

Snapshot: UK sustainable food systems in the spotlight



Food Ethics Council

The task in hand

How is the UK really doing on food sustainability? Our food systems have huge impacts on people, animals and the planet. When considering this range of – positive and negative – impacts in the round, is the UK a global leader? If not, why not? And how can it rapidly rise up the rankings? These are just some of the questions we set out to explore.

The latest Food Sustainability Index – developed by BCFN and the Economist Intelligence Unit – provides a snapshot of how countries are performing. The role of the Food Ethics Council is as independent commentator – to shine a spotlight on the food sustainability of the UK and to lead a conversation about how to overcome ethical concerns it raises.

As with any index that is trying to compare a complex set of issues across very different countries, it is of course possible to pick holes with the indicators used and the weightings. Nonetheless, we believe the FSI is a valuable index – providing a unique basket of measures that when taken overall, give a good sense of how countries are performing, relative to one another.

It is not feasible for a country to lead the way in every area – from food loss and waste, to sustainable agriculture, to nutritional challenges, and beyond. But it is important to aspire to be a global leader, albeit not ruthlessly striving to be top of the rankings at *any cost*. What we want to see is a *race to goodness*, whereby the UK is striving hard to perform as well as possible and to continuously improve, but in doing so is also

encouraging other countries to do likewise. In that way, the overall bar will be raised.

The FSI contains 89 sub-indicators (or sub-sub indicators) under three main ‘domains’ and in 2018 assesses 67 countries. A simplified version of the FSI’s framework used is shown below.

Table 1: Simplified version of the FSI framework. (Source: adapted from 2018 FSI)

A. Food loss and waste
1. Food loss
2. End-user food waste
B. Sustainable agriculture
1. Water
2. Land (land use, biodiversity, human capital)
3. Air (GHG emissions)
C. Nutritional challenges
1. Life quality
2. Life expectancy
3. Dietary patterns

How is the UK doing and why?

UK food sustainability in the spotlight

Overall, the UK ranks 24th out of the 67 countries included in the FSI. The FSI has included a much greater number of countries than in previous years, which is welcome. There is much the Global North can learn from the Global South, and vice versa. For the UK, it is perhaps most useful to compare the UK with peer countries e.g. high income countries and/ or countries within the EU.

If we look at a regional level, the UK is lagging a long way behind many of its European neighbours. The UK comes 16th out of 28 EU countries, which is a poor performance from one of the largest economies in the world.

“The UK’s performance on food sustainability is disappointing. With the future of food, farming, the environment, animals and our health at stake, there is an urgent need for coherence, not complacency.”

Dan Crossley

Executive Director, Food Ethics Council

Table 2: Overall ranking of EU countries included in 2018 FSI (Source: 2018 FSI)

Overall ranking	Country
1	France
2	Netherlands
3	Finland
=4	Czech Republic
=4	Denmark
6	Sweden
7	Austria
8	Hungary
9	Croatia
10	Poland
11	Germany
12	Ireland
13	Spain
14	Estonia

Overall ranking	Country
15	Portugal
16	United Kingdom
17	Italy
18	Luxembourg
19	Belgium
20	Cyprus
21	Lithuania
22	Greece
23	Romania
24	Latvia
25	Malta
26	Slovakia
27	Slovenia
28	Bulgaria

How does the UK measure up?

In the interests of balance, it is important to note that the UK comes top or equal top on a few of the indicators. These include, but are not limited to:

- The quality of policies to address food loss
- Compulsory nutrition education
- Quality of animal welfare regulation

It is right to acknowledge good performance and to celebrate these.

Overall though, the performance of the UK is extremely disappointing. The worst 'domain' for the UK is sustainable agriculture, where the UK ranks 24th out of 28 EU countries, scoring poorly on several aspects relating to the 'air' and 'water'. Indicators of poor performance extend across many different areas. To pick out just some of the many areas the UK is performing badly in:

Indicator	UK ranking out of 28 EU countries	What is needed to address this?
 <p>Prevalence of over-nourishment</p>	<p>24th</p>	<p>Bolder measures to tackle our obesogenic food environment</p>
 <p>Number of people per fast food restaurant</p>	<p>27th</p>	<p>Stronger planning legislation, particularly to prevent a mushrooming of unhealthy fast food restaurants around schools</p>
 <p>GHG emissions from agriculture</p>	<p>26th</p>	<p>A time-bound commitment to net zero GHG emissions from food and farming; pathways mapped out for how that will be achieved</p>
 <p>Diversification of agricultural system</p>	<p>=18th</p>	<p>Changes to subsidies and incentives to encourage greater diversification (to avoid overreliance on a handful of crops) plus proper support for UK horticulture</p>
 <p>Participation rate of youth in farming</p>	<p>25th</p>	<p>Work to improve the image of, and the reality, of farming - including fair pay & treatment and clear career paths for people working in food and farming</p>
 <p>Working conditions</p>	<p>=18th</p>	<p>Something equivalent in England to the (former) Agricultural Wages Board; transition to a real living wage for all; collective bargaining body for farm workers</p>

What does this tell us and how can the UK transform its position?

If the UK has aspirations to be a global leader on food sustainability, it must step up to the plate. There are some recent signs of optimism in the UK: the promise of a new food strategy, the desire to shift towards public money for (a range of) public goods and the rise of flexitarianism, to name a few.

“Replacing the current subsidy system under the EU’s CAP with a system of support that delivers a better quality of environment, sustaining food production, and other economic, social and environmental benefits presents a significant opportunity to meet the aims of the 25-year Plan and the Climate Change Act.”

Committee on Climate Change (November 2018), ‘Land use: Reducing emissions and preparing for climate change’

These must be driven forward and built on, but there are a myriad of changes needed to transform the UK’s current standing and it is not possible to set all of those out in this snapshot analysis. Here are three priorities.

1. The need to develop and implement an integrated food strategy

“The UK’s poor performance in the 2018 FSI provides conclusive evidence for the need for a bold and integrated food strategy”

Our understanding is that UK Government is planning a UK food strategy in 2019. Such a strategy is vital in order to give a clear sense of direction to all those involved in the UK’s food systems.

There is an urgent need for a bold and integrated food strategy – and it must have fairness at its heart. When considering fairness, it is important to think not just about ‘fair shares’ (equality of outcome), but also ‘fair play’ (equality of opportunity) and ‘fair say’ (autonomy and voice).

As important as the ‘what’ of any food strategy is the ‘how’ it is developed. We urge those leading the food strategy process to reach out as widely as possible and to make it inclusive, including engaging with those losing out from the UK’s current industrialised food system.

The expectation is that the Government’s food strategy will provide an overarching framework, under which will sit relevant existing plans and Bills or Acts, such as the Agriculture Bill, Fisheries Bill, 25 Year Environment Plan and Obesity Plan. Any strategy must (i) address the full range of human health and nutrition, environmental, animal welfare *and* social justice concerns relevant to food and farming; and (ii) highlight linkages and interconnections between different plans, so they reinforce each other, instead of simply being a place where separate plans reside.

2. The need for an outward-looking approach

The uncertainties around Brexit must not distract the UK from playing its part in tackling global challenges. The UK must adopt an outward-looking approach and must **lead by example in fulfilling its global responsibilities – including delivering the Sustainable Development Goals and meeting the Paris climate change commitment.**

There are lots of big questions at the moment about the future of trade relating to food and drink – from the potential risk of chlorinated chicken imports (as a ‘poster child’ for a whole range of possible low quality imports) to what the opportunities might be for UK food and drink exporters.

As of late 2018, the UK is a net food and drink importer and is heavily reliant on the EU. Countries like the Netherlands and Ireland are key countries for UK food and drink imports – and the Netherlands in particular has scored very highly in the FSI, ranking second overall.

Some of the countries that have been talked about as potential key food and drink trading partners for the UK in the future, such as Japan and Canada, rank highly in the FSI. However, other key target countries such as the USA are ranked lower than the UK in this year’s FSI.

If the idea of global responsibility is accepted, actions and policies pursued in relation to food sustainability should not harm others nor contribute to harm. It is vital therefore that the UK does not offshore the environmental and social impacts of its food imports.

3. The need for an international food sustainability learning exchange

It is vital to learn from what other countries are doing. **We advocate the development of an international food sustainability learning exchange**, where countries around the world can share inspiring best practice examples of holistic approaches to policy and practice that have a positive impact on food sustainability in the round.

For example, in November, France – top of the FSI rankings – proposed a suite of measures aimed at putting a stop by 2030 to deforestation caused by imports of non-sustainable forest or agricultural products. Brazil has a holistic set of dietary guidelines; Denmark has bold policies and targets on promoting organic food; Japan has a progressive approach to food education; and the list goes on.

There are a growing number of good news stories. Whilst it is not as simple as ‘cutting and pasting’ one policy approach from one country to another – because of different cultural contexts – nevertheless there are huge, largely untapped opportunities, for better sharing of policy ideas and approaches that contribute to fair, healthy, humane and environmentally sustainable food and farming.

Final word

All those interested in a better future for UK food and farming must not fixate only on what is wrong. Genuine leadership for the UK must involve accepting an honest assessment of the state of the UK’s food systems and being open and willing to learn from others. Our food system in the future must be based on respect for fairness, wellbeing and freedom.



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Note – this publication is from the Food Ethics Council and does not represent the views of the BCFN Foundation or the EIU.

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