

# Briefing

July 2024

## POLICIES FOR FOOD AND FARMING RESILIENCE

**Commit to multi-year funding to support farmers transitioning businesses to more regenerative, organic or nature-friendly practices**

**Support new and existing peer-to-peer learning groups for farmers at different stages of becoming more resilient and sustainable, to share knowledge and build community**

**Regenerate local food infrastructure, such as mills, abattoirs and markets, creating alternative options for farmers to sell produce**

**Restore fairness and transparency to supply chains through tougher, fully enforced regulation for supermarkets, processors and intermediaries buying from farmers**

**Integrate food into existing national, regional and local plans for resilience currently focused on climate and nature**

**Reduce food inequalities among households and families by increasing access to freshly cooked food in and out of the home and helping reduce waste**

# From Food Security to Food Resilience

## SUMMARY OF THE FFCC FARMING LEADERSHIP GROUP SYMPOSIUM, 14 MARCH 2024

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Food security has surged up the UK political agenda in 2024. The phrase was emblazoned on placards at [farming protests](#). Before the election, Defra published its [first food security index](#). At an NFU reception in July, the new farming minister, Labour's Daniel Zeichner, repeated the party's line: "food security is national security."

While this attention is welcome, a narrow view of food security is unfeasible in a volatile, interconnected world suffering the effects of climate change. To ensure a healthy, sustainable and prosperous future for all, the UK cannot merely increase its domestic production. Instead, its food system must become more resilient. This requires changing how food is grown to emphasise climate and nature, tackling major imbalances of power in the supply chain, rebuilding local food networks, ensuring all households have access to good food, and preparing for inevitable disruption. Only a more complex, diverse and truly sustainable food system can respond to shocks like war, pandemic and extreme weather in a positive, equitable way.

The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission convened a conversation on resilience at its third farming symposium, held at 18 Smith Square, London. Attended by the top figures from farming and conservation groups and businesses in FFCC's Farming Leadership Group, along with academics, policy experts, politicians and farmers, the event was held under the Chatham House rule to encourage a lively discussion. The themes that emerged are summarised below.

Since the symposium, resilience has been mentioned frequently in food and farming circles. The Farm to Fork summit at Downing Street in May featured a breakout session on the topic. But a limited view of food security is still pervasive. This could entrench the precarious status quo by not addressing the key factors, such as biodiversity, soil health and water quality, that underpin food security in the long run. Real food security requires resilience, and comprehensive plans to adapt to anticipated and unforeseen risks.

## Changing the Frame: Security and Resilience

The symposium began with a discussion of the concepts of food security and resilience, as well as the tangled crises and fast-changing global problems, which have pushed these ideas up the agenda.

The drive for food security has become a focus for UK politicians and agricultural organisations. In May, the Conservative-led government published its first draft food security index, based on nine key indicators, most of them focused on production and supply. But this kind of approach is being made untenable by massive shifts in the environmental, economic and political context leading to increased instability. As one of the speakers put it, “Hazards are going up and our exposure is going up and so is our vulnerability.”

The current global food system is experiencing a rising number of increasingly dangerous shocks and failures. These range from the 28 billion-dollar weather and climate disasters the USA suffered in 2023 to the immense externalised costs of the current food system, mainly in environmental damage and poor health, equivalent to 12% of global GDP. Agriculture worldwide is suffering more frequent, simultaneous crop failures in multiple growing regions. Worse is still to come: climate and ocean temperature data for the first months of 2024 were well above the average of even recent years.

Currently, the concept of food security means different things to different people, and has been co-opted by certain fringe political groups, as shown in the farming protests across the UK early in 2024. Because of this, it is crucial to define what resilience means.

The existing food system possesses *structural* resilience, a characteristic that allows it to return to its former condition following a disruption or crisis. A good example of this was the UK food supply during the Covid-19 pandemic. This kind of resilience means the system does not learn from shocks but ends up more deeply locked into structures which weaken the ability

to respond well to subsequent problems. It becomes more and more out of date.

*Functional* resilience is more desirable. This is built by getting ahead of the next disruption and generating adaptive capacity to respond to whatever is coming. That response should also be positive. One participant said: “Instead of building back as fast as we possibly can, we build back in a way that enhances our long-term food security and resilience.”

Significantly, functional resilience requires a wide and holistic view because disruptions can take different forms and come from beyond the accepted boundaries of the food system. One example discussed was a carefully researched food security report that was released just two months before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, a crisis that dramatically changed the UK’s position in terms of energy and food security.

History shows that we tend to underestimate the hazards we face, and when negative events take place, we fail to take account of their total impact through cascading and compound effects. We may think of “black swan” events (those thought to be very rare but high impact) having only a probability of perhaps 1 in 1,000. But if shifting circumstances create 1,000 opportunities for failure then one of those extraordinary events becomes almost certain.

There are different goals that a state can pursue in order to achieve a more functionally resilient food system. Each of these has its own challenges and trade-offs. They include:

- Avoiding single points of failure, such as reliance on a specific trade route like the Suez Canal
- Increasing self-sufficiency and domestic food production and processing
- Diversifying the supply of critical goods or preferentially sourcing from allied countries
- Increasing redundancy and storage capacity within the supply chain, to move from a just-in-time to a just-in-case system

- Identifying risk hotspots and planning for early interventions
- Increasing flexibility among consumers, willingness to substitute foods, and reducing demand for certain products, especially the idea that they are available 24/7

Participants in the symposium were presented with two possible future scenarios. Maintaining business as usual with a structurally resilient food system would lead to more large-scale commodity crop production, the proliferation of biotechnology, biofortification and robotics, even more consumption of Ultra-Processed Foods, and the continued dominance of long, anonymous supply chains. But as an alternative, the system could be developed to embrace more varied farming systems, a wider range of nutritious diets including more whole foods, better access to freshly cooked food, and a major reduction in food waste. This second scenario would mean trading conventional agricultural efficiency for higher overall system efficiency, but this was a way to bring down the enormous environmental and health costs the UK and the wider world currently pays.

## Personal Resilience: A People-Focused Food System

A key aspect of becoming more resilient is accounting for the specific needs of local communities and the challenges faced by individual farmers and citizens. The UK's current food system is largely based on anonymity and isolation. Meanwhile, the drive for cheap food is working neither for farmers nor citizens: farmers are under immense pressure as they try to run a profitable business and earn a livelihood; for the poorest households, the right mix of nutritious foods is still far too expensive.

The symposium discussion repeatedly turned to a topic that does not always feature in conversations about the food system: mental health. Food poverty in households is contributing to a range of health problems. A survey by the [Food Foundation](#) of people

using emergency food assistance, such as food banks, found that 65% had some form of mental health issue.

These problems are rife within the farming community. According to the [Farm Safety Foundation](#), 94% of young farmers say poor mental health is the biggest hidden danger in agriculture today. The range of charitable help on offer from organisations like the Farming Community Network, the YANA Project and the DPJ Foundation is testament to the scale of the challenge.

Farmers attending the symposium offered reflections on the difficulties of mental health within farming and how it could be improved. One farmer said the negative public perception of livestock production had affected her. For one arable grower, encouraging more visitors to his farm and creating a strong connection with the public had helped, alongside its broader benefits for those visitors. "It's just having more people about," he said. "I think it's very good for the population at large to get their hands dirty and get involved with farming. We can get them onto the land and help farmers help themselves." An estate manager advocated for the importance of good tenant-landlord relations in maintaining health, motivation and mutual support. "We have very open, honest dialogue [with our tenants]," he said. "We meet with them and have a pint and just chat through stuff that's going on."

Turning to solutions, a key process will be shifting the culture of the food supply chain, which currently creates little connection between farmers and citizens. One of the benefits of smaller-scale food systems is that proximity encourages fairer, more humane interactions. As one participant explained, "When you get back to a more local system, you can't treat your neighbours the way that some actors are able to do so from a place of anonymity."

## Organising for Action: The Political Economy

Rebalancing and reconnecting national, regional and local structures of governance would allow the food

system to be oriented to the needs of households and farmers.

FFCC's [The Food Conversation](#) is revealing citizens' aspirations for a better food system that provides healthy, accessible food for all, stronger regulation to create a fairer supply chain, support for farmers to farm more sustainably, and a joined-up approach from government at all levels.

There is limited connection and alignment between food policy across national, regional and local scales. The symposium discussed how there are lots of examples of existing mechanisms, strategies and bodies that aim to boost resilience, mostly focused on preparing for floods and other natural events. These could be adapted to cover food. Organisations such as the National Preparedness Commission and Local Resilience Forums were ready to take on such functions.

National government could support the success of regional and local efforts through a more systemic approach to the distribution of public funds, such as agri-environment payments, and a commitment to introduce a Land Use Framework with multifunctionality at its heart.

Local and regional bodies could begin to address some of the thorniest food system challenges, such as 60% of total food waste deriving from households. These could involve public procurement schemes and social safety nets that are tailored to local needs. There are excellent examples of success in this area from other countries.

The Food Belt movement in Liege, Belgium aims for the majority of food consumed in its region to be grown locally in the "best ecological and social conditions". The movement is building an alternative food system, with 28 food co-ops, 300 individual producers, and a school meals programme supplied with organic produce from within the Food Belt network.

Such initiatives require skilled political leadership at a regional level. Resilience is best developed within communities as part of a collective and collaborative

effort, because that is where the positive feedback loop is most visible. When citizens participate in change led by local and regional government, they can witness the effects of their decisions happening around them, and immediately recognise the environmental and health benefits.

## The Political Pace is Quickening

In a politics-focused session representing the views of the major parties, there was broad agreement across the ideological spectrum that any calls for food security should include features of resilience.

The previous Conservative government was openly committed to boosting the country's food security. It promised to speed up the publication of its regular [food security reports](#) from a five-year to a three-year interval, and published a draft version of an annual [Food Security Index](#), ahead of the second edition of its Farm to Fork Summit at Downing Street in May 2024.

Now that the concept of food security is seeing broad support, there is an opportunity to ensure resilience receives similar attention. While the issue is not being raised explicitly, it should align with the existing interests of the leading parties. For example, the new Labour government is placing a strong emphasis on the "[everyday economy](#)" and preventative aspects of healthcare, which can be clearly linked to household food resilience.

Post-Brexit, new agricultural support policies are being developed across the four nations. The panel concurred that the English Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) was heading in the right direction, but there were different emphases from the contributors about how it should be developed. For some, public funding should be supporting regenerative agriculture, by rewarding food production as well as environmental actions. Another speaker stressed the need for the effects of ELMS to be properly measured and an impact assessment to be rapidly

published, so the government and the public understood the value for money of this investment.

There was further agreement about the need for a Multifunctional Land Use Framework, to make sure that the UK's limited land is used and shared in the most effective and appropriate ways. With all parties committed to its introduction, the question is how such a framework would be developed and used in the future.

The panelists highlighted the plethora of levers that can be used to bring about greater resilience within the food system. This spanned the use of public funds for agri-environment payments, restriction of unfair supply chain practices, and higher standards on food imports in trade deals. More local and regional actions, including public support for infrastructure such as abattoirs, mills and markets, were also raised as useful interventions. What was needed next was a strategic assessment of which of these policy levers were most effective and viable.

At the same time, the government could demonstrate leadership by sending strong messages to guide the direction of the sector and help businesses to plan and invest for the long run. The panel shared a recognition of the scale of the challenge and concurred that tinkering around the edges was not sufficient.

## Investing in Resilience: Midwifing the New

One of the strengths of the FFCC Farming Leadership Group symposia is the in-depth farming knowledge in the room. Policy debates are grounded by contributions from farmers and growers themselves. Across the day, they reflected on how the growing frequency of risks and challenges was affecting their business and how they could be supported to become more resilient.

Numerous barriers to change were identified. It can be difficult to find trusted advisers who are not trying to sell chemicals, machinery or a particular farm system.

The old system of extensive government-advisory services for the technical aspects of farming has been broken up. In terms of financing farming's transformation, grant funding from public funds is generally directed towards technological solutions, such as robotics in vegetable production, rather than the systemic changes to business operations that are required for radical and enduring change.

In the absence of independent advice, support for peer-to-peer learning among farmers was highlighted as crucial. The [Groundswell regenerative farming festival](#) was mentioned as the kind of event where knowledge about shifting farming practices could be shared. Regional events are also running across the UK. Public funding could be directed towards these burgeoning networks as a way of encouraging the uptake of more resilient practices across the farming community.

Both public and private finance are needed to incentivise farmers to adopt changes. Following the UK's departure from the EU, new systems for farming support payments have been developed for the different regions, with England's Environmental Land Management Scheme the most advanced. While there was positivity at the symposium around ELMS, there was also a desire for any payments to cover the full period of transition as farm businesses shifted towards more regenerative, sustainable, nature friendly or organic systems. This transition takes several years and carries upfront costs, so farmers need confidence to make this investment. There was lively discussion about alternative payment models, including payment by results. One participant spoke about working in a National Park where, at the farming community's request, such a model was trialled, coupled with a capital expenditure fund for investment.

The businesses that farmers supply can also generate momentum for change. Several dairy processors have introduced bonus or incentive payments based on farmers achieving better environmental outcomes. It was noted that while these amounts were often

relatively small, they seemed to have an outsized effect in changing farming practices.

In general, incentives and support payments represent an important source of guaranteed income for farmers in a world of uncertain harvests and volatile input costs. Because of this, they take on a significance out of proportion to their actual monetary value. As a way of encouraging change within farming, this makes them a wise investment.

## Setting Goals: Designing the Future

Throughout the day, symposium participants described in concrete terms the features of a more resilient food and farming system. With a clear goal in mind, this would enable farmers, politicians, policymakers and food businesses to plot the route to bold transformation. The attendees wanted:

**For Westminster government**, a stable, coherent policy landscape including a financial settlement that ensures resources flow to where they are most needed and level the playing field. Building connection and community is at the heart of resilience, but this is difficult when the government food policy is shaped in departmental silos and decision-making is centralised in Whitehall.

**For devolved, regional and local governments**, food and farming recognised as integral to climate, nature and growth strategies, ensuring that the countryside works for everyone, with better land use decisions, and existing Resilience Forums repurposed to coordinate local civil food resilience.

**For the supply chain**, clear and enforced guardrails to establish and maintain fairer market conditions and a food system based on transparency and collaboration. Currently, power is concentrated in the hands of a few large companies, but this should be distributed much more equitably, particularly through the development of local food networks.

**For farms**, a just transition that maintains and improves livelihoods and incentivises farming as a positive force for change in the transition towards more sustainable, regenerative or organic practices. There must be sufficient public and private funds available to support farmers shifting their operations and farm businesses must be able to make a reasonable return.

**For households and citizens**, a welfare and benefits system that ensures that healthy food is easily available for everyone everywhere. It is at the household level where the inequalities in the system surface and a wider, holistic view is needed to find solutions. This includes linking food policy to other areas such as social security.

### FURTHER READING

[Farming Leadership Group Symposium #1: Finding the Finance for Growth](#)

[Farming Leadership Group Symposium #2: Creating Fair & Equitable Supply Chains](#)

[Charlie Taverner, "No Food Security Without Resilience", FFCC, April 2024](#)

[UK Food Security Index 2024](#)

[Tim Lang, "Britain's New Food Security Index is a Poor Excuse for Policy", Financial Times, May 2024](#)

[Resilience of the UK Food System in a Global Context: A Global Food Security Programme](#)

["A Resilient UK Food System", UK Parliament POST, POSTNOTE no. 626, June 2020](#)

[P. Garnett, B. Doherty, and T. Heron, "Vulnerability of the United Kingdom's Food Supply Chains Exposed by COVID-19", Nature Food 1 \(2020\)](#)

[A. R. Hansen, J. S. I. Ingram and G. Midgley, "Negotiating Food Systems Resilience", Nature Food 1 \(2020\)](#)