

# FOOD, FARMING AND COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION - WRITTEN EVIDENCE (FDO0108)

## 1. Summary

- 1.1. To add what we hope will be a fresh perspective to their Lordship's inquiry, we are basing our responses on the latest findings from our citizen engagement project, The [Food Conversation](#).
- 1.2. In recent years, attempts by the government to change anything about the way food works – most recently with the National Food Strategy – have faltered. This is, in part, because of a perception that citizens don't want change to the way we grow, make, buy and eat food. **The Food Conversation aims to provide a well-evidenced view of what citizens really think about food.** Citizens are exploring which food policies they would support and prioritise, examining the complexities of the issues, and debating the trade-offs we might have to accept for change to happen.
- 1.3. We started The Food Conversation in 2023 through a series of workshops with a representative group of citizens in Birmingham and Cambridge, and it is now continuing around the UK throughout the rest of 2024. The whole process is designed to be easy to understand and engaging, so that everyone – no matter what their background or interest – can participate. Nonetheless, it is methodologically robust, enabling in-depth conversation and deliberation (similar to approaches developed for citizen assemblies).
- 1.4. As we bring The Food Conversation to communities across the UK, we are hearing a clear message that how we grow, make, and eat food just isn't working for citizens. The public are telling us they want change.
- 1.5. Our [initial findings](#) show that the **public overwhelmingly back state intervention to improve the food system.** They don't worry about a nanny state. Instead, citizens want sensible policy decisions that protect people and planet, and they want powerful (often multinational) food businesses to be more accountable.
- 1.6. What we are hearing through The Conversation has also been affirmed by nationwide polling in [September 2023](#) and [March 2024](#) by [More in Common](#), showing wide agreement and support for food policy interventions – and, importantly, that this support crosses societal and political party lines.

- 1.7. We are finding there are **several policies with strong public support**, including (among others):
- **Visible political leadership on food**
  - **Stronger standards for publicly procured food, especially for children's settings and schools**
  - **A 'polluter pays' approach for environmental *and* health harms**
  - **A ban on junk food advertising**
  - **Targets for reducing ultra-processed foods on the high street and in shops**
  - **Support for people and farmers to enable a transition to healthier and more sustainable food, especially so those on low incomes can afford healthy food.**
- 1.8. Through a range of methods, including robust citizen workshops, polling and local inquiries, The Food Conversation will be the biggest and most ambitious deliberation about food in the UK – and we will be delighted to share our findings with you as they develop.

## **Evidence from The Food Conversation in response to the Inquiry's Questions**

### **2. Response to Questions 2 and 3 on trends and drivers of food, diet and obesity**

- 2.1. One of the drivers of obesity and food-related ill health we heard most about from citizens in The Food Conversation was the influence of the food environment. Citizens reflected that it was hard for them and their children to eat well in their local area – with the prevalence of fast-food outlets on the streets and ultra-processed food in shops, and when they were being bombarded with junk food advertising.
- 2.1.1. *If I really left it in my children's hands, they would probably be eating junk food every day. Because of the advertisement, because it's just convenient. And just driving in the car, you see a McDonalds or a KFC. The majority of buildings that have been derelict are turned into fast food restaurants. -- Sophia, a mum from Birmingham*
- 2.1.2. *It's hard for people to buy healthy food because it's more expensive and not so readily available. Unhealthy food, on the other hand, is cheaper and more accessible. It's also manufactured with a lot of sugar and salt, which means it's more appetising and addictive – especially for children. There's pressure from society and from advertising. We need the government to act. -- Vania, a mum from Cambridgeshire said*

2.2. They also felt the odds were stacked against them when it came to eating healthy food – and saw big food companies as obvious winners in the system.

2.2.1. *The majority of people are trying to eat food that is healthier and more sustainable, but the odds are stacked against them. We need to bring this system in order, to ensure there is fairness from farm to fork.* – Yasmeen from Glasgow

2.2.2. *I couldn't believe that this government is spending 40 million pounds on something called Wegovy, which is a new drug to reduce obesity ... So, since we can't stop these huge multinational corporations from reducing their fats and sugars and salts, we'll treat the symptoms and not the cause? It's incredibly frustrating. And I just think, what's going on? This is an upside-down world we're living in.* – Leslie, a retiree from Birmingham

### 3. Response to Questions 5, 6 and 7 on Ultra-Processed Foods

3.1. Our early findings show citizens want tighter controls on the availability and marketing of UPFs. They feel hoodwinked by UPFs and puzzled by the fact that food in spaces like hospitals and schools isn't chosen because of its healthiness or sustainability.

3.2. They were not confused by the definition of UPFs – for many it seemed intuitive – and their manifestos from the **citizen workshops call for government action and legislation to “fix UPFs.”** This included transparency on the ingredients within UPFs, more information for citizens on the harms of UPF consumption and targets to substantially reduce UPFs in shops within the next few years. In our nationwide polling from September 2023, 74% of citizens wanted a target set for reducing UPFs in shops and on the high street.

3.3. There was also widespread agreement in the workshops that **businesses should pay for the damage UPFs cause through a polluter pays type policy.** One participant said, *“There should be the UPF tax ... That money should be ring-fenced for the same area, so tax UPF and use the money for better food.”*

3.3.1. Likewise, David from Berkshire said: *“I worry about how deceptive foods can be. Ultra-processed food, that’s the buzzword now, everyone knows they exist. And everyone knows they’re not good for you. But I’ve struggled to recognise what is healthy food and what’s not... They look like they’re made from the same thing.”*

3.3.2. Kerri from London said: *“I don't think the government is really putting two and two together about how food and diet is related to the NHS, for example. Ultra-processed food is causing so*

*much preventable illness, things like diabetes, and that particularly affects people in low-income areas."*

#### 4. Response to question 8 on role of the food and drink industry

- 4.1. We are hearing that citizens are surprised that a small handful of companies control large parts of the food system. They are also concerned about how the activities of big food companies are damaging the environment and people's health. This was reflected in the nationwide polling. Citizens saw big food companies as the clear winners in the system: 72% thought big food companies get a good deal – only 8% thought the average food shopper gets a good deal.
- 4.2. Instead, citizens are telling us they want government to regulate big businesses and are supportive of polluter pays policies to hold big food companies to account, with one participant saying, *"the collective optimistic vision would be that the companies that are doing the damage are paying for it."*
- 4.3. Talu, a student from Birmingham said, *"We need more regulation of the large food companies that dominate the market... they have too much power and leverage to do whatever they want. We need more government involvement to regulate them so they can provide healthier food for us and they can take better care of the environment. As people we really do expect more from our politicians."*

#### 5. Response to question 10 on food and drink policy governance

- 5.1. Through the Food Conversation, we're hearing that citizens want visible political leadership when it comes to food, and a serious plan of action that brings together the different parts of government, building on the National Food Strategy. These findings rang true across voters for all political parties, with people expecting those in power to work hard on the difficult issues – with no fears of nanny statism.
- 5.2. Specifically on policy governance, citizens were supportive of the strong structures to hold the food system, and the government, to account. They supported the idea of creating an independent ombudsman for food, holding the government to account, and creating a Minister for Food.
- 5.3. One participant said: *"There are something like 16 different departments. Could there not be a possibility of a Ministry for Food or minister for food to coordinate it altogether? The right arm seems to hit the left arm and the right leg seems to kick the left leg."*
- 5.4. Another said, *"Don't be scared to regulate and mandate [...] The government [is] scared to be seen as a nanny state. I think that's a cop out. They need to regulate, and under that can be*

*education standards and all that but yeah, first and foremost, there needs to be policy."*

5.5. Nat from Sheffield said *"I want the government to start viewing food policy as a really important area. And for it not to be dealt with as a fragmented issue that's divided up amongst different government departments, that there actually is some centralised decision making."*

## 6. Response to question 11 and 12 on policy tools

6.1. What action do citizens think will create change? We are hearing broad [support from citizens](#) for:

- **Visible political leadership on food**
- **Stronger standards for publicly procured food, especially for children's settings and schools**
- **Support for people and farmers to enable a transition to healthier and more sustainable food.**

6.2. They support actions which will help to level the playing field, like **polluter pays** - not just for environmental harms - they think that companies producing unhealthy food should also pay fines for damaging health. Similarly, they support **strong restrictions on junk food advertising**, which go beyond the current proposed 9pm watershed.

6.3. Importantly, citizens considered what making some of these changes will mean in their everyday lives, and are **willing to accept change to achieve a fairer and more sustainable food system**, even if it meant less food choice or higher food prices - as long as people who need help to pay higher prices are supported in doing so. In particular, they say that UPFs and foods that are not ethically or sustainably produced should be limited - especially those intensively produced.

6.4. These findings are backed by nationwide polling, in [September 2023](#) and [March 2024](#), which found that citizens want:

### **6.4.1. A healthier and more sustainable food environment**

- 84% want stronger standards for food in hospitals and schools
- 74% want a target for reducing ultra-processed foods in shops & high street
- 68% want a junk food ban on advertising across TV, streaming & social media

### **6.4.2. The government to use taxes and regulations to hold big food companies to account, including the polluter pays principle**

- 79% want fines imposed on food producers that pollute the environment
- 78% want regulation to protect against industrial farming that harms nature & countryside

### **6.4.3. Support for citizens to eat healthily and sustainably**

- 60% want greater intervention to protect children from unhealthy food and UPFs
- 79% want the government to support people on low incomes to afford healthy food
- 72% want government to provide more information so that shoppers know which food choices are having the biggest impact on the planet

### **6.4.4. Visible political leadership across government**

- 68% of the public say it is the government's job to make healthy food affordable
- 78% think we need big changes to food in the UK  
75% think that the government is not doing enough to ensure everyone can afford healthy food' (only 3% say gov is doing too much)
- 80% of the public ranked access to 'healthy food' as vital – second only to access to healthcare.

## **7. About FFCC and The Food Conversation**

- 7.1. The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) is an independent charity, set up in 2017 to help shape the future of food and farming, land use and the countryside. Our purpose is to bring together people and ideas from different perspectives to find the practical and radical solutions which also tackle the climate, nature, health and economic crises of our time. We curate the latest research and evidence, involve citizens in deliberations, and tell the inspiring stories of people taking action in their businesses and communities. We are working together for a world where healthy food is everyone's business, farming is a force for positive change, the countryside works for everyone and resources flow to where the work is needed.
- 7.2. Of all the elements of our economy, one of the things we cannot manage without is food. It is a basic human need, at the centre of some of the biggest challenges we face. Headlines about food security, diet-related ill health, the impact on nature and climate of food production, food bank usage (and more) dominate the media and are part of our daily discourse.
- 7.3. Over the last 10-15 years there have been many new ideas and policy interventions suggested to tackle issues such as obesity and diet-related ill health. Despite work such as the Foresight report on obesity (2007), the People's Food Policy (2017) and the National Food Strategy (2021), action has been hampered by a narrative that 'people don't want a nanny state telling them what to eat' and 'all people want is cheap food'. We set out to ask whether this narrative was correct and understand what people really think about food.
- 7.4. FFCC started The Food Conversation in 2023 through a series of pilot deliberative dialogues with representative groups of citizens

in Birmingham and Cambridgeshire, and it is now continuing around the UK throughout the rest of 2024.

- 7.5. Through a series of workshops, citizens spend 20+ hours together discussing and debating a range of policy solutions to solve challenges in the food system. They listen to experts with different perspectives and explore case studies, examining not whether the way food works now needs to change, but how.
- 7.6. The citizens are representative of the population in their area, with different age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, political leanings and ethnicities, recruited through an independent Sortition Foundation postcode lottery selection process.
- 7.7. **More about The Food Conversation and how it works**  
[thefoodconversation.uk/faq](https://thefoodconversation.uk/faq)

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