

Recommendation 4b: Introduce a Horticulture Strategy to boost fruit and vegetable consumption and production

SUMMARY

- The UK currently produces just 35% of our total fruit and vegetable supply. If we were to increase fruit and vegetable consumption to 7 portions a day, total supply would need to increase by 89%.

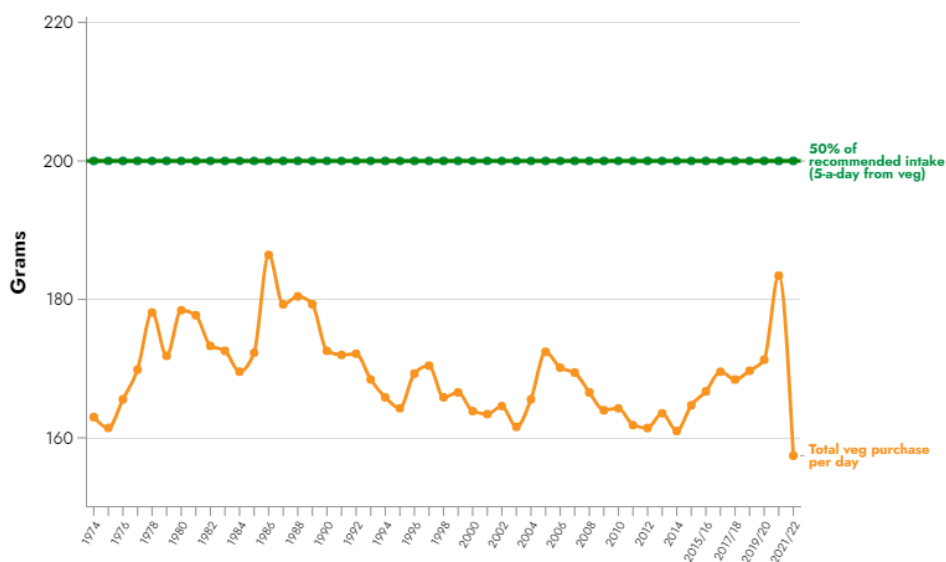
- A robust, long-term horticulture strategy is needed. Any strategic plan to increase fruit and vegetable production must be coupled with efforts to increase fruit and vegetable consumption. This would provide opportunities for policy wins, bringing benefits to our health, the environment, employment opportunities, and our food security.

- Current supply chains are vulnerable to climate shocks, as demonstrated by recent shortages in supermarkets. However, the UK itself has relatively stable weather, allowing for significant expansion of our horticulture sector.

We are not eating enough fruit and vegetables

- In the UK, only [33% of adults and just 12% of 11–18-year-olds](#) currently meet the recommended five-portion of fruit and veg a day. The cost-of-living crisis has reduced household purchases of vegetables to their lowest level in 50 years.

TRENDS IN VEGETABLE PURCHASES (HOUSEHOLD AND EATEN OUT) G/PER PERSON/PER DAY, 1974–2022



Sources: Adjusted National Food Survey data 1974–2000, Expenditure and Food Survey 2001–2002 to 2007 and Living Costs and Food Survey 2008 onwards, Family Food Survey 2022



- Although the 5-a-day message has been widely communicated, the government's recommendation, as per the Eatwell Guide, is closer to [7-a-day](#). Others suggest we should be eating more, with the EAT Lancet commission suggesting up to [11-a-day](#).
- We would need to increase the amount of fruit and vegetables we consume by [86%](#) to meet the Eatwell Guide dietary guidelines.

The disparity in consumption of fruits and vegetables is widening

- Recent data from [The Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker](#) shows that in the UK, 60% of households experiencing food insecurity in January 2024 are cutting back on purchasing fruits, and 44% are cutting back on purchasing vegetables.
- In terms of affordability, findings from the Food Foundation's [Kids Food Guarantee](#) revealed that a week's worth of fruit and veg for one person (equivalent to at least 35 portions) would cost between £8.67 and £13.24 depending on the retailer.
- This means that the poorest 10% of UK households may have to spend between 34- 52% of one person's weekly food budget to afford a week's worth of 5-a-day. In contrast, the wealthiest 10% of families would only need allocate 17-26% for the same purpose.
- This report also revealed that over 1 in 7 (14%) of the lowest priced fruit and veg available across the 7 major retailers contain added salt and/or sugar (e.g. baked beans, tinned peas or tomato sauce). This is concerning, given that fruit and veg products with added salt or sugar are not within the scope of the Healthy Start Scheme, limiting the options for low-income families to afford their 5-a-day.

Why should fruit and veg consumption be increased?

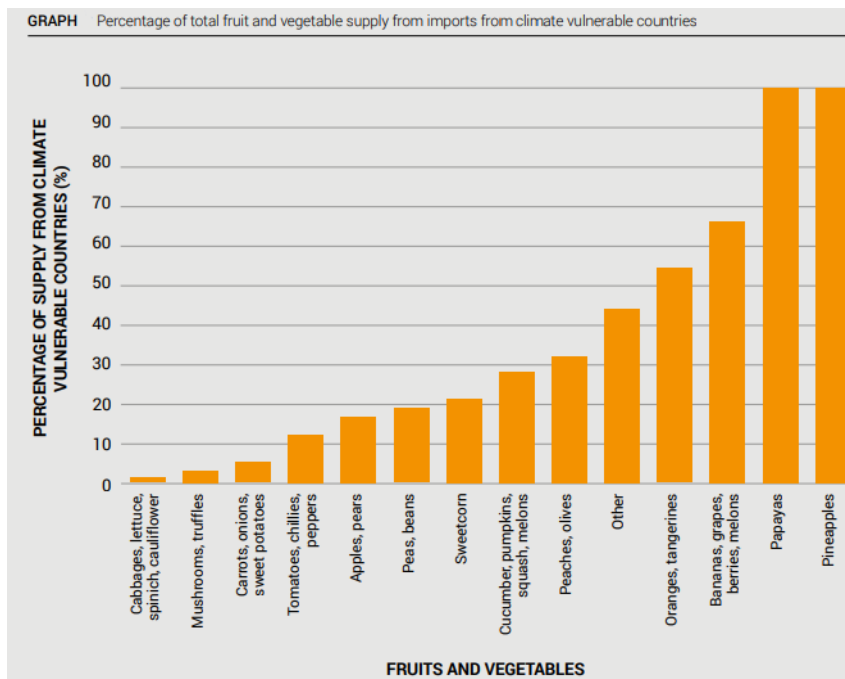
- Sufficient intake of fruit and vegetables [reduces the risk](#) of multiple diet-related diseases such as heart disease, stroke, and various types of cancers.
- In the UK, at least [31,000 premature deaths](#) could be averted per year if everyone ate sufficient fruit and vegetables.

How much fruit and veg is available?

- 35% of the [UK's fruit and veg supply](#) comes from domestic production (3.1 million metric tonnes per year), and 65% from imports (5.7 million metric tonnes per year).
- Total supply is well below the amount that would be required for everyone to eat enough fruit and veg to meet dietary recommendations. If everyone were to eat 7 portions a day, the fruit and vegetable supply in the UK would need to increase by approximately 89% ([7.8 million metric tonnes per year](#)) taking into account food waste at current levels.
- However, our domestic horticulture sector is contracting due to labour shortages, punitive supermarket contracts and unprecedented inflation. [Growers](#) are choosing to plant fewer crops or leave the sector altogether due to lack of support.

To succeed in driving up consumption, we need more fruit and veg in the food system.

- Our domestic horticulture sector is contracting due to labour shortages, punitive supermarket contracts and unprecedented inflation. Growers are choosing to plant fewer crops or leave the sector altogether due to lack of support.
- More tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, lettuce, mushrooms, peppers, spinach, courgettes, cherries, broccoli and cauliflower could be grown in the UK if we could become more competitive. A good number of these crops are grown in glasshouses or inside and so can often be produced year-round. They are currently imported from The Netherlands and Ireland, where the climate is not very different from the UK.
- However, increasing supply takes time. Both domestic and foreign horticultural production operations typically take many years to reach production at scale.
- A growing proportion of the UK's fruit and veg supply is [dependent on climate-vulnerable countries](#). In 2013, 32% of UK fruit and vegetable imports were from areas defined as climate vulnerable, a 60% increase since 1987.
- There is therefore a need for long term planning to secure fruit and vegetable availability, running alongside measures to increase consumption.
- Existing supermarket supply chains bake in a lot of waste; new business models which link producers and consumers are also needed.
- The UK horticulture industry is [worth over £5 billion](#) each year, and the industry employs over 50,000 people. This is a pivotal moment for the future of the horticulture sector; with the right support there is a huge opportunity for it to flourish. Equally, this is an opportunity to secure better future health outcomes for citizens.



Source: SHEFS, Policy brief: Is the UK's supply of fruit and vegetables future proof?

What should the Government be doing?

- **Develop a Horticulture Strategy** for the UK that brings together efforts to increase fruit and vegetable production with efforts to increase consumption, while also supporting producer's livelihoods. A robust, long-term horticulture strategy can support the production and increased consumption of fruit and vegetables, and ensure the UK is not unsustainably reliant on imports.
- **Appoint a Minister with specific horticultural responsibilities** to provide direction and accountability for the sector, as recommended by The House of Lords Horticultural Sector Committee's 2023 [report](#).
- Other policy levers which could be used to encourage increased consumption of fruit and vegetables whilst supporting UK horticultural producers include:
 - o **Public procurement** – reforming the Government Buying Standards to include two portions of veg in every main meal would drive increased demand. Dynamic procurement practices could also support smaller growers, who often grow to higher environmental standards and Dynamic food procurement [pilots in England and Wales](#) show that it offers a solution that adheres to strict legal regulations whilst overcoming some of the inherent barriers preventing smaller businesses supplying the public sector.
 - o **School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme** – further investment would allow schools to procure higher quality produce from local growers. It should be expanded to all children in primary school – currently children aged 5 to 7 attending state primary schools in England only receive one portion of fruit or vegetable each school day.
 - o **Mandatory reporting on fruit and veg sales**, and on food waste to help drive business engagement.

Full details can be found in the [fruit and vegetable policy briefing series](#) prepared by The Food Foundation using research conducted by the [SHEFS research consortium](#).

As the UK approaches a General Election, The Food Foundation is urging all candidates and political parties to recognise the importance of improving the food system for achieving many societal goals. The Food Foundation's manifesto 'Nourishing the Nation' presents a range of policy priorities aimed at transforming the current food system, reshaping the nation's well-being and future.

You can find our Nourishing the Nation manifesto [here](#).

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