to pay more attention to profit

than it does to health? Who stands to benefit from the gains and who stands to suffer from the losses imposed by an industry that has undeniable health and environmental consequences?

These are the questions raised in this vital and timely report. Inevitably, the answers are not always straightforward. Sector by sector, foodstuff by foodstuff, company by company: the economic, environmental and social performance of food will vary enormously. What we want from our national food system also varies. Humans don't just feed. Food is not just fodder. A functioning food system is never going to answer to a one-off financial metric.

Costs matter. Of course they do. But so too does health, taste, nutritional value, decent work, the sustainability of the soil and the quality of our lives. Social and community values are as important here as monetary costs. Any exercise to assess the claims of the food industry to be an undeniable force for good must grapple with this complexity. That's why the prescriptions in this report are so vital for the industry, for the government and for the general public.

Everyone wants to be on the right side of history. That's no less true of those who serve up the nation's food than it is of anyone else. But handing democratic accountability and regulatory power to those who stand to benefit financially from the short-sightedness of the market is a recipe for disaster.

This report offers a solid foundation for thinking clearly about the question left unanswered by those enthusiastic politicians who attended KFC's birthday bash. Is fast food really the net gain claimed by the industry or is it a net drain on our health, our productivity, our community and our environment? Being able to answer that question matters.

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Executive summary

In the launch of its work to develop a UK Food Strategy in July 2025, the government described the UK's food sector as the “beating heart of our economy”, generating £153.2bn of economic activity and employing more than 4.2 million people.

At first sight it therefore seems obvious that the government should promote the growth and profitability of large successful agri-food corporations to the benefit of all. However, the government also recognises that “the food system is not delivering the outcomes we need with respect to health, environmental sustainability, resilience and food security”.

Understanding the full picture of both costs and benefits throughout the whole of the UK's agri-food system is complex.

This report sets out the results of a scoping project to identify a creative, impactful and feasible way to assess the performance of the whole UK agri-food system, its constituent sectors, and the contributions of the most dominant corporations within it.

Navigating through complexity to reach better outcomes

The government's food strategy is stuck between using mainstream economic measures to quantify the economic value of the food system, and recognising that the value of our food system extends beyond narrow economic measures to other aspects, such as fairness, sustainability, localism and equity, that can be hard to measure but no less real in their human, ecological and financial impacts.

Large agri-food companies are naturally adept at putting forward their side of the argument, as evidenced by over 1,400 meetings with the Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs over four years – 40 times the representation of food NGOs.

Can we move beyond a narrow focus on short-term financial measures to survey the landscape of all the key drivers of long-term sustainable prosperity? And if we are to use a more holistic framework of value to assess the performance of the agri-food system, and the companies within it, who gets to determine the values and metrics we should use?

Our answer is straightforward – citizens should inform the work of experts, policymakers and businesses. The Food Conversation is FFCC's comprehensive and carefully designed programme of deliberative conversations with citizens, who

told us that they experience profound frustrations with how the current food system works in practice and want change.

In this report we propose a new value framework that builds on existing research and analysis of food systems and companies and makes a novel contribution by rooting our analysis in the core values and desired outcomes that we heard from citizens. We consider this to offer a method for assessing the value created by the agri-food system, and companies within it, that is both comprehensive and democratic.

A Citizen-inspired Values Framework

Our proposed framework has four categories:

Economic and financial value

transparent, diverse, sustainable and fair food economy

Individual value

nourishing, affordable food for all with particular protections for the most vulnerable

Social value

vibrant food culture, local communities, respect for tradition and protection of key institutions

Environmental value

sustainable, resilient and responsible systems

The results from the Food Conversation were used to develop a set of 15 value components, or themes, within these four categories. Based on research into existing approaches to measuring different types of value along the agri-food chain, we conducted an initial feasibility study of how these themes can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively at a system, sector and individual company level. The themes are further broken down into 32 potential indicators, for which there are 42 relevant measures supported by metrics and data sources. It should be noted that there are six indicators for which no measure has yet been identified. Of the 42 measures that have been identified, 27 are quantitative and 15 qualitative.

This detailed mixed-methods approach to assessing value reflects the complexity of the agri-food system and the pervasiveness of its impacts on the economy, on citizens – both individually and collectively – and on the environment.

We also consider how to map the agri-food system to identify which companies are the key players in each sector of the agri-food system. The difficulty in doing

this raises important questions about transparency and accountability for government and civil society, especially given that transparency was considered by citizens to be one of the key values of a system that serves their interests.

We propose that the framework is further developed in collaboration with researchers and stakeholders so that it can be applied both as a detailed methodology for experts and policymakers, and also as an accessible dashboard that helps civil society and their elected representatives to hold the agri-food system, and its most significant companies, to account.

Our aim is that this work will achieve two outcomes.

First, to gain clarity about what story is true: are the most dominant food companies the net-positive contributors and value-generators they say they are? Or are they net-drains on public value?

Second, and crucially, to help identify the actions – policies, regulations and market structures – that help good businesses to thrive while delivering measurable and tangible improvements to the lives of citizens through the food that we eat, the quality of our jobs, the health and wellbeing our families, and the quality of life in our communities.

1. Seeing the bigger picture

In 1990, McDonald's sued five London Greenpeace activists for distributing a six-page leaflet titled "What's wrong with McDonald's? Everything they don't want you to know". The leaflet accused McDonald's of making food "linked with cancers of the breast and bowel, and heart disease", of "deliberately" exploiting children, "starvation in the Third World", "cheap labour", "major ecological catastrophe" and the "torture and murder" of millions of animals, setting out short cases for each claim.¹

Three of the five sued activists apologised and withdrew, leaving Helen Steel and David Morris to defend the case with no financial backing. Known as *McLibel*, the case made history by becoming the longest civil case in English history. It may also be reasonable to assume that it represents the most rigorous and systematic legal review of a campaign's critique of Big Food in English history too.

Mr Justice Rodger Bell ruled in June 1997 that while some of the leaflets' claims were indeed libellous (e.g. that "eating McDonald's food will bring the very real risk that you will suffer cancer of the breast or bowel"), some were deemed to be true (e.g. that McDonald's "exploit children by using them, as more susceptible subjects of advertising, to pressurise their parents into going to McDonald's").² Steel and Morris were ordered to pay McDonald's £60,000. They appealed and the amount was reduced in 1999 after the Court of Appeal ruled that some of the claims Justice Bell found to be libellous were in fact fair comment (e.g. that McDonald's employees "do badly in terms of pay and conditions").³

Steel and Morris continued to seek justice. In 2005, after escalating their case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the ECHR ruled that "the denial of legal aid to the applicants deprived them of the opportunity to present their case effectively before the court and contributed to an unacceptable inequality of arms with McDonald's", and the UK government was ordered to pay compensation.⁴

In an early interview, the human rights lawyer who assisted Steel and Morris pro bono and represented them at the European Court described the case as "very much a David and Goliath" because McDonald's spent an estimated £10m on "an extremely good legal team" while Steel and Morris "have had to act for themselves with me as a sort of free back up whenever possible".⁵ That lawyer, Keir Starmer, became UK Prime Minister in 2024.

The case demonstrates the lengths large food corporations are willing to go to oppose and silence criticism. It is also the inspirational tale of activist bravery and the lengths citizens are willing to go to fight for justice and transparency. Reassuringly, the UK law changed with the Defamation Act 2013 that means corporations could not file such libel cases today without proof of serious damage

caused. Less reassuringly, since the activists first handed out their leaflets back in 1990, the issues they sought to bring to the public's attention are as relevant as ever.

The rise of ultra processed food

Since McLibel, food corporations like McDonald's have continued to expand, consolidate and displace traditional diets across the world. In 1990, when McDonald's sued the Greenpeace activists, there were 380 McDonald's restaurants in the UK. Today, there are more than 1,450.⁶ Other fast-food companies like KFC have been found to apply aggressive tactics to challenge local authority plans to reduce the proliferation of unhealthy food outlets and in most cases succeeded in getting them scrapped or watered down.⁷ Such expansion means that food corporations are present in most countries, offering people from China to Brazil the same products made by the same processes. You can eat a McDonald's in 119 countries, while Coca-Cola distributes its products to more than 200 countries and territories and Nestlé to 185 countries.

Research has monitored this, revealing nutritional, environmental, social and economic harms such expansion, consolidation and displacement. A pivotal moment came in 2009, when Brazilian scientist Professor Carlos Monteiro published a commentary in Public Health Nutrition titled, 'The issue is not food, nor nutrients, so much as processing'. Monteiro and his colleagues had figured out that the rapid rise in chronic diseases and obesity globally was because of the displacement of traditional, largely minimally processed diets by diets high in industrially produced food made by large corporations. They proposed a new category of food and drink termed ultra-processed foods (UPF). These foods are "typically branded, distributed internationally and globally, heavily advertised and marketed, and very profitable", they contain "salt and other preservatives, and often also cosmetic additives – flavours and colours", they "induce unhealthy dietary patterns", and the growth of UPF production and consumption has been "spectacular in the last decades in both higher- and lower-income countries".⁸

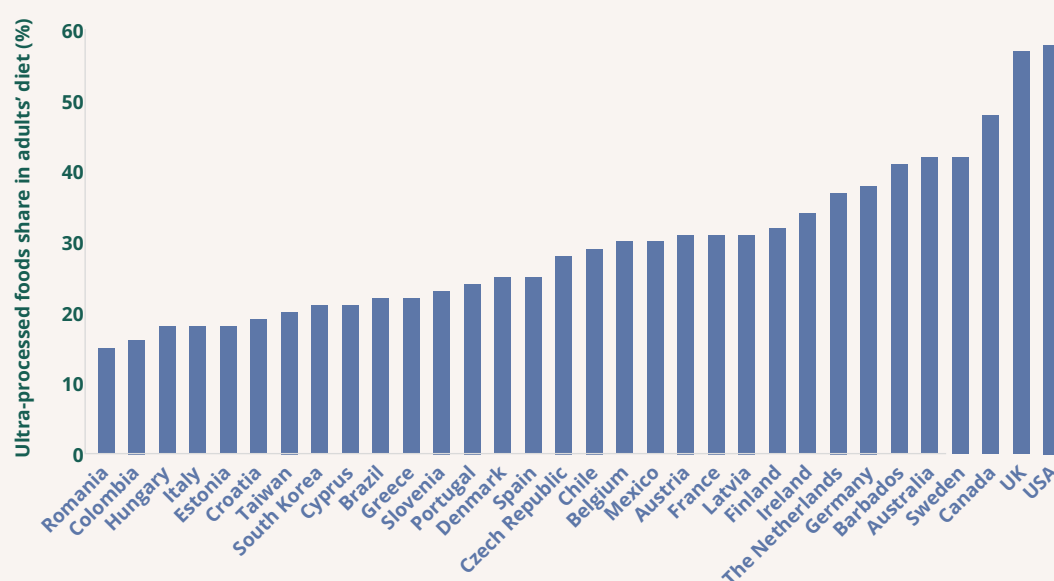
Since this commentary was published, thousands of studies have been published on UPF, the industrialisation and financialisation of the global food system, the companies, incentives and activities driving this, and the impact it is having on people and the planet. It serves as a useful concept to capture both the human health harms and damage to the planet. Making high volumes of UPF relies on and drives intensive farming and industrial processes which involve removing forests and habitats, chemical damage in soils and rivers, reduced biodiversity and fossil fuel dependency.⁹

In 2019, Monteiro and 11 co-authors published an updated commentary in Public Health Nutrition explaining what UPFs are and how to identify them.¹⁰ They concluded that UPFs are "not 'real food'" and that "most are made and

promoted by transnational and other giant corporations". They remarked that the displacement of 'real food' by UPFs is "a cause of social, cultural, economic, political and environmental disruption and crises". Studies consistently demonstrate how large food corporations shape environments and social norms in ways that undermine public health, and how companies employ sophisticated strategies to influence regulatory frameworks and directly influence consumer behaviours. A new Lancet Series on Ultra-Processed Foods and Human Health published in November 2025 called for government policies to halt and reverse the rise of UPFs worldwide by moving beyond the dominant focus on consumption to a policy approach that tackles all key "food system drivers": production, marketing and consumption.¹¹ In other words, policies to address the behaviour of companies, not just people.

Figure 1: UPF as a proportion of national diets.

(Source: Touvier et al (2024) BMJ)



As shown in Figure 1, above, the UK and USA have already passed the significant tipping point: UPFs make up more than 50% of the average diet, marking their dominance in the food supply and the official displacement of traditional, largely minimally processed diets in those countries.¹²

While the US government is now formally looking to define ultra-processed food for policy and research purposes and some states are already introducing UPF policies,¹³ the UK government is not.¹⁴ This is because a persistent narrative about large food corporations continues to dominate the economic and political discourse: that people want cheap food above all else and should be left to choose; that the largest food corporations are positive and important contributors to the economy; that the market should be as free as possible to solve problems; and that the government should only regulate to correct market failures.

Moving beyond tunnel vision towards a panoramic view

Politicians regularly celebrate UPF companies, highlighting the jobs they create and other positive contributions. This often coincides with the presence of a food company in a politician's constituency.

In May 2025, Labour MP Naushabah Khan invited fellow parliamentarians to attend her “celebratory drop in event” to “find out more about 60 years of KFC’s economic and community contribution to the UK”, stating in her invite email that KFC has restaurants in 540 parliamentary constituencies (Figure 2).¹⁵

Figure 2: Examples of food companies and brands holding events in Parliament

(Sources: Chris Elmore MP’s website and KFC UK LinkedIn post)



In December 2024, a similar Parliament event was held to celebrate 200 years of Cadbury UK, with MPs and their staff posing photos holding the giant chocolate bars they were given and celebrating Cadbury’s “health and wellbeing commitments” (Figure 2).¹⁶

In June 2023, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt posted on social media that it was “brilliant news” PepsiCo UK was making its largest investment in the UK in 25 years. PepsiCo’s post explained that the investment would lead to an increase of 11,000 tonnes in snacks such as crisps.¹⁷

Politicians even invite these companies to be involved in government policymaking and to partner in delivering solutions. In March 2025, the government announced its official Food Strategy Advisory Board

which included six food industry representatives across manufacturing, wholesale and retail, including ultra-processed desserts company Little Moons, global food manufacturer Sofina Foods, and convenience food manufacturer Greencore. Compared to five public health and policy experts.¹⁸

So positive is the government's view of food corporations, that when evidence emerges about the harms their products and practices cause and policies are proposed to tackle them, politicians struggle to act, worrying that policies will hamper economic growth, dampen commercial success and annoy industry leaders. As Béné (2022) summarises, "the extremely high concentration of most agri-food industry's resources in the hands of a few, very powerful, transnational food corporations ... is greatly limiting countries' domestic policy spaces and impeding the capacities of governments and other legitimate stakeholders to act".¹⁹

In Nourishing Britain (2024), former secretary of state Michael Gove explained that the Treasury pushes back against proposed food industry regulation saying, "Ooh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, if there's regulation then that will reduce the production capacity of the economy".²⁰

The idea persists that these companies are economic assets.

In mainstream economics, economic growth is said to benefit everyone by increasing incomes, jobs and services, and generating tax revenue to spend on improving public services. Chancellor Rachel Reeves said in a speech in January 2025 that "economic growth is the number one mission of this government ... without economic growth, we cannot improve the lives of ordinary working people".²¹ Embedded in this idea is the belief that more is better and everyone will benefit.²²

The government recognises the agri-food sector (from the production and processing of food and agricultural products through to distribution and consumption) as a key contributor to economic growth. In a ministerial foreword published in July 2025, the government described the UK's food sector as "the beating heart of our economy", generating £153.2bn (6.2%) Gross Value Added (GVA) in 2023 (an indicator of economic performance similar to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that measures the value of goods and services in a given sector), with the historic trend being one of growth.²³ The sector also employs more than 4.2 million people (13% of total employment) and food is the UK's largest manufacturing sector.

It is entirely understandable that the government and MPs focus on the economic benefits of the agri-food sector and champion companies that they believe to be generating prosperity for their citizens.

But what if this cheerleading is based on only a partial view of national prosperity and fails to see the bigger picture? What if the tunnel vision of Gross Value Added leads us to completely ignore the whole landscape of economic, social, health, environmental and cultural costs and benefits and, crucially, what citizens themselves value most?

Indeed, the government also recognises that “the food system is not delivering the outcomes we need with respect to health, environmental sustainability, resilience and food security”. It lists a range of indicators including how much diet-related ill health is estimated to cost the NHS, the proportion of greenhouse gas emissions the UK food system contributes, the decrease in food secure households and the difficulty of costing environmentally damaging practices.²⁴

In 2024, a report by Professor Tim Jackson, published by the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC), helped generate a number to directly challenge the government’s positive rhetoric about the food sector’s economic value. It found that the direct and indirect health-related costs attributable to food in the UK add up to £268bn per year, almost twice the amount the food sector contributes to GVA.²⁵ The Office for Budgetary Responsibility has also been highlighting health-related inactivity, low productivity and rising health spending as key fiscal risks resulting in the Treasury holding roundtables and gathering experts to find solutions.²⁶

What the government did not include in its problem analysis, was some of the financial and economic harms done by the food industry such as minimising tax payments and real economy contributions (e.g. by cutting jobs and production costs) to protect and increase profits.²⁷ Contrary to Chancellor Reeves’ intention to benefit ordinary working people, the beneficiaries of this system appear to be primarily the company executives and owners – shareholders and private owners – of large global food corporations.^{28, 29}

The government’s food strategy is stuck between using mainstream economic measures to quantify the economic value of the food system, while recognising that the value of our food system extends beyond the economic to other aspects, such as fairness, sustainability, localism and equity, that can be hard to measure even with broader cost benefit analysis methods such as True Cost Accounting.³⁰

The tension politicians face between championing and regulating businesses has reached a critical point, and it will be almost impossible to overcome without clarity about which businesses are causing greater harm than good. While the substantial and growing body of research on the commercial determinants of ill health is helpfully challenging the benign view of corporate contribution overall and sector-level harm, research and attention on specific conclusions that can be drawn about individual companies are lacking.

This scoping phase project was proposed to identify a creative, impactful, radical and practical way to assess the most dominant food corporations in the UK, drawing inspiration from McLibel. We hope that by developing a proposed method to assess food companies as holistically as possible, we will assist politicians as well as companies, researchers, funders and the public, to gain clarity about what story is true: are the most dominant food companies the net-positive contributors and value-generators they and politicians say they are? Or are they net drains?

2. Developing a citizen-inspired value framework

Although large food corporations are dominating government food policy, there is another critical driver of political prioritisation: public opinion and voter support. Politicians rely on voters for their jobs and support for their actions.

In the 2024 Nourishing Britain political manual, favourable public opinion was found to have facilitated the introduction of ambitious food policies such as the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) and the ban of junk food advertisements on Transport for London, even against strong industry opposition. Former Chancellor George Osborne who introduced the SDIL said that celebrity chef and food activist Jamie Oliver and other supporters “did come out in force, and fought off an attempt by the drinks industry to either get rid of it or water it down”.³¹

However, it was also found that politicians did not see food policy as a make-or-break, election-clinching, high voter priority issue. While politicians recognised strong public support for intervention on food, the voter demand was not considerable enough to counter other opposing forces.

FFCC has spent two years examining the idea that voters are not demanding change and gaining insight and evidence about what the public values from food – by asking them.

The Food Conversation is the largest ever public dialogue about the UK food system. Over the last two years, FFCC has been communicating and amplifying citizen demands for change by holding events in UK Parliaments where citizens have been able to address ministers directly. The project has resulted in a citizen advisory board to help shape the government’s food strategy alongside the industry-dominated main advisory board.³²

Despite these attempts to increase the influence of citizens in government food policy, there is a McLibel-esque David and Goliath challenge regarding resource. In 2025, The Food Foundation found that between 2020 and 2024, Defra, the government department responsible for food policy, met with food businesses and related trade associations 1,408 times – 40 times more than with food NGOs.³³ Such resource enables companies to engage with government much more than others such as members of the public and NGOs. This is a global problem. In the same report, The Food Foundation found that UPF manufacturers spent \$1.15bn on lobbying in the US – more than any other industry including gambling, tobacco and alcohol.

This project provides a perfect opportunity to place public opinion centre stage and ask the question: how would citizens assess the most dominant food companies in terms of the value they provide? What do citizens value in the food system? Is economic value enough, or do citizens expect companies to offer more than that?

We believe that focusing on what citizens value holds the highest chance of resonating with politicians and providing them with a tool to distinguish between companies that are helping to improve people's lives versus those that are not.

Our approach consisted of five main parts:

1. Identifying what citizens value most in a food system and developing a value framework based on this to structure our proposed assessment.
2. Reviewing existing literature to identify how the value of food corporations has been defined and measured by others.
3. Drawing on the existing literature to identify indicators for our value framework and test the potential impact and feasibility of measuring these.
4. Identifying and mapping the UK's most dominant food corporations across the agri-food chain as the potential sample to assess.
5. Setting out our proposed method of assessing the performance of the UK's agri-food system and the value of the most dominant companies within it based on what citizens care about most.

What citizens value in a food system

Citizens experience profound frustrations with how the current food system works in practice. Through FFCC's Food Conversation, they shared experiences of navigating a system that seems designed to work against them. They described the daily reality of food shopping within tight budgets, juggling dietary needs, and confronting choices constrained by what's available, affordable and convenient.

Citizens also expressed deep unease about corporate power. They think that the current food system rewards companies for practices that harm public wellbeing and the environment, and they want better policies, incentives and regulation in place to prevent the pursuit of short-term profits at the expense of the public interest.

Based on their experiences of the food system, citizens articulated clear values about what they want, values that differ from how corporations and governments currently measure success. These values are set out in the 'A Citizen Mandate for Change' published by FFCC in May 2025 and can be summarised as:

- **Fairness:** Citizens are troubled by perceived power imbalances, where some farmers receive minimal returns while some global corporations and their financiers make huge profits. They question the 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.
- **Care:** Citizens care about the next generation and for others' health and wellbeing, showing particular concern about protecting children from unhealthy food and manipulative marketing.
- **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.
- **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 trade policy to support local businesses, regional economies and UK food production.

What's clear is that what citizens value about food extends far beyond just the economic contributions of the agri-food industry. Food is more than the numbers of jobs, goods, services and amount of tax raised. Food is about the quality of jobs, where value is created and redistributed, and about health, life, community, nature, identity, culture, meaning and pride.

In assessing the value of the UK's most dominant food corporations, starting with what citizens want offers an exciting, holistic and politically relevant way to do this.

The UK government's food system goals

In July 2025, the UK government published its 'Food Strategy for England' policy paper which set out its 10 priority goals for the food system (see Figure 3, below). We found significant alignment with the citizen values identified in the Food Conversation.

The government plans to publish policies on how it intends to achieve these goals in early 2026. As noted earlier, food industry representatives comprise majority of Defra's Food Strategy Advisory Board with 6 of 11 external members. As important as industry engagement is, the holistic value framework we set out below could be used to inform a more expansive assessment of the government's goals and the extent to which their policy proposals achieve them.

Figure 3: The UK Government's 10 priority goals

HEALTHIER AND MORE AFFORDABLE FOOD

1. An improved food environment that supports healthier and more environmentally sustainable food sales.
2. Access for all to safe, affordable, healthy, convenient and appealing food options.

GOOD GROWTH

3. Conditions for the food sector to thrive and grow sustainably, including investment in innovation and productivity, and fairer more transparent supply chains.
4. Food sector attracts talent and develops skilled workforce in every region.

SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT SUPPLY

5. Food supply is environmentally sustainable with high animal welfare standards, and waste is reduced.
6. Trade supports environmentally sustainable growth, upholds British standards and expands export opportunities.
7. Resilient domestic production for a secure supply of healthier food.
8. Greater preparedness for supply chain shocks, disruption and impacts of chronic risks.

VIBRANT FOOD CULTURES

9. Celebrated and valued UK, regional and local food cultures.
10. People are more connected to their local food systems, and have the confidence, knowledge and skills to cook and eat healthily.

The framework: four categories of value

We drew from the Food Conversation to develop a value framework that could be used to assess the UK's most dominant food corporations. We were guided by Professor Rowan Conway at UCL's Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP) who has led the creation of value frameworks for major institutions such as the BBC.³⁴

This value framework starts to provide the mechanism to help describe and tackle current challenges, capture the complex and dynamic contributions of the food system, and ultimately design the food system that citizens want. The purpose is to assess whether companies contribute to building the kind of industry structure

that serves public interests – one that's open to new entrants, diverse in ownership and scale, sustainable in practice and fair in how it exercises power and distributes returns.

The agri-food system affects value substantially across society: the economic and financial value in generating jobs, revenue, and driving productivity; to consumers who are affected directly in their health and everyday life; to communities and society in shaping culture and preserving tradition; and to the environment in affecting nature and biodiversity. How these values are measured and prioritised differs. Government and industry tend to place greatest emphasis on the economic and financial value food provides in terms of goods, services, revenue and jobs rather than on public health, nature, culture.

Our value framework seeks to bring all these core values together through four main categories:

Economic and financial value

transparent, diverse, sustainable and fair food economy

Individual value

nourishing, affordable food for all with particular protections for the most vulnerable

Social value

vibrant food culture, local communities, respect for tradition and protection of key institutions

Environmental value

sustainable, resilient and responsible systems

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL VALUE

Economic and financial value relates to what the industry generates in terms of products, services, jobs, opportunities and wealth and the way it does this. Citizens value a transparent and honest industry that provides them with full information and awareness. They don't want a few large companies making decisions behind closed doors. They want to know how decisions are made, what is in the food that companies make and where it comes from. Citizens want to be involved in decision-making and trust that corporate expansion will not continue to happen without their say and involvement.

Citizens want opportunities for new, smaller business to enter markets so different businesses can thrive – smaller and healthier farms, local processors, independent and locally owned shops, and cooperatives. Citizens want money and power to flow fairly along the supply chain from producers to consumers, so no one is squeezed financially while corporations make billions. They want jobs

and services to be abundant, good quality, secure and fairly rewarded;
and to ensure most wealth created is reinvested to enhance other key values
such as ensuring benefit to local communities.

INDIVIDUAL VALUE

Individual value is about the direct personal experience citizens have with food as consumers. Citizens are frustrated by the false choice between cheap food and nourishing food. They want both affordability and nutrition and reject the idea that healthy food should be a luxury. Individual value is rooted in nourishing and affordable food being available to all, with special protections for the most vulnerable individuals, such as people on low incomes and children.

Citizens are clear that price should not be a barrier to eating well and food should actively support health, not just fill stomachs. As World War II food minister Lord Woolton said in a speech to the Women's Institute in 1945, "feeding is not enough, it must be good".³⁵ This relates to the definition of food security, "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life".³⁶ Citizens are concerned about ultra-processed food that can provide calories but undermine wellbeing.

SOCIAL VALUE

Citizens see food as more than nutrition, it is about identity, tradition, culture and community connection. They want food systems to build rather than extract from community wealth and social fabric. Food holds the power to increase community resilience, with the right food system delivering local food to local people. Citizens are concerned about the UK's cultural diversity and what impact emphasising pride in British food may have. They want to ensure local food knowledge, seasonality and local food infrastructure, such as abattoirs, are not lost.

Social value relates to the wider food culture created by a company, its role in local communities and how diet-related health problems impact on vital institutions such as the NHS. It focuses on the importance of local engagement in food systems – the inclusivity of local businesses and regional economies – and the respect given to local skills, knowledge, traditions and cultures. Social value involves maintaining trust and pride in the food system, ensuring the food system supports other social institutions and features such as community building, diversity, identity, accessibility and inclusivity.

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUE

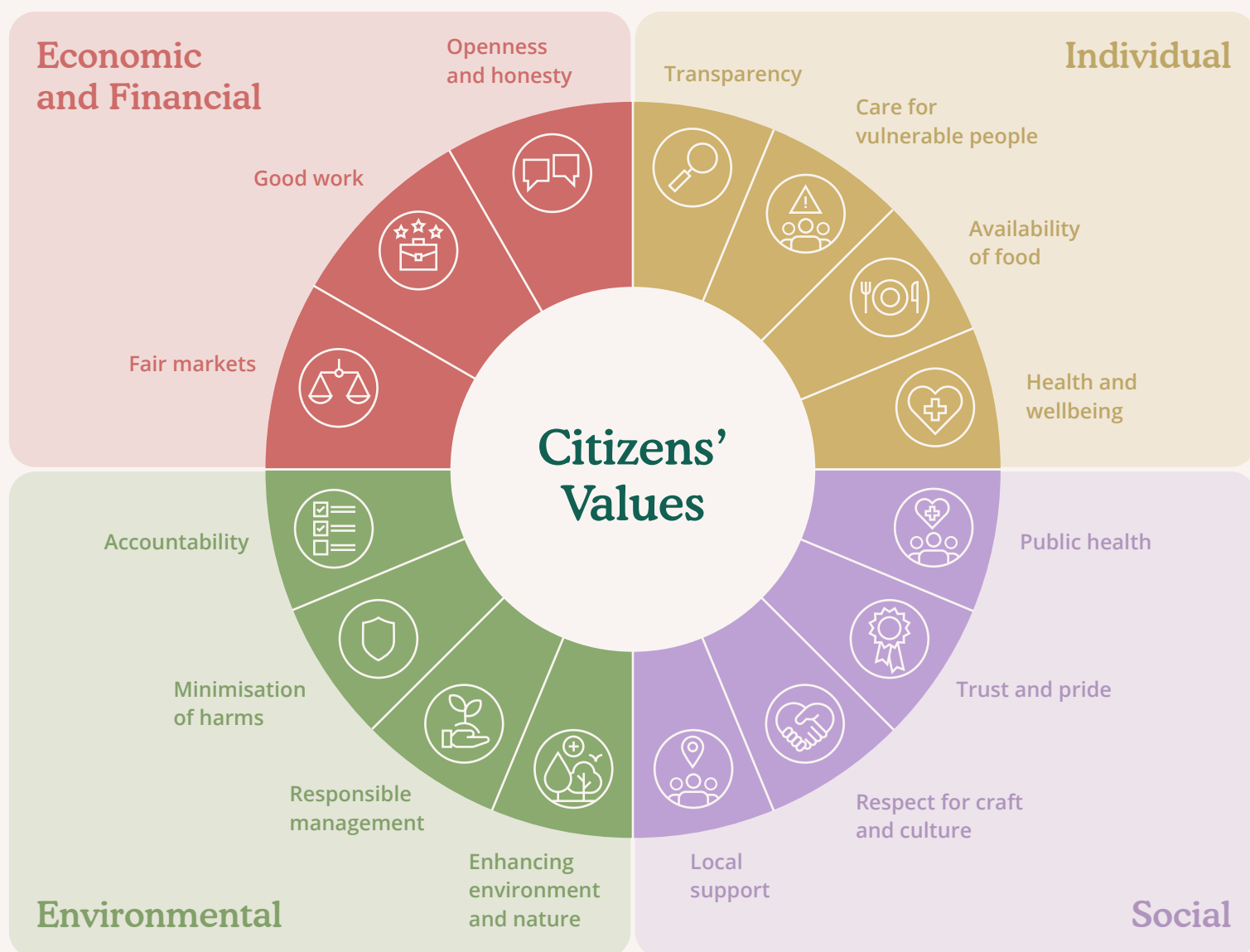
Citizens are concerned that the current food system is unable to continue indefinitely without destroying the resource base it depends on. Uncontrolled growth is unsustainable. Citizens want to move away from the fragile and concentrated dominance of transnational corporations towards a diverse and resilient food system that can withstand shocks. Environmental value is about the sustainability, resilience and responsibility of the food industry. As with health, food has huge implications for the environment.

Citizens want companies that can operate long term without destroying the environment and exploiting people. They want companies with clear sustainability goals rather than companies that extract maximum short-term profit. The environmental value of a company relates to how accountable it is for sustainable practices that protect people, animals and the planet. This includes responsible and practical stewardship of land and resources. Creating environmental value moves beyond the minimisation of environmental harms to the enhancement of the environment and nature.

The framework: developing value themes and indicators

We developed 15 sub-components – or themes – of these four value categories to create a comprehensive citizen-inspired value framework, which is illustrated below in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Citizens-inspired value framework

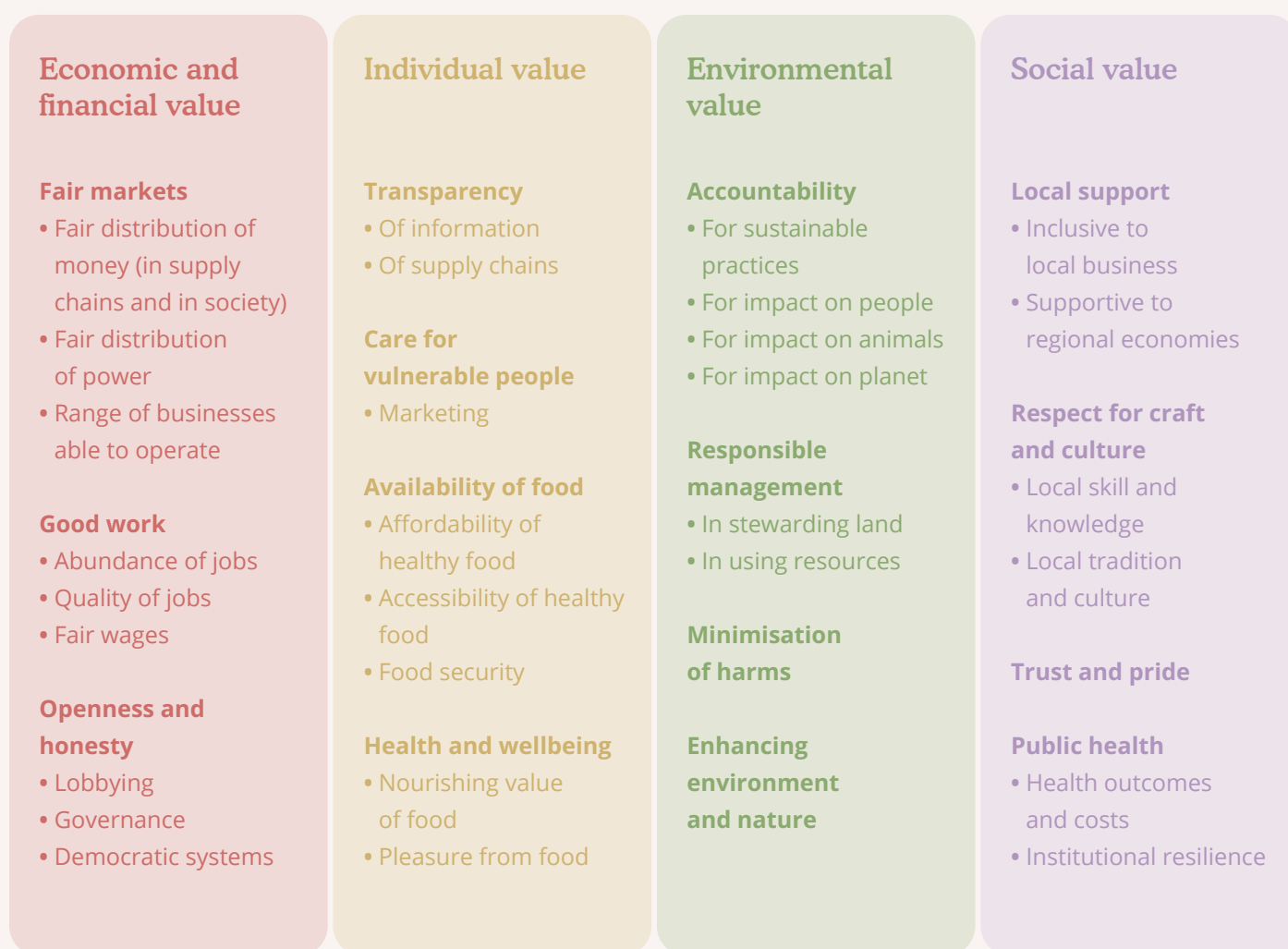


To start fleshing out the high-level concerns of citizens into a set of measurable indicators, we conducted a rapid scoping review of existing literature and other relevant documents to identify what has been published about the most dominant

food corporations' value and economic contribution and to identify useful ways to measure value and gaps. We sourced a range of potentially relevant documents including academic papers, NGO reports and news articles and identified 47 documents that provided useful methods and examples of how different food corporation contributions and harms could be assessed.

The final step in developing the value framework was to draw on the existing literature to propose a set of indicators for each theme. All 15 themes and 32 indicators are shown in Figure 5. We explore how to assess these indicators in the next section.

Figure 5: Value framework and key themes



Note(s): themes are shown in bold with indicators shown underneath in bullets

3. Measuring value in practice

The value framework represents a comprehensive approach, anchored in the values and goals of citizens, to evaluating the performance of the agri-food system and the true net value contribution of companies within it.

We recognise that consciously aiming for a broad and holistic value measurement framework inevitably brings considerable complexity in applying the framework in practice.

There are two parts to applying the framework: identifying the system we want to assess in whole and in part and developing relevant quantitative and qualitative metrics that we can use to assess relative performance over time and between different companies.

Mapping the UK agri-food industry

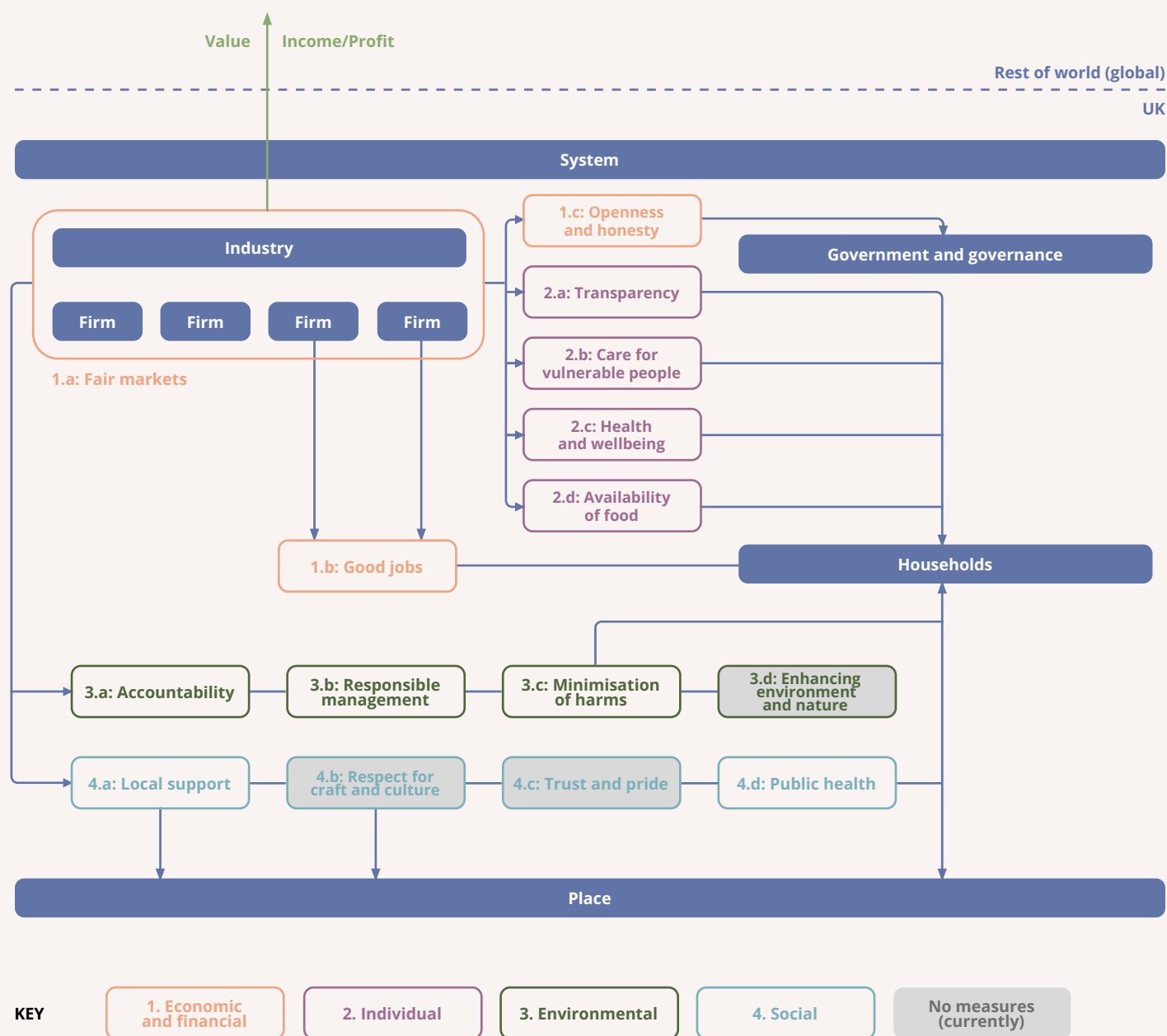
The agri-food industry comprises thousands of businesses across several distinct industrial activities from growing food to delivering it to our doors. As of 2024, there were 285 large and 20,085 small and medium businesses in UK's food and drink manufacturing sector alone.³⁷ Assessing all, or even most, businesses in the agri-food chain is an unrealistic task. We propose focusing initially on those companies likely to have the largest impacts on the values in framework.

The impacts of the system are also driven by the relationships between different actors and extend well beyond the financial and operational performance of companies themselves. These different actors within the system – industry, government, households and place/environment – are represented in Figure 6 below.

This system map shows where the impacts identified by the framework's 15 value themes are likely to be primarily located. It also indicates the likely unit of analysis for different measures, e.g. at the various levels of the national economy, businesses, local areas, households or individuals.

The map demonstrates that the business decisions of firms within industry (the top left of the map) have far-reaching consequences for individuals, society and the environment. It also indicates themes for which we have not yet identified a suitable measurement. We explore how values are assessed in practice in greater detail below.

Figure 6: Map of agri-food system actors, value themes and outcomes



Analysing the system into sectors and identifying influential companies

We found examples in the academic literature of where part of the agri-food chain is analysed in detail, including the dominant companies within certain sectors, and examples of comprehensive breakdowns of the agri-food chain from field to fork but which did not analyse the companies within them.

As far as we are aware, no existing literature provides both a comprehensive agri-food chain breakdown containing all major sectors and a list of the most dominant companies in each.

This scoping project offers the first attempt to produce this and sets out the challenges of doing so. Our approach was to develop a comprehensive sectoral analysis, with more detailed subsectors where available information allows, and then identify the largest companies within each subsector as determined by their UK sales related to that subsector. Sectors, subsectors and examples of some of the largest companies are summarised in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Sectors, subsectors and significant companies

SECTOR	SELECTED SUBSECTORS	EXAMPLES OF SIGNIFICANT CORPORATIONS (UK SALES >£0.5 BILLION)
Farming inputs	Pesticides & herbicides; Fertiliser; Animal pharmaceuticals	BASF UK; Bayer UK; Merck & Co; Yara UK Ltd
Primary processing and production	Grain merchants; Oil crushers; Dairy; Red meat; Poultry; Pigs and pork	Frontier Agriculture; Cargill; Arla; ABP Food; Moy Park; Cranswick
Manufacturers		Coca-Cola GB; Mondelez UK; Nestlé UK
Grocery	Wholesalers; Retailers	Booker; Sysco GB; Costco; Tesco; Sainsbury's; Asda
Caterers		Compass Group UK; WSH; Sodexo
Restaurants		J D Wetherspoon; Greggs; McDonalds
Delivery companies		Just Eat; Deliveroo; Uber Eats

Obtaining the data required for this approach is highly challenging. Companies might disclose sales only for Europe rather than individual countries such as the UK. Equally, they may disclose sales by product category at a higher, more aggregated level than the subsectors in our analysis. This problem is exacerbated by the prevalence of large companies in the agri-food chain that operate in many different countries and that are integrated vertically, owning companies/factories both upstream and downstream of their core activity. Further complications arise from the lighter reporting requirements for private companies compared to public corporations, and because annual reports are designed primarily to meet the needs of shareholders rather than consumers, employees or policymakers.

Finally, the analysis above is not intended to capture the dynamic relationships between different companies and subsectors. Where some companies and subsectors hold substantial market power or political influence relative to others, they can exert influence over products and processes across the whole system. For example, harms caused by agri-food businesses (e.g. pollution and antibiotics use) might be driven by pressure from UPF manufacturers or fast-food restaurants, and higher consumption of processed food can be a driver of more intensive practices such as monocropping.³⁸ The profits available within manufacturing create financial incentives to drive customers towards 'value added products' which are associated with higher food prices and less healthy products and cultural practices (e.g. less cooking).

The difficulty in identifying which companies are the key players in each sector of the agri-food system raises important questions about transparency and accountability for government and civil society, especially given that transparency was considered by citizens to be one of key values of a system that serves their interests.

Developing a set of measures and metrics

Most of the indicators in our framework have been measured by a range of authors in different ways and to emphasise different things (e.g. harms and benefits).

From this starting point, we have developed an initial proposal for a comprehensive set of measures for the 32 indicators in the value framework.

For each measure we noted whether it is quantifiable and, if so, whether it could be aggregated with other measures, i.e. through conversion into monetary values. Of the 42 measures that have been identified, 27 are quantitative and 15 qualitative. For each measure, where possible, we have identified one or more metrics and either existing data sources, or the types of data that would need to be generated or collected.

We have also assessed the analytical effort required to produce the metric. Some metrics are low effort either because the data are already in the required form or the calculation is straightforward, whereas others may be high effort because they involve extensive data combination and/or techniques that are time (or computationally) intensive.

Finally, it should be noted that there are six out of the 32 indicators for which no measures (or therefore metrics) have yet been identified: governance (economic and financial), pleasure from food (individual), enhancing environment and nature (environmental), local skills and knowledge, local tradition and culture, and trust and pride (social).

The relationship between different attributes in the value framework – categories, themes, indicators, measures and metrics is described in Figure 8 with examples of each attribute.

Figure 8: Hierarchy of attributes in the value framework

ATTRIBUTE NAME	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER	EXAMPLES	
Category	The top-level value categories of the framework	4	Social	Economic and Financial
Theme	More detailed components of value creation	15	Local support	Good jobs
Indicator	For each theme, one or more indicators, denoting an aspect of interest	32	Inclusive to local businesses	Quality of jobs
Measure	Description of a measurable proxy for the indicator to inform whether the indicators are, in some sense, good, bad, improving or worsening. Indicators may have more than one measure. It is not always possible to identify a relevant measure for an indicator, highlighting evidence gaps that require further research.	42	Number of smallholders and small and medium-sized enterprises	Job, wage, and entitlement quality
Method	The proposed approach to measurement.	as above	Data analysis	Qualitative
Metric	Quantitative or qualitative metrics, generally where a relevant data source has been identified. Measures may have more than one metric.	61	Counts / market shares of businesses by size	Reports of working conditions

The full set of indicators, measures and metrics includes a wide range of approaches and considerable complexity, and several key observations arise from this.

- Quantitative methods range from descriptive statistics to more sophisticated quantitative techniques including input-output analysis (from economics, to examine the supply-chain relationships between industries) and network science (e.g. to trace profit flows through to their beneficial owners).
- Qualitative techniques include document review and analysis, assessments of media coverage, interviews and polling. The generation of new qualitative datasets will be necessary to augment existing quantitative datasets.
- Some measures and metrics could appear under more than one category, for example lobbying could be conceptualised as an economic measure (capturing enhanced economic rents) or as a social measure of the robustness of democratic decision-making. We recognise that there is room for debate about how measures are categorised.
- Measures and data are applicable at different scales – national, regional – and units of analysis – industry or company. The value framework already identifies the likely unit of analysis in each case and a task for any future assessment would be to examine the data more carefully and to see how best to bring together the information across the measures into a coherent whole.
- The frequency of updates to the underlying data varies. For example, some employment statistics are released quarterly, but larger datasets may only be updated annually (or even less frequently), and some others may need to be updated through one-off or bespoke data gathering exercises.
- There are gaps in the evidence. While our ability to assess economic and financial value, and in many respects individual value, appears quite well developed, environmental value and social value show relatively more gaps. Rather than showing the limitations of our broad value analysis approach, we argue that it demonstrates the limitations of current analysis and discourse based only on a narrow and partial set of indicators.

Below we consider in further detail how to develop the framework in two main (and complementary) ways:

1. Analysis of a subset of the (quantitative) measures to most directly test the question of net gain from the food industry and its practices.
2. Development of a dashboard to provide a broader and more comprehensive overview of the food industry which could be maintained and expanded over time, applying a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques.

Approach #1: Focused set of quantitative measures

The quantitative analysis would focus initially on a restricted set of measures to gauge the ways in which the food industry might have both positive and negative impacts and how they may combine to test the net gain or net drain hypothesis. Where metrics are possible to monetise, and legitimate to aggregate, this may also help inform a headline measure of net gain or net drain.

Based on those measures that most easily support quantification, and the levels of effort that might be involved in each case, we suggest an initial subset set out in Figure 9.

Although this focused set covers only 17 out of 42 measures, it provides a relatively broad snapshot of the industry across all four categories of the value framework.

It would be useful to prioritise measures for future inclusion that are considered most salient or which could function as a bellwether for a whole indicator or category. Prioritisation should also consider the assessment of effort versus the expected benefit of the additional indicator to the explanatory power of the whole set of measures.

In this vein, an indicative set of measures ripe for early assessment (some of which represent novel applications) might include:

Economic and financial

value flows (supply chains) and profit flows (beneficial ownership)

Individual

structure of food environments (accessibility of food)

Environmental

environment impacts of supply chains

Social

burden of disease

Figure 9: Suggested indicators for initial focused quantitative analysis

VALUE	THEME	INDICATOR	MEASURE
Economic and financial	a) Fair markets	i) Fair distribution of money (in supply chains and in society)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value flows across industries • Profit flow analysis
		ii) Fair distribution of power	Market concentration
	b) Good work	i) Abundance of jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jobs provided • Jobs supported
		iii) Fair wages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total wages • Average wages
	c) Openness and honesty	iii) Democratic systems	Tax contributions
Individual	b) Care for vulnerable people	i) Marketing	Advertising and marketing expenditure
	d) Availability of food	i) Affordability of healthy food	Consumption baskets and inflation
Environmental	c) Minimisation of harms	i) Minimisation of harms	Environmental impacts
Social	a) Local support	i) Inclusive to local business	Numbers of SMEs
		ii) Supportive to regional economies	Regional GVA composition
	d) Public health	i) Health outcomes and costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health outcomes • Health costs
		ii) Institutional resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System costs • Sustainability of the NHS (expenditure)

Note(s): Measures in blue are in monetary terms or could be monetised to produce more aggregate (combined) metrics.

Approach #2: Broader dashboard of quantitative and qualitative measures

To offer a more complete view of the food industry, we can incorporate a wider range of quantitative and qualitative indicators. By developing a dashboard that can be updated over time, we can track whether the agri-food industry is performing and improving according to the values framework.

The value framework contains a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures. The former are directly measurable and numerical, whereas qualitative measures describe features or characteristics often in more descriptive or narrative form. Nevertheless, in many cases qualitative measures can be converted to a numerical form e.g. by calculating counts or shares of company adhering to different standards or, more subjectively, assigning scores such in a subjective scale 1–10, high/medium/low or ‘traffic light’ assessments, red, amber yellow). Provided the scoring is set out clearly and transparently, both quantitative and qualitative measures can be set alongside one another.

Going further, certain measures are either already expressed in monetary units or can be calculated as monetary equivalents. While sometimes contentious, this approach can support the addition of different measures (costs and benefits) to generate headline figures.

It would be reasonable to take the initial list of quantitative approaches detailed in the previous section as a starting point for the dashboard and to add qualitative indicators that offer complementary insights. Figure 10 proposes these additional indicators, with much greater emphasis on qualitative methods.

Understanding an industry as complex as food is a multifaceted problem. The power of a dashboard lies in its ability to bring together a range of different indicators into an accessible form.

Where this requires simplifying assumptions, it will be vital to be clear and transparent about the caveats to the data, for example where the data were gathered at different times and so some data is more out of date than others, and where potentially material measures, either positive or negative, are not yet included in the dashboard.

Each indicator will need to be calibrated against the desired outcomes expressed by the values framework. This is likely to be a range of potential target outcomes including indicators which should be minimised (for example, food waste), measures we want to maximise (for example, accessibility of healthy food), and those with a target range (for example, ratio of wages to profit).

Figure 10 – Suggested additional indicators to create a dashboard

VALUE	THEME	INDICATOR	MEASURE
Economic and financial	a) Fair markets	ii) Fair distribution of power	Company adherence to best practice supply chain due diligence
		iii) Range of businesses able to operate	Key barriers faced by small businesses
	b) Good jobs	ii) Quality of jobs	Job, wage and entitlement quality
		iii) Fair wages	Wage ratios
	c) Openness and honesty	i) Lobbying	Lobbying/ political activity on the part of companies
Individual	c) Health and wellbeing	i) Nourishing value of food	Structure of food environments (accessibility)
	d) Availability of food	ii) Food security	Food production balances
Environmental	a) Accountability	i) For sustainable practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies of investors (in food companies) on environmental issues • Social policies and practices
		3.a.ii For impact on people	
		3.a.iii For impact on animals	
		3.a.iv For impact on planet	
	Responsible management	3.b.ii In using resources	Food waste
Social	Local support	4.a.i Inclusive to local business	Opportunities for SMEs
		4.a.ii Supportive to regional economies	Investment in local food economies/communities
	Public health	4.d	Sustainability of the NHS (staffing ratios and absence from sickness)

Note(s): Measures in blue would involve quantitative measures. All other measures are qualitative.

This calibration is another subjective exercise in defining what good looks like and therefore, as with the choice of which values to measure, is an ideal question for deliberative engagement with citizens, informed by expert input and contextual information.

Even at an early stage, accessible forms of presentation and visualisation should be explored, to make the dashboard accessible to all.

As well as providing summary visual information, an effective dashboard should also allow the user to explore the data, drilling down into the detail to, for example:

- Examine the more detailed data underpinning the results, to see the details of good/bad performance.
- View trends in the data over time, to easily see whether the food industry is improving (or not) by the various measures.

We stress that our proposed value framework and measures are indicative and ripe for refinement. In operationalising the dashboard, we recommend a progressive strategy to develop a first version of the dashboard reasonably quickly (i.e. prototyped and tested), to give a preliminary view of the industry. After that, further work could gradually expand the dashboard to be more comprehensive and detailed over time.

4. Conclusions and next steps

This report addresses important tensions that sit at the heart of agri-food policy and industry practice, and which are illustrated by the breadth of the 10 goals of the government's Food Strategy.

We want a profitable and successful agri-food industry that generates economic prosperity. We also want that same industry to support a wide range of positive outcomes for individuals, society and the environment that are not captured in traditional financial measures of sales and profits, or jobs and wages.

Inevitably there will be trade-offs to navigate, but currently we are trying to navigate with a limited and inadequate set of instruments.

We need a systematic way to holistically assess which impacts of the agri-food industry are most important, measure all of these impacts, and to define what good looks.

We argue that the most democratically legitimate way to develop a such a broad value measurement framework is to ground it in the values and goals of citizens, as revealed through the deliberative engagement conducted during FFCC's Food Conversations. It could also be used to assess progress towards the government's food strategy goals.

The complexity and barriers identified in this report are no excuse for inaction. They are, on the contrary, an incentive for action. Indeed, this is particularly true when lack of transparency is likely to provide cover for businesses that are in reality a 'net drain' on society rather than a 'net gain'. The act of shining a light on industry practices and scrutinising the disclosures of the most powerful companies is not just a benefit for civil society, but a pro-competitive approach to promote more efficient markets.

It's not just that full value measurement is the right way forward for democratic accountability, it's the only way forward if we are to develop effective policy that deliver the outcomes that the government has set out and that citizens have told us they value.

However, we recognise that an overly bureaucratic approach to expanding the range of disclosure requirements for businesses can be counterproductive, adding costs and further entrenching the market power of large global corporations, and so the use of existing public data sets and generation of new qualitative data should be maximised as far as possible.

Recognising the scale of the ambition of a comprehensive citizen-inspired value framework, our research and findings stand as an initial phase of work which we wish to continue in collaboration with others.

Our proposed next steps are to:

- Engage with stakeholders, including citizens, on the detailed value framework and refine it in response to feedback, including calibrating the targets for those initial measures and metrics that have been identified.
- Develop an initial focused set of quantitative metrics to carry out a value analysis on a sample of companies. This would test the possibility that companies' true value contribution could differ significantly from headline economic statistics, even to the extent of being negative overall.
- Continue to define qualitative measures where quantitative metrics are not available, to complete the set of measures.
- Evaluate the market power dynamics between different subsectors and companies through approaches such as tracking profitability and financial flows through the value chain. Our preliminary analysis suggests adapting the framework developed for the oil and gas industry to analyse the flow of money through the UK agri-food system.³⁹
- Develop a values dashboard that can be used to evaluate the performance of the agri-food system as a whole and over time, and function as an effective and accessible communication tool to aid transparency and accountability to politicians and citizens.

Given the scale, complexity and importance of this work, we recommend that the best approach would be a collaborative transdisciplinary project with an anchor university partner and involving NGOs, business groups and, of course, citizens.

We must strive towards finding better answers to the question of whether the agri-food industry really delivers the net gains it proudly and loudly claims, or whether companies can also turn out to be net drains on our health, our productivity, our community and our environment.

To reiterate Tim Jackson's foreword to this report, being able to answer that question matters.

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