



The Food  
Foundation



# **MEAT FACTS**

What  
meat is  
the UK  
eating and  
why does  
it matter?

## 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 and investors) we use a wide range of approaches to make change happen including events, publications, media stories, social media campaigns and multistakeholder partnerships. We also work directly with citizens to ensure their lived experience is reflected in our policy proposals. We work with many partners on a range of different thematic areas, working closely with academics to generate evidence and campaigners who can drive change. We are independent of all political parties and business, and we are not limited by a single issue or special interest.

**Visit: [foodfoundation.org.uk](https://foodfoundation.org.uk)**

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### **Conflict of interest declaration**

The Food Foundation only accepts funding which does not compromise our independence. We do not take funding directly from food companies and use The Financial Relationship Policy developed by World Obesity Federation to help us consider new financial engagements.

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# Top 10 meat facts



1

The UK eats  
**TWICE**  
as much meat as  
the global average



2

Over **A THIRD** (36%)  
OF THE MEAT CHILDREN  
EAT IS PROCESSED  
despite the associated  
health risks



3

**NORTHERN  
IRELAND**

eats the **LARGEST** amount  
of meat of all UK nations



4

**YOUNG MEN**  
AGED 19–40  
eat the **LARGEST AMOUNT**  
of **PROCESSED MEAT**  
of all demographic groups



5

**42%**  
OF THE MEAT WE  
EAT IS **CHICKEN**,  
despite concerns around the  
way we farm and feed chickens



6

Almost **A THIRD** (31%)  
OF ALL MEAT EATEN BY  
MEN IS PROCESSED  
with men eating a **A FIFTH**  
more processed meat  
than women



7

**9%** of the meat  
children  
AGED UNDER 18 EAT  
comes from **PIZZA**



8

Over **A THIRD** (36%)  
OF ALL THE PROCESSED  
MEAT WE EAT IN THE UK  
is eaten Out of the  
**HOME**



9

**4 OF THE 5**  
most commonly eaten  
meat-containing dishes from  
**FAST FOOD OUTLETS**  
are **PROCESSED AND/OR**  
**ULTRA-PROCESSED MEAT**



10

**A THIRD** (32%)  
of the red meat we  
**IMPORT**  
is processed



# Introduction

## Few foods represent so much to so many as meat.

So it's perhaps unsurprising that meat eating is increasingly being drawn into divisive narratives around gender, politics, and identity as well as fierce debates over the future of British farming. It is also a topic that reliably engenders lively debate among citizens and in the media. After all, what is British food culture if not meat and two veg?

And yet questions of how much meat we ought to be eating, and what type, and from where, must be tackled if we are to have any chance of averting the looming public health and environmental crises being driven by our current diets.

Eating a little less meat, produced to better standards, and more whole plant foods is something health and environmental organisations globally are agreed ought to happen. Such a shift would deliver significant benefits for both people and planet.

*This briefing aims to unpick exactly who is eating what meat in the UK*

Yet despite both the National Food Strategy and the Climate Change Committee recommending a reduction in meat consumption there is currently little action from either the Government or businesses in terms of supporting a shift towards more plant rich diets. This briefing therefore aims to unpick exactly who is eating what meat in the UK, and in what settings, in order to support food system stakeholders to begin to map out and implement pathways to change.



## A glossary of meat

Meat can be classified as white, red or processed. We have used the NHS's classification of meat throughout this briefing, including in our categorisation and analysis of the National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS)<sup>1</sup> to understand meat consumption patterns.

**White meat** – this is meat like chicken and turkey as well as duck and goose.

**Red meat** – this is meat from the muscle of a mammal, typically dark red before cooking, and includes beef, lamb, mutton, pork, veal, venison and goat.

**Processed meat** - this is meat that has been preserved by smoking, curing, salting or adding preservatives. This includes sausages, bacon and

ham, deli meats such as salami, pates, as well as white processed meat like chicken nuggets with high levels of salt and preservatives. It is worth noting that many – although not all – processed meats can also be categorised as ultra-processed using the NOVA categorisation system. Cured or salted meats such as beef jerky are categorised as processed using the NOVA framework (category 3), while meats such as sausages or chicken nuggets are considered ultra-processed (category 4).

SOURCE: NHS; WCRF

<sup>1</sup>NDNS analysis has been undertaken of waves 9-11, 2016-2019



## PART ONE

# What are we eating?

### THE ROLE OF MEAT IN DIETS GLOBALLY

Meat is a good source of protein as well as being nutrient dense; high in many essential micronutrients like iron, zinc and vitamin B12. There is also strong evidence that in low and middle income countries animal based food can help to prevent malnutrition and support normal growth in young children (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2024). For these reasons **meat can form part of a healthy, balanced diet, yet high intakes of meat are also associated with a number of negative health outcomes, including**

**cancer and cardiovascular disease** (NHS, 2024). This is particularly true of red and processed meats which are often high in saturated fat and sodium and are strongly associated with an increased risk of cancer, with processed meat classified as carcinogenic to humans, and red meat possibly carcinogenic (World Health Organization, 2015). Animal protein is also a major driver of greenhouse gas emissions, with industrial livestock systems responsible for catastrophic levels of nature loss (World Wildlife Fund, 2024).

As a result of the high environmental impacts associated with meat in addition to the health risks, and given that other food sources of protein and micronutrients<sup>2</sup> are available with far lesser environmental impacts, meat is not considered an essential part of dietary guidelines (particularly in high income countries) and there **are no recommended daily intake amounts for total meat consumption in the UK**. It is also worth noting that although meat can form part of a balanced diet, many cultures have diets that include no meat for ethical,

<sup>2</sup>Vitamin B12 is only found in animal products, but is found in dairy, eggs and some fortified breakfast cereals as well as meat.

cultural or religious reasons. The British Dietetic Association advises that 'carefully planned plant-based diets can support healthy living at every age and life stage' (British Dietetic Association, 2021) .

## HOW MUCH MEAT SHOULD WE BE EATING?

The government's Eatwell Guide plate recommends that 12% of our diets should be comprised of protein sources but doesn't provide any specific or quantifiable guidance on total meat consumption, with meat included alongside beans, pulses, fish, eggs, and other protein foods as a good source of protein, vitamins and minerals.

In the UK protein contributes 17% of average total calorie/energy intake and on average, UK adults eat 50% more protein than is recommended (British Nutrition Foundation, 2025). The UK therefore does not have issues with protein deficiency at a population level as can be the case in low and middle income countries.

Although there is no quantitative guidance on the total amount of meat that could be consumed as part of a balanced diet, **the Eatwell Guide does recommend that we eat less red and processed meat 'like bacon, ham and sausages'**, with the NHS suggesting that anyone eating more than 90g of red or processed meat a day reduce this to 70g.

Other organisations recommend eating even less meat for both health and environmental reasons. The Eat Lancet Commission's Planetary Health diet recommended a maximum of 43g of

meat a day (no more than 14g of red meat and 29g of white meat) in order to keep the impact of the food system within sustainable planetary boundaries (EAT-Lancet Commission, 2019). And The World Cancer Research Fund recommends eating 'very little, if any' processed meat given the strong links with bowel cancer, with insufficient evidence to establish a safe level of processed meat consumption (Eating Better, 2015; World Cancer Research Fund, 2025).

## HOW MUCH MEAT ARE WE ACTUALLY EATING?

The following section looks at reported intakes of meat in the National Diet and Nutrition Survey, for the years 2016/17-2018/2019, which at the time of writing are the most recent years for which we have published data.

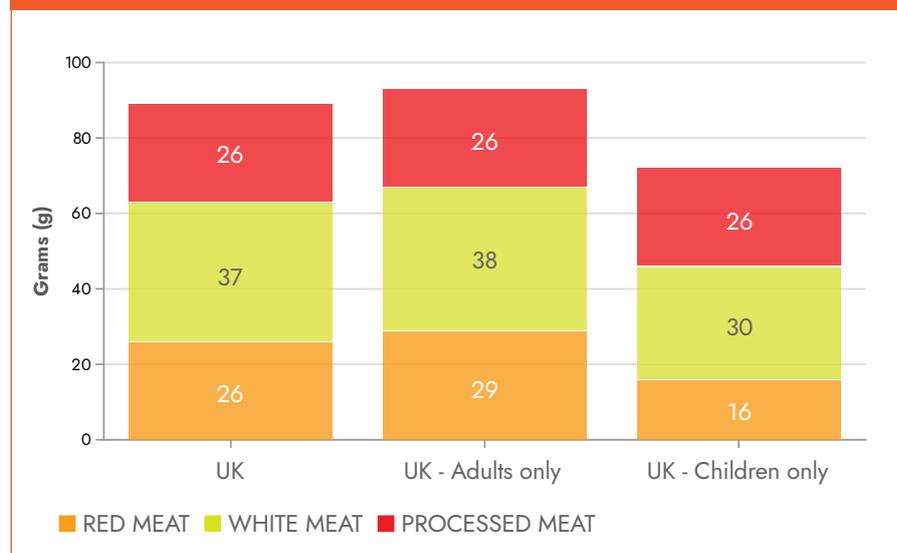
## Meat consumption in the UK

On average we eat 89g of meat each day, equating to roughly three slices of beef or a large quarter-pounder beef burger (NHS, 2024). Adults eat 93g of meat each day with children (those aged under 18) eating smaller amounts (72g).

Far and away the largest contributor to daily meat consumption is white meat, with almost half (42%) of the meat we eat coming from chicken and turkey.<sup>3</sup>

We are also eating a large amount of processed meat. On average across the UK almost a third of the meat we eat is processed (29%). **Children eat proportionally more processed meat than adults – with over a third (36%) of meat eaten by children coming from processed meat.** This is concerning given the strong evidence linking the overconsumption of processed meat to a greater risk of developing a number of chronic diseases, including bowel cancer (Salter, 2018; WCRF, 2024).

FIGURE 1: The average daily intake of total meat, red meat, white meat, and processed meat



<sup>3</sup> Based on analysis of the NDNS waves 9-11. It is worth noting that the vast majority of white meat eaten is chicken, with just one food item included that is labelled chicken/turkey meat rather than just chicken within the NDNS data files.

Across the devolved nations citizens in Northern Ireland eat significantly more meat than in England, Wales and Scotland, consuming an average of 108g of meat a day overall, as well as the largest amount of processed meat of all four nations (39g). This is much more than is eaten in the other three nations, with Northern Ireland citizens eating 56% more processed meat than citizens in England, which has the lowest level of processed meat consumption of all four UK nations. The differences in processed meat intake across the UK nations correlates with bowel cancer incidence rates in the UK, which are significantly higher in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than the UK average and significantly lower in England compared to the UK average (Cancer Research UK, 2025).

### HOW DOES THIS COMPARE TO OTHER COUNTRIES?

On average the UK eats almost twice as much meat as the global average (83kg per person a year compared to 44kg).

Within the G7 group of countries only Canada and the USA eat more meat on average than the UK. All G7 countries have a higher consumption rate per capita of meat compared to the global average. While processed meats are not differentiated from red and white in the FAO dataset, red meat (beef, pork, mutton and goat) contributes over half of total meat consumption in the UK (56%).

FIGURE 2: Daily absolute intake of total meat, red meat, white meat, and processed meat across the four UK nations (g)



FIGURE 3: Meat available for consumption across the G7 countries and the world average, per capita per year (kg), 2022.



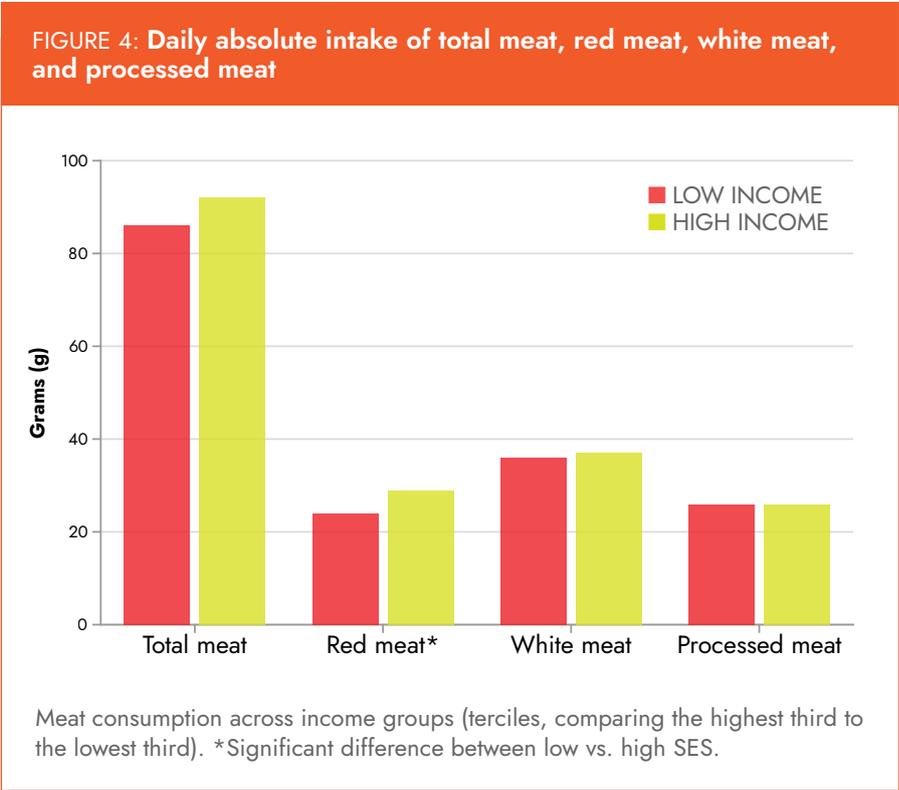
The FAO's Food Balance data shows the amount of meat available for consumption before food waste and other losses are taken into consideration.

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2025). Food Balance (2010-) domestic supply quantity per capita

## DOES INCOME IMPACT ON MEAT CONSUMPTION IN THE UK?

Overall, high income groups eat more meat than low income groups do (7g more in total per day). This difference is driven by the significantly larger quantities of red meat eaten by higher income households – on average eating a fifth more each day compared to low income groups. Both high and low income groups eat the same amount of processed meat and very similar amounts of white meat.

The difference in red meat consumption is likely being driven by the higher price point whole cuts of red meat such as beef steak often carry in contrast to processed meat and white meat such as chicken. According to the ONS’s Retailer Price Index, as of January 2025, the average cost of a joint of beef was £12.94 per kg compared to £6.63 per kg for pork sausages and £3.78 per kg for chicken (Office for National Statistics, 2025).

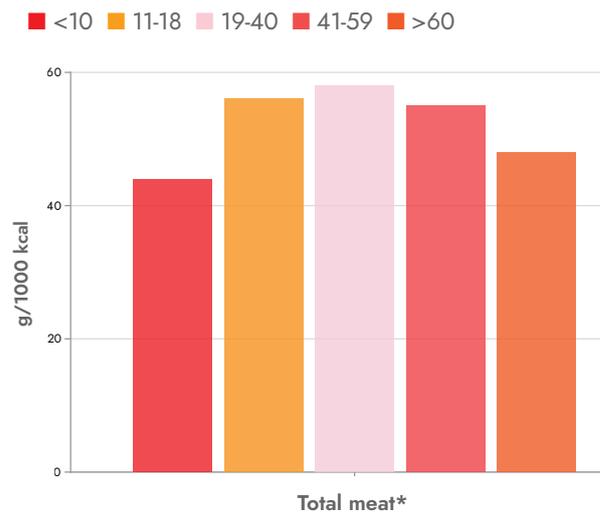


## DOES AGE IMPACT ON MEAT CONSUMPTION?

Younger adults aged between 19 and 40 eat the largest amount of meat on average of all age groups, driven in large part by their significantly higher intake of white meat compared to other age groups. Meat intake rises in line with age before starting to fall in those aged 41 and over, with the over 60 age group eating the smallest amount of meat overall (with the exception of under 10's).

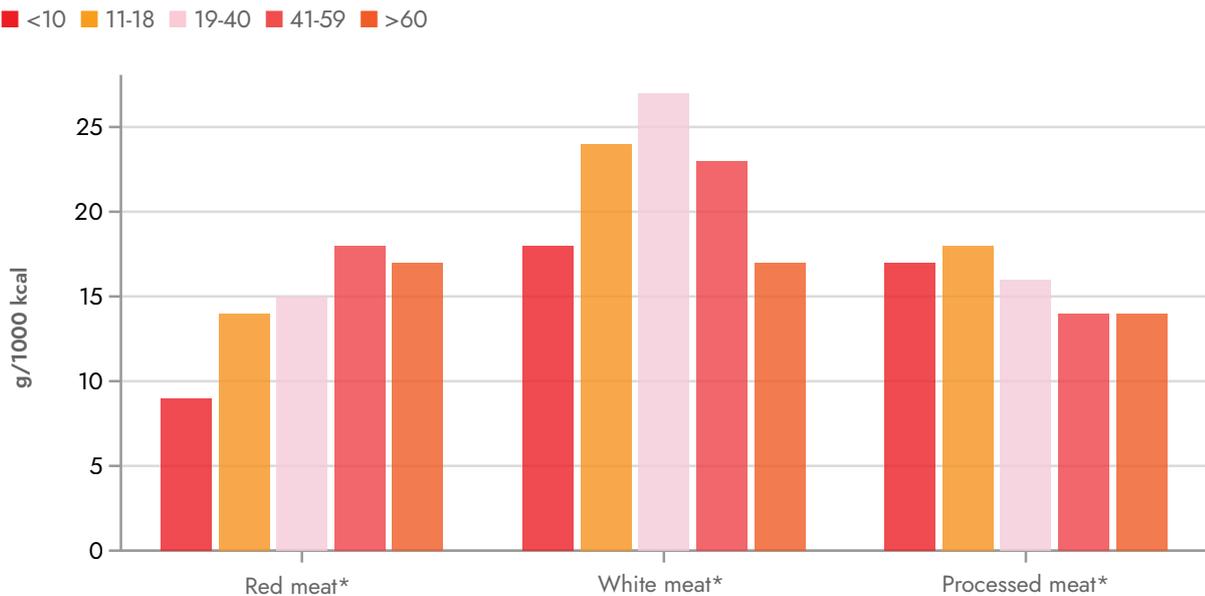
This is perhaps paradoxical given that younger adults are also often found to be most open to the idea of eating more sustainably (Eating Better, 2019), but may reflect a food environment and food culture that positions meat - especially chicken - as a key source of protein (with an accompanying health halo) and a convenient and appealing meal option. Fried chicken shops for example, dominate high streets and play a key role in social and cultural life, especially for younger age groups (Gupta et al., 2018; All City Media Solutions, 2025). In one area of South London there are 29 chicken shops in a single 3.8 mile stretch of road (The Times, 2024), with Brits spending the equivalent of £70 per person a year on chicken purchased from fast food outlets – thirteen times more than is spent on beef bought from fast food outlets.<sup>4</sup>

FIGURE 5: Daily energy adjusted intake of total meat across age groups.



\*Significant differences between age groups.

FIGURE 6: Daily energy adjusted intake of red meat, white meat, and processed meat across age groups.



\*Significant differences between age groups.

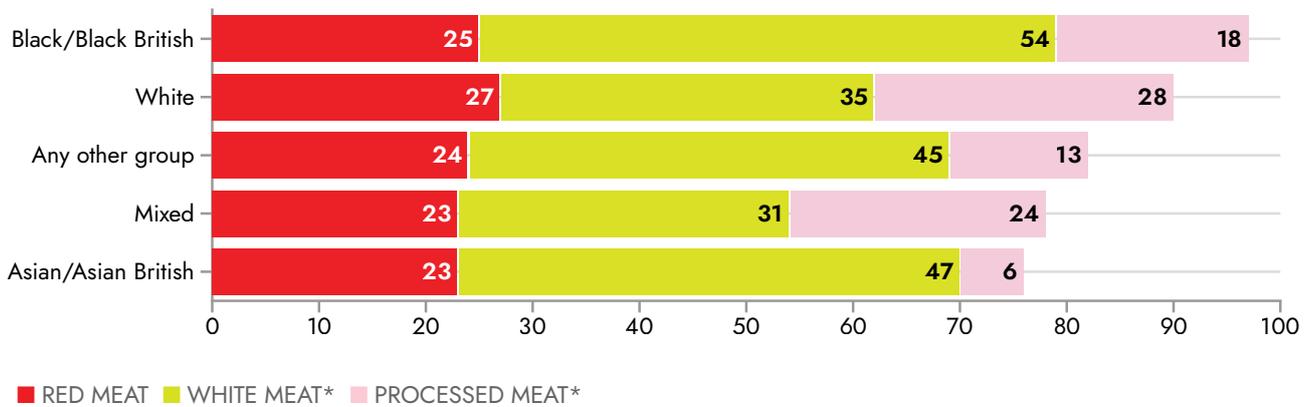
<sup>4</sup>Kantar data in the 12 months to May 2024 found that £4.58 billion was spent on chicken in fast food outlets compared to £1.98 billion for beef.

## DO ETHNICITY AND SEX IMPACT ON MEAT CONSUMPTION?

Meat intake varies by ethnicity. Citizens identifying as Black and Black British eat on average the greatest amount of meat of all ethnic groups (97g a day), with Asian and Asian British groups eating the smallest amount of

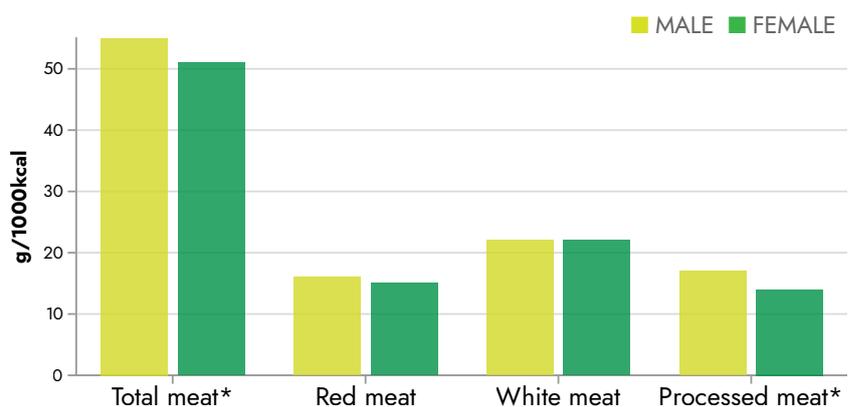
meat (76g a day). Black and Black British groups also eat significantly more white meat than other ethnicities, with those identifying as White eating significantly larger quantities of processed meat than other ethnic groups.

FIGURE 7: Daily absolute intake of total meat, red meat, white meat, and processed meat across ethnic groups.



Men eat significantly more meat than women do, even when intake is adjusted for the lower amount of calories women consume on average. **The largest difference in intake is seen for the processed meat category, with men eating 20% more processed meat on average than women do.** Almost a third (31%) of all meat eaten by men is processed. Younger men in particular tend to eat a lot of meat. Recent research by Food Standards Scotland found that men aged 25-34 were the highest meat consumers of all age and sex groups (Food Standards Scotland, 2024) and the same trend is true of the UK as a whole.

FIGURE 8: Daily energy adjusted intake of daily total meat, red meat, white meat, and processed meat across sexes.



\*Significant difference between males and females.

## WHO EATS THE LARGEST AMOUNT OF MEAT IN THE UK?

Men eat significantly more red and processed meat than women do in the UK. Men aged 60 and over have the highest consumption of red meat, while **younger men aged 19-40 have the highest intake of processed meat**.

This suggests that any campaigns or interventions to reach those eating the largest amounts of processed meat ought to be targeted towards young and middle-aged men.

FIGURE 9: Consumption of red meat by age and sex

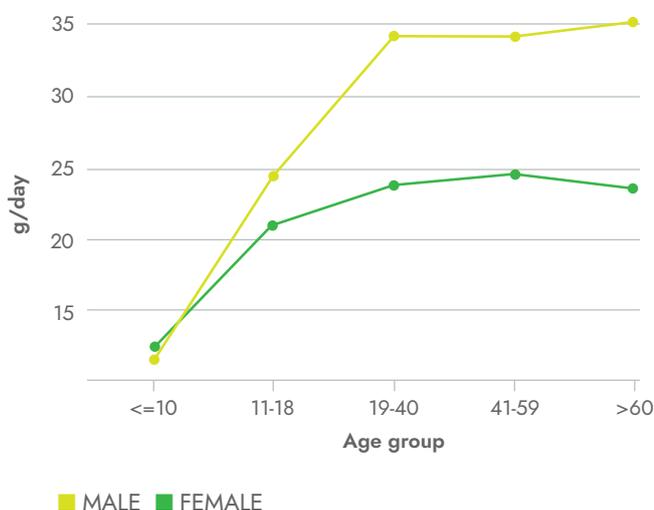
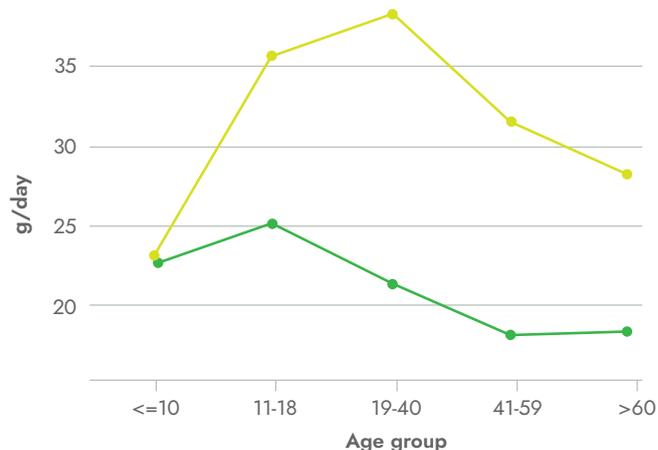


FIGURE 10: Consumption of processed meat by age and sex



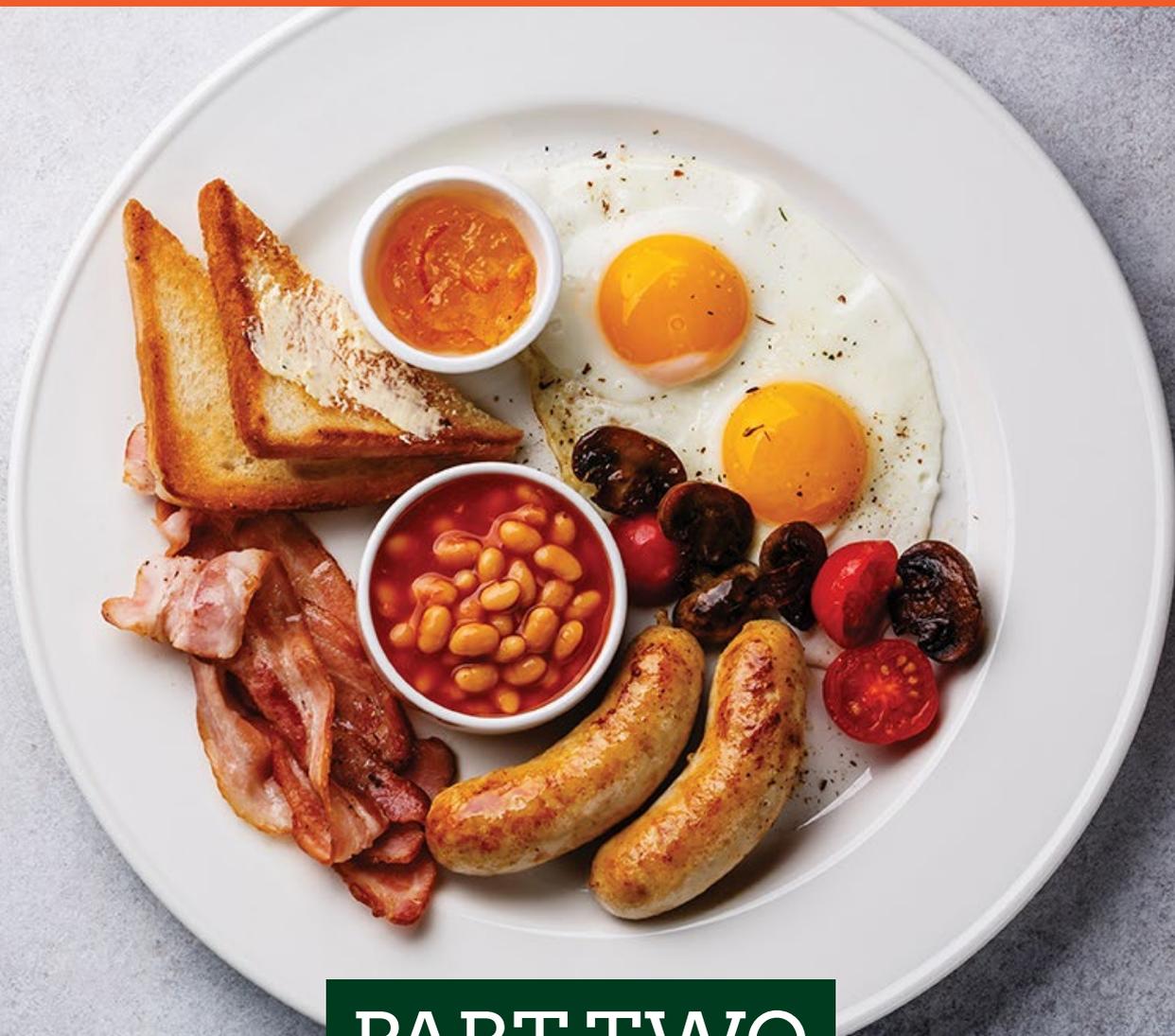
## Meat and masculinity

Globally, men reliably eat more meat than women (Hopwood et al., 2024). Although the reasons for this are not fully understood, meat eating has long been associated with idealised notions of masculinity. Meat is rich in symbolism and is often seen as a food of the wealthy and powerful, with red meat in particular often associated with strength and virility. Historically, men were more likely to be hunters, receiving preferential shares of meat compared to women in many societies (TABLE, 2024).

Nowadays, the presence of meat in diets is a common part of identity-driven conversations that aim to divide. For example, attacks on so-called 'soy boys', which aim to bring into question the masculinity of men

who choose plant-based diets (Changing Markets Foundation, 2023). Meat-eating and diets that are high in protein have become a part of 'gym bro culture', a lifestyle variously criticised for its links with toxic masculinity as well as praised by some for its focus on fitness and a healthy lifestyle, and driven by increasingly widespread social media use among young men (NSS Magazine, 2024).

According to recent research by Hubbub, younger men aged 16-24, are significantly more likely than men in general to say they'd feel uncomfortable eating plant-based food with friends and family. That's 17% of younger men compared to 11% of all men, and 10% of the total UK population (Hubbub, 2025).



## PART TWO

# How and where are we eating meat?

### HOW ARE WE EATING MEAT?

While chicken is the most consumed meat in the UK overall, red and processed meat remains a staple of British diets, with three of the five most consumed meats in the UK classified as red or processed (sausages, beef and bacon). Processed meats (sausages, coated chicken, ham) are more popular among children than adults despite the associated health risks.

TABLE 1: The top 5 most frequently eaten meats as a proportion of total consumption for the UK overall, adults, and children

UK	Adults (19-64)	Children (aged <18)
1 Chicken/turkey <sup>5</sup>	Chicken/turkey	Chicken/turkey
2 Grilled chicken breast	Grilled chicken breast	<b>Sausages</b>
3 <b>Sausages</b>	<b>Beef (steak and roast beef)</b>	<b>Coated chicken</b>
4 <b>Beef (steak and roast beef)</b>	<b>Sausages</b>	Grilled chicken breast
5 <b>Bacon</b>	<b>Bacon</b>	<b>Ham</b>

■ PROCESSED MEAT ■ RED MEAT

<sup>5</sup>This category in the NDNS includes any chicken or turkey part, including boiled and roast but excluding grilled chicken breast which is a separate category.

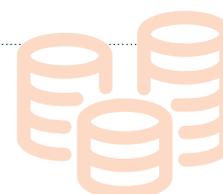
Low-income households are less likely to eat whole cuts of meat, with minced beef the fifth most consumed type of meat among the poorest third of households. This differs from the type of beef most frequently eaten in the wealthiest third of households, where beef steak or roast beef is the third most popular choice of meat.

We also looked at the most popular meat-containing dishes eaten in the UK, as opposed to 100% meat products, including a wider range of products and meals that contain any amount of meat. While chicken, turkey and chicken breast still emerge as the most popular options when both meat and meat-containing dishes are taken into account, pizza with meat toppings contributes a surprising amount of meat to UK diets when a wider range of dishes are considered.

TABLE 2: The top 5 most frequently eaten meats as a proportion of total consumption for high and low income households.

High income	Low income
1 Chicken/turkey	Chicken/turkey
2 Grilled chicken breast	Grilled chicken breast
3 <b>Beef (steak and roast beef)</b>	<b>Sausages</b>
4 <b>Sausages</b>	<b>Bacon</b>
5 <b>Bacon</b>	<b>Minced beef</b>

■ PROCESSED MEAT ■ RED MEAT



Pizza with meat toppings is the third most eaten type of dish containing any amount of meat eaten by children, and the fifth most frequently eaten among adults. Pizza contributes 9% of the meat in meat-containing dishes eaten

by children and 6% of the meat eaten by adults. Chicken burgers and goujons are also popular with children, and the most consumed type of meat or meat-containing dish eaten by this age-group overall.

## WHAT TYPES OF MEAT DISHES DO THOSE CONSUMING LARGE AMOUNTS OF RED AND PROCESSED MEAT EAT?

Recent research commissioned by Food Standards Scotland that modelled the potential impact on diet and health of a 20% reduction in meat consumption by 2030, found that while this might lead to a worsening of micronutrient intakes for some population subgroups who already have poor diets, a notable section of the population eat considerably more red and processed meat than is recommended (Food Standards Scotland, 2024; Stewart et al., 2024). A third of adults living

in Scotland report consuming more than 70g of red and processed meat a day and are therefore less at risk of any possible micronutrient deficiencies if they were to reduce their consumption of meat. Further modelling that explored the impact of a more targeted population approach to meat reduction, focussing only on those eating large amounts of red and processed meat, found that a 16% reduction in total meat reduction could be achieved if all Scottish adults met the recommendation for

red and processed meat (70g/day).

Those eating high amounts of red and processed meat (>70g a day) in the UK also eat large amounts of white meat, with beef, chicken and sausages the three most commonly consumed meat containing dishes eaten by this group. Interestingly, high consumers of red and processed meat in the UK eat a large proportion of their total meat in the workplace, the most popular setting for this group to eat meat out of the home.

Top 5 most consumed dishes containing any type of meat for those eating the most red and processed meat



BEEF



CHICKEN



SAUSAGES



BACON



MEAT ROLLS/  
PIES

■ PROCESSED MEAT ■ RED MEAT

## WHAT MEAT DO WE EAT WHEN WE'RE OUT AND ABOUT?

Different types of meat are eaten in different settings, with much more red and processed meat eaten in the Out of Home sector (which includes businesses like restaurants, fast food outlets, cafes and caterers) than at home.

All five of the most commonly eaten meat containing dishes eaten in fast food outlets (Quick Service restaurants) and leisure settings (like tourist attractions or the cinema) are classified as red or processed meat. **A staggering four of the five most commonly eaten meat-containing dishes from fast food outlets are likely to be processed and/or ultra processed meat** (chicken goujons/burgers, sausage and bacon muffins, pizza with meat toppings, sausages).



TABLE 3: The top five most commonly eaten meat dishes in different settings

	At home	Casual dining	Schools and educational institutions	Leisure settings	Quick service restaurants	Workplace
1	Chicken/turkey	<b>Beef steak or roast beef</b>	<b>Ham</b>	<b>Lasagna</b>	<b>Beef burgers</b>	<b>Ham</b>
2	Chicken breast	Chicken breast	<b>Sausages</b>	<b>Steak pie</b>	<b>Chicken goujons/burgers</b>	Chicken breast
3	<b>Pizza with meat topping</b>	<b>Sausages</b>	Chicken/turkey	<b>Bacon</b>	<b>Sausage or bacon and egg in a muffin</b>	Chicken/turkey
4	<b>Sausages</b>	Chicken/turkey	<b>Bolognese sauce</b>	<b>Sausage rolls</b>	<b>Pizza with meat topping</b>	<b>Sausages</b>
5	<b>Minced beef</b>	<b>Bacon</b>	<b>Sausage rolls</b>	<b>Beef steak or roast beef</b>	<b>Sausages</b>	<b>Bacon</b>

■ PROCESSED MEAT ■ RED MEAT

## WHAT PROPORTION OF THE MEAT WE EAT DO WE EAT OUT OF THE HOME?

Over a quarter (28%) of the meat we eat in the UK is eaten outside the home. Given that around 13-25% of all calories consumed are eaten out of the home (DHSC, 2020; Mariani et al., 2024), this higher figure suggests that options offered by the OOH sector are

predominantly meaty. Research from the University of Cambridge supports this, showing that 58% of main meal options available from the UK's largest restaurant and fast food chains are meaty, with meat free options often very hard to come by (Food Foundation, 2024).

**The Out of Home sector contributes a notable amount of the processed meat eaten in the UK, with over a third (36%) of the processed meat we eat in the UK eaten out of the home.**

FIGURE 11: Share (%) of total daily meat intake in the UK consumed in different meal settings

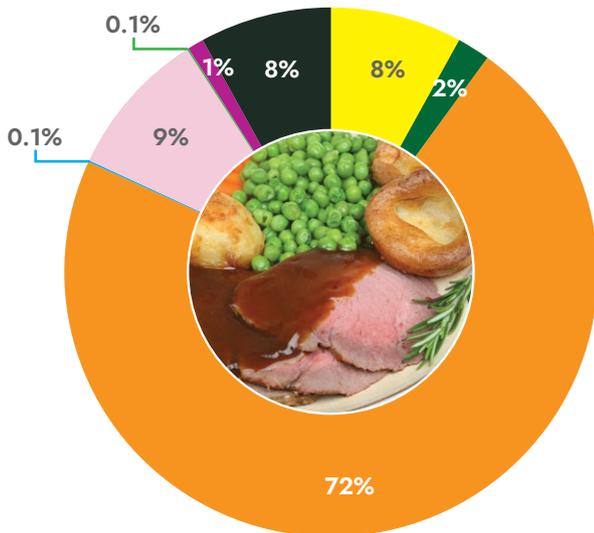
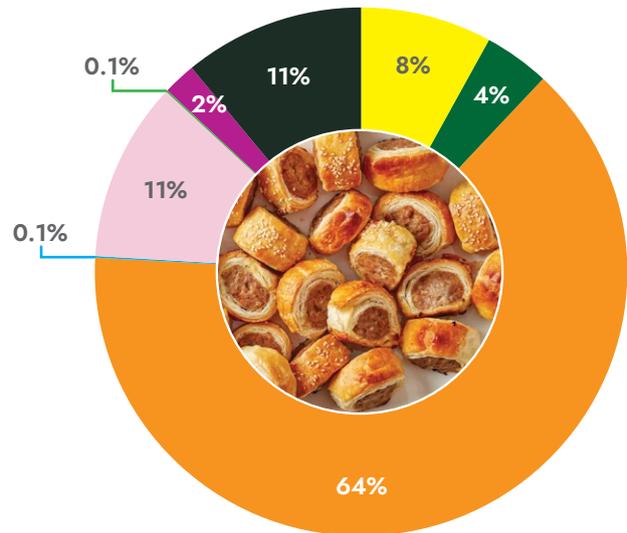


FIGURE 12: Share (%) of daily processed meat intake in the UK consumed in different meal settings



- HOME
- NOT HOME
- QSR
- CASUAL DINING
- LEISURE SECTOR
- PUBLIC SECTOR
- WORKPLACE
- EDUCATIONAL SECTOR





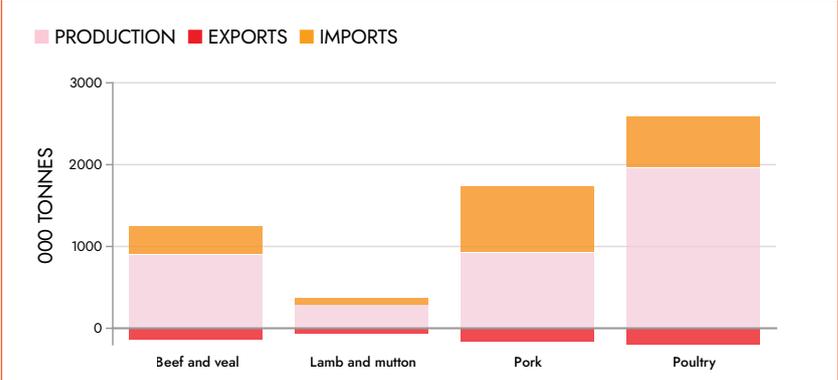
# PART THREE

## Where does our meat come from and are meat-eating habits changing?

### WHERE DOES THE MEAT WE EAT COME FROM?

The UK is a net importer of beef, veal, pork and chicken and a net exporter of lamb. We import almost a third (31%) of UK beef and veal, over a half (51%) of the pork and over a quarter (26%) of chicken available for consumption in the UK supply chain. Of all three red meat categories analysed, pork is the type of red meat available in the largest quantity for consumption in the UK. This is notable given that many processed meat products are pork based, including bacon, sausages and ham. **Of all processed meat imported into the UK, nearly half of this meat (49%) is comprised of sausages.**

FIGURE 13: Production, exports and imports of beef and veal, lamb and mutton and pork in 2023



Source: Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, 2024 (beef, veal, lamb, mutton and pork), Agriculture in the United Kingdom data sets, 2024 (poultry)

Just under a third (32%) of the red meat we import is processed, which – in addition to the health risks - means British livestock farmers are at risk of being undercut by cheap imports of meat produced to lower standards than those maintained in the UK (Figure 14).<sup>6</sup> Fresh and frozen meat imported into the UK may be processed once in the country, but it is hard to calculate what proportion of fresh and frozen meat may undergo further processing once in the UK. Of the red meat imported from both the EU and globally into the UK during 2024, only a marginal amount (1%) of lamb is processed, but:

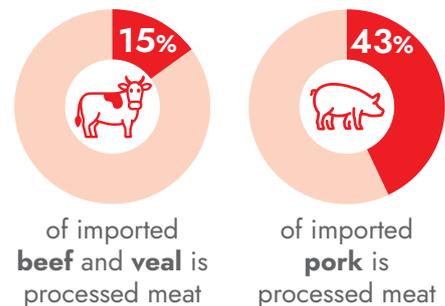
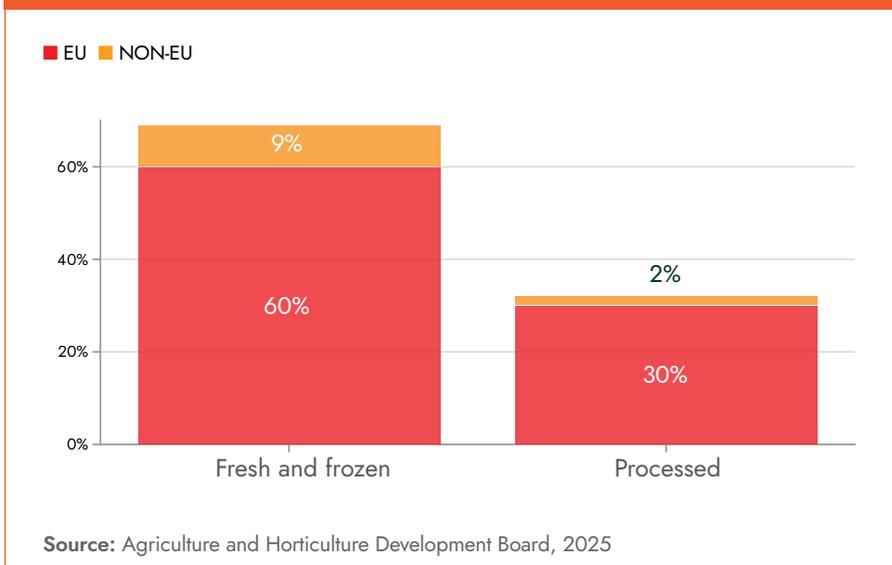


FIGURE 14: Imports of beef and veal, lamb and mutton and pork in 2024



The vast majority of the red meat we import comes from the EU. However, outside of the EU, Australia is the main source of imported beef and veal coming into the UK and the USA the main source of imported pork (Table 4). Both countries have been criticised for various aspects of their farming practices, including different animal welfare and feed sourcing practices. For example, sow stalls remain legal in 39 US states but have been banned in the UK

since 1999, while antibiotic use is on average five times higher in the USA compared to the UK (Compassion in World Farming, 2025).

A number of international animal welfare standards used in countries we import meat from have also been found to score lower than the UK's Red Tractor scheme when directly compared (Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, 2024), despite this scheme

offering little above the legal minimum standards required by the Government.

**Enshrining a set of core environmental and animal welfare standards in law for all agri-food imports, with a minimum threshold that imports must meet in order to access the UK market, is therefore crucial in ensuring that the food and meat we eat does not rely on harming nature elsewhere.**

<sup>6</sup>The Defra dataset tracking production, imports and exports of poultry does not differentiate between fresh and processed poultry products. This data was only available for red meat.

TABLE 4: The top EU and non-EU countries the UK imports red meat from

	Fresh and frozen				Processed			
	EU		Non-EU		EU		Non-EU	
Beef & veal	Ireland	81%	Australia	25%	Ireland	52%	Brazil	99%
Lamb & mutton	Ireland	86%	New Zealand	69%	Ireland	53%	n/a	n/a
Pork	Denmark	24%	USA	66%	Netherlands	43%	USA	80%

Source: Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, 2025

### ARE WE EATING AND BUYING MORE OR LESS MEAT THAN IN THE PAST?

Between 2008 and 2019, according to NDNS data, average UK meat consumption per person per day decreased by 17%. This included reductions in the amount of red and processed meat being eaten but an increase in white meat consumption (Stewart et al., 2021).

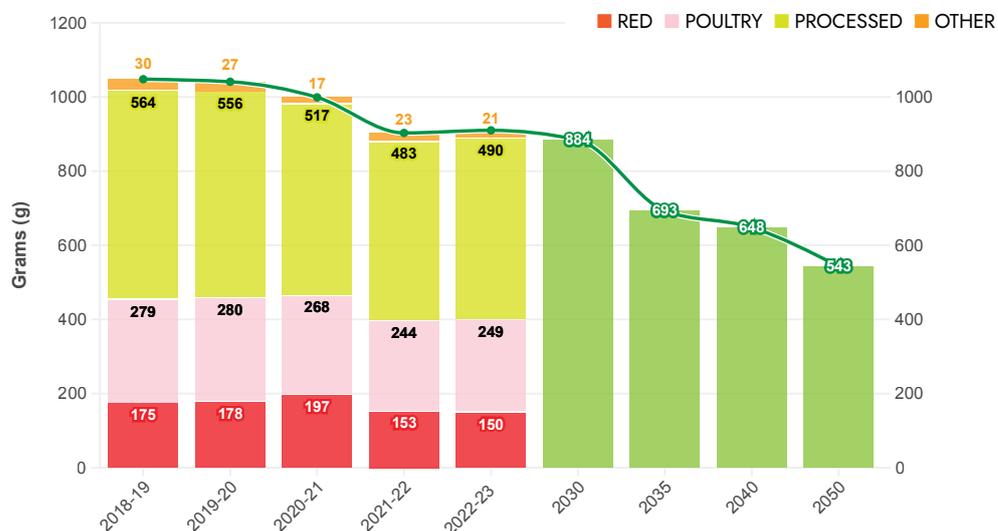
When we look at the amount of meat being purchased (rather than reported as eaten) in the government’s Family Food Survey (FFS) we see a similar trend continuing in the years following 2019. Between 2018-19 and 2022-23 meat purchases (both Out of Home and bought to eat at home) declined

across all categories, with total meat purchases declining by 13% (137g).

According to the FFS processed meat (both red and white) is the most purchased type of meat, with over half of all meat bought both out of home and for the home in 2022-3 processed (53%).

FIGURE 15: Meat and meat products purchased when eating out and in household shops per person per week (g), alongside the projected reduction in purchases required to hit Net Zero.

Source: [Climate Change Committee's 7th Carbon budget](#) and [Defra's Family Food Survey, 2018-2023](#).



This downward trend in consumption of meat can be seen in other high income countries around the world, leading to suggestions that we are reaching ‘peak meat’, with intakes plateauing or even falling (Whitton et al, 2021). However, even with this downward trend in consumption, the UK remains some way off the pace required to hit the targets set out by the CCC and in the NFS (Figure 15).





While it is encouraging to see a decline in the average amount of meat being purchased, it remains unclear whether this is a temporary response to the cost-of-living crisis or the beginning of a longer-term trend. Meat purchases are sensitive to economic shocks, with the 2008 financial crash and recession leading to a drop in purchases of meat by 6% (Griffith et al., 2013). Certainly the same seems to be true of the cost-of-living crisis. Purchases of meat dropped by 9.5% between 2020-1 and 2021-22, and we can see that during the most acute phase of food price inflation (2021-22), there was an increase in the amount being spent on meat despite a

drop in the volume of meat being bought overall. This suggests that consumers bought less meat while prices were high.

In the most recent year for which we have data (2022-23) the amount of meat being bought very slightly increased compared to the previous year (2021-22) - by 1% - although this is still below the amount being purchased in 2020-21. More recent reports also suggest that sales of red meat are rising again following the cost-of-living crisis, with both volume and value sales of beef and lamb up in 2024 compared to the preceding year (The Grocer, 2024).

**FIGURE 16: Expenditure on meat and meat products on average per person per week (£)**



Source: Family Food Survey, 2018-19 to 2022-2023

## PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO MEAT

Public surveys show a gradual shift in attitudes towards meat eating, with increasing numbers of people open to more flexitarian patterns of eating.

- › 57% of people are open to changing their diets to be healthy and more sustainable and would welcome help to do it (IGD, 2021), while 43% of working age adults intend to increase their consumption of a range of plant-based foods (GFI, 2025).
- › Eating Better's public attitudes survey has been running for a decade, finding that the amount of people reporting 'eating less meat than they did a year ago' has increased by 26% from 2017 (19%) to 2024 (24%).
- › There is growing public awareness of the negative environmental impact of meat production and consumption, with Eating Better's survey finding this has increased

from 31% in 2013 to 41% in 2024, aligning with Hubbub's findings in 2024 where 41% agreed that meat contributes to climate change.

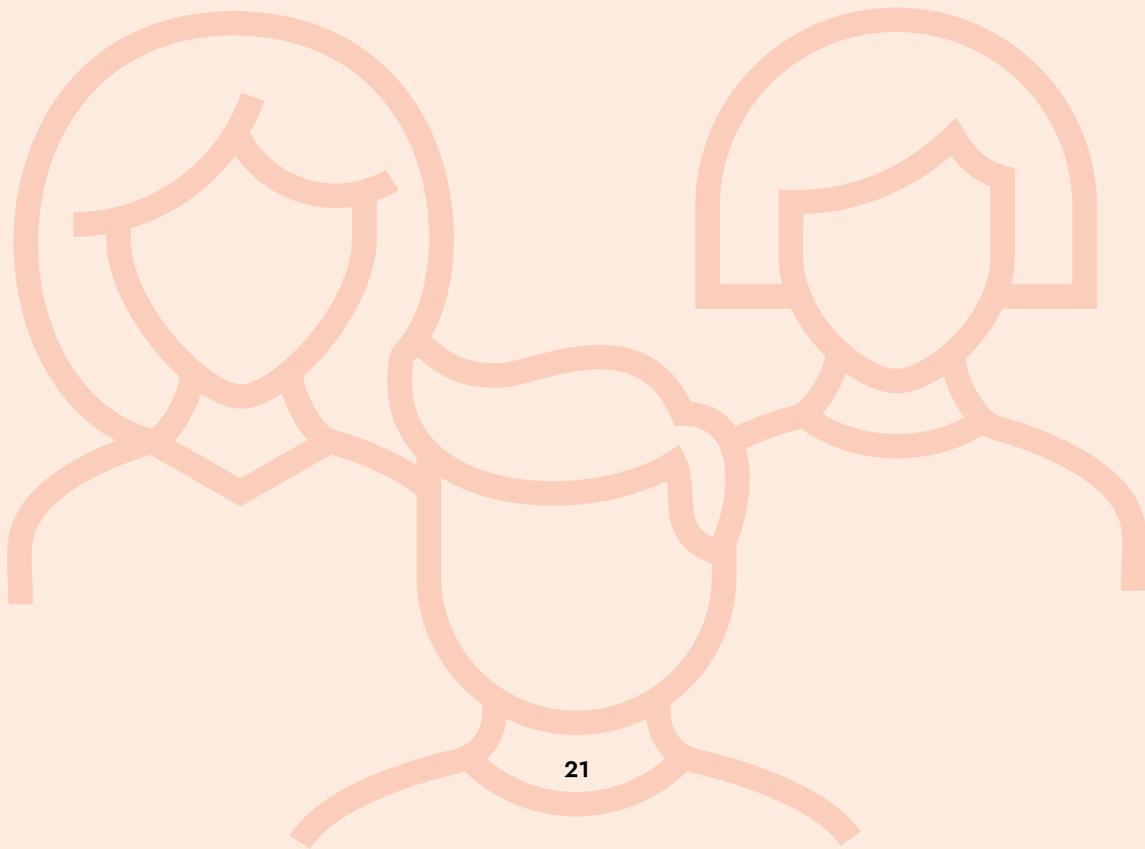
**However, there is an intention-action gap with citizens needing support to shift towards more plant rich diets, and some groups currently increasing their consumption of meat.**

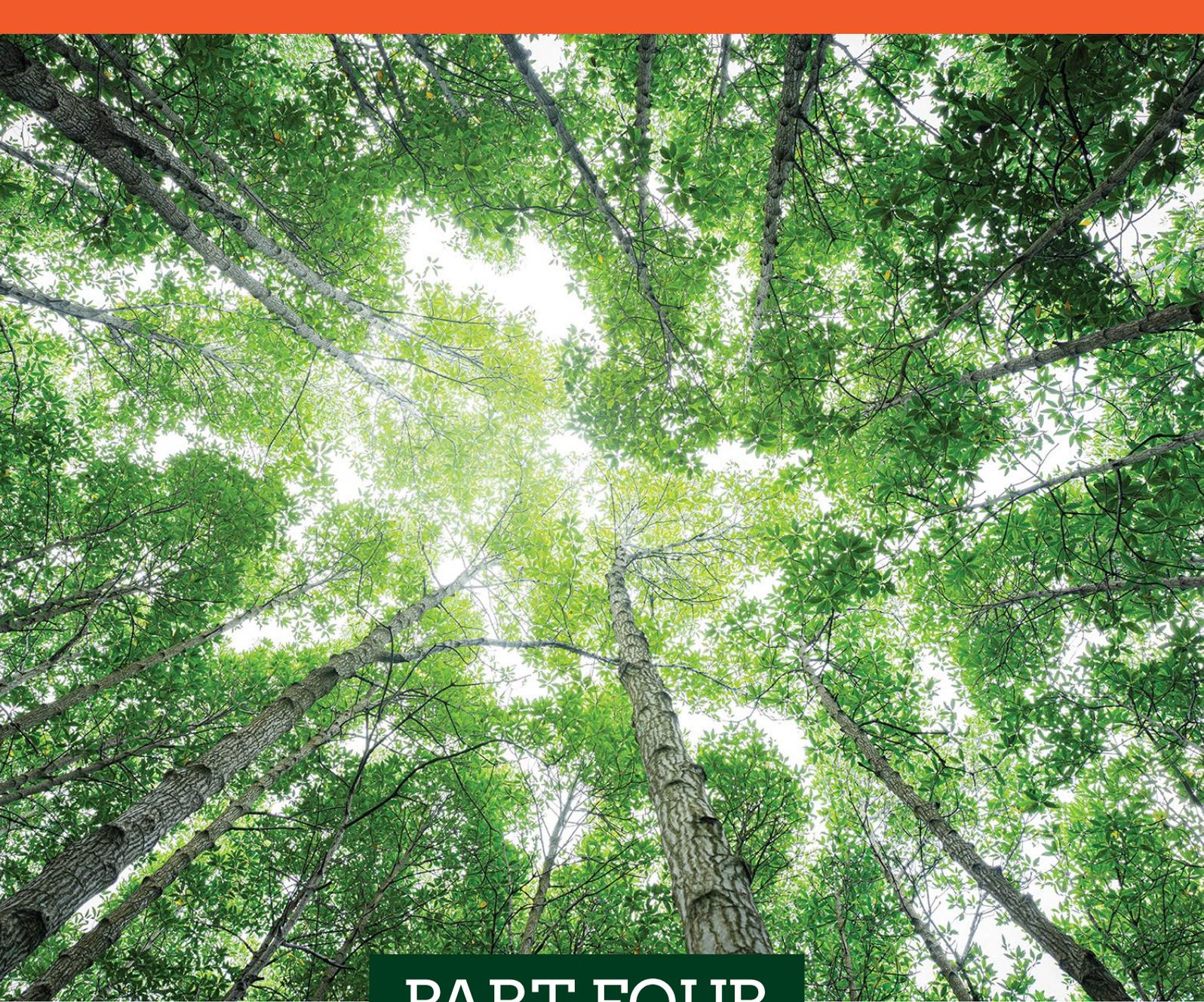
- › Despite almost two thirds (61%) of individuals being willing to cut down their meat consumption, the number of people consuming meat at least five times a week has risen from 43% in 2022 to 50% in 2024 (Eating Better, 2024).
- › Hubbub's polling on attitudes towards sustainable diets found that while 30% of people are eating less meat than the previous year, 16% are actually eating more meat than the previous year (Hubbub, 2024).

› Similarly, while 47% of respondents in Hubbub's survey agreed that eating less meat and dairy would help reduce environmental harm, only 24% stated they are eating less meat and dairy to benefit the environment.

› Over 40% of respondents agreed supermarkets and restaurants should be providing more plant-based options.

**Younger citizens, particularly young men, show conflicting behaviours.** While 46% acknowledge the environmental impact of livestock production and consumption, this age group has the lowest percentage of individuals who have reduced their meat consumption in the past year (16%) and the highest percentage of those who have increased their meat consumption (19%). (Hubbub, 2024).





## PART FOUR

# Why does it matter how much meat we eat?

### WHY WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT MEAT

While meat can form part of a balanced diet, climate and health organisations globally are agreed that in high income countries like the UK we need to be eating less meat than we currently do (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023; World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2019).

In the UK, the independent National Food Strategy for England recommended a 30% reduction in UK meat consumption by 2032 in order to meet both climate and

health goals, and the Climate Change Committee has recommended the UK reduce meat consumption by 25% by 2040 and 35% by 2050 to remain on track to meet climate targets (Climate Change Committee, 2025).

Although this briefing focuses primarily on the health and climate impacts of meat production and consumption for the sake of brevity, there are also compelling reasons from biodiversity and animal welfare perspectives to reduce meat consumption, although these are not covered in great detail here.

## THE HEALTH CASE FOR ACTION

The over consumption of meat can have negative effects on public health. Intensive livestock systems are associated with an increased risk of zoonotic diseases (Hayek, 2019) and excessive meat consumption is associated with obesity and other diet-related diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type two diabetes and certain cancers (Salter, 2018).

The risk of these chronic diseases is greater in those who consume red and processed meats. The International Agency for Research on Cancer has classified the consumption of processed meat as carcinogenic and that of red meat as probably carcinogenic (Bouvard et al., 2015). White meat, particularly chicken, has a better health profile than red and processed meat - with

lower levels of saturated fat and sodium – and so is less associated with the risk of diet-related diseases that are consistently seen with consumption of processed meat and with high consumption of red meat. However, it still performs less favourably relative to consuming plant-based protein sources in terms of reducing the risk of type two diabetes (Bernstein et al., 2010) and coronary heart disease (Zhubi-Bakija, 2021). Swapping from white meat to plant-based proteins is generally associated with health benefits.

A recent cohort study suggested that high consumption of white meat may also carry some health risks, with those eating over 300g a week having a higher risk of gastrointestinal cancer (Bonfiglio, 2025).

## PROCESSED MEAT POSES PARTICULAR RISKS FOR HEALTH

Almost a third (29%) of the meat we eat in the UK is processed, with 32% of the red meat we import from overseas comprised of processed meat. This makes imported, processed meat an obvious target for reduction given the health risks, and the fact it is likely to be produced to lower environmental and animal welfare standards than British meat.

There is strong evidence linking the overconsumption of processed meat to a greater risk of developing a number of chronic diseases (see Fig 17) (Salter, 2018; WCRF, 2024). The World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) recommends eating 'very little, if any' processed meat given the strong links with bowel cancer, with insufficient evidence to establish a safe level of processed meat consumption. Recent studies have shown an increased risk of bowel cancer associated with eating even small amounts (under 50g per day). (Eating Better, 2023; WCRF, 2024).

➤ **The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classifies processed meat as a Group 1 carcinogen** (meaning it can cause cancer in humans), with

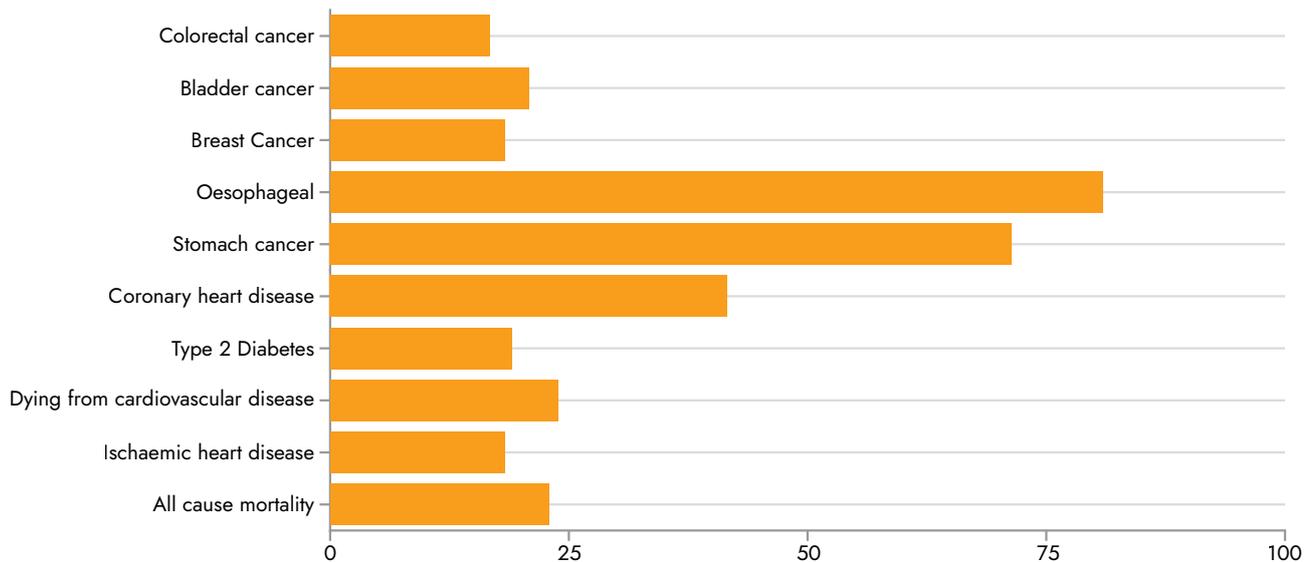


the strongest link found for colorectal (bowel) and stomach cancers.

- Analysis of 400 studies by WHO IARC show **the relative risk of developing bowel cancer increases by about 18%** with each additional 50g eaten per day.
- Cancer Research UK estimates that of the 42,000 new cases of bowel cancer that occur every year in the UK, 13% (or over 5,400) are caused by eating too much processed meat.

- There is also strong evidence linking processed meat to an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease (CVD), breast cancer, bladder cancer, gastric cancer, type 2 diabetes and all-cause mortality.
- In addition, one UK study found that, for every additional 25 grams of processed meat in a person's daily diet, the risk of dementia increased by 44% (Eating Better, 2023).

**FIGURE 17: The increase (%) in relative risk of developing different diseases associated with a 50g increase in average processed meat consumption per day**



Source: *Eating Better*, 2023. Figure adapted from *Eating Better*, and showing findings from systematic reviews.

## IS MEAT CRITICAL FOR MEETING MICRONUTRIENT REQUIREMENTS?

Meat is a nutrient dense food, and a good source of many essential micronutrients including:

- > Iron
- > Zinc
- > Selenium
- > Phosphorus
- > Vitamin B12
- > Vitamin B3 (niacin)
- > Vitamin B6

In the UK, meat is the main contributing food source for intakes of zinc (32%) and selenium (29%) among adults (Public Health England, 2020). It is also one of the main contributing food groups for iron and B12. For this reason, an increased risk of micronutrient deficiencies is one of the main concerns raised in the context of conversations around reducing intake of meat in the UK.

While meat can be a good source of a number of essential micronutrients it is important to note that there are usually a number of different food sources available for every micronutrient. For example, iron can be found in fortified cereals and bread, tofu, nuts and seeds and beans as well as red meat. **In fact, NDNS analysis shows that cereals made by far the greatest contribution to**

**total iron intake in the UK between 2008 and 2019** (37-53%, depending on age group), followed by meat and meat products (14-19%) (Fairweather-Tait, 2023). Vitamin B12 is an exception in being the only micronutrient that can only naturally be found in animal foods. However, sources of vitamin B12 include dairy, eggs and some fortified breakfast cereals as well as meat.



## BUT WHAT ABOUT IRON?

Iron is a nutrient of concern in the UK given low intakes of iron among certain population groups, notably teenage girls, where 49% of girls aged 11 to 18 years have low iron intakes with a smaller number (9%) having low iron stores (Public Health England, 2020).

The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) are currently reviewing how best to measure iron intake and absorption to better understand what the daily recommended value for iron intake should be to ensure adequate iron stores (NIHR, 2025). This is due to the discrepancy between the high proportion of low iron intakes in some population groups and the low prevalence of poor iron status in these same groups, which suggests that daily recommended intake amounts may be higher than they need to be in order to avoid iron deficiency (Public Health England, 2011).

While meat is a rich and bioavailable source of iron, it does not follow that diets low in meat automatically equate



to high levels of iron deficiency. Individuals following diets lower in meat and higher in plant foods have been shown to have adequate iron intakes and meet national and international recommendations (BDA, 2024). In fact, there is little evidence to show that levels of iron deficiency anemia are higher in those consuming vegetarian diets (Hunt, 2003), despite plant-based diets having relatively lower iron bioavailability. Up to a certain point, it appears that the absorption rates of iron increase in individuals with low iron stores over time.

Certainly, a SACN review found that for those in the UK who eat large amounts of red and processed meat (90g a day or more), reducing their consumption to the recommended 70g a day would have little impact on the proportion of adults with low iron intakes (Public Health England, 2011).

How much of a risk reducing meat consumption poses for levels of micronutrient deficiencies in the UK therefore depends on how much meat different population groups are eating to begin with, what they are substituting meat with, and the overall balance and healthiness of their diet.

## SUBSTITUTING RED AND PROCESSED MEAT FOR POULTRY: A MEATY ISSUE

Poultry has a lower carbon footprint relative to red meat and is linked to fewer negative health outcomes. Replacing red meat (beef and lamb) with chicken is therefore sometimes suggested as a strategy for reducing diet associated greenhouse gas emissions given that poultry has a notably smaller emissions footprint than red meat does.

And certainly, chicken's popularity shows no sign of waning. Worldwide, 65 billion chickens are eaten every year, more than any other meat (Eating Better, 2020). And this is growing. **Between 2008 and 2019 consumption of white meat in the UK increased by 10%**, in contrast to consumption of red and processed meat which both fell during the same period of time (Stewart et al., 2021). The vast majority of chicken we eat in the UK is intensively reared. **Less than 4% of all chicken we consume in the UK is free-range**, a figure that has fallen over the past five

years (The Times, 2024; RSPCA, 2022).

Yet although intensively reared chickens produce lower greenhouse gas emissions and waste per unit of meat than grassfed or extensively reared meat production systems do (LEAP, 2020), there are other major trade-offs to be considered when it comes to chicken production, not least:

- concerns around animal welfare
- the use of antibiotics in the industrial livestock sector
- the impact of intensive poultry farming on local pollution
- the impact of land clearing to grow animal feed on global deforestation and nature loss

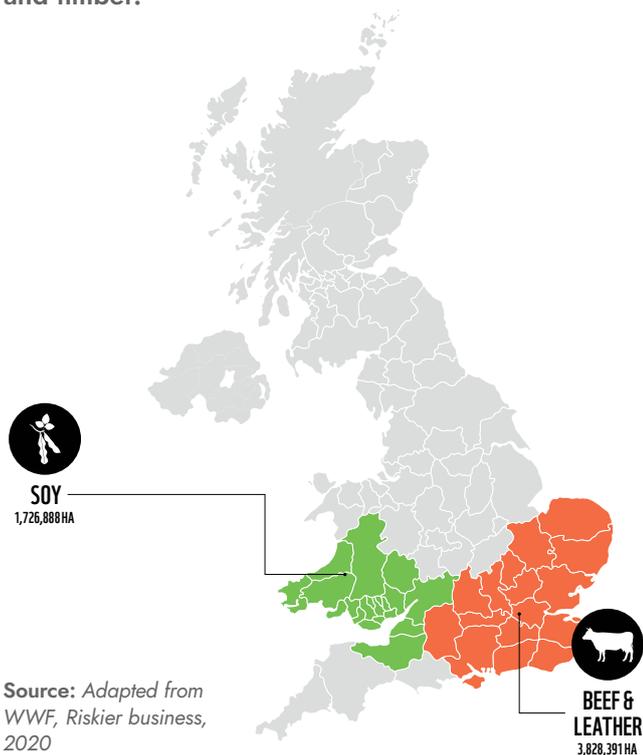
The impact of feed on deforestation and nature loss is one key area of concern. Poultry feed imported into the >

> UK effectively shifts greenhouse gas emissions offshore to countries such as Brazil, where significant amounts of land are cleared of forest in order to grow crops that are then exported as feed. This can be overlooked by UK policymakers given that the UK's climate targets focus only on domestic emissions and so do not take into account the impacts of our food system – such as feed - that are offshored elsewhere.

Soy is the largest source of protein for animal feed in the world, yet its production is a major driver of deforestation and land-use change, notably in South America. The UK imports around 3 million tonnes of soy annually (Eating Better, 2020), an overseas land footprint equivalent to the size of Wales (Figure 18). **It's estimated that up to 60% of imported soy is used by the poultry industry** (Eating Better, 2020), yet nearly half (47%) of the soy used to feed poultry in the UK is not certified deforestation free (3keel, 2022).

**FIGURE 18: The UK's overseas land footprint required to produce beef and feed**

From 2016-18 the UK had an annual estimated overseas land footprint of 21.3 million hectares – that's an area more than half the size of the UK – to supply imports of just seven commodities: beef & leather, cocoa, palm oil, pulp & paper, rubber, soy, and timber.



Source: Adapted from WWF, Riskier business, 2020

Those concerned with animal welfare issues also point to the much larger number of lives lost when eating chicken compared to meat from larger animals – the so-called ‘omnivores dilemma’. The average person in the European Union consumes around 80 kilograms of meat per year. If all of this came from poultry about 40 chickens would have to be killed per person, compared to less than one-sixth of a cow for an equivalent amount of meat (Ritchie, 2024). Additionally, the lives of industrially farmed chickens or broilers are subject to extensive animal welfare concerns, for example the impact of high stocking densities on the ability of chickens to walk and move (Better Chicken Commitment, 2024).

## Industrial chicken production in the Wye Valley

The River Wye, one of the UK's best-known rivers, has made headlines in recent years having deteriorated due to pollution following rapid growth in the number of intensive poultry units in Wye valley. The main pollution causing concern is phosphate, 73% of which comes from nutrients leaching out of manure into the river (mostly from poultry) (Hertfordshire Wildlife Trust, 2024). Avara, one of the UK's biggest chicken producers that supplies major supermarkets including Tesco, was sued last year for their part in damaging the river (BBC News, 2024). It has since said its supply chain will no longer sell litter from poultry units to be used as fertiliser on fields within the river catchment area, although it has not publicly set any firm dates for meeting this commitment, nor a plan for ensuring the litter won't pollute other rivers (Sustain, 2023).

The previous government launched a plan to better protect the River Wye in 2024, including providing up to £35 million in funding (DEFRA and Natural England, 2024). However, National planning rules currently still allow factory farming to expand even in areas where people, wildlife and rivers are being harmed by pollution (Food for the planet, 2024).

This problem is not just confined to the River Wye. Every river in the UK is polluted. Just 15% of rivers in England are in good ecological health, with agriculture the main source of pollution (The Rivers Trust Food for the Planet). Tens of thousands of tonnes of waste are produced by factory farms every day, and when this waste is spread onto oversaturated soils, it washes into rivers (Food for the Planet, 2024).

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL CASE FOR ACTION

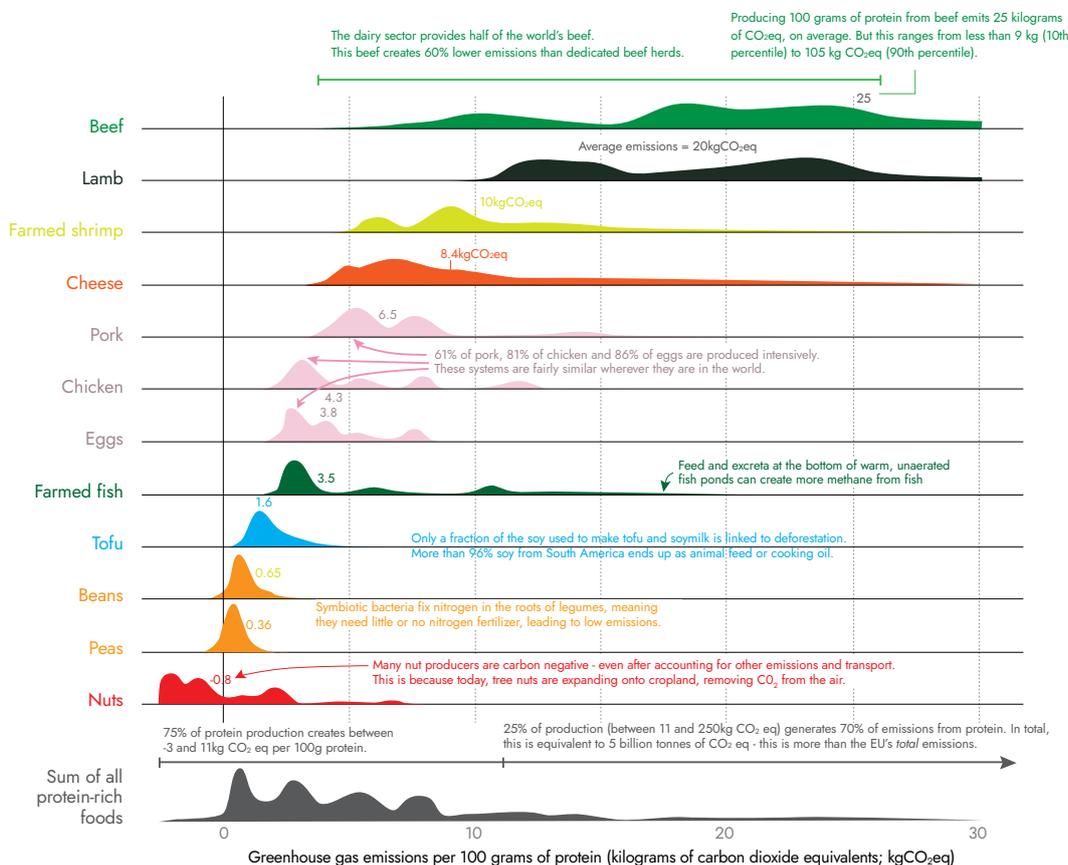
In the UK, greenhouse gas emissions (GHGEs) from the food system account for 19% of our domestic GHGEs (closer to 30% when emissions from imported food and feed are included) (National Food Strategy, 2021). Nearly two-thirds (63%) of UK agricultural emissions in 2022 were directly emitted from livestock, with 49% from the digestive process of cattle and sheep and 14% from the management of livestock waste and manure (CCC 2025). While domestic carbon emissions associated with livestock are lower than the global average, the UK spends £5.8 billion on meat imports annually, with beef accounting for almost half of total meat imports

(Defra, 2021). This means there are also environmental impacts of the meat we eat in the UK that are externalised. **Globally, 15% of total GHGEs are driven by livestock production** (World Economic Forum, 2019).

In the UK, meat accounts for the largest proportion of GHGEs associated with diets (32%), with dairy products contributing an additional 14% (Rippin et al., 2021). The largest contribution to diet-related GHGEs comes from animal products even when these are produced using more sustainable production practices (Figure 19) (Clark et al., 2022). Even quite small reductions in meat consumption can have large

benefits for reducing diet-related environmental impacts (Scarborough et al, 2023). This is largely due to the fact that livestock have much higher resource requirements than plant foods, using more land, water and energy. For most animal-based foods, 80% of GHGEs result from land use change and farming practices such as the application of nitrogen fertilizers and the production of methane in the stomachs of ruminant animals (Ritchie, 2019). As a result, reducing the amount of animal-based products we eat, particularly meat, can help to reduce both UK and global GHGEs as well as lessen other negative impacts on the environment such as nature loss and water pollution.

**FIGURE 19: Comparing the greenhouse gas emissions of different protein sources and the range of emissions associated with different production practices**



**Source:**  
Our World in Data, based on Poore and Nemecek (2018).

## DO WE STILL NEED TO EAT LESS MEAT IF WE IMPROVE PRODUCTION PRACTICES?

The evidence shows that it is not possible to reach climate targets without producing and consuming less meat (Climate Change Committee, 2025). However, some argue that we needn't reduce livestock numbers or change diets; instead, we should prioritise farming livestock less intensively and use more regenerative methods, including grazing on pasture which can deliver wider environmental benefits such as improvements in soil health and biodiversity that are not currently captured in Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs).

Yet beyond the numerous benefits for nature and biodiversity of more sustainable production practices, there is significant debate around the extent to which more regenerative, grassfed livestock rearing systems could potentially aid the process of carbon sequestration. Grassfed systems can stimulate plant growth and increase organic matter below ground: thus potentially capturing carbon and offsetting emissions. However, there is limited empirical evidence on the potential for grassfed systems to reduce GHGs. Carbon sequestration is a time-limited benefit and poor on-farm emissions data means it's currently hard to quantify the potential of such an approach. A recent modelling study that looked at the amount of land required globally if there was a shift towards grassfed beef production, found that to offset the emissions from ruminant sector worldwide, grassland carbon stocks would need to increase by approximately 25% – 2,000% (Wang, 2023). Additionally, increasing stocks of grassfed livestock would increase other GHG emissions such as methane and nitrous oxide.

There are also difficult trade-offs to consider in relying on more sustainable production practices in isolation. Somewhat counterintuitively,

production systems associated with "better meat" (e.g. organic or free-range) often result in higher environmental impacts per kilogram of protein, although animal welfare and wider environmental indicators such as soil health may improve in non-industrial systems. This is primarily due to the larger amount of

standards, such practices require higher resource use over their lifetimes and—for ruminant animals like cows — this results in more time alive spent emitting methane. Analysis by WRI found that the amount of land needed under systems marketed as "better" was higher than under "conventional" systems more than 90% of the time,

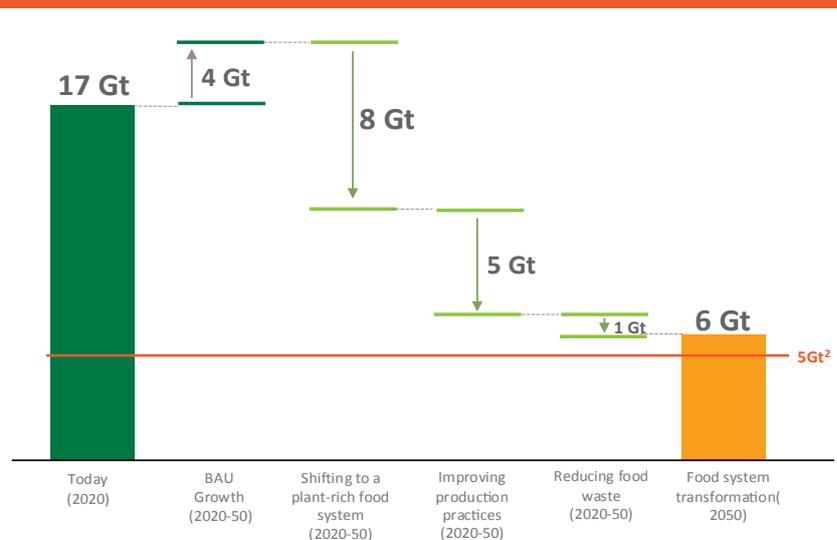
***There is not enough land available to be able to continue to produce meat at the same levels, more sustainably***

land required to rear animals in more sustainable production standards, with land use the major driver of both nature loss and GHGs.

Moreover, while grazing animals or sourcing from slow-growing breeds is undoubtedly better for animal welfare

with GHGs higher in 70% of cases (World Resources Institute, 2024). In the UK, 70% of land is already used for agriculture with the majority of this used for rearing lamb, beef and dairy cattle (National Food Strategy, 2021). This means it is hard to see where additional UK land could easily be

**FIGURE 20: The reduction potential of different strategies for reducing food system GHGs. Shifting to a plant-rich food system delivered the greatest potential emissions savings.**



**Sources & Notes:** 1. Tilt Collective & Systemiq (2023) analysis; all numbers based on 'high-ambition food system transformation' Scenario; 2. 5GT defined by EAT-Lancet as food limit planetary boundary to stay inside 1.5c scenario, assuming food system becomes a net carbon sequester.



found to support maintaining current levels of meat consumption with a wholesale shift towards more extensive farming methods.

While there is undeniably variation in the carbon footprint of different food categories depending on the methods of production (particularly the intensity and production practices used in ruminant livestock) (Ritchie, 2020) (see Figure 20) **there is simply not enough land available to be able to continue to produce meat at the same levels, more sustainably.** WRI's recent report showed eating less meat can actually support objectives to shift towards higher standard 'better meat' by providing food service companies with the budget headroom to invest in better meat sourcing strategies (World Resources Institute, 2024).

When it comes to GHGEs eating less meat is more impactful than eating the most sustainable meat in order to achieve a lower-carbon diet (Ritchie, 2020). Tilt Collective & Systemiq (2023) analysis found that while multiple approaches to reducing food system emissions are needed, with three key actions required (shifting to a plant-rich food system, improving production practices and reducing food waste), shifting to plant-rich consumption and production is the most effective, offering a mitigation potential of 8Gt CO<sub>2</sub>e by 2050 and the highest climate return on investment (TILT Collective, 2024) (Figure 20). In other words, it's still the cow as well as the how.

## Less and Better

While there are ongoing debates around the cost challenges of more sustainably produced meat and how best to define 'better', and less meat will look different for different groups within the UK, the less and better meat approach is a useful framing for looking at how changes in how we produce and consume animal protein fits into the wider shifts needed for more healthy and sustainable diets.

A combined approach would lead to the best outcomes for health, animal welfare and the environment in the UK.

The 'less and better' meat approach refers to reduced consumption of meat while simultaneously shifting towards more natural farming methods which are better for farm animals, human health and the environment (Eating Better, 2022). It involves reducing the numbers of livestock so animals can roam and graze freely thereby reducing the need to rely on imported feed. Eating Better describe it as the 'phasing out of industrial livestock farming and scaling up of agroecological and regenerative practices where farmers work to restore and enhance nature, boosting soil fertility and protect precious water resources.' The Eating Better Alliance currently has 68 member organisations supportive of the less and better approach.

## BIODIVERSITY AND NATURE LOSS

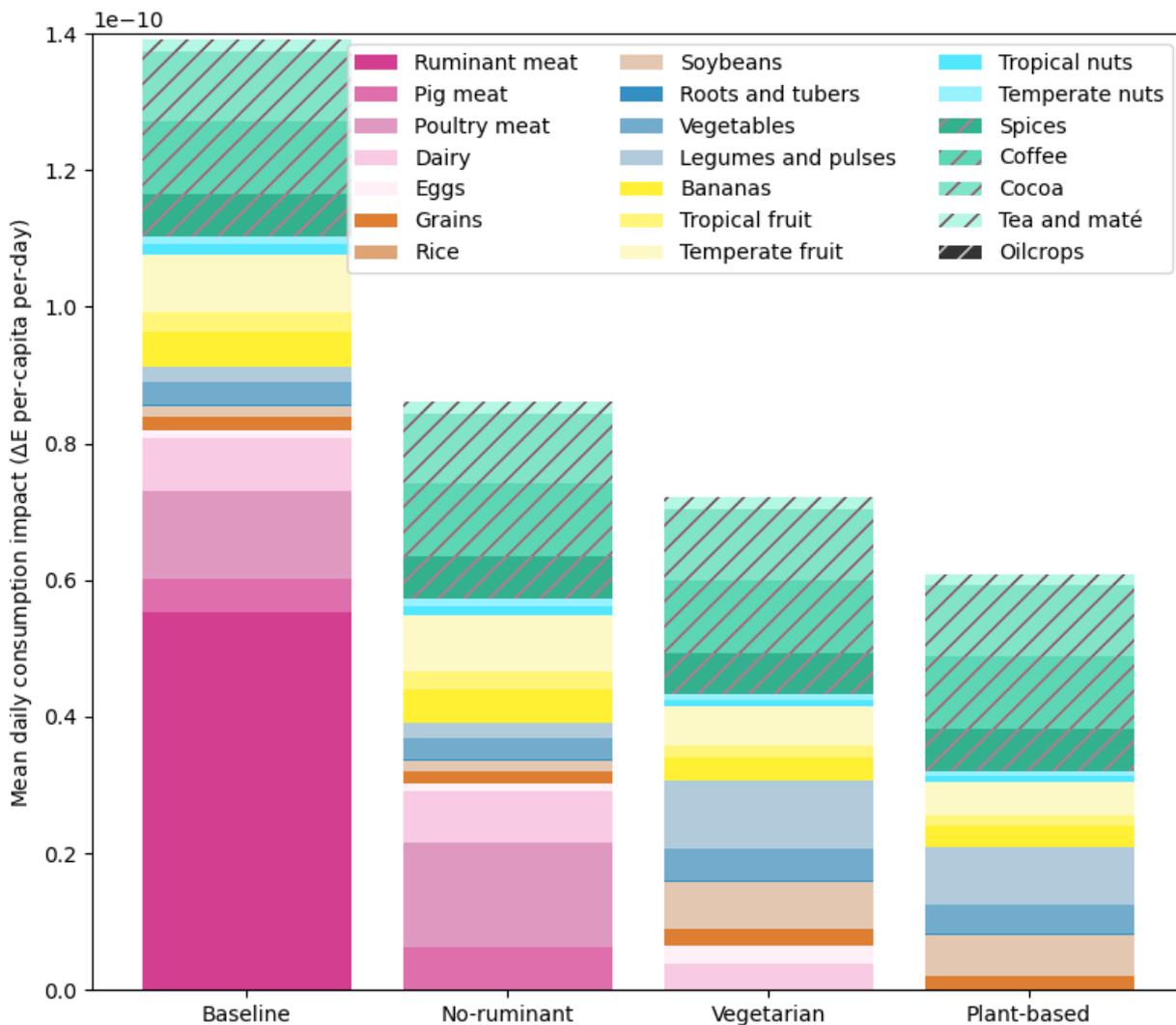
Biodiversity is critical to planetary health. However, we are currently in the middle of a sixth mass extinction event (World Wildlife Fund, 2022). The last mass extinction event recorded led to the extinction of the dinosaurs, yet this time round species extinction is being driven by human activity, with global wildlife populations shrinking by an average of 73% in the past 50 years (World Wildlife Fund, 2024).

Food production and agriculture play a role in driving this catastrophic loss of biodiversity and nature given the impact of land use change on natural habitats (Ritchie, 2022).

Analysis by the Mandala Research Consortium into the impact of land-use on approximately 30,000 vertebrate species has identified that current UK diets are responsible for an increased

risk of extinction, which in large part is driven by the consumption of ruminant meat (i.e. cows and sheep) (figure 21). However, **shifting to plant-based diets could reduce the projected number of extinctions linked to current dietary habits by 58%**, rising to 79% if we consider only calorie-contributing food commodities and remove items like spices, tea, coffee, and cacao.

FIGURE 21: The percentage of per-capita consumption-driven extinctions arising from imported and domestically produced food commodities, estimated for the United Kingdom

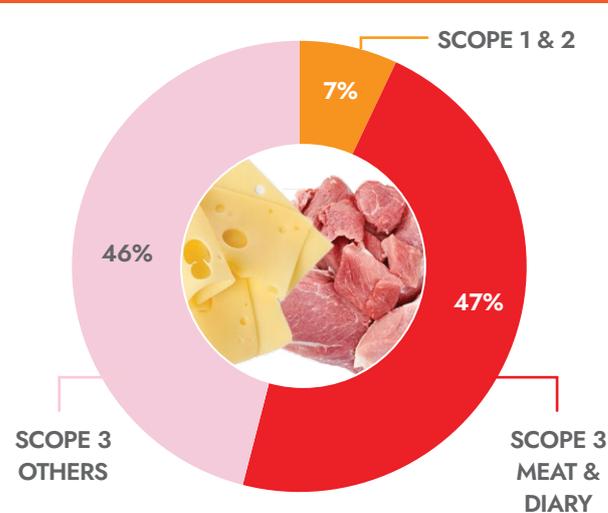


Sources: Ball, et al., 2024

## TACKLING FOOD BUSINESSES' IMPACT ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The vast majority of large food businesses in the UK have Net Zero plans and ambitious commitments to reduce their environmental impact. Yet for food businesses to get to grips with their carbon emissions they must tackle their Scope 3 emissions (indirect emissions that occur along the supply chain) as they account for around 90% of their carbon footprint (Defra, 2024). This will have to include reducing the amount of meat and dairy sold given the large footprints associated with livestock production and consumption. For food retailers, meat and dairy make up an estimated 47% of all Scope 3 emissions (Madre Brava, 2024). Yet only two major UK food businesses (Lidl GB and Compass UK & Ireland) currently have sales-based targets to readdress their animal: plant protein sales split.

FIGURE 22: Meat and dairy alone make up almost half of all emissions of a food retailer



Sources: Madre Brava, 2024

## HIGH STEAKS: BIG AG LOBBYING

There is an increasing focus on the influence of large agricultural and meat companies and their trade associations on climate and diet policy-making. Globally, the number of lobbyists representing agrifood associations reached a record high at COP28 in 2023, doubling in number between the 2022 and 2023 COPs to 340 delegates - of which 120 represented the meat and dairy industry specifically (The Guardian, 2023).

Recent accusations from ex-FAO employees - that lobbyists and farming-focused states have a history of pressuring the FAO to downplay the link between livestock farming and climate change - have also raised questions about the influence of vested interests on food policy and research. For example, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) '1.5 degree roadmap for food system change' which was published at COP28, was criticised as a missed opportunity for reducing food system emissions with



no mention of the need to reduce consumption of animal-based foods in the roadmap (Verkuijl et al, 2024).

Trade associations acting on behalf of the meat and dairy industry also appear to be coordinating campaigns to discredit academic studies exploring the planetary benefits of a shift away from meat. A leaked document seen by the climate website DeSmog recently found evidence that a PR firm representing the Animal Agriculture Alliance, a meat and dairy industry coalition, was behind a smear campaign attempting to discredit the landmark Eat Lancet report in 2019 (The Guardian, 2025).

In the UK, Food Foundation research has identified a large number of smaller, livestock-focused trade associations actively meeting with ministers. In addition to a number of meetings between the NFU and Defra, forty meetings with meat and dairy trade associations and Defra were recorded between 2022 and 2023 alone (Food Foundation, 2025) outnumbering the number of meetings (35) held between Defra ministers and food NGOs during a much longer period of time (2020-2023). The highest number of meetings were with the British Poultry Council and the National Sheep, Pig and Beef Associations.



## PART FIVE

# Encouraging uptake of plant rich diets

### HOW DO WE ENCOURAGE A SHIFT TOWARDS LESS AND BETTER MEAT AND TOWARDS MORE PLANT RICH DIETS?

#### Businesses should:

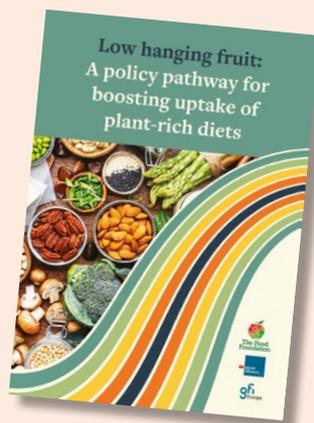
- **Reduce their reliance on processed meat, particularly in the Out of Home sector.** Retailers should look to exclude processed meat products from volume, location and price promotions in store and online, and food service businesses should reduce the number of menu options containing processed meat, for example substituting this for beans and other plant proteins. This would bring notable benefits for public health and the environment.
  - **Disclose data and set sales-based targets to shift the ratio of plant to animal protein sales.** Transparent data disclosure and target setting allows companies to better understand areas for development and ensures there is a clear direction of travel for shifting sales. UK retailers are currently lagging behind European retailers, many of whom have set targets for increasing sales of plant protein relative to animal protein.
  - **Make beans and whole plant foods more appealing.** Promotional spend ought to be redirected towards nutritious plant foods in order to make them more appealing. Advertising and promotional strategies should be focused specifically on beans as the most affordable, sustainable and healthiest plant-based alternatives to meat, where intake is not patterned by level of income.
  - **Follow the WRI behaviour change Playbook.** Out of Home businesses should look to the WRI's Playbook 2.0 and implement the eighteen evidenced priority behaviour change techniques for boosting uptake of plant focused dishes on menus.
  - **Price parity.** Retailers and Out of Home businesses should ensure that plant-based meat alternatives and plant-based dishes are priced at the same level, if not cheaper, than meat products. UK retailers are currently lagging behind European retailers in working towards better pricing of plant-based products and ought to ensure high margins are not placed on plant-based brands.
  - **Reformulating pre-prepared meals.** The Climate Change Committee's 7th carbon budget found that one of the most promising levers for supporting a reduction in meat consumption was replacing a small amount (for example, 15%) of meat and dairy content in pre-prepared meals with plant whole foods or alternative proteins.
- We will be publishing a more detailed report in the first half of 2026 mapping out the pathways to more plants for each food industry sub-sector.*

## POLICYMAKERS SHOULD:

Our three priority asks for boosting uptake of plant rich diets are to:

- **Strengthen government procurement rules** for schools, hospitals, prisons, and other public spaces where food is served through a review of the Government Buying Standards for Food. The current requirement for schools to serve meat three days a week should be relaxed, and guidance should recommend removing/limiting the amount of processed meat being served to children.
- **Support the production and increased consumption of fruit, vegetables and beans, pulses and legumes.** Specifically, there should be a strategy across all the devolved nations for an expanded, vibrant, and thriving edible horticulture sector.
- **Introduce mandatory reporting for large food businesses** to unlock innovation and create a level playing field that de-risks business investment into more healthy and sustainable food offerings. This ought to include a consistent set of metrics for measuring and reporting on the proportion of animal versus plant-based protein sales, the proportion of sales from healthier foods, and the proportion of fruit and vegetable sales.

For further policy recommendations see our briefing: [‘Low hanging fruit: a policy pathway for boosting uptake of plant-rich diets’](#).



## INVESTORS SHOULD:

- In their **advocacy on well-designed reporting regulation**, investors should advocate for mandatory corporate reporting across a range of health and sustainability metrics (including sales of protein by source). This would enable responsible investors to accurately compare business progress and allocate funds accordingly.
- **Investors should engage with individual companies to set expectations that net zero commitments include scope 3 emission targets** and that progress is disclosed. Businesses need to back this up with strategies, policies and targets that show they are shifting their business models to align with those commitments.
- **Investors should assess the risks and opportunities of companies involved in the production and sales of animal-based foods across their value chain** and engage with those companies to encourage the production of healthy, sustainable and affordable products. This ought to include encouraging companies and their supply chains to assess and limit their exposure to the impacts of water scarcity and quality, land use, deforestation, land degradation, biodiversity loss and climate change that are frequently driven by animal-based food production.

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