

Low hanging fruit: A policy pathway for boosting uptake of plant-rich diets



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Food security is national security. That's why the Government is developing a food strategy. To maximise our food security, as well as the country's health and economic growth, the strategy must put increasing the production and consumption of healthy and sustainable food at its core. This document sets out the policy pathway needed to get there.

Defra's food strategy

In December 2024, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Steve Reed, announced that his Department will lead the development of an ambitious new food strategy for the whole of the UK, alongside other government departments and the devolved administrations.

The strategy is described as a long-term plan to provide healthier, more easily accessible food to improve citizens' health, maintain food security in the face of climate and geopolitical threats, drive economic growth in the food and drink sector, and support the [25-year Farming Roadmap](#) to reduce the impact of farming on nature and biodiversity and deliver a credible plan to decarbonise food and farming.

What is a plant-rich diet?

Plant-rich diets focus on incorporating a range of different plant foods, such as fruit, vegetables, beans, legumes, nuts, seeds, wholegrains and plant-based meat and dairy alternatives. They may also contain some meat and/or fish and/or dairy. Plant-rich diets offer a range of health benefits and are more environmentally sustainable compared to the average UK diet (Clark et al., 2020; Scarborough et al., 2023; Trewern, 2024).

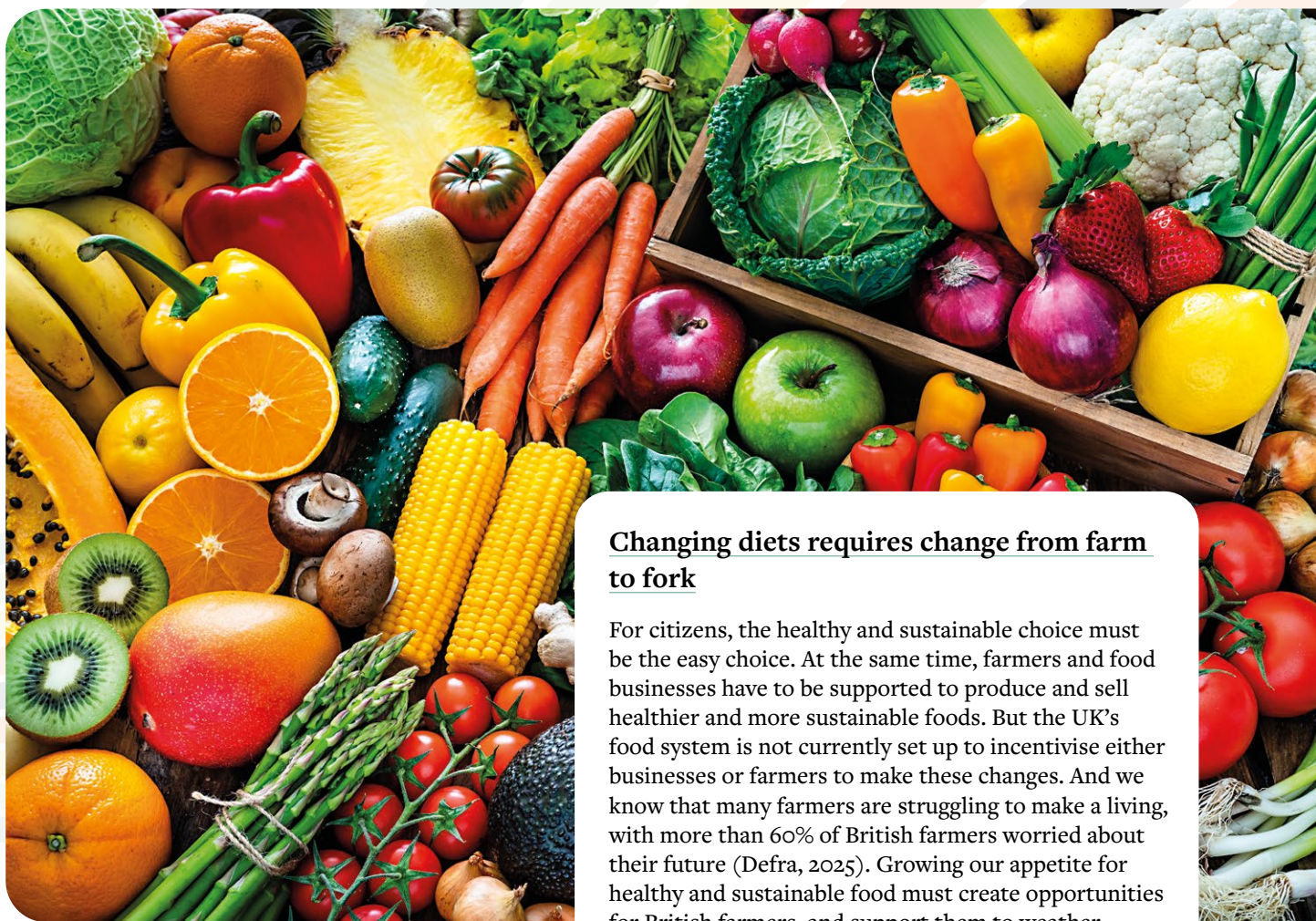
Shifting diets to be more plant-rich can unlock significant benefits for health and the economy

In the UK today, diet-related disease is one of the leading causes of preventable ill health (The Food Foundation, 2024a). This is placing unsustainable demand on the NHS, people's ability to work, and the wider economy. The costs of this challenge are immense – the annual cost to the UK economy of obesity and overweight is £98 billion per year (Frontier Economics, 2023).

At present, people on low incomes are priced out of eating healthily and sustainably. The most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend 45% of their disposable income on food to afford the government-recommended healthy diet, rising to 70% for those households with children (The Food Foundation, 2025). Meanwhile, only 58% of households in the lowest income decile reach dietary recommendations for fruit and vegetables compared to 88% of those on higher incomes (National Food Strategy, 2021). Changes to the food environment are therefore urgently needed to make healthier and more sustainable options more accessible.

The good news is that supporting small shifts in diets can deliver big improvements to our health. Increasing consumption of plant-rich foods, such as wholegrains, pulses, fruit and vegetables, and eating a little less meat (equivalent to just one rasher fewer of bacon a day) would reduce the cost of diet-related disease to the NHS and the UK economy as a whole (The Food Foundation, 2024a). Diet-related deaths and disability would reduce by a tenth (equivalent to 6,000 fewer deaths and a reduction in the total years living with disability by 28,857 every year (ibid.).

In 2025, the independent Climate Change Committee advised that a shift to eating more plant-rich diets would not only ensure the UK reaches its legal environmental



Changing diets requires change from farm to fork

For citizens, the healthy and sustainable choice must be the easy choice. At the same time, farmers and food businesses have to be supported to produce and sell healthier and more sustainable foods. But the UK's food system is not currently set up to incentivise either businesses or farmers to make these changes. And we know that many farmers are struggling to make a living, with more than 60% of British farmers worried about their future (Defra, 2025). Growing our appetite for healthy and sustainable food must create opportunities for British farmers, and support them to weather harmful climate events which are posing an increasing threat to our national food security.

targets but would also deliver the equivalent of nearly £1 billion in health benefits (CCC, 2025). This provides a real opportunity to support British growers and boost plant-rich diets.

And citizens want this change too: 57% of people are open to changing their diets to be healthier and more sustainable and would welcome help to do it (IGD, 2021), while four in ten adults intend to increase their consumption of a range of plant-based foods, including 54% of under 35s (GFI Europe et al., 2025).

At the same time, the food system is a major driver of climate change, making up a fifth of domestic emissions (closer to 30% when emissions from imports are included (NFS, 2021). Emissions from food are falling at half the rate of the wider economy, and agriculture is expected to be the second-largest source of emissions in the UK by 2040 and the largest by 2050 (CCC, 2025). Livestock accounts for nearly two-thirds (about 65%) of agricultural emissions and uses 85% of UK farmland despite providing only 32% of our calories (NFS, 2021).

This pathway

This policy pathway outlines a series of pragmatic and easily implementable policy recommendations. These actions would give people much greater access to healthier and more sustainable plant-rich diets in a way which would improve the nation's health, maintain our food security whilst bolstering our nutrition security (by producing more fruit, vegetables and legumes), and support the livelihoods of our farmers.



1. Grow demand and unlock efficiencies to make it easier for everyone to access healthier and more sustainable food

A shift towards healthier and more sustainable diets will only happen if we prioritise making such diets more appealing, accessible and affordable. The Food Strategy must incentivise farmers and businesses to deliver the outcomes we need from the food system. Without this, the risks and opposing commercial pressures that the food industry faces are too great to deliver change at the necessary pace.

Greater transparency from food businesses through mandatory reporting on standardised health and sustainability metrics would unlock business efficiencies and increase accountability, as well as helping the government to monitor progress towards population-level goals. Shifting the balance of advertising and promotion is another lever the government can use to increase the affordability of healthier and more sustainable foods and drive demand.

Food marketing is associated with significant increases in food intake, choice, preference and purchase requests, yet healthier and more sustainable foods are rarely in the spotlight. For example, just 2% of media advertising spend goes towards fruits and vegetables (The Food Foundation, 2025). At the same time, 10.6% of supermarket multi-buy offers are on processed meat (like bacon and ham), compared to just 5% of deals on fruit and vegetables (The Food Foundation 2024b).



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Unlock business action by introducing mandatory public reporting by large food businesses on a range of health and sustainability metrics to de-risk investment in more healthy and sustainable food offerings, building on the Food Data Transparency Partnership and the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) standards. Having sector-wide data would also allow for more informed policy decisions – Government would be able to more accurately evaluate the likely impacts of current and new policies on food supply and track progress towards population-level health and sustainability goals. Mandatory reporting should include standardised disclosure on Scope 3 emissions, the proportion of sales coming from healthier foods, and the proportion of protein sales coming from animal versus plant proteins. Leadership is already emerging among businesses (albeit slowly in the absence of government incentives).


- › **Key outcomes:** smarter policy making, unlocking investment, enabling more efficient business decisions, progress towards net zero, better health outcomes for citizens.
- › **Department:** Defra, DHSC, DBT (ISSB standards).
- › **Policy opportunity:** Food Strategy and the UK's endorsement process of the ISSB standards.

Strengthen government procurement rules for public institutions where food is served, including School Food Standards, by making health, sustainability* and environmental standards legally binding for the **£5 billion** annual spend on public sector catering, and extend the standards to local government catering. Additionally, requirements for high-emissions foods to be served should be removed —such as the current requirement for schools to serve meat three days a week— and sourcing more British-produced food should be prioritised wherever possible.

- › **Key outcomes:** Cost-savings for the NHS, better health outcomes for citizens, cost-savings for public sector food spending, opportunities to support growth for smaller UK food businesses and UK growers, accelerating progress towards net zero.
- › **Department:** Defra, DfE, Food Standards Agency, DHSC.
- › **Policy opportunity:** Food Strategy.

*Including animal welfare standards

Advertising


 **Advertising reform.** Adopt the **recommendations** of the House Of Lords Committee on Food, Diets and Obesity and restrict advertising for foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) across all physical platforms, including outdoor advertising and as part of sports sponsorship.

Invest in advertising for British fruit, vegetables, beans and pulses and other plant-rich foods to drive aspiration and to normalise consumption, building on the work of initiatives like **Veg Power** (a charitable organisation inspiring children to love vegetables through advertising and school programmes).


- › **Key outcomes:** Growth in the UK's edible horticulture sector, supporting good jobs, and better health outcomes for citizens.
- › **Department:** Defra, DHSC, DCMS.
- › **Policy opportunity:** Spending Review, Food Strategy.




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 **Update the Eatwell Guide** (which was last updated in 2016) to take into account the latest evidence on the climate and nature footprint of different foods. This will help inform decisions about what a more sustainable, healthy diet looks like and bring it in line with the progress being made by other countries. The Government should be mandated to review—and if needed, update—the Eatwell Guide at least once every five years to reflect the latest health and sustainable diet evidence.


- › **Key outcomes:** Cost-savings for the NHS and other public sector procurement bodies, lower carbon footprint.
- › **Department:** DHSC.
- › **Policy opportunity:** Food Strategy.

 **Close the loophole which means that processed meat products that are high in fat, salt and/or sugar (HFSS) are currently excluded from the government's forthcoming restrictions** on HFSS multi-buy deals, due to be implemented in October 2025. This is a notable omission given the large proportion of multi-buy deals on processed meat.

- › **Key outcomes:** Improved health outcomes for citizens, cost-savings for the NHS, lower carbon footprint.
- › **Department:** DHSC.
- › **Policy opportunity:** Food Strategy.

 **Expand eligibility, improve uptake, and increase the value of Healthy Start payments** in line with inflation to ensure that low-income families with young children and babies can afford the fruit, vegetables and pulses the scheme entitles them to. The value of the scheme should be indexed to inflation to protect against future food price shocks. The definition of milk within the scope of the scheme should also be widened to include fortified and unsweetened plant-based milk alternative drinks to reduce the barriers for low-income families in accessing sustainable foods.

- › **Key outcomes:** Better health outcomes for low-income families, improved early years outcomes.
- › **Department:** DHSC, DWP.
- › **Policy opportunity:** Child Poverty Strategy, Food Strategy.

 **Review the potential of using VAT rates to incentivise healthier and plant-rich meals in the out-of-home sector.** Adjusting VAT rates on meals based on their health and environmental impacts could deliver benefits for public health and the environment in addition to generating government revenues. Further research and modelling in this area should be commissioned.

- › **Key outcomes:** Increased availability of plant-rich options, healthier high streets.
- › **Department:** The Treasury, Defra.
- › **Policy opportunity:** Food Strategy.



2. Expand production of healthy and more sustainable foods

It is impossible for the UK to meet its net zero target without reducing emissions from agriculture and rethinking land use. This doesn't mean eliminating meat and dairy but it does mean eating a more plant-rich diet, as well as supporting British farmers to grow more fruits, vegetables, beans and pulses. Edible horticulture offers a particular growth opportunity, and expanding domestic production could help avoid supermarket shortages as climate change disrupts production elsewhere. More plant-rich diets are the best route to the UK becoming more self-sufficient and reducing the pressure we are putting on land overseas.

We currently import £5.8 billion worth of meat annually and £7.8 billion of animal feed (Defra, 2021; Defra, 2024), meaning our appetite for meat is driving substantial impacts at home and abroad. Protecting UK trade standards is therefore crucial both to avoid externalising the environmental impact of our diets elsewhere, and to protect British farmers from being undercut by cheap imports of meat produced to lower standards than those maintained in the UK.

The Government must also boost investment in research and innovation to bring a new generation of sustainable and healthy plant-based foods to market that better satisfy consumers' expectations. While whole plant foods like beans and pulses are an affordable and nutritious alternative to meat, they can't always directly replace many animal-based products like milk and cheese in our shopping baskets. For many, the taste and convenience of animal-based foods is hard to replace, so producing familiar, affordable meat and dairy alternative products (from plants like British-grown peas and oats) with comparable nutrition profiles offers a simple and sustainable switch.

This is also an opportunity for economic growth, with estimates finding that the alternative protein sector could be worth £6.8 billion annually by 2035, creating 25,000 new jobs (Green Alliance, 2023).

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Deliver an ambitious edible horticulture growth plan for British farmers and growers

across all of the devolved nations for an expanded, vibrant, and thriving horticulture sector. This would support the production and increased consumption of plant foods, such as fruit, vegetables and beans and pulses that can be grown in the UK, and ensure the UK is not unsustainably reliant on imports. The horticulture industry is currently worth over £5 billion a year and employs over 50,000 people yet is often overlooked and offers opportunities for growth (UK Parliament: Committees, 2024).

- › **Key outcomes:** Drive growth of rural local economies, support good jobs, increase food security.
- › **Department:** Defra.
- › **Policy opportunity:** Food Strategy, The 25-year Farming Roadmap.

Finance a new £30 million UKRI plant-based innovation fund, in partnership with

Defra, focused on taste, affordability, convenience and nutrition, and developing domestic supply chains and on-farm production models for plant-based foods. This funding should be deployed through collaborative R&D projects and grant funding for food producers, startups and scientists. The UK must be able to rival countries like Canada and Denmark which are investing heavily in plant-based innovation.

- › **Key outcomes:** Drive economic growth, create new highly skilled jobs, accelerate progress towards net zero.
- › **Department:** UKRI, Defra, DSIT.
- › **Policy opportunity:** UKRI's next Strategic Delivery Plans.




 **Implement a Land Use Framework** that identifies the areas of England where land use or management must change to meet our climate and nature targets, including through habitat creation and increased horticulture production. Spend from the farming budget must be aligned to these areas and activities to support farms to increase the sustainability of our overall food production system.

- › **Key outcomes:** increase food security, increase support for nature protection and progress towards net zero, greater protection against extreme weather events.
- › **Department:** Defra.
- › **Policy opportunity:** Land Use Framework.

 **Support sustainable production by strengthening regulation in supply chains** to give farmers fairer prices and contracts that enable investment in more sustainable practices. The Groceries Code Adjudicator must have more power to ensure retailers adopt fairer practices, and its remit must be expanded to cover the intermediary companies that are more commonly buying from farms than retailers.

- › **Key outcomes:** Improve farm incomes, longer-term certainty for UK farmers and growers to allow for better planning and investment in the future.
- › **Department:** Defra.
- › **Policy opportunity:** National Food Strategy, The 25-year Farming Roadmap.

 **Invest in the farming budgets across the UK** to help farmers transition to more sustainable practices. For England, £3.1 billion per year is needed to offer fair farm incomes whilst delivering our environmental targets (Wildlife Trusts, 2024).

- › **Key outcomes:** Protection for British farmers and growers, accelerating to net zero and restoring nature.
- › **Department:** Defra, HMT.
- › **Policy opportunity:** Spending Review, The 25-year Farming Roadmap.

 **Protect UK trade standards** by enshrining a set of core environmental and animal welfare standards in law for all agri-food imports, setting a minimum threshold in domestic regulation that imports must meet to access the UK market. This would ensure that policy interventions supporting people to eat more healthily and sustainably don't mean inadvertently leaving a backdoor open to cheap imports which would force our farmers to compete with lower standard products from abroad, and make sure the food and meat we eat does not rely on harming nature elsewhere (NFU, 2024).

- › **Key outcomes:** Maintaining our world class farming standards, protection for British farmers and growers.
- › **Department:** Defra, Food Standards Agency, DBT.
- › **Policy opportunity:** Food strategy, Trade strategy.

CONCLUSION

Producing and eating more plant-rich diets would bring an array of health, environmental and economic benefits to the UK.

Many of the policies in this document that would support this transition are already supported by a broad range of stakeholders.

With a new government and a new food strategy underway, now is an opportune time to act and deliver a UK food system that supports both people and the planet.



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To find out more about the policies in this document and the supporting evidence please see **our technical report.**