

## REALITY CHECK: how is the UK doing on food sustainability? A response by the Food Ethics Council to the latest Food Sustainability Index

***“The UK’s performance in the latest Food Sustainability Index – languishing in 20<sup>th</sup> place - shows that a bold UK government response to the National Food Strategy is desperately needed”***

Dan Crossley, Executive Director, Food Ethics Council

### **‘How the Food Sustainability Index can help’**

Our food systems have major impacts – both positive and negative - on people, animals and the planet. When considering a range of social and environmental impacts in the round, how is the UK doing on food sustainability? Where is the UK doing well and where is it lagging behind? How can it seek to rise up the rankings? These are just some of the questions we explore in this short briefing note.

The latest Food Sustainability Index (‘FSI’) - developed by BCFN and Economist Impact – provides a reality check of how some countries are performing on food sustainability, using data and qualitative assessment to help cut through the rhetoric of claims by political leaders. **Sweden, Japan and Canada take first three places overall in the latest iteration of the FSI, with the UK languishing in 20<sup>th</sup> place.**

Like any index seeking to compare a complex set of issues across many countries, it is possible to pick holes with the indicators, data and weightings used. Nonetheless, we believe the FSI remains a valuable index – providing a unique basket of measures that when taken in the round, give a decent sense of how countries are performing, relative to one another. The Food Ethics Council - as independent commentator – wants to shine a spotlight on the (relative) food (un)sustainability of the UK and to encourage a conversation about how to overcome ethical concerns it raises. We are pleased to see some additional indicators we previously advocated for have been included in the latest FSI e.g. additional measures on animal welfare (e.g. intensity of livestock production).

It's not feasible for countries to lead in every area – on food loss and waste, sustainable agriculture, nutritional challenges, and beyond. But the UK should aspire to be a global leader, albeit without striving to be top of the rankings at any cost. How it moves forward is vital, particularly post EU exit as it looks to negotiate a new place in the world. We urge the UK to adopt an outward-looking internationalist approach, exchanging lessons with other countries<sup>1</sup>. Such an internationalist approach can and should involve trading globally – where it makes sense and always done fairly – but we caution against the UK rushing to negotiate free trade deals that risk undercutting food, farming and environmental standards in the UK.

As we said for the last iteration of the FSI, **we want to see a *race to goodness***, where the UK is striving to perform better and to continuously improve on food sustainability, but in doing so is also encouraging other countries to do likewise. In that way, food sustainability levels will be ratcheted up.

The FSI contains around 100 sub-indicators (and 38 indicators) under three main ‘domains’ and in 2021 assesses 78 countries, 11 more than in the previous iteration. A simplified version of the FSI’s framework used is shown below.

#### **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

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<sup>1</sup> This is what we have encouraged via our Business Forum e.g. exchanging lessons on food sustainability w/ Denmark [\[link\]](#)

### How is the UK doing and why? UK food sustainability in the spotlight

Overall, the UK ranks 20<sup>th</sup> out of the 78 countries included in the FSI. 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 i.e. high-income countries. Amongst the 34 high income countries included in the rankings, the UK comes 20<sup>th</sup>, with the highest places in the overall index all being taken by higher income countries. However, the performance of the UK, as one of the largest economies in the world and one that aspires to be a global leader, remains disappointing.

Overall ranking in FSI – high income countries only	Country
1	Sweden
2	Japan
3	Canada
4	Finland
5	Austria
6	Denmark
7	Australia
8	Netherlands
9	Estonia
10	Germany
11	Portugal
12	France
13	Poland
14	Latvia
15	South Korea
16	Italy
17	Croatia
18	Ireland
19	Czech Republic
20	United Kingdom
21	Luxembourg
22	Spain
23	Slovakia
24	Belgium
25	Cyprus
26	Hungary
27	United States
28=	Greece
28=	Lithuania
30	Slovenia
31	Israel
32	Malta
33	Saudi Arabia
34	United Arab Emirates

*Overall ranking of high-income countries included in 2021 FSI (Source: 2021 FSI)*

## How does the UK measure up?

Indicators where the UK ranked in the top 10 countries globally included:

- Food loss (but much lower on policy response to food loss)
- Food waste (but much lower on policy response to food waste)
- Sustainability of water withdrawal
- Environmental impact of agriculture on land
- Land ownership
- Animal welfare policies
- Financial access and protections for land users
- Opportunities for investing in sustainable agriculture
- Micronutrient deficiency
- Affordability of a healthy and sustainable diet
- Policy response to dietary patterns

It is right to acknowledge areas of stronger (relative) performance and to celebrate these. However, critically the UK Government should not think that it can rest on its laurels in the areas the UK is performing better on, as there is still a lot of improvement needed. Overall, the performance of the UK was again very disappointing.

The UK scored in the 'low' category on several indicators in a range of areas. To pick out just *some of* the areas the UK is performing badly in, according to the FSI:

Indicator	UK ranking amongst all countries	Some of what needs to be done to address this
Trade impact (virtual blue water net impacts)	UK ranks 76 <sup>th</sup> of 78 countries	UK pushing for high core food standards and ensuring it is <b>not</b> importing drought and offshoring its environmental footprint
Prevalence of over-nourishment	UK ranks 63 <sup>rd</sup> of 78 countries	Bolder measures to tackle our obesogenic food environment
Prevalence of insufficient physical activity	UK ranks 59 <sup>th</sup> of 78 countries	Investment in making sport and exercise accessible and fun for all, from a young age
Diet composition	UK ranks 56 <sup>th</sup> of 78 countries	Measures to encourage shifts away from ultra-processed food and to increase fresh fruit & veg consumption for all; plus stronger planning legislation to stop expansion of unhealthy fast-food restaurants e.g. around schools
Participation rate of youth in farming	UK ranks equal 67 <sup>th</sup> of 78 countries	Work to improve the image of, and reality, of farming – including fair pay & treatment + clear career paths for people working in farming and along the whole food value chain
Livestock density	UK ranks equal 57 <sup>th</sup> of 78 countries	Measures to encourage shifts away from the most intensive livestock farming

### What does this tell us?

*“The food system we have now has evolved over many years. It won’t be easy to reshape it. But time is not on our side... For our own health, and that of our planet, we must act now.”*

(Henry Dimbleby, in the foreword of The Plan, the National Food Strategy - Independent Review, 2021)

If the UK aspires to be a global leader on food sustainability, it must move beyond incremental measures and be unafraid to make interventions to put UK food systems onto a more sustainable footing. There are some positive elements in the UK on which to build – a ‘public money for public goods’ approach to incentivise sustainable farming, the development of a Good Food Nation Bill in Scotland, a possible Food Bill in Wales, the National Food Strategy in England and the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework. If measures are enshrined in legislation, these can provide invaluable strategic frameworks and bring much-needed direction at a time of huge uncertainty, not least with the UK having only recently left the EU and with the long-tail of the COVID-19 pandemic still being felt.

Around the world, there are a growing number of examples of pioneering practice, whether it’s on farms, in communities or in legislation. Whilst it is more complicated than simply ‘cutting and pasting’ one policy approach from one country to another – because of different cultural contexts – there remain huge untapped opportunities for better sharing of policy ideas and approaches when it comes to food and farming sustainability. This is one way the UK can seize the opportunity to lead.

### Final word

We urge the UK government to respond positively to the National Food Strategy in its White Paper, and to put fairness and sustainability at its heart. It should commit to new primary legislation with targets and measures to enable joined-up action with the goal of good food, for everyone, forever. Without a strong food strategy, the UK will continue to lag behind its peers. With a bold integrated food strategy, the UK can move up the global rankings on food sustainability and encourage a *race to goodness*. If we want the 2020s to be the Transformation Decade, we must act now.

January 2022