

The Food
Foundation



Introduction to the food system and why it matters in the UK today

**You can view
The Food Foundation's
full manifesto here:**

[foodfoundation.org.uk
/initiatives/election-
2024-nourishing-nation](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/election-2024-nourishing-nation)



Foreword



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Congratulations on your election to parliament! Whether you are brand new to the job, or have years of experience under your belt, this guide sets out why working on food in this parliamentary term will allow you to contribute to a policy agenda that will deliver tangible benefits to your constituents.

If you're concerned about the health service, the economy, climate change, education, children, communities or inequalities, this guide explains why the food we eat is a crucial and often overlooked part of the solutions that our society needs.

Food is a huge part of all of our lives. It is universal – none of us can do without it. It can nourish us and it fuels us. It impacts our health, happiness and overall prosperity. Good food can help everyone to reach their full potential. Good food can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and restore nature. Good food can also be part of the solution to many of the challenges that policy makers are grappling with in the UK today.

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This guide gives a brief intro to the food system, how it is currently failing us, and why a new approach is so critical for the UK.

Please get in touch – we want to meet you and to work with you on this agenda for change.

What is a food system, and why is it useful to know?

The food system is the combination of all the factors affecting our food, both individually and as a society. Issues such as cost, taste, availability, convenience, culture, trade, the environment, health and development and wider economic factors all feed into the food system, and determine what we consume.

If we get our food system right, it can boost health and wellbeing, employment, education, the environment, the economy, help address inequalities, and maybe most importantly: our enjoyment of food.

But when our food system goes wrong, it can have dire consequences for both people and planet.

Unfortunately, our current food system is failing us

For many years, our food system has been deprioritised by policymakers. On the one hand we have increasing food prices, high levels of food insecurity and poorly paid workers across the food system. At the same time, multi-national food companies are making huge profits from unhealthy and highly processed foods.

Meanwhile, in our day to day lives, our food environments are failing to support healthy diets, with unhealthy food hard to avoid. It is in our supermarkets and corner shops, on our screens, at our sports events, and on our high streets.

All of this is contributing to worsening diets and increasing diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancer, while also impacting on healthy life expectancy.

These are all signs that the food system needs urgent attention in this parliamentary term.



Many of the challenges you are faced with as an MP relate to the food system.



There is no single solution to these problems, but improving our food, and our wider food system, is a crucial part of the solution.

The food system in numbers

46%

of food is imported in the UK¹, including **65%** of our **fruit and vegetables**.²



£98 BILLION the estimated cost to the UK economy

every year due to **overweight** and **obesity**. That's **4%** of GDP.⁴

30%

of **greenhouse gas emissions** are from the **food system**.^{5,6}

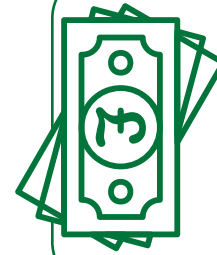


1 IN 4 places to buy food on high streets in England are **fast food outlets**.³



15% of UK households were living with **FOOD INSECURITY** in **January 2024**.⁷

This rises to **45%** of households who are in receipt of **Universal Credit**.



50% THE AMOUNT OF DISPOSABLE INCOME

that the **most deprived fifth** of households would need to spend to afford a healthy diet.³

900,000

the number of **children** living in poverty but are not eligible for free school meals.⁸



JUST **1 IN 3**

adults get their 5 a day.⁹ The **most deprived fifth** of adults **consume**

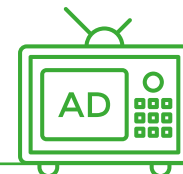


37% less fruit and vegetables than the least deprived.³

1% of advertising in the UK goes towards fruit and vegetables.

THIS COMPARES TO

33% which goes towards **confectionery, snacks, desserts and soft drinks**.³



1 IN 5

children in the UK have **obesity** when they start primary school. THIS RISES TO OVER



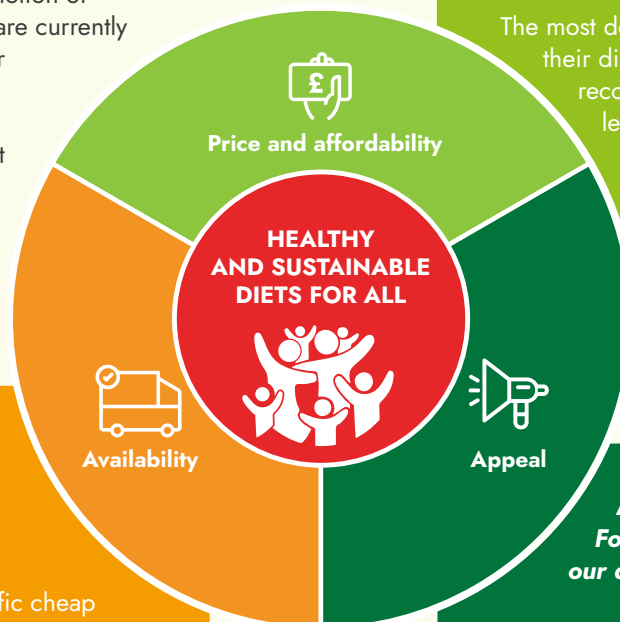
2 IN 5 amongst the most **deprived fifth** of the population.¹⁰

What drives our diets?

Our food system impacts the environment in which we live and make decisions about food. The three major variables within our food environments that influence what we eat are the affordability, accessibility and appeal of food. These drivers are much more powerful and influential than any notion of personal responsibility and choice. Unfortunately, these drivers are currently working against us, contributing to poor population health, poor planetary health, and widening inequalities.

To improve what people eat, policy makers must use the relevant levers to ensure that healthy and sustainable food is available, affordable and appealing for everyone.

Let's look at each in turn, and how they are currently impacting our citizens.



Accessibility

People tend to eat what is convenient and easily available to them.

British neighbourhoods are awash with corner shops selling sweets and crisps, and fast food outlets selling highly calorific cheap meals. Our roads are punctuated with petrol stations selling junk food, and public spaces are littered with vending machines and billboards promoting chocolate, fast food and fizzy drinks.

Regardless of where you are in the UK, it is almost always easier to find unhealthy food than it is to find healthy food. In some neighbourhoods, it is impossible to buy healthy or nutritious food. These are called 'food deserts'.

Easy access to junk food is a problem everywhere, but it's worse in more deprived areas where 1 in 3 (30.5%) food outlets are fast food outlets.³ This has been made worse by online delivery apps.

Affordability

People can only eat what is within their budget.

More healthy foods* are over twice as expensive per calorie as less healthy foods.³

The most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend 50% of their disposable income on food to meet the cost of the Government recommended healthy diet.³ This compares to just 11% for the least deprived fifth.

An increasing problem is also the affordability and access to adequate kitchen equipment and facilities, especially in the private rented sector. This helps to explain why many people have become trapped into eating less healthy diets.

**as per the Government's Nutrient Profile Model*

Appeal

Food marketing and advertising is pervasive, and it shapes our decisions.

The British public are being bombarded with adverts for unhealthy food. One third of the UK's total food and soft drink advertising spend goes towards confectionery, snacks, desserts and soft drinks.³ This compares to just 1% for fruit and vegetables.

Much of this advertising targets children, for instance with cartoon characters on packaging and social media ads, as well as on billboards near to schools and at sports events.

The reason that food companies are so willing to invest so heavily in well-honed and well produced advertising campaigns is because they work so well.

MYTH BUSTER

You might come across arguments that we need to educate people about healthy eating rather than change the food that is all around us.

If only it were that simple. The reality is that people generally know which foods are healthy, and which are not. Rates of food related ill-health in the UK have rocketed in the last thirty years, but there is no evidence to say that people's knowledge of nutrition decreased.

What has changed is food environments: Unhealthy food has become more affordable, while takeaways are constantly available through apps. Junk food marketing has become a major industry and this is a more powerful driver of diets than individual choice.

Junk food marketing has become a major industry and this is a powerful driver of diets

The job of policymakers is, therefore, to improve the affordability, accessibility and appeal of a healthy and sustainable diet.



How is our food system affecting us?



Our food system is affecting our health

The UK is faring worse than many other high income and OECD countries on factors such as obesity and healthy life expectancy.

Obesity and dietary risks are a leading cause of death and disability in the UK.¹¹

Across the UK, over 4 million people are living with diabetes, 90% of which is type 2 diabetes.¹² In addition, 7.6 million people have a heart or circulatory disease.¹³ Two thirds of adults in England have overweight or obesity.¹⁴

Across all forms of food-related ill health, it is often the most deprived who are affected the most. Healthy life expectancy (the number of years a person is expected to live in good health) in the most deprived tenth of the population is 19 years lower for women and 18 years lower for men than in the least deprived tenth.³

Improving our food system would therefore take significant pressure off both our NHS and the social care system, as well as going a long way to addressing inequalities.

Healthy life expectancy is 19 years lower for women in the most deprived tenth of the population compared to the least deprived³

Our food system is affecting our children's future

Our declining food system is causing a downwards trajectory in children's health in the UK large inequalities.¹⁵

- The height of 5 year olds has been falling since 2013.
- Obesity among 10-11 years olds has increased by 30% since 2006.
- Type 2 diabetes among under 25s has increased by 22% in the past 5 years.
- Babies born today will enjoy a year less good health than babies born a decade ago.

Our current food system is making our children and young people sick, and denying them the full opportunities to develop that they deserve. We need to put our children's health and nutrition at the heart of all policies.



MYTH BUSTER

You might hear people describe government intervention on unhealthy food and people's diets to be 'nanny state' intervention.

The reality is that there is no more flagrant example of institutions influencing what people eat than the barrage of advertising for junk food on our high streets, in our newspapers and online.

Therefore taking action to fix a broken system and a failed market that offers people little choice and opportunity to eat a healthy diet, is a necessary role of government to help citizens live healthy lives, and protect them from corporate interests.

Our food system is affecting our economy

The food system is damaging our workforce, our productivity, our growth, our public services and our GDP.

The Office for Budget Responsibility has analysed that economic inactivity that is working age adults not being able to work, is one of the major risks currently facing the British economy.¹⁶ We now have almost three million people who are too sick to work – a figure that is rising year on year. The rise is due to mental health, and food-related ill health.

The economic cost of overweight and obesity is £98 billion⁴

According to analysis done by Frontier Economics, the economic cost of obesity and overweight is £98 billion, equivalent to 4% of our GDP.⁴ If policymakers fail to take action on the food system, this economic cost could rocket to £110 billion by 2040.

That means that the economic incentive for change is huge. It is up to us to put the country on a different path.

MYTH BUSTER

Watch out for arguments that blame individuals for issues like obesity, stroke or type 2 diabetes.

As food companies have flooded the market with affordable and convenient unhealthy food, it is inevitable that people will eat it.

Childhood obesity rates are twice as high in the poorest areas than in the richest. This is not because parents in those areas actively make different choices, it is because of the difference in what is accessible, available and affordable.



Our food system is affecting our food security

The UK imports 46% of the food we consume¹, including 65% of our fruit and vegetables.²

Much of this is imported from Southern Europe, which is significantly more vulnerable to climate shocks and change than the UK. Recent years have seen unprecedented levels of drought, flooding, storms and other unpredictable weather patterns which make growing food increasingly difficult for farmers across

65% of our fruit and vegetables are imported²

the globe. In addition, accessing sustainably produced British food is hard for many.

A strategy to increase the amount of fruit and vegetables that are grown in the UK, would not only improve UK food security, but also support British farmers and could increase the availability of fruit and vegetables around the UK and help meet demands for procuring more British produce in the public sector.

Our food system is affecting the climate

In addition to the climate threatening our national food security, our food system is also impacting on the climate and the natural environment.

The current global food system is currently responsible for 90% of deforestation across the planet¹⁷ and 70% of biodiversity loss as species of animals or plants continue to die out.¹⁸ Food production also accounts for a third of global greenhouse gas emissions^{5, 6} - a truly staggering figure.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation released their Global Roadmap for Achieving Zero Hunger without breaching the 1.5°C threshold in 2023.¹⁹ It lays out the need to cut food waste, reduce methane from livestock and plant a more diverse range of crops. It also highlights the need for high income countries to reduce their consumption of both meat and dairy products.

Food production accounts for a third of global greenhouse gas emissions globally⁵

How can our food system be improved?

As we enter a new parliamentary term, we have a real opportunity to make a difference to our food system. This will require decisive and co-ordinated action across the food system, recognising that there are multiple interacting parts across the system which cannot be isolated from one another. Cross-government coordination to ensure that we realise the full potential of our food policies will be essential.

Failure to do so risks missing opportunities to ensure that everybody has access to an affordable, healthy and sustainable diet. For instance:



Improving the healthiness of food sold in supermarkets won't have the impact it could if we don't also ensure that people can afford it.



Investing in high street growth and local communities won't deliver if we don't encourage tasty and healthy food outlets to replace junk food outlets.



Ensuring all children have school food won't have as much impact as it could if that school food is not nutritious and nourishing.



Efforts to teach children about the benefits of healthy food won't have the impact they could if we continue to aggressively advertise unhealthy foods to children at the same time.



Making healthy food cheaper won't help change consumption if unhealthy foods continue to be more available and more convenient.



Encouraging everybody to eat more fruit and veg won't work unless the government makes provision to grow more fruit and veg and make it easily accessible for all.



More vegetables on sale aren't helpful if people don't have the adequate kitchen facilities or time to cook them.

The food system has been changed before and it can be changed again

By making food part of the solution, we have a fantastic opportunity to help kickstart our economy, save our NHS and support British farmers.

Politicians and policymakers can help nourish the nation and build a better, healthier, more sustainable future for our society.

Implementing policies that put our citizens first, and support access to affordable, healthy and sustainable foods is vital. Doing so can help create a future where:

- ✓ Delicious and nourishing food is affordable for everyone
- ✓ Good food improves people's health and doesn't harm it
- ✓ Our food supply is less vulnerable to climate change and is helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions

This does not have to be an aspiration; IT CAN BE A REALITY

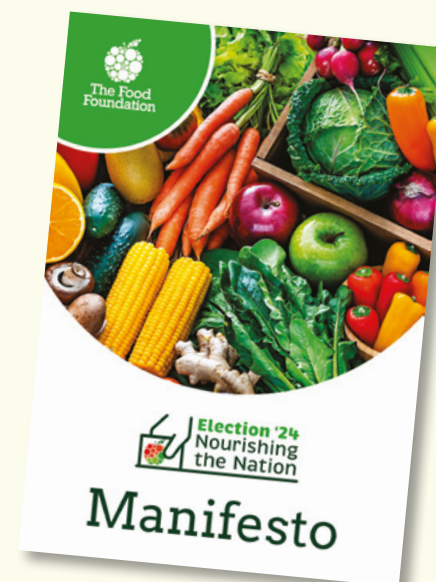


We can have a food system that nourishes and supports a healthy society.

But to make it happen, we need bold policy makers who can bring change for the better.

The Food Foundation manifesto, **Nourishing the Nation**, sets out 15 specific policies that could drastically improve our food system, and make a real difference to people's lives.

Please follow the QR code to view **Nourishing the Nation**:



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ABOUT THE FOOD FOUNDATION

The Food Foundation is an independent charity working to address challenges in the food system in the interests of the UK public. Working at the interface between academia and policymakers (parliamentarians, civil servants, local authorities, business leaders) we use a wide range of approaches to make change happen including events, publications, media stories, social media campaigns and multi-stakeholder partnerships. We also receive extensive direct input from the public to ensure their lived experience is reflected in our policy proposals. We collaborate with many partners on a range of different thematic areas, liaising with academics to generate evidence and campaigners who can drive change. We are independent of all political parties and businesses, and are not limited by a single issue or special interest.



Visit: foodfoundation.org.uk

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You can view The Food Foundation's full manifesto here:



Report design: whitecreativecompany.co.uk



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