

Written evidence submitted by the University of Birmingham (FSC0011)

**'Fairness in the food supply chain': University of Birmingham
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techniques, food law enforcement, food chain analysis, food chain security, food fraud, food safety management systems such as Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) and ISO quality systems, allergen management and the workings of control authorities/bodies.

1. To what extent is the UK's food supply chain currently operating effectively and efficiently?

According to the UK [Food Security Report in 2021](#), the UK's food supply chain is operating effectively and efficiently to a significant extent. The report highlights the resilience of the supply systems owned and operated by the private sector, their adaptability, and their flexibility in responding to problems. The government collaborates with industry to monitor risks and respond to emerging issues, indicating a proactive approach to maintaining the supply chains. The complex and interconnected nature of the UK food supply chain encompasses various stages, from primary producers to food manufacturing, logistics, wholesale and retail, and food services. The efficiency of the supply chain is facilitated by logistics systems that allow for the transportation of food within a short period of time, minimising waste and ensuring fresh products are available on supermarket shelves. However, the report also highlighted the risks and vulnerabilities faced by the supply chain. These include dependencies on critical sectors such as energy, transportation, borders, labour, key inputs, and data communications. It also emphasized cyber-attacks threat to UK businesses, including those in the agri-food sector.

Certain key aspects can be considered to further analyse the effectiveness and efficiency of the UK's food supply chain.

- **Availability:** The supply chain guarantees a diverse range of food products throughout the year, though occasional disruptions may arise due to various factors like weather, political or trade issues, or global pandemics such as COVID-19 ([British Retail Consortium, 2020](#)).
- **Affordability:** The UK's supply chain has historically provided relatively affordable food due to sophisticated farming practices, optimized supply chains, and international trade agreements. However, rising costs and inflation may pose future challenges to affordability.
- **Sustainability:** Sustainability is a significant concern within the UK's food supply chain. Despite numerous initiatives to reduce waste, optimize resource usage, and promote sustainable farming practices, debates persist about the sustainability of the UK's reliance on imported food, which accounted for half of the food consumed in the UK as of 2018 ([House of Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee, 2018](#)).
- **Resilience:** The food supply chain in the UK demonstrated resilience during the Brexit transition and the COVID-19 pandemic by adapting to new regulations and conditions. Nevertheless, these events brought attention to potential vulnerabilities, such as dependence on foreign labour in food production and logistics, and reliance on just-in-time supply models ([DEFRA, 2021](#)).
- **Regulation and Safety:** The UK's food supply chain has a robust regulatory framework in place, some elements of which are now under review, overseen by the Food Standards Agency, to ensure food safety and quality. However, significant challenges associated with maintaining these standards amidst international trade deals and other international agreements remain, particularly after Brexit ([Food Standards Agency, 2021](#)).

Overall, while the UK's food supply chain is currently operating effectively and efficiently in many aspects, it faces challenges surrounding sustainability and resilience to unexpected events. The experiences of Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and increasingly, regular extreme weather events related to climate change have underlined areas of potential weakness that need to be addressed for the ongoing success of the supply chain.

2. How could structural relationships between farmers and fishers, food producers and manufacturers, handlers and distributors, retailers and consumers be improved for both domestic and foreign foods?

The structure of the food system within the UK is characterised by a consolidation of market power and value creation. Steps in the value chain like supply of agricultural input (e.g. fertilisers), processing and retailers are more consolidated and profitable in comparison with farming. This structure does not favour farmers and producers who receive little return on their investments ([Sustain, 2022](#)) and struggle to generate positive net income from their activities ([Farm Business Income, 2022](#)). Farmers believe that current supply chain relationships are unfair and are

characterised by short term contracts that are unpredictable and fail to cover the cost of production. According to the latest Groceries Code Adjudicator survey, refusals or delays in considering a cost price increase is the highest-ranking issue faced by food suppliers ([Groceries Code Adjudicator, 2023](#)). The asymmetric power dynamic across the food system is also apparent when farmers are required to comply with reporting and sustainability requirements as a condition for market access.

Measures to improve the structural relationships within the food supply chain include:

- Adopting new regulations that would embed fairness in supply chain relationships and encourage the re-orienting structural relationships towards long-term collaboration and the sharing of investment and risk costs.
- Enhancing transparency in value chains relationship and encouraging the adoption of reporting mechanisms of environmental and social impacts across a value chain.
- Extending the remit of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to include secondary and tertiary supply relationships.
- Developing new business models, like farmers' networks or co-operatives, to connect farmers to consumers and ensure greater resilience and sustainability ([Sustain, 2021](#)).
- Exploring new financial mechanisms that reduce uncertainty, like linking prices to production costs and encourage partnership across the chain.

Market power and regulation

3. How does the market power of UK supermarkets and manufacturers compare to other participants in the food supply chain, and how does this compare to equivalent relationships in other advanced economies?

A common index often used to measure supermarkets' market power is the big-four concentration ratio. This index is calculated by the combined market shares of the top four supermarkets. In the UK, the big-four concentration ratio was 76% in 2011 but this figure has decreased to 64.7% ([Institute of Grocery Distribution](#)). Cross-country comparisons show that UK supermarkets' market power was below the average of the European Union single market members states. It was higher in comparison with those of some countries such as France, Italy and Netherlands but was lower than in other countries such as Finland and Norway ([Van Dam et al., 2021](#)).

Two main-reasons can explain the decline in the market power of supermarkets in the UK. First, due to the poorer economic outlook and increasing cost of living, more and more households try to reduce expenditure on essentials such as food products by shopping in discount supermarkets such as Aldi or Lidl. Up until recently, the largest four supermarkets in the UK were Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda and Morrisons. However, since September 2022, Aldi has overtaken Morrisons in terms of market share. The second reason relates to the change of consumers' habits and the increased share of online shopping in the food retail trade. The big-four supermarkets, though having online sales, are still very much 'brick-and-mortar' stores. There are various reasons why more and more consumers are attracted by shopping food online. These include more information availability, wider assortment, greater transparency and often lower prices. Although the big-four supermarkets' online business also gains from this consumer shopping trend, a lot of these gains are at the expense of less customer traffic and sales in their physical stores. Worst still, the same consumer shopping trend has propped up sales of online platform-only retailers large or small across the country.

The decrease of the supermarkets' market power has important implications. Manufacturers' market power has been comparably increased via bigger bargaining power. Some of these manufacturers even vertically integrate into selling their branded products directly to consumers. In certain sectors, like dairy or livestock, there is a significant level of consolidation at the level of food manufactures. For example, the 11 largest companies control 92% of the slaughtered pig market, while nine companies are responsible for the processing of 70% of fresh milk in the UK ([AHDB, 2019](#)). Moreover, a recent report into the Global Food Industry finds extreme and growing concentration in the upstream stages of the food supply chain, with oligopoly and the potential for supernormal profits in agrochemicals, commercial seeds, farm machinery, animal pharma and livestock genetics ([ETC, 2022](#)).

In spite of the supermarkets gradually reducing their power in recent years, there is no obvious sign that farmers would benefit from this power shift. Sustain, a food and farm charity, reported in 2022 that farmers in general receive less than 1% of any final profit of the food these very farmers produce. For example, recent reports indicate that many small dairy farmers are at risk of closure because the costs of producing milk exceed the price they receive from dairy processors ([Financial Times, 2023](#)). Not having more direct routes to market for the farmers is one important reason why farmers continue to be on the losing side of the balance of power within the food value chain.

4. Is existing regulation appropriate, for example the Groceries Supply Code of Practice and the Groceries Code Adjudicator for supermarkets' direct suppliers, as well as the Secretary of State's powers under Part 3 of the Agriculture Act 2020?

Existing regulation can be broadly seen as appropriate. The Groceries Supply Code of Practice (GSCP) is a UK legislative instrument adopted on 4 August 2009 that provides for certain restrictions on the purchasing activities of the largest supermarket chains, with the aim of preventing, or at least limiting, potential abuses of buying power. Retailers under the GSCP must evidence a [UK grocery sales turnover greater than £1 billion](#), and there is no provision in the code that would prevent such retailers from demanding cost price reductions from their supplier base, provided their demands are even handed across all suppliers. The GSCP is overseen by an Adjudicator, who is an official appointed by government under the supervision of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). The current GSCP adjudicator was appointed in 2013. In turn, the code stipulates that each supermarket must appoint a Code Compliance Officer, who is in charge of addressing suppliers' concerns in cases of queries or disputes. At present, there are [14 retailers](#) considered as such under the GSCP.

The Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA) was established on 25 June 2013 by the [Groceries Code Adjudicator Act 2013](#). It is responsible for regulating the relationships between the UK's largest grocery retailers and their direct suppliers by encouraging, monitoring, and enforcing compliance with the GSCP. The GCA is funded by a levy on the Retailers, which is reviewed each year and requires the consent of the Secretary of State for Department for Business and Trade (DBT, previously the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) (GCA Review, 2021-2022). However, the current GCA does not reach secondary or tertiary supply chain relationships.

The Secretary of State's powers under Part 3 of the Agriculture Act 2020 (AA 2020) are ample and numerous. Given their relative novelty, the level of effectiveness provided by these powers will need to be continuously assessed. At present however, they can be broadly seen as adequate to enhance fairness and resilience. This Act, which replaces the European Union Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), provides for new agricultural support schemes post-Brexit, as well as a range of powers to implement new approaches to farm payments and land management. A stronger GCA combined with a code for supply chain fair dealing (as provided for in the AA) may improve fairness in the agricultural supply chain and on the operation of agricultural markets most notably through enhanced transparency requirements.

5. How effectively has the Government conducted reviews of contractual practice in specific sectors, for example in the pig and dairy sectors, and should other sectors be reviewed?

In 2016, the Government undertook a statutory review of the GCA's performance and effectiveness, while calling for evidence on the extension of the GCA's powers. The review, published in 2017, concluded that the GCA is regarded as an ['exemplary modern regulator with an international reputation'](#), and so Ministers consider an extension to the remit of the GCA unnecessary. In 2020, the government decided against an amendment of replacement to the Groceries Code Adjudicator (Permitted Maximum Financial Penalty) Order 2015, which provides the maximum financial penalty the GCA may impose. The possibility of a penalty is seen by the GCA as an important element of its collaborative approach. Equally, the current GCA does not believe it is necessary for the Secretary of State to make an Order limiting the information which the GCA may consider when deciding whether to investigate (s.5 (11)), as it could affect the effectiveness of proceedings.

Vulnerable supply chains - exacerbated post-Brexit by diverging regulations, shortage of labour and new international agreements - as well as the cost-of-living crisis and sudden changes in consumer behaviours and preferences create significant challenges for the groceries sector, with 91% of suppliers requesting at least one Cost Price Increase (CPI) in the past 12 months ([GCA Annual Survey 2023](#)). The GCA cannot advise suppliers who have a dispute with a designated retailer about whether the retailer has breached the Code. This is because the GCA may be

asked to arbitrate between the supplier and the retailer or may need to launch an investigation. However, the GCA team will often be able to direct suppliers to the relevant parts of the Code.

As a result, the dispute resolution mechanism provided for by the GCA appears unsatisfactory. There is recent evidence that suppliers prefer to pursue civil litigation instead of making recourse to the GCA for two main reasons: 1) litigation before civil courts would allow compensation claims for loss of business - an option that is not provided under the GCA; and 2) suppliers associate complaints to the GCA with likely reputational and business damages, discouraging other retailers from potential future working collaborations.

Food prices, security and fairness

6. What is the relationship between food production costs, food prices and retail prices? How have recent movements in commodity prices and food-price inflation been reflected in retail prices?

Food production costs, food prices, and retail prices are all interconnected within the complex system of the food supply chain. Food production costs are involved in growing, harvesting, and processing food products. This includes the cost of energy, fertilisers, raw materials, labour, equipment, transportation, and other operational expenses. It can also include the cost of complying with various regulations and standards, such as those related to food safety, environmental impact, etc. Food prices refers to the price at which the food product is sold from the producers to the next stage in the supply chain (like wholesalers or retailers). Food prices are greatly influenced by food production costs. In other words, when the cost of production goes up, food prices typically go up as well. They are also impacted by factors like supply and demand, market competition, and government policies. Retail prices are the prices at which the end consumer purchases the food product from the retailer. Retail prices are influenced by the price the retailer paid for the product, as well as the retailer's operating costs, desired profit margin, and market factors, such as competition and consumer demand.

Movements in commodity prices and food-price inflation can significantly impact retail prices. Commodity prices are a major component of food production costs. When commodity prices rise, it becomes more expensive to produce food, which often leads to higher food prices. This cost increase is typically passed on to consumers in the form of higher retail prices. The relationship between commodity prices, food prices, and retail prices is not always one-to-one. The impact of commodity price fluctuations on retail prices can be buffered by various factors, including supply chain efficiency (more efficient supply chains can absorb cost increases without passing them on to consumers); retail competition (if the retail market is highly competitive, retailers may choose to absorb cost increases rather than risk losing customers by raising prices); and price elasticity (depending on how sensitive consumers are to price changes (a concept known as 'price elasticity'), retailers may choose to absorb cost increases to maintain sales volume).

In recent months, we have seen considerable fluctuations in commodity prices due to various factors such as climate change, geopolitical events, trade policies, and market speculation. These fluctuations often translate into food-price inflation, which is then reflected in higher retail prices. However, the extent to which these increases are passed on to consumers can vary widely depending on the factors mentioned above.

7. What are the consequences of current relationships in the supply chain for:

a. risk-sharing

The structure of the food supply chain often results in an uneven distribution of risk. Small-scale farmers and other primary producers often bear the brunt of risk factors like weather, diseases, price volatility, and changes in consumer preferences. Meanwhile, larger entities higher up in the chain, like processors and retailers, are often better insulated from these risks due to their size, diversified product lines, and greater market power.

b. prices paid and profit margins of farmers, food manufacturers and other suppliers

The balance of power in the supply chain also impacts prices paid to producers and their profit margins. Farmers, especially small-scale ones, often receive a small fraction of the retail price of their products due to their weak bargaining position relative to large buyers (like processors and retailers). This dynamic can squeeze farmer profit margins and make it difficult for them to invest in improvements to their operations.

c. prices for consumers

Retail prices for consumers are influenced by a variety of factors including commodity prices, costs at each stage of the supply chain, and the level of competition among retailers. While efficiency improvements in the supply chain can help reduce consumer prices, consolidation among retailers and other supply chain entities, like commodity traders or suppliers of fertilisers, can potentially lead to higher prices.

d. quality

The relationships within the supply chain can influence the quality of products that reach consumers. If there are issues in the supply chain, such as poor handling, inadequate storage conditions, or delays in distribution, it can impact the freshness and overall quality of the products. Lack of coordination and communication between different stages of the supply chain can lead to quality issues, such as product defects, inconsistent standards, or compromised safety measures. Additionally, if there are limited options for sourcing products within the supply chain, it can limit consumer choice and access to high-quality products.

The current relationships in the UK's food supply chain play a critical role in determining food quality. A robust regulatory framework is in place, overseen by the Food Standards Agency, to ensure food safety and quality ([Food Standards Agency, 2021](#)). This system includes routine inspections, traceability systems, and stringent safety measures, all of which are designed to maintain high quality standards.

However, the increasing complexity of the supply chain, particularly with respect to imports, can create challenges in maintaining quality. The UK's departure from the EU and subsequent trade deals might impact these standards, depending on the terms agreed. Some concerns have been raised about the risk of lower-quality food imports from countries with less stringent regulations, which could potentially undermine domestic standards.

e. healthy food for consumers

The current relationships in the UK's food supply chain also impact the availability of healthy food for consumers. The diversity of food products available in the UK, thanks to its intricate supply chain, allows consumers access to a wide variety of food choices.

However, the supply chain also plays a role in the prevalence of processed and High-Fat, Sugar, and Salt (HFSS) foods. The widespread availability and promotion of these items, often driven by commercial interests within the supply chain, contribute to public health concerns, such as obesity and heart disease.

Efforts are being made to shift the supply chain towards healthier, more sustainable food, including governmental initiatives like the Childhood Obesity Plan. But progress can be slow, given the many competing interests and the global nature of the food supply chain.

f. animal welfare and the environment

The pressure to reduce costs and increase efficiency in the food supply chain can have negative impacts on animal welfare and the environment. Intensive farming practices can compromise animal welfare, while practices such as overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, deforestation for agricultural land, and overfishing can harm the environment. However, consumer demand and regulatory pressure can also drive improvements in these areas.

g. competition between retailers?

The structure of the supply chain can have significant implications for competition among retailers. Consolidation among suppliers can reduce competition and give more power to a few key players, potentially leading to higher prices and less choice for consumers. On the other hand, a competitive retail landscape can drive innovation, efficiency, and price reduction.

8. Does the structure of the UK food supply chain support overall domestic food security (both self-sufficiency and the availability of imported foods)?

The UK imports around 46% of the total food consumption and is a net importer of food. The reliance on imported food varies depending on the type of food and time of the year. Although the UK imports food from a variety of countries and region, 70% of food and live animal imports are sourced from the European Union ([UK: Food Security Report 2021](#)). This leaves the UK vulnerable to shocks (for example, climate related shocks) in the countries or

regions of origin of imported food. This vulnerability is more acute in seasons when the UK relies more heavily on imports of food. For example, the droughts in Spain and Morocco in early 2023 resulted in a shortage of salad produce in the UK. The vulnerability of the UK food supply chain has been compounded by Brexit. Non-tariff barriers on imports from the EU post Brexit are estimated to have contributed around 30% to food inflation in the UK ([Centre for Economic Performance, 2023](#)). The increase in food prices due to Brexit is likely to further increase once the UK starts imposing border controls and inspection fees on imports from the EU.

The UK may also be vulnerable to indirect shocks, in third countries for example, when these result in increases in global food prices. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many countries have imposed restrictions on the exports of food and fertilisers, particularly the exports of key staples such as wheat, rice, and soybean. According to the [World Bank](#), these restrictions pushed global food prices by 9% or more.

The challenges facing domestic food production in the UK are compounded by the need to transition to more sustainable practices and to achieve net zero, the uncertainty related to government support after the exit of the UK from the Common Agricultural policy and the risks associated with international trade agreements that allow market access to products with standards lower than those produced domestically. These challenges are made worse by a structure of the supply chain that lacks transparency and where value and costs are not shared fairly across the chain.

Affordable and healthy food

9. How successfully are supermarkets promoting affordable and healthy eating in the current high food inflation environment and what steps could they take to increase the take-up and affordability of healthy options? How are promotions, such as multi-buy offers, supporting healthy eating including for those on low incomes, and also affecting levels of food waste?

- Inflation in food and non-alcoholic beverages have seen a reported 17.4% rise in the year to June 2023 ([OFNS](#)) which has made it difficult to support healthy eating, especially in the poorest communities of the nation where food affordability and poor health are inextricably linked ([The Broken Plate, 2022](#)). However, measures that have been reportedly implemented include:
 - **Promotions and discounts on healthy products:** Supermarkets are running promotions and discounts on healthy food items, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy products, to encourage consumers to make healthier choices. They are highlighting reduced prices and special offers on nutritious items through in-store signage, flyers, online platforms, and loyalty programs.
 - **Expanded range of affordable options:** Supermarkets are increasing their range of affordable and own-brand products, providing consumers with a wider selection of budget-friendly choices for healthy eating. They focus on offering affordable alternatives to popular branded products, including 'basic' range or 'value' range options, which can be lower in price but still meet quality standards.
 - **Collaboration with local suppliers:** Supermarkets are partnering with local farmers and producers to source locally grown or produced food, which can reduce transportation costs and make fresh and healthy products more accessible and affordable. They may highlight these local collaborations to promote the availability of locally sourced, sustainable, and affordable options to customers.
 - **Emphasis on waste reduction:** Supermarkets are taking steps to reduce food waste by implementing initiatives such as discounted "wonky" or imperfect produce, which may have minor cosmetic imperfections but are still perfectly good to eat ([Grocery Gazette](#)). They are also promoting the use of leftovers and providing recipe ideas and tips for reducing food waste, enabling consumers to save money while making nutritious meals.

Nutritional labelling and information

Supermarkets are in general following nutritional labelling guidelines and providing clear nutritional labelling on products, helping consumers make informed choices about the nutritional content of the items they purchase. Some of them also provide nutritional information and healthy eating tips through various channels such as their own publications and online platforms. A 2020 study by University of Bristol has confirmed the positive impacts that provision of nutrition labelling information has brought to consumers. The study shows that, as a result of the labelling, consumers improved their diet quality by reducing intakes of calorie, saturated fat, sugar and sodium. However, there is still room for improvement for the current nutritional labelling policy guidelines. In recent years there have been two deaths caused by allergic reaction after consuming food products from Pret a Manger. Food businesses including Pret a Manger do not intend to mislead consumers but the absence of a particular allergen in the nutritional information provided on the food items that caused the above deaths clearly shows more needs to be done to provide 100% clear information for allergy suffering consumers to act upon. For example, the terms such as “free-from” and “vegan” can be potentially misleading. Urgent policy decisions on how to provide 100% clear allergic information in the nutritional labelling are needed.

Multi-buy offers

Multi-buy offers are often happening on less healthy food items such as those high in sugar, fat and salt. The attraction to consumers of these offers have resulted in unhealthy eating as well as food waste. Nevertheless, multi-buy offers and other promotional methods such as price discounts can also be used on healthy food items such as fruit and vegetable. Promotion and price are two of the 4Ps of marketing theory and time and time again these two Ps have been proved to be effective in increasing purchases. However multi-buy offers can also contribute to food waste no matter whether the food items bought are healthy or less healthy. In this regard, greater efforts on consumer education on the private and social cost of food waste are needed. Consumers should also be educated on how to exercise constraints in their consumption behaviours.

Supermarkets can take several steps to promote affordable and healthy eating in the current high food inflation environment:

- **Clear and consistent unit pricing:** Making unit pricing prominent, legible, and consistent both in-store and online, allowing consumers to compare the best value across different brands and packaging sizes and ensuring that unit pricing is readily available for all products, including promotional offers that will help consumers make informed decisions.
- **Provide clear unit pricing for promotional offers:** Display unit pricing for promotional offers in-store and online, enabling consumers to determine whether the offers truly provide the best value compared to similar items. Ensure that unit pricing is provided for special offers included in loyalty card programs.
- **Offer a basic range of essential budget lines:** Stock a range of affordable, healthy everyday choices in all stores, with particular emphasis on locations where support is most needed. Provide a basic range of essential budget products that are consistently available and support healthier choices for consumers.
- **Adapt online delivery services to increase affordability:** Review minimum spend requirements for online deliveries to accommodate households in areas with limited supermarket access. Coordinate and optimize delivery slots to priority places, ensuring that delivery costs are reasonable and do not pose a barrier for low-income households.
- **Tailor marketing budgets and promotions to support those in need:** Shift marketing budgets to invest disproportionately in communities and households facing the greatest financial challenges. Target promotions, loyalty card benefits, vouchers, and offers to specific areas or demographics most likely to be struggling financially.
- **Provide additional support and link to government schemes:** Offer additional support or "top-ups" to low-income individuals and families who are eligible for government support programs like the Healthy Start

scheme. Collaborate with relevant government schemes and ensure eligible customers are informed about the availability and benefits of these programs.

- **Promote the uptake of government support schemes:** Raise awareness and encourage the uptake of government support schemes like Healthy Start and Best Start Foods, particularly in areas with low levels of uptake. Educate customers about the benefits and eligibility criteria of these schemes to ensure that those who can benefit from them are aware and actively participating.
- **Offer straightforward price reductions instead of multi-buy offers:** Focus on providing clear and direct price reductions on healthy and sustainable food items, including fruits and vegetables. Move away from multi-buy offers that may require larger initial spending and potentially lead to more food waste.
- **Increase promotions on healthy and sustainable foods:** Implement more promotions and discounts on healthy and sustainable food options, building on evidence showing such promotions' positive impact. Highlight reduced prices for items like fruits and vegetables to encourage consumers to make healthier choices.
- **Public Reporting on Food Sales:** Information on healthy and sustainable food sales should be reported for transparency. Currently only one major retailer reports this information. ([The Broken Plate 2022](#))
- **Promote Competitive Markets:** Work to pass on any falling production costs to consumers and to ensure correct marketing competition practices are enforced. ([GOV.UK](#)).

10. What challenges do low-income households face, in both urban and rural areas, in terms of accessing affordable and healthy food from a choice of retailers?

Accessing affordable and healthy food is one of the main challenges faced by low-income households. Some of these challenges have been highlighted in recent research by Dr Dr Özlem Ögtem-Young ([Understanding the Financial Lives and Vulnerabilities of Castle Vale Community Housing Tenants](#)) which explored how the current cost-of-living crisis impacts the everyday lives of people from low-income/financially vulnerable households living in one of the most deprived urban areas of England:

- **Combined with the stress of meeting their everyday essential needs and paying off debts under the cost-of-living-crisis,** food insecurity exacerbated physical, and mental health problems for people whose lives have already been shaped by poverty and the multiple inequalities of class, gender, health, education, income, age, etc.
- **Finding it hard to access affordable food** respondents in the study frequently reported 'going without'. They cut down on meals to manage food costs and to feed their children/families. Food unaffordability also harmed their sense of worth and engendered feelings of embarrassment and depression leading to isolation/withdrawal from social relations with their mental health deteriorating.
- They reported the process of **going shopping as being a stressful event as they 'count every penny'**, searching for the cheapest food available in supermarkets. They were no longer able to afford meat, fish, or even fresh fruit and vegetables and opted for low-priced products such as 'cheap white bread', 'tins', and 'cheap processed food'. There was an acute worry about the limited and poor nature of their diet and the negative health consequences of having to keep food costs down and pay for other essentials and service their debts (mostly consisting of utility, council tax and rent arrears).
- Most people in the study reported that they accessed foodbanks. In line with previous research (Garthwaite, K. (2016). [Hunger pains: Life inside foodbank Britain](#), Bristol, Policy Press), strong feelings of 'embarrassment', 'shame', and 'hurt' are frequently expressed by respondents accessing foodbanks. Some respondents chose to go without food altogether rather than access a foodbank. There were also concerns about the lack of variety and the level of nutrients in the food available in foodbanks. Therefore, keeping a healthier diet and lifestyle became unattainable. The food in foodbanks was reported to be often insufficient for people with specific dietary requirements or those with certain health problems, making it difficult to manage their health conditions.
- The lack of cheaper alternative supermarkets or grocery shops in proximity to local areas was also an issue. This was particularly challenging for older people and those with health or mobility problems. They reported having to rely on friends and families to take them shopping due to the lack of their own vehicles and limited access to public transport.

- Therefore, encouraging local grocery stores and supermarkets to offer cheaper options within the local community and having shorter distances between shops can help those who cannot travel easily to supermarkets in their area to buy food/other essentials. This should be considered a top priority, for tackling the root causes of poverty, and food insecurity. Food insecurity has implications for wider society as it impacts negatively on physical and mental health, personal relationships, productivity, and employment opportunities. Improved government policies and the implementation of more sustainable and ethical food redistribution models (Kennedy, K. and Snell, C. [How can Supermarkets help end food insecurity?](#) 2021) by supermarkets are key to reducing food insecurity.

11. What measures could be taken by central and local government, and others, to enhance cooking skills to reduce reliance on processed food and improve access to self-grown food, in particular for lower income households? What challenges do such ambitions face given the pressures of modern living?

Enhancing cooking skills and improving access to self-grown food, particularly among lower-income households, are significant components of public health strategies worldwide. The following are suggested measures:

- **Public Education Campaigns:** Both central and local governments can fund and implement public education campaigns that emphasize the importance of cooking skills, nutrition education, and the health risks associated with processed foods. For example, Public Health England's "Change4Life" campaign provides practical advice to families on healthier eating and cooking ([Public Health England](#)).
- **Cooking Skills Programs:** Government can offer cooking classes, especially to lower-income households. These programs can teach fundamental cooking techniques, meal planning, and budgeting for groceries. One successful example of this is Jamie Oliver's Ministry of Food program, which showed improvements in participants' dietary habits ([Flego et al., 2014](#)).
- **Community Gardening Initiatives:** Local governments can allocate land for community gardens, especially in urban areas. These gardens can provide lower-income households with access to fresh produce, which can also foster a sense of community. The success of the "Detroit Urban Gardening Movement" illustrates the potential impact of these initiatives ([White, 2011](#)).
- **Farm-to-School Programs:** Government can support programs that connect local farmers with schools to provide fresh produce for school meals. Such programs can also involve students in gardening activities, which can improve their understanding and appreciation of healthy food ([Robinson-O'Brien et al., 2009](#)).
- **Subsidising Fresh Produce:** Governments can make fresh, unprocessed food more affordable by subsidising the cost, especially for lower-income households. This could involve vouchers for fresh produce or targeted subsidies for these foods within existing aid programs.
- **Legislation and Regulation:** Governments could introduce policies that restrict the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children, similar to those in Chile, which have shown promise in improving dietary habits ([Corvalan et al., 2018](#)).

Challenges in achieving these ambitions given the pressures of modern living include:

- **Cost and affordability:** Healthy and fresh food options can be more expensive compared to processed and fast foods. Low-income households may struggle to afford the necessary ingredients for nutritious meals. The cost of cooking equipment and kitchen supplies can also pose a financial barrier to acquiring the tools needed for home cooking.
- **Marketing and availability of processed foods:** Processed foods are often heavily marketed, easily accessible, and designed for convenience. The influence of advertising and the widespread availability of processed foods can make it challenging for individuals, particularly those with limited knowledge and resources, to resist the appeal and convenience of these options.
- **Time constraints:** Modern lifestyles often involve busy schedules, multiple jobs, and caregiving responsibilities, leaving little time for meal planning, shopping, and cooking. Finding the time to learn and practice cooking skills can be difficult for individuals with limited availability.
- **Lack of knowledge and confidence in cooking:** Many individuals, including those from low-income households, may lack basic cooking skills and knowledge of nutrition. Limited exposure to cooking and inadequate education on healthy meal preparation can hinder their ability to make informed choices and confidently prepare nutritious meals.

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