



Food Ethics Council

**Food ethics in the UK:
from small beginnings to food citizenship and beyond**
24 October 2019

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Food Justice and a fair food future*: An approach from the UK's Food Ethics Council

1 | INTRODUCTION

It was British government inaction in the mid 1990s that led to the establishment by a group of concerned citizens of the independent Food Ethics Council. The government had failed to act on a recommendation of a Ministry of Agriculture ethics committee in 1995 to establish a standing government committee to explore ethical implications of farm animal biotechnologies.¹ This led Joanne Bower, who was chair of the Farm and Food Society (since disbanded), to suggest setting up an independent council for the same purpose. She was then in her 80s. She invited Ben Mephram, who was a patron of the Farm and Food Society, to chair a group to work on the prospective council's constitution, aims, strategies and sources of funding. The group included a member of faculty from the Bristol veterinary school, a retired pharmaceutical chemist, and an environmentalist.

Ben was appointed part-time executive director of the new council in 1998. The members of the council are unpaid volunteers who act in their personal capacity but get travel expenses. Ben had just retired from a full-time academic post at Nottingham University where he had lectured and researched in the biosciences since 1968, and also developed courses in bioethics from the 1980s. However, he continued to direct the Centre for Applied Bioethics at the university, which he had established in 1993. He also edited a book in 1996, called *Food Ethics*, which was apparently the first use of this term.

The new Food Ethics Council got a 3-year grant from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which paid for his and the secretary's salaries (but only for 10 hrs a week), an office, financing of meetings and publication of reports. Ben wrote the first four of these:

- on drug use to increase productivity in animal farming;
- ethical impacts of GM crops;
- a critique of intensive animal production systems; and,
- a consideration of the nature of "sustainable agriculture."

Each report was based on the deliberations of a working party comprised of some members of the Council and some

nonmembers invited for their relevant expertise. Each member acted in a personal capacity, not as a representative of any organizations to which he or she might have belonged. Each of the reports was launched in a committee room at the House of Commons, and was generally well-received.

It was only in the year 2000 that I first became aware of and involved with the Food Ethics Council. I received a letter from Ben, writing as executive director the council, inviting me to become a member. They had seen the work I had done on the food system in the book I wrote of the same title and felt that they would like to have my perspective added to that of the others on the council. What I found particularly interesting was that this was not a council made up purely of ethics specialists and philosophers, but of people with a range of experience and backgrounds who had a long-standing interest and experience of different aspects of the food system including, obviously, some ethicists and philosophers.

2 | A PRACTICAL SYNTHESIS APPROACH TO ETHICS

When I got the letter I did not know the Food Ethics Council existed. I had not thought very much about the meaning of food ethics. I tended to do what I thought was the right thing to do. But when he explained more about what he meant and how the Council thought about ethics, I joined. As I got to know Ben and the methods of the Food Ethics Council, I very much appreciated the practical approach they took to thinking about the different ethical dilemmas involved in trying to create fair, sustainable and healthy food systems.

What is ethics? For Ben, it is about providing an explicit justification for your chosen course of action. And for each of us that comes down to a decision on what I sincerely believe I should do next based on the ethical principles guiding that decision. What are those ethical principles? Ben drew together three different philosophical and ethical traditions that people in the UK tend to use when thinking about something but most of the time do not clearly articulate them. They are:

Volume6, Issue4

November 2017

<https://doi.org/10.1002/fes3.121>

*This paper was prepared for the 1st Turkish Congress on Agricultural and Food Ethics, Ankara, March 10-11, 2017

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<https://doi.org/10.1002/fes3.121>

wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/fes3 | 1 of 6


Council members





MISSION

To accelerate the shift
towards fair food systems
that respect people, animals
and the planet



Ethical principles

Wellbeing

Autonomy/ Freedom

Justice/ Fairness



Food Justice

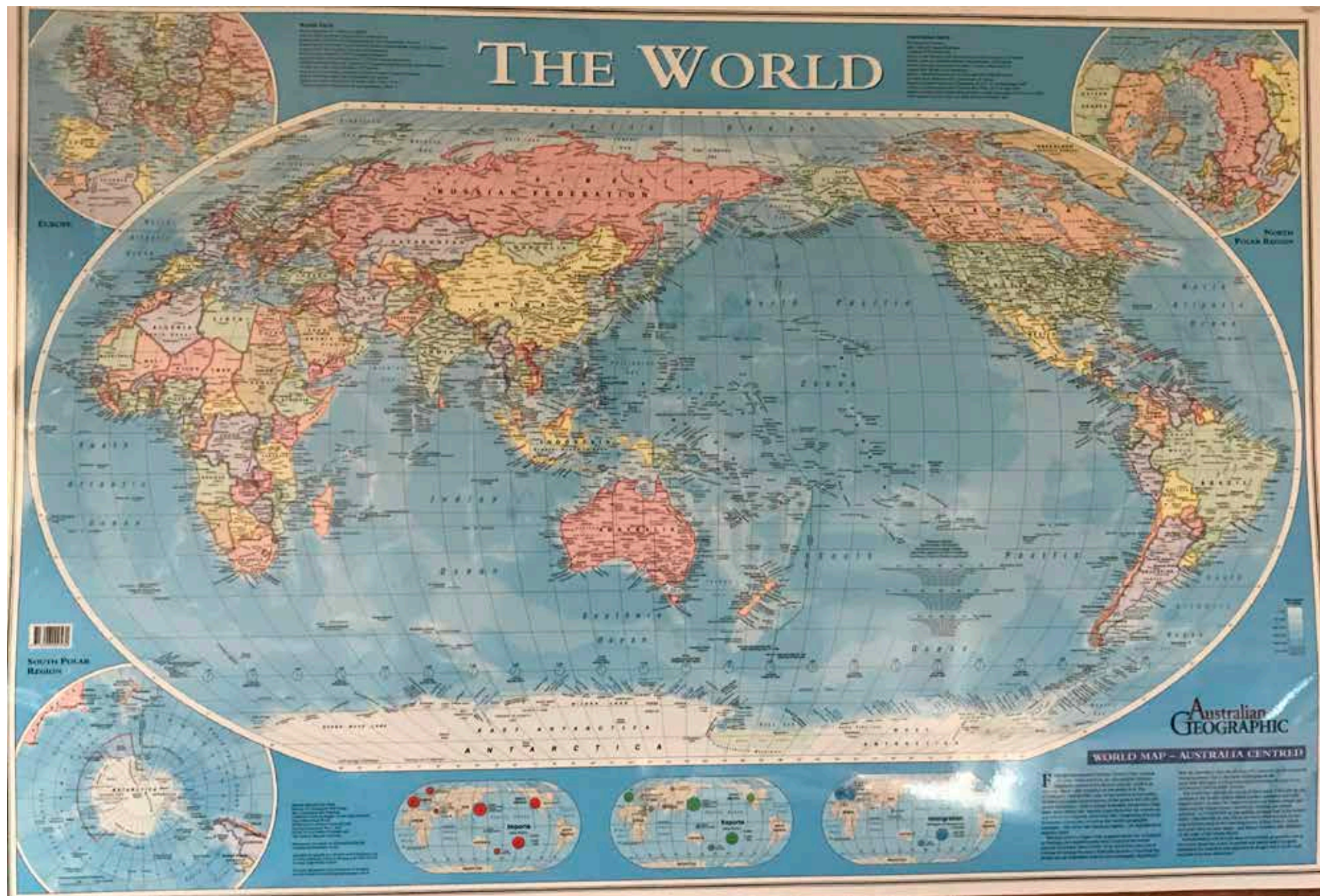
A vintage kitchen scale with a circular dial and a red needle, set against a background of a stream and trees. The scale is blue and has a wooden base. The dial has two scales: the outer scale is in grams (0 to 600g) and the inner scale is in kilograms (0 to 6kg). The needle is pointing to 0 on both scales.

The report of the Food and Fairness Inquiry

FAIR SHARES? Equality of outcomes

FAIR PLAY? Equality of opportunity

FAIR SAY? Autonomy and voice





[Home](#) | [About Us](#) | [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#)

Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015



The Well-being of Future Generations Act gives us the ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act requires public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change.

[Our Team](#)

[Future Generations Commissioner for Wales](#)

[Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#)



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Food Ethics Council



About

Get Inspired

Get Involved

Get in Touch

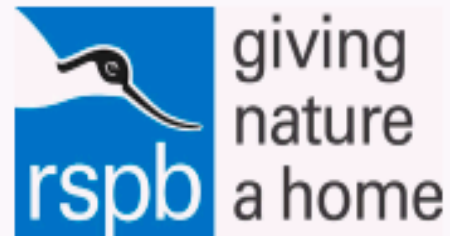
How thinking of
ourselves
differently can
change the future of
our food system



See <https://www.foodcitizenship.info/> incl. original 'Food Citizenship' report from New Citizenship Project



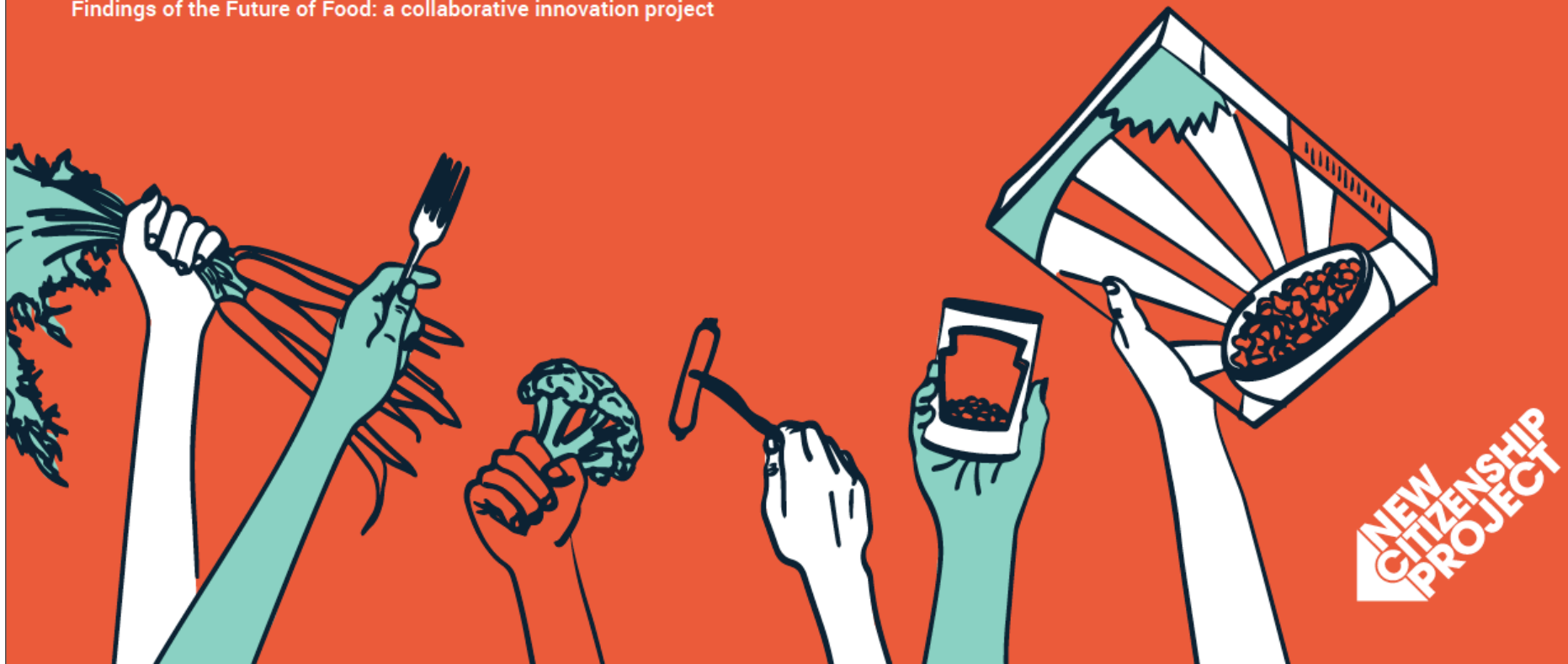
Food Ethics Council



FOOD CITIZENSHIP

How thinking of ourselves differently can
change the future of our food system

Findings of the Future of Food: a collaborative innovation project





Harnessing the power of **food citizenship**

Download at: foodcitizenship.info

A new era is emerging in today's UK food and farming sector: the era of the food citizen.

The idea that people are simply consumers at the end of a food chain is being challenged. Our identity, our role in the food and farming sector, our relationship with our food and with nature are all being reassessed, particularly as social and environmental concerns take centre-stage in the public discourse.

As food citizens, we believe in the power of people. We want to and can have a positive influence on the way that food is being produced, distributed and consumed. We are given opportunities to express our care for each other, for our health, for the environment and for animals. Importantly, we share our knowledge and our platforms so others can join us.

The dominant narrative in the UK food and farming sector today is that as individuals we are merely consumers at the end of a food chain. Daily messages tell us that being a consumer is our only source of power to influence society as a whole and, specifically, our food system. Our role is to choose between products and services, not to participate in the systems that provide us with our food. We become demotivated and cut off from the food we eat.

Research¹ shows that exposure to the word 'consumer' significantly decreases our sense of responsibility in shaping the world around us. It also decreases our trust in each other and our belief that we can be active participants in society. We have reduced concern for others. We tend to be more selfish and self-interested. As consumers, those of us with money feel disengaged while those of us without it feel disempowered. Our relationship with food is transactional.

Organisations operating within the food system can see themselves as consumers too, seeking maximum benefit for themselves, and leaving little room to cater for wider concerns for fellow citizens, animals and the planet.

This consumer identity shapes our everyday decisions, which ultimately culminate in the food systems that we have.

Food citizenship challenges the assumption that we're nothing more than consumers. Its impact cannot be underestimated. What we care about and how we feel about our role in society significantly shifts when we are treated as citizens rather than consumers. As citizens, we care about animals being treated humanely, about the wellbeing of the environment, about the livelihoods of those who grow and make our food.

Common Cause Foundation² found that most of us care *more* about things like 'helpfulness', 'equality' and 'protection of nature', than we do about 'wealth', 'public image' and 'success.' In fact, their research found that 74% of respondents place greater importance on compassionate values than selfish values.

If that's the case, why is the 'value-action' gap between caring and doing something about it still so wide? The problem is not that we don't *care*, but that we feel *powerless* to act. And when we feel powerless, we are more likely to blame others, shift responsibility onto them and ignore our own impacts. The reason for this feeling of powerlessness? The fact that we're treated as consumers, not citizens.

"Show people as one thing, only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become."

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie³

Words lead to stories. Stories told many times create new mindsets. By recognising and celebrating the food citizen in ourselves and in others we have an incredible opportunity to change the story.

1 New Citizenship Project (2014) This is the #Citizenshift: A guide to understanding & embracing the emerging era of the citizen [\[link\]](#)

2 Common Cause Foundation (2016) Perceptions Matter: The Common Cause UK Values Survey, London: Common Cause Foundation. [\[link\]](#)

3 The danger of a single story, Ted Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie [\[link\]](#)

Citizenship – an ongoing dialogue

- ‘Rights’ liberal conception
- Public Duty (republican) conception



Home

Many peoples

Much diversity

Global is local

Local is global

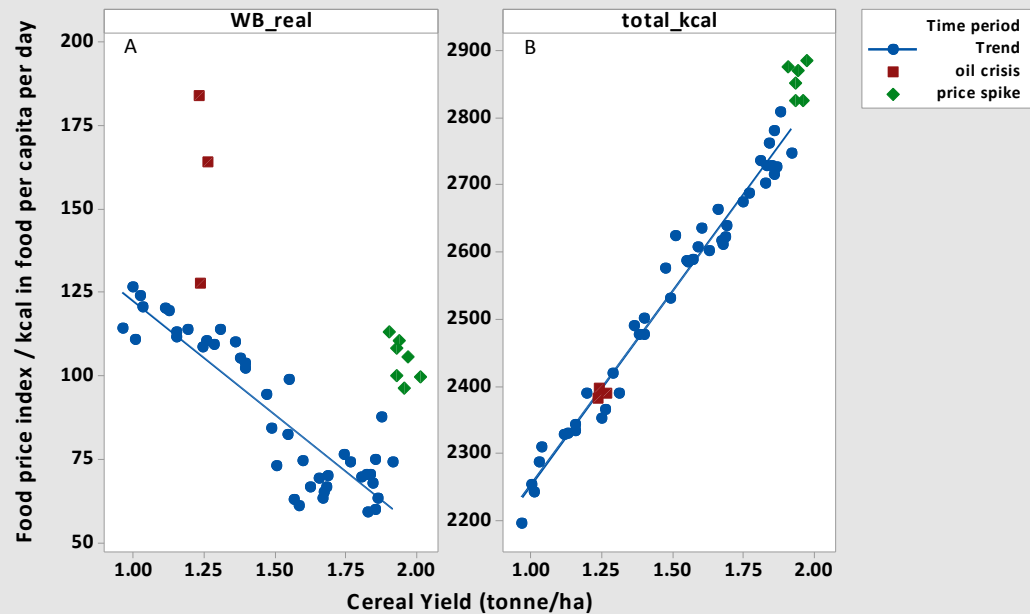
200 year perspective

“...there is a clear failure of food systems to deliver healthy diets to people”

Committee on World Food Security (CFS)
plenary
17 October 2016



Lower food prices and greater availability of food are associated with larger yields



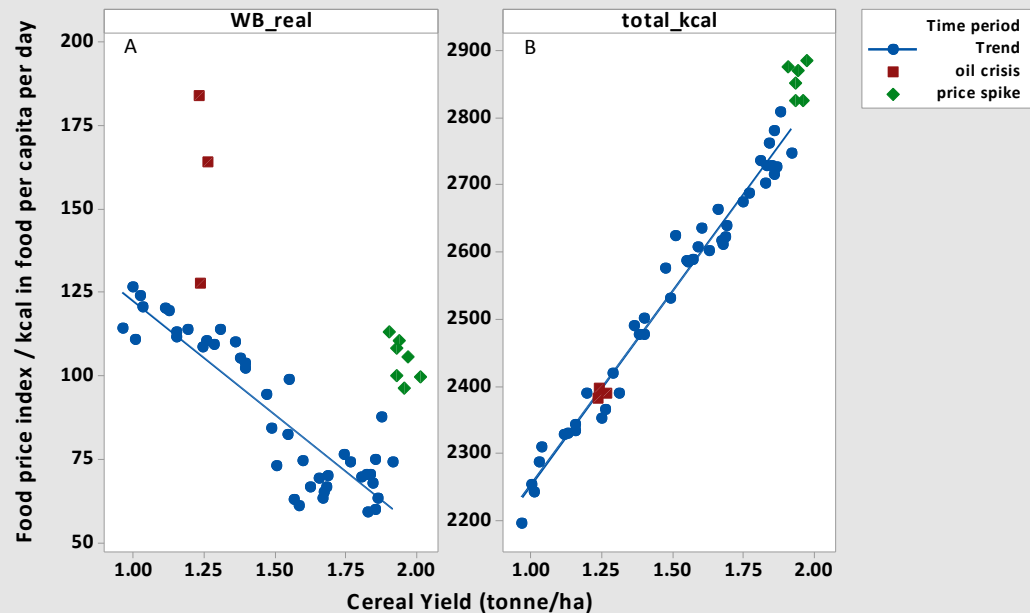
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Lower food prices and greater availability of food are associated with larger yields



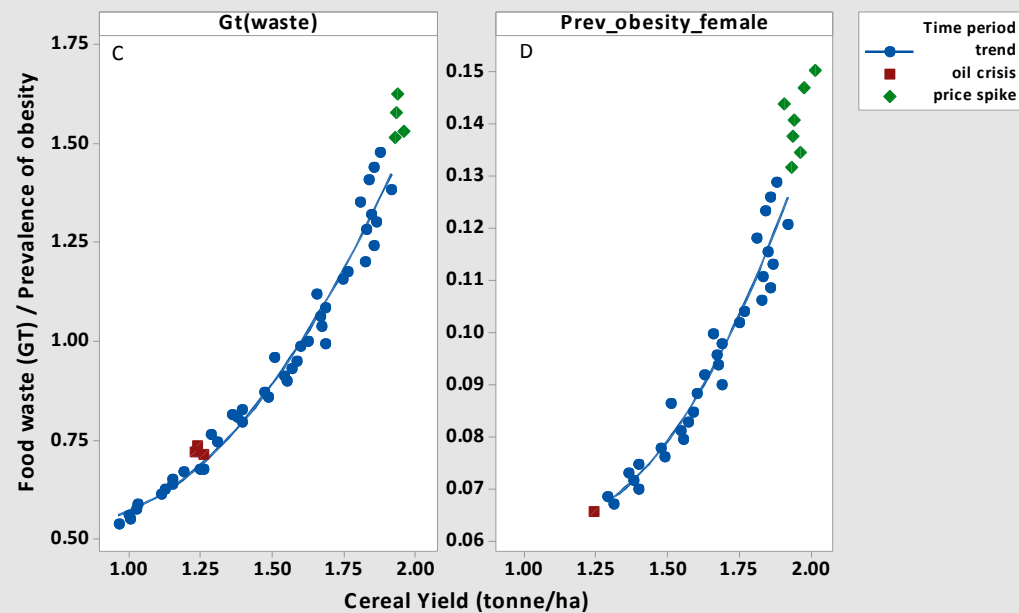
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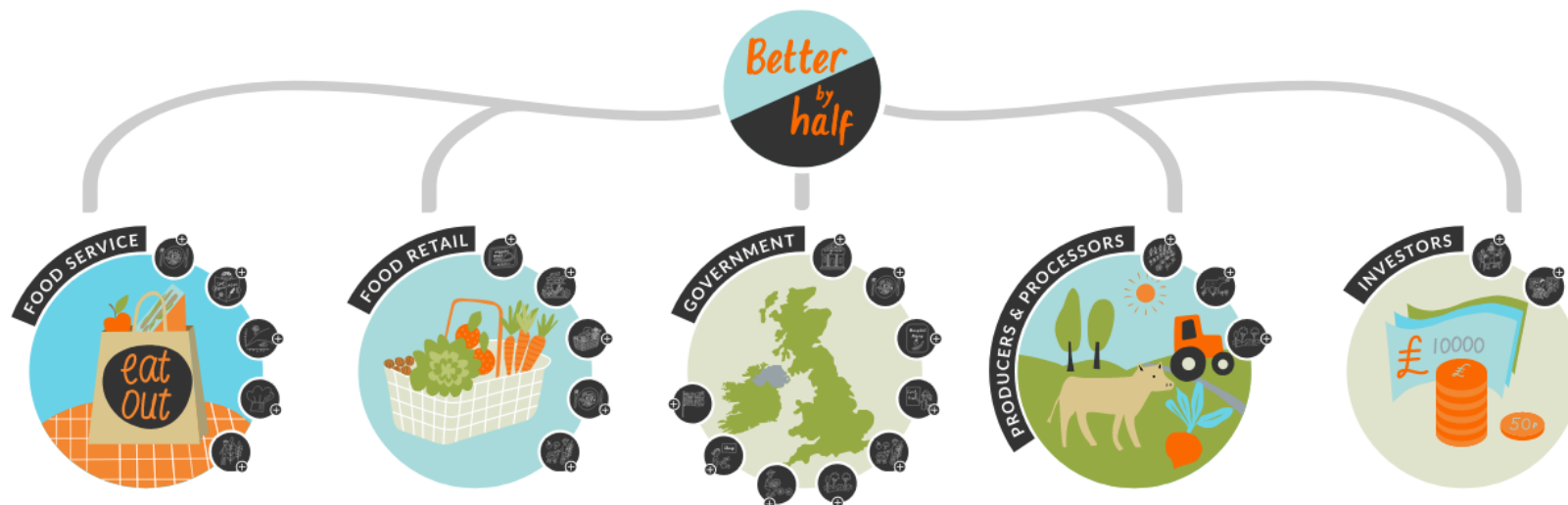
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Food waste and obesity are associated with larger cereal yields





Better by half: A roadmap to less and better meat and dairy

The Eating Better alliance is working to stimulate a 50% reduction in meat and dairy consumption in the UK by 2030, and for a transition to 'better' meat and dairy as standard. This will be better for the environment, our health, for land use, animal welfare and social justice

Better by half: A roadmap to less and better meat and dairy provides 24 actions to be taken across 5 sectors to create an enabling environment to drive the necessary transformation in eating habits.

Click into the sector and action icons above to find out more and see where these actions are already taking place, or click on the Overview icon below to find out more about the campaign.

Overview





MEAT, LIVESTOCK & DAIRY

Producing and eating meat and dairy foods have significant impacts on people's health, the planet and animal welfare.



FOOD WASTE

Wasted food hurts our wallets but also costs our planet in wasted resources, pollution and increased greenhouse gas emissions.



CLIMATE CHANGE

Urgently moving to 'carbon positive' food & farming systems will benefit the UK and climate stressed regions where many go hungry.



FARM ANIMAL WELFARE

Farm animal welfare is an important indicator of how sustainable our food system is. It also shines a spotlight on our values and ethics.



FOOD & POVERTY

With diet-related illnesses – and their associated costs – on the rise in the UK, we urgently need to address the root causes of poverty.



POWER IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

With too much power concentrated in too few hands, our current industrial food system can never be fair or resilient.

Brexit

"Food citizenship is much more than having the privilege to choose good food. It is about having individual and collective agency within a society where capitalism, social inequities, and a complex food web intersect. It demands of us a responsibility to be truly humanitarian, to be protectors of nature and to stand for real democracy and human rights. Our food citizenship places us as rights bearers at the heart of the right to food, to hold our government accountable to its duty to ensure all people are able to access culturally appropriate, healthy, sustainable and just food."

Dee Woods

Co-founder Granville Community Kitchen and member of the Food Ethics Council

"Any vision of a better food system has to be built upon an understanding of what citizens value. It cannot be generated in a vacuum. Citizens will also bring fresh ideas, insights, and energy to the process. In developing a National Food Strategy, we will involve people from all over the country in a national conversation about how we should transform our food system."

Henry Dimbleby

Independent Lead, National Food Strategy



Food Ethics Council

The Food Ethics Council
Business Forum

CRITICAL ISSUES
CUTTING-EDGE THINKING
OPEN SHARING
CONSTRUCTIVE CHALLENGE
EXPERT INSIGHT
UNRIVALLED NETWORKING

Join a community
of leaders asking
the big questions in
food and farming



Offering unrivalled access to leading experts and insights, our Business Forum meetings are chaired by Food Ethics Council members and offer a unique opportunity to navigate the burning issues of today and get ahead of the critical issues of tomorrow.



Snapshot:
UK sustainable
food systems in
the spotlight



Developed by



with



Barilla
Center
FOR FOOD
& NUTRITION

COUNTRY INDEX & DATA

The Food Sustainability Index (FSI) ranks 67 countries on food system sustainability. It is a quantitative and qualitative benchmarking model constructed from 38 indicators and 90 individual metrics that measure the sustainability of food systems across three categories: Food Loss and Waste, Sustainable Agriculture and Nutritional Challenges. The index has three key types of performance indicators—environmental, societal and economic.

SELECT DATA TOOL



Food Ethics Council

Food Sustainability Index: 2018
RESET

MAP
SUMMARY
INDICATOR RANKING
COUNTRY PROFILE
COUNTRY SCORECARD
COUNTRY COMPARE
REGION COMPARE
SCATTER
DATA/SCORES
WEIGHTS

SELECT INDICATOR
OVERALL SCORE

COUNTRY HIGHLIGHT
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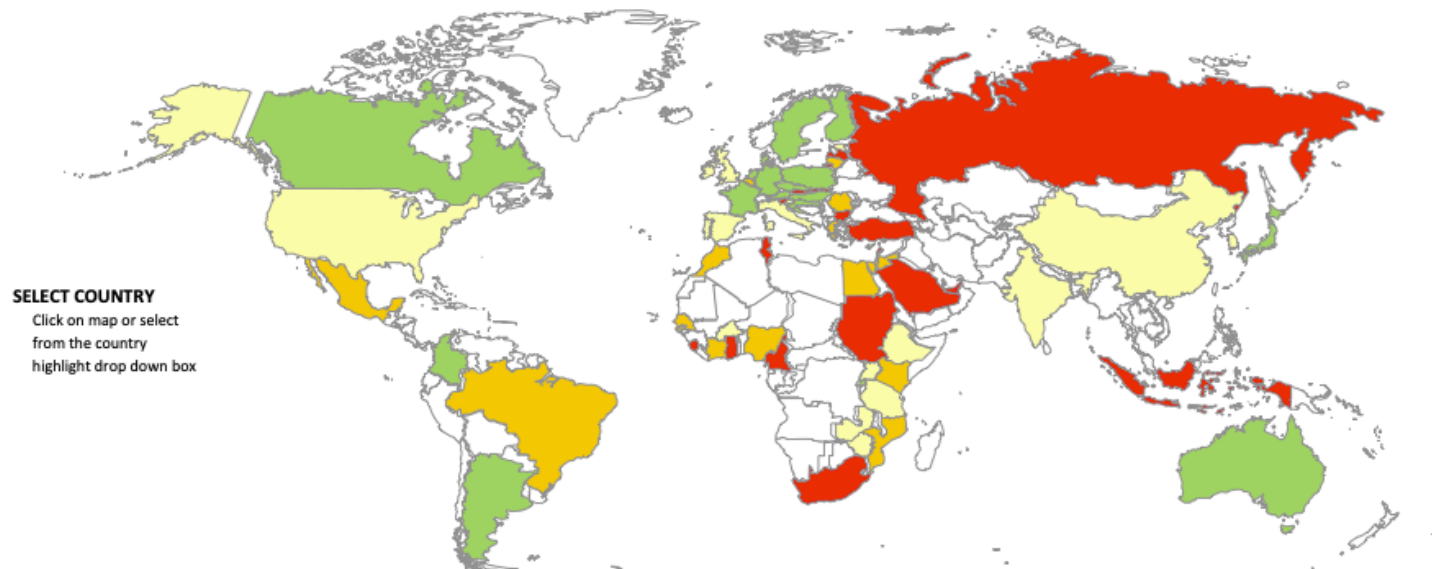
REGION HIGHLIGHT
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REGION FILTER
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WEIGHTS
Expert assigned

OVERVIEW

OVERALL SCORE



SELECT COUNTRY

Click on map or select from the country highlight drop down box

VERY HIGH Score 71.2 to => 76.1		HIGH Score 66.5 to => 71.1		MEDIUM Score 62.7 to => 66.4		LOW Score 52.3 to => 62.6	
France	76.1	Ireland	71.0	Belgium	66.2	Lebanon	62.4
Netherlands	75.6	Spain	70.9	Cote d'Ivoire	65.9	Tunisia	62.3
Canada	75.3	Estonia	70.8	Cyprus	65.8	Latvia	61.9
Finland	74.1	Portugal	70.6	Senegal	65.8	Malta	61.5
Czech Republic	74.0	South Korea	70.5	Mexico	65.6	Slovakia	61.4
Japan	73.8	China	70.2	Brazil	65.5	Slovenia	60.9
Denmark	73.5	United Kingdom	70.0	Lithuania	65.3	Sudan	60.9
Sweden	73.4	Uganda	68.7	Israel	64.6	Turkey	60.1
Austria	73.3	United States	68.6	Greece	64.5	Cameroon	59.7
Hungary	72.5	Ethiopia	68.5	Kenya	64.4	Indonesia	59.1
Australia	71.8	Italy	68.1	Romania	64.4	Sierra Leone	58.8
Rwanda	71.6	Luxembourg	67.9	Nigeria	63.7	Ghana	57.6
Argentina	71.5	Tanzania	67.4	Morocco	63.5	South Africa	56.4
Croatia	71.4	Zimbabwe	67.3	Egypt	63.0	Saudi Arabia	56.2
Poland	71.3	Zambia	67.2	Mozambique	63.0	Russia	56.1
Colombia	71.2	Burkina Faso	66.4	Jordan	62.8	Bulgaria	54.5
Germany	71.2	India	66.4			UAE	52.3

A vision for 2034...?

A shared vision for 2034...



FOOD POLICY ON TRIAL: IN THE DOCK – MEAT TAX. JURY VERDICT.



Home / Resources / Food Policy on Trial: In the dock – meat tax. Jury verdict.

May 23, 2019

This paper represents a summary of the Food Ethics Council's first [Food Policy On Trial](#) event, critically exploring the idea of a meat tax, which took place on May 23rd 2019, at Conway Hall in central London.

DOWNLOAD PDF

[← BACK TO RESOURCES](#)



FOOD POLICY ON TRIAL: IN THE DOCK – PLAIN PACKAGING ON JUNK FOOD & DRINK. JURY VERDICT.



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/ Food Policy on Trial: In the dock – plain packaging on junk food & drink. Jury verdict.

FOOD POLICY ON TRIAL: IN THE DOCK – PLAIN PACKAGING ON JUNK FOOD & DRINK.

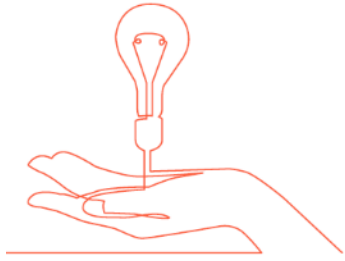
Our second Food Policy on Trial event put plain packaging on the 'worst impact' food and drink 'in the dock'. We heard from expert witnesses.

- Alex Hough, Valuation Director, Brand Finance
- Craig Mawdsley, Joint Chief Strategy Officer, AMV BDO
- Dr Helen Crawley, Director, First Steps Nutrition
- Ben Pugh, co-founder and CEO, Farmdrop

Our jury panel consisted of four members of the Food Ethics Council:

- Jon Alexander
- Dr Julian Riggall
- Emeritus Professor Liz Dowler
- Jo Lewis (Chair)

Below you can read selected extracts from the evidence presented, get a sense of the wider discussion and read the jury's verdict on this emerging policy idea. We encourage you to also listen to the audio.



Factors that help us

- Our independence
- Using an ethical lens / ethical analysis
- Tackling the root causes
- Bringing people together in a safe space
- Respecting each others' views
- Not shying away from the most contentious issues, persevering and recognising that some change can take a long time to happen
- Being open-minded and learning from who is doing things well



Food Ethics Council

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Registered charity number: 1101885

Thank you!

