



Food promises?

A review of shifts in UK
general election manifestos
2015-2019

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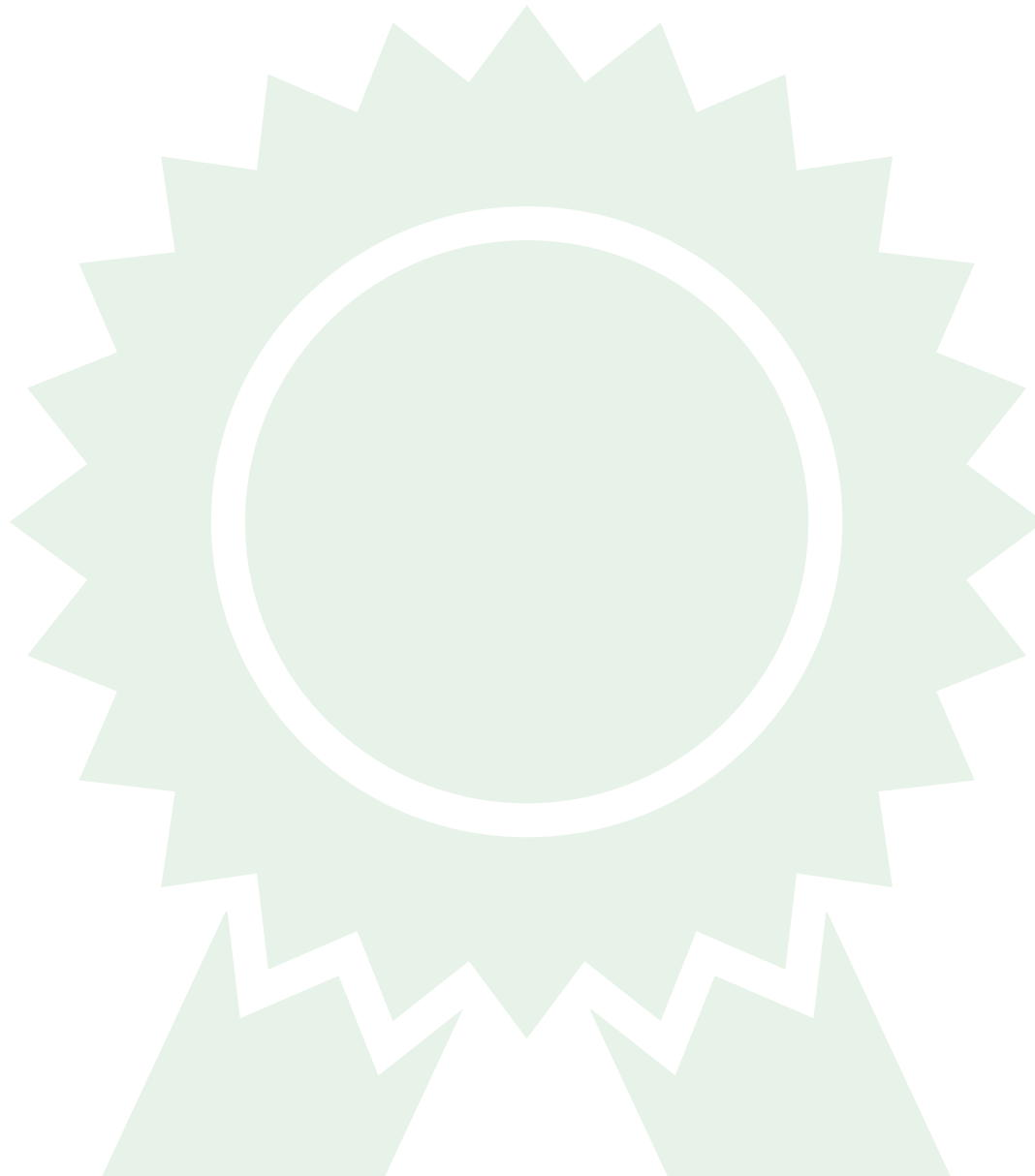
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Introduction



General election manifestos allow political parties to present a holistic overview of their values, priorities, strategic approach, and the political and socio-economic objectives they would like the electorate to support. They are an effective snapshot of what a party believes should be done and what they hope the public will vote for.

Manifestos are also a promise to deliver. While manifestos frequently resonate with the intentions and objectives that a given party has advocated or achieved in the past, they are primarily a set of policy commitments to which the party is willing to be held accountable if it gets elected. Because all parties produce their manifestos at roughly the same time, this provides a means by which to assess policy shifts over time across a broad political spectrum.

The lens of food provides a useful entry point to understanding and addressing the environmental and social challenges of our time – and is applicable to all political parties, whether on the right, the left or in the centre.

The Food Ethics Council has worked for over 20 years to champion fairness in UK food and farming and to encourage the development of an active and engaged civil society concerned with food ethics. We strive to establish ethics at the centre of our food systems, which includes adopting ethical perspectives in agri-food policymaking.

The principles and approaches we would like to see reflected in electoral manifestos are:

- Food, farming and fishing as a central theme that connects so many of our biggest social and environmental challenges.
- Ethical principles, such as respect for fairness, wellbeing and freedom, embedded at their heart.
- Long-term, sustainable approaches which include consideration of impacts on, and moral responsibility towards, future generations.
- Urgent, but considered, action to address the multiple crises that face our food systems and society.
- A joined-up, integrated approach to policymaking which considers environmental, public health and nutrition, social justice and animal welfare issues 'in the round'.
- A food citizenship mindset, which, instead of treating people merely as consumers, treats them as active and responsible food citizens able to become involved in and shape future policy.

Following the 2019 general election, we wanted to understand the degree to which political priorities which intersect with food ethics concerns have changed since 2015, if at all. For instance, to what extent have the leading political parties promised action commensurate with the scale of food-related challenges such as the climate, biodiversity and obesity crises?



We undertook a review of electoral manifestos in order to:

- **Recognise progress (where it exists):** We want to enable policy influencers and policymakers to step back and consider how the landscape has changed and where there have been positive shifts that can be built on.
- **Focus efforts going forward:** We also want to understand where issues have not received the political attention we feel is needed and where there are gaps. This will help us and other civil society organisations know where to focus individual and collective efforts. We would like all political parties to promise – and deliver on – stronger commitments relating to our food systems.
- **Hold government to account:** We hope this review will encourage other civil society organisations to hold the government to account for those food-related promises in the Conservative Party's 2019 manifesto that are ethically sound.
- **Understand our own impact:** Positioning the Food Ethics Council within a constellation of other civil society organisations working in food and farming, we want to point to positive shifts in areas that we have worked on, though we are of course not claiming sole responsibility for all the changes identified here.

We decided to focus on the four leading political parties active across more than one of the home nations – i.e. Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party of England and Wales ('Green Party'). This was in part due to resource constraints but also because we felt this was sufficient to give us a sense of the shifts from 2015 to 2019. We therefore evaluated eight documents. We also reviewed the Labour manifesto on animal welfare; the Labour Party signalled in its main manifesto that its policies on animal welfare were covered in a separate manifesto, and omitting that would distort the analysis. A review of our methods can be found in the appendix.

In the following pages we discuss the key shifts observed between 2015 and 2019 and we analyse specific food system issues covered by the manifestos – such as food insecurity, meat and dairy production and food waste. In doing so, we explain why we believe they are significant and some of the work the Food Ethics Council has done, and continues to do, in these areas.

Overarching shifts





We found several important shifts in approach and terminology expressed by the parties between their 2015 and 2019 manifestos. In 2019, we found that:

- **Food system concerns were more prominent overall.** Although most parties (except Labour) shortened their manifestos in 2019, food issues were more prominent in terms of total word count, percentage of word count, and interrelation with other issues. The Green Party, for example, cut its manifesto by 20,000 words, but increased the space devoted to food and farming issues by more than 50%. The Conservative Party more than doubled the space devoted to food and farming, including two prominent pull-out boxes on animal welfare and a post-Brexit deal for farmers and fishermen. Labour made a general commitment to “a world-leading Food, Farm and Fisheries sector” in 2015, but made much more extensive and explicit policy commitments in 2019.
- **Policy proposals or targets tended to reference more specific timeframes,** particularly in the Green Party manifesto, with specific short timeframes given for a transition to agroecological farming, agroforestry, pesticide reduction and a reduction in emissions from meat and dairy production. The Conservative Party set a short timeframe for protecting the world’s oceans; Labour also set a short timeframe for ending the use of cages on farms. There are some longer-term, time-bound targets included in 2019 manifestos, such as the Labour Party target of achieving “net-zero-carbon food production in Britain by 2040.”
- **There was a greater focus on stewardship.** In 2015 the Green Party was already describing farming in terms of “improved agri-environment schemes...to protect the soil, reduce flood risk, conserve wildlife, improve water quality, increase recreation and assist carbon capture.” By 2019, all four parties connected farming with land management, water management, reforestation, stewardship and environmental regeneration. The fishing industry was also described in terms of stewardship. There is a shift both in language (i.e. more use of terms such as stewardship, agroecology) and in the diversity of farming activities listed to include extensive tree-planting/agroforestry, both for water management and for carbon sequestration.
 - The Conservative Party urged farmers and fishermen “to act as the stewards of the natural world, preserving the UK’s countryside and oceans as they have for generations.”
 - The Green Party advocated “reforestation, rewilding and regenerative farming [which will] reduce carbon emissions and realise the land’s ability to absorb carbon”, and “a transition to agroecological farming [which will] restore ecosystem health, including the quality of our soils and rivers.”
 - The Liberal Democrats supported redirecting farm subsidies towards “the public goods that come from effective land management, including restoring nature and protecting the countryside, preventing flooding and combating climate change through measures to increase soil carbon and expand native woodland.”



- **There was stronger cross-party support for smaller farmers, new entrants to farming, urban farming, and more regional and local control of food.** This included more explicit promises to shift financial support from landowners to food producers, and giving more protection to land tenants. The motivations for this trend vary and include food sovereignty, a “public funds for public goods” approach, and a desire for more “people-based” food production.
 - Labour promised support for county farms, new entrants, local food networks and small-scale farmers, including those in the global south.
 - The Green Party put forward numerous arguments for localised food systems, greater security of tenure for farmers, smaller-scale, more people-focused production, urban food-growing, and new entrants to farming.
- **There was a trend towards greater use of rights-based language.** Three of the parties (Green, Liberal Democrats and Labour) advocated a right to food, although without making clear exactly how this right would constitute a justiciable legal entitlement as opposed to a desirable social goal. The Green Party, Labour and Conservative Party also mentioned workers’ rights; the Green Party advocated making trade terms “explicitly subject to environmental and human rights commitments” while Labour made particular mention of the “rights of union representation for all food and agricultural workers.” While rights-based language was not applied to animals, all four parties promised to enshrine animal sentience in policy and law.
- **There was cross-party commitment to protecting UK standards** when negotiating trade agreements. Whilst this was likely largely a reaction to Brexit, nevertheless it is an important development.
 - The Conservative Party: “In all of our trade negotiations, we will not compromise on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards.”
 - The Green Party promised to work for “protection for British farmers from low-welfare imports.”
 - Liberal Democrats wanted to “work...to ensure that future trade agreements require high environmental and animal welfare standards.”
 - Labour promised that they would “uphold the highest environmental and social regulations in all our trade relations.”

The changes in public and political discourse reflected in the shifts between the 2015 and 2019 manifestos are the outcome of a complex set of factors. For example, key IPCC¹ and IPBES² reports of the last few years thrust the climate and biodiversity crises into public consciousness as never before. Additionally, Brexit has had a fundamental impact on the manifestos, transforming the political agenda and changing the kind of messages and policies presented in the manifestos. There has been a greater focus on protecting UK standards in international trade, for example, or the notable absence of the common agricultural and fisheries policies in 2019.

Shifts in thinking on food systems are also the result of the concerted and committed work of an extensive, rich network of civil society organisations, social movements, academics and progressive businesses. The Food Ethics Council places itself firmly within this network, having consistently emphasised and encouraged collaboration between organisations, sectors and disciplines. The Food Ethics Council has worked hard - sometimes leading and sometimes supporting wider coalitions - to encourage positive shifts.



| Shifts in manifestos | Relevant work of the Food Ethics Council |
|---|---|
| <p>Food system concerns becoming more prominent</p> | <p>For many years, we have highlighted the importance of food and farming issues and have argued that the lens of food is a critical ‘way in’ to many of the social and environmental challenges we face. We have done this in all of our work, encouraging a focus on tackling root causes. We have played a key role in joint advocacy on food system concerns, for example through the Square Meal alliance. We have also highlighted the mismatch between the importance of food and farming concerns and levels of funding that civil society working in these areas are getting through our Food Issues Census.³</p> |
| <p>More specific timeframes</p> | <p>We have always been keen on specific timeframes for targets, with progress tracked and regularly reported on. This is why we have argued for the UK to set bold domestic targets but also, as we wrote in ‘what we want to see in party manifestos’, we want to “ensure the UK leads the way on delivering international commitments - including but not limited to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Agreement.”</p> |
| <p>Greater focus on stewardship</p> | <p>We have always believed that farming and fishing are doing more than simply producing units of food. Stewardship of the land, water and air is vital, as we have long argued e.g. in Square Meal alliance; through the Sustainable Food Supply Chains Commission; in work such as ‘From Individual to Collective action: exploring business cases for addressing sustainable food security’ and through joint advocacy.</p> |
| <p>Stronger cross-party support for smaller farmers, new entrants to farming, urban farming, and more regional and local control of food</p> | <p>We have been involved in advocacy to promote the needs of smallholder farmers, new entrants and localised food systems. This includes participation in Sustain’s farming working group.</p> |
| <p>Greater use of rights-based language</p> | <p>For many years, we have spoken of the need to recognise a range of rights relating to food, including the right to food itself through our own work such as ‘Food Justice: report of the Food and Fairness Inquiry’ also participation in joint activity from the UK Food Poverty Alliance and End Hunger UK.</p> |
| <p>More emphasis on need to protect (and enhance) UK food standards - including environment, workers’ rights and animal welfare</p> | <p>We have consistently advocated high standards of food safety, environmental protection, workers’ rights and animal welfare and that these should be protected in any future trade negotiations post-Brexit. We have done joint advocacy and have proposed policy ideas and business recommendations in this area, including via ‘Beyond business as usual’; ‘Brexit food ethics - trade deals and trade-offs’ Business Forum report; ‘Brexit food ethics: Beyond migrant labour’ Business Forum report and Measuring UK Food Sustainability.</p> |

Key issue shifts



Agriculture



The issue in a nutshell

Farming and food production are dependent on nature and can enhance it. However, much of the dominant, conventional agriculture depletes the natural resources on which it relies, damaging biodiversity and contributing to global heating. Smaller farmers increasingly struggle to survive in a sector increasingly dominated by large agricultural corporations. The UK's agriculture and food sectors contribute £121 billion Gross Value Added to the British economy,⁴ supporting many livelihoods. These sectors are vital to the life of British citizens, our relationship with other countries, our ability to meet climate targets and the preservation of landscape and wildlife.

Changes between 2015 and 2019 manifestos

- The Greens and Liberal Democrats emphasised reform of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy consistently in their manifestos for the two years and they both identified the objective of transitioning to a sustainable agricultural model, as did Labour in 2019.
- In both 2015 and 2019, the Greens and Liberal Democrats identified the role of agriculture in preventing climate change and the need to implement strategies to prevent flooding.
- The Labour 2019 manifesto introduced a new commitment to local, smaller-scale food production – county farms, support for new entrants to farming, support for farmers in the Global South and Indigenous Peoples' right to land, and support for local food markets.
- The Green Party made a number of specific new commitments in 2019, including support for organic farming and agroforestry; grants to enable farmers to invest in the transition to agroecology; greater security of tenure for farmers, and more support for small-scale farming.
- The Conservative 2019 manifesto expressed plans for British agriculture post-Brexit which included protecting and enhancing the natural environment and safeguarding animal welfare. The Conservatives emphasised commercial objectives for agriculture centred on growing, selling and buying more British food.

Implications – why is this significant?

The importance of agriculture and the wider environmental and social impacts of the sector, beyond food production alone, are starting to be recognised more. This is welcome, but there is still a long way to go. Leaving the EU raises many challenges for the sector, but also opens up potential opportunities for the UK government to have greater control of its agricultural policy, to give its citizens a greater say in policymaking and to reward farmers for the environmental services they provide as well as the food they produce.

What we would like to see

We want to see strong support for sustainable farming – including investing in UK horticulture, supporting the transition to 'only the best' livestock, meat and dairy, and promoting a 'public money for public goods' approach in the UK. We also want to see farmers, growers and food producers properly valued and rewarded for the vital role they play.

Our activity in this area

We have worked extensively on agriculture – from one of our earliest publications '[Farming animals for food: a moral menu](#)' back in 2001 through to a [Business Forum on regenerative agriculture](#) in 2020. We have also been active in joint advocacy, including via [Sustain's farming working group](#).

Environment and the climate crisis



The issue in a nutshell

A healthy natural environment is key to growing enough nutritious food for everyone. Yet our current industrial food system is contributing to the nature and climate crises. Industrial farming is a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity loss, while climate change is already contributing to lower yields in some parts of the world. With most of the world's hungry living in climate-stressed regions, and the UK relying on some of their resources for a proportion of its own food, rationally we need to move to 'carbon positive', nature-friendly agroecological approaches. Political leadership is needed to eliminate threats, remedy harms and enable positive action.

Changes between 2015 and 2019 manifestos

- The Green Party's manifestos in 2015 and 2019 expressed commitment to enabling sustainable food systems, the reduction and elimination of pesticide use, a moratorium on the use of GM technologies and tackling climate change. The 2019 manifesto also included positive measures such as extensive agroforestry, urban fruit and nut trees, and a programme to monitor and improve soil health.
- In 2019, the Labour Party set a target that was not present in its manifesto of four years earlier, namely to achieve net-zero-carbon food production in Britain by 2040.
- The Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives communicated understanding of the need to protect the natural world and pursue environmentally beneficial objectives, including tackling climate change. However, they referred to climate change primarily in relation to energy and transport, and did not relate it to food as clearly.
- The Conservatives' 2019 manifesto captured the need to protect the oceans and not just terrestrial environments.
- Labour's 2015 manifesto identified the need to prevent the spread of human disease, but this was not carried through to 2019.

Implications - why is this significant?

There are noticeable shifts in the priority given to climate change between 2015 and 2019, but it was only really the Green Party - and to a lesser extent the Labour Party - that related this directly to food. On broader environmental issues, similarly, there were some signs that political parties are beginning to recognise the importance of environmental stewardship, yet most did not link that closely enough to food and farming. The failure to put food and farming at the heart of tackling the nature and climate crises is a concern, given the pivotal role that our food systems play.

What we would like to see

We want strong policy support for a transition to agroecological approaches that protect and enhance our natural environment, providing food that is good for people, planet and animals. We also want the Government to significantly bring forward its 'net zero' target from 2050. We want 'carbon positive' food systems, including farms where soils and plants capture carbon, support in-field biodiversity and provide healthy and nutritious food. We want to encourage the shift towards people eating a diverse range of lower-impact foods. We also want the UK to lead the way in delivering international commitments, including but not limited to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Agreement.

Our activity in this area

We have long pushed for bold action to accelerate the shift to net zero food systems. We have explored actions and policies needed e.g. via our '[Food, farming and climate change: from culprit to champion?](#)' Business Forum report, plus we explored the role of meat, dairy and climate change in '[Livestock consumption and climate change](#)'.

Farm animal welfare



The issue in a nutshell

Farmed animals have the capacity to experience physical and mental suffering, pleasure and contentment. As a nation we should be concerned about their quality of life. The fact that farmed animals are sentient beings creates a moral obligation for all political parties to implement policies which ensure high welfare standards throughout our food systems.

Changes between 2015 and 2019 manifestos

- All four parties made a commitment in 2019 to enshrine animal sentience in law, recognising that animals experience pain and suffering, as well as pleasure and contentment.
- Liberal Democrats and Conservatives expressed support for high standards of farmed animal welfare in Britain. The Greens expressed opposition to intensive animal production, coupled with requirements to improve the quality of life of farmed animals.
- Greens and Liberal Democrats advocated the development of vaccines to control TB in cattle.
- Labour and the Greens expressed concern for wild animal welfare, seeking protection of badgers in relation to TB controls. Labour called for a ban to fox hunting, while the Greens wanted to ban all animal hunting.
- Greens and Liberal Democrats expressed relatively consistent intentions between 2015 and 2019. The Conservatives reduced their expression of interest in farmed animal welfare over the same period.
- Labour did not mention farmed animals in 2015, but had a separate, extensive animal welfare manifesto in 2019 which made a number of specific and concrete proposals, including:
 - Enshrining animal sentience in law
 - Promoting cruelty-free animal husbandry, ending the use of cages and farrowing crates, and banning imports of specific foods such as Foie Gras
 - Providing support to help farmers make these changes, including specific subsidies and other financial support
 - Banning live exports for slaughter and fattening
 - Addressing labour-force issues through training, better standards, better management accountability and a formal whistle-blowing procedure for abattoirs

Implications - why is this significant?

All four parties identified the need for the sentience of animals to be enshrined in UK law in their 2019 manifestos. This is a welcome, if long overdue, step, as animal welfare has for too long been treated as a 'poor second cousin' to other social and environmental concerns. There are one billion land animals and many millions of fish that are farmed for food in the UK alone. We recognise that there are sometimes real or perceived conflicts between safeguarding animal welfare and addressing other pressing sustainable food system concerns such as environmental protection. However, ensuring high animal welfare for all farmed animals - both in the UK and for meat, dairy, fish and eggs that we import - is vital, given that such animals are sentient beings.

What we would like to see

We want to ensure that all farmed animals live a good life and have a humane death: not just that their needs are met, but for them to be free to express their natural behaviours. We want the government to take steps to standardise farm animal welfare measures, along with other key sustainability metrics, at a national level. We want animal welfare outcome measures (like incidences of physical injury) to be included alongside 'input' measures (such as how intensively stocked chickens are). That way, however animals are farmed, animal welfare is both a measure of sustainability and a goal in its own right.

Our activity in this area

We have promoted the importance of putting farm animal welfare on a level footing alongside environmental and social measures e.g. with our work on **farm animal welfare metrics** (inclusion in global indexes) and our '**Farm animal welfare: past, present and future**' report' (for RSPCA).

Fish and fisheries



The issue in a nutshell

Fishing tends to receive less social and political focus than land-based agriculture. However, fishing is an integral part of the UK's food system for both humans and the farmed animal species upon which the UK's agricultural economy is dependent.

Changes between 2015 and 2019 manifestos

- The Green Party did not give high prominence to fishing; both the 2015 and 2019 manifestos simply advocated improving the sustainability of fishing.
- The Liberal Democrats also advocated sustainable fishing in both manifestos, as well as action to tackle illegal fishing; however, the 2019 manifesto used stronger wording, stating that sustainability should "[lie] at the heart of fisheries policy." They also addressed the need to decentralise and regionalise fisheries management, and ensure an adequate labour force.
- In 2015 the Conservatives focussed on protecting Common Fisheries Policy reforms, expressing the desire to enable sustainable fisheries. By 2019, the emphasis had shifted to one of taking back control from the EU and the UK becoming an independent coastal state maintaining an economically significant fishing industry.
- Labour's 2015 manifesto did not address fishing beyond one reference to creating "a world-leading food, farm and fisheries sector." However, in 2019 Labour committed to "set maximum sustainable yields for all shared fish stocks, redistribute fish quotas along social and environmental criteria and... require the majority of fish caught under a UK quota to be landed in UK ports."

Implications - why is this significant?

Widespread general support for more sustainable fishing is welcome, but the manifestos lack detail on this important area, with the Liberal Democrats providing the most detailed statement of their concerns. Ethical concerns related to the need to avoid overfishing, the health benefits of eating certain types of fish and seafood, fish welfare (which is increasingly, albeit slowly, being recognised) and livelihoods in fishing communities.

What we would like to see

We want to see not just passing reference to sustainable fishing, but concrete policy proposals to ensure long-term sustainability of fish stocks and to reward the livelihoods of sustainable fishers. This is particularly important at the current time, with the UK no longer in the EU and therefore having greater say over its fisheries policies. We want policies that address serious concerns around fish welfare and sustainability of both farmed and wild fish.

Our activity in this area

Fish and fisheries have not been central to the work of the Food Ethics Council, with other civil society organisations much more active in this area. However, we have run events on sustainable fish, including our Food Talks series and in Business Forums such as in 'How can we get fish welfare and sustainability on the menu?' (2019).

Household food insecurity



The issue in a nutshell

In 2019 the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Professor Philip Alston, stated that some 14 million British citizens live in poverty. Food insecurity is one of the key components of social inequality in the UK, negatively impacting child development and the productivity of the national workforce as well as blighting lives generally.

Changes between 2015 and 2019 manifestos

- The Greens and Liberal Democrats identified the importance of child nutrition and committed to free school meals in both manifestos. The Labour Party promised to 'poverty-proof' schools, including introducing free school meals for all primary school children and encouraging breakfast clubs.
- The Conservatives expressed the intention to provide free meals for infants in the 2015 manifesto, but shifted focus to free school meals 4 years later.
- In 2019 the Greens, Liberal Democrats and Labour committed to introducing a right to food.
- Labour in 2019 committed to ending what it called 'food bank Britain', and lifting children and pensioners out of poverty. It set the specific target of halving food bank usage within a year and removing the need for them altogether in three years.
- In 2015 the Green Party committed to reducing the power of corporations over the food system, while in 2019 emphasis was given to the development of local food initiatives including urban food production.

Implications - why is this significant?

By 2019 all four parties committed to free school meals, and three of the parties (as well as the Scottish National Party) promised to legislate a right to food. Hence, the direction of travel is encouraging. However, the scale of the problem - not least in light of COVID-19 - is likely to only grow in the coming months. Bold and sustained action is needed by the government if it is to recognise its duty to ensure everyone has access to sufficient, nutritious, culturally-appropriate food. We want everyone to be involved in shaping our food systems for the better in future.

What we would like to see

Hunger is a symptom of poverty. The root causes are the structural inequalities in household incomes and access to food. The government must urgently address these inequalities. All households must have enough money to thrive, not just survive, through a real living wage and a properly functioning welfare safety net, and healthy food should be more readily available and, in relative terms, less expensive than unhealthy food.

Our activity in this area

The Food Ethics Council helped catapult household food insecurity up the political agenda through our research (with University of Warwick and Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford) for Defra on '[Household Food Security in the UK: a review of food aid](#)', that was picked up in Prime Minister's Questions by the then Prime Minister. We have subsequently actively participated in the UK Food Poverty Alliance, including supporting the End Hunger UK campaign.

Food waste



The issue in a nutshell

Food waste represents a significant and avoidable flaw of the modern, industrial food system. Ideally, all food would be consumed and none would be wasted. However, WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme) estimates that in 2018, UK food waste amounted to some 9.5 million tonnes, 70% of which was intended for consumption. The value was estimated at some £19 billion or more than 25 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. Government policies can directly and indirectly address the problem of food waste.

Changes between 2015 and 2019 manifestos

- In 2015 the Green Party's manifesto recognised the issue of food waste, stating the intention to both reduce it and prevent such waste from entering landfill disposal.
- By 2019 the Green Party's thinking had evolved to using education and revising hygiene and disease rules to permit the use of food waste in animal nutrition.
- In 2019 the Labour Party referred to working with local councils to minimise food waste, but did not give further details.
- Other parties did not mention food waste as explicit manifesto objectives.

Implications - why is this significant?

With only a few isolated mentions in manifestos, food waste is not yet getting the same attention as packaging, particularly single-use plastics, which have risen faster up the public consciousness and seemingly higher up the political agenda. This is disappointing because the scale of domestic and commercial food waste, right along food value chains, remains staggeringly high. Wasting food is deeply unfair – given the effort that goes into producing food, that the planet has finite resources and that so many people lack access to sufficient, nutritious food.

What we would like to see

While the existence of food waste is not contested, there remains a tension over how to tackle it. Some advocate redistributing surplus food to people in need. However, in our view, conflating food waste and poverty is not the answer. The structural causes of both those issues must be addressed separately - for food waste, that means preventing it in the first place. So what we would really like to see is governments (and others) truly following the food waste hierarchy by prioritising action, regulation and incentives on prevention of food waste.

Our activity in this area

We have long argued for the need to tackle food loss and waste in our value chains - from our 2009 Food Ethics magazine edition focusing specifically on food waste ('[waste: dishing the dirt](#)') to our [Sustainable Food Supply Chains Commission](#) work in 2014 to Food Talks events on waste more recently.

Healthy and sustainable diets



The issue in a nutshell

Our food systems have huge impacts on the health and wellbeing of people and our environment. Societal increases in incidences of obesity and type 2 diabetes translate into human and economic costs through suffering, death and increased burden on health services. These are driven by a complex set of factors, including lack of access to healthy diets. A study of 19 European countries revealed that UK families buy more ultra-processed food than any others across Europe.⁵ This matters, because such foods are often high in salt, sugar and fat, and low in protein, vitamins and minerals. Governments should prioritise policies that encourage sustainable diets, that are healthy for people and the planet.

Changes between 2015 and 2019 manifestos

- In 2015 the Green Party advocated taxation as an instrument to subsidise fruit and vegetables, suggesting that this could reduce diet-related mortality. By 2019 the Greens had shifted to a more behavioural approach, advocating incentives to encourage healthier, more environmentally-friendly diets.
- In both 2015 and 2019 the Liberal Democrats emphasised the link between junk food and diet-related disease, proposing strategies to reduce consumption of unhealthy foods and increase consumption of healthy foods.
- In 2015 the Conservatives identified the need to address childhood obesity and in 2019 extended their consideration to diet-related disease more broadly as well as burdens on the NHS.
- In 2015 Labour identified the issue of unhealthy diets due to salt, sugar and fat, whereas in 2019 they adjusted their focus to include diet-related disease more broadly as well as food insecurity and access to healthy and sustainable food.

Implications - why is this significant?

To differing degrees, each of the parties recognise social and economic issues associated with access to healthy and sustainable food, or lack thereof, and the need to address associated issues by means of policy. The Liberal Democrat, Conservative and Labour manifestos evidence evolution in thinking about the issues between 2015 and 2019. While this is encouraging, not enough links are being made between the health of citizens and the health of the planet.

What we would like to see

To support a food system that is healthy for people and the planet, now and in the future, the UK Government needs to act, including - but not limited to - creating an adequate safety net for welfare recipients; ensuring agricultural and social policies support healthy eating; legislating for a living wage; supporting vegetable and pulse production; increasing the uptake of breastfeeding, and using the power of the public purse to buy healthy and sustainable food for people in its care (children, the sick and the elderly). These interventions could be funded by a tax on ultra-processed foods, like the sugary drinks levy which funds sport in schools.

Our activity in this area

Our Executive Director chaired a key part of the **Sustainable Consumption strand of the Green Food Project**; we have written about the business case for healthy, sustainable diets in foodservice through our '**Catering for Sustainability**' work and we have advocated for honesty in claims on packaging plus policies such as an ultra-processed food tax, as part of our **Food Policy on Trial** series.

Meat, dairy and farmed animals



The issue in a nutshell

The meat and dairy we consume comes from a variety of different production systems, each one with its merits and challenges. Some types and methods of livestock production are major contributors of greenhouse gas emissions and to biodiversity loss (including via animal feed). Some environmental advocates and governments recommend an 'eat less and better' strategy for reducing meat and dairy consumption and associated environmental impact.

Changes between 2015 and 2019 manifestos

- The Green Party is the only one to raise the issue of climate change in relation to livestock production.
- In 2015 the Green Party stated the concept of 'eating less and better meat' as a strategy to tackle GHG emissions as well as the need to consider carbon capture and storage.
- By 2019 the Green Party's strategy had evolved to one of 'eat less and better' as a means of changing food consumption practices and included measures such as transitioning to plant-based diets, phasing in a tax on meat and dairy products, plus carbon footprint labelling.
- In 2015 the Liberal Democrats expressed the desire for country-of-origin labelling on meat and dairy products, but this was not linked to environmental issues.

Implications - why is this significant?

Not all meat and dairy are produced equally - while the same is true of plant-based food and drink. There is huge variety in the range of environmental, social justice, animal welfare and human health impacts of animal-based products, depending on where and how farmed animals are reared, slaughtered and processed. Nuance in these debates is important. Nevertheless, many studies highlight that limiting our consumption of (particularly highly processed) meat and dairy can be a significant factor in reducing environmental and climate impacts. The Green Party is the only party willing to address this thorny issue in its public manifesto.

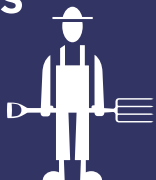
What we would like to see

For climate and social justice reasons, a 'contraction and convergence' in global meat consumption, where some eat less meat and others eat more, would take us towards a global average amount consumed that is significantly lower than current UK levels. However, it's a complex set of issues, and dietary changes have significant impacts, including on those in the sector. That is why we advocate listening to every voice with an interest and why we want to work with livestock farmers to transition to 'only the best' models of livestock (or, for some, into different areas altogether).

Our activity in this area

Meat (and dairy) has long been a contentious issue and our work has helped shift debates forward. Our flagship **Livestock Dialogues series** with WWF-UK helped catalyse the launch of the Eating Better alliance, promoting 'less and better' meat. More recently we have put emerging policies 'in the dock' via our innovative **Food Policy on Trial series**, which included one where we critically explored the idea of a **meat tax**.

Workers' rights and fairness



The issue in a nutshell

Food workers face what can be difficult, dangerous and poorly paid work. The agriculture sector has a higher number of fatal injuries than any other,⁶ plus 84% of UK farmers under the age of 40 believe mental health is the biggest hidden danger facing the industry.⁷ However, food and farming can, and should be, amazing places in which to work. Increasingly, power within the food system is concentrated in the hands of large corporations who control technologies and market access, meaning smaller farmers cannot demand a fair price for their produce. Agri-food policy must have principles of fair share, fair say and fair play at its heart.

Changes between 2015 and 2019 manifestos

- The Labour Party in 2019 wrote of ensuring rights of union representation for all food and agricultural workers, plus re-establishing the previously abolished Agricultural Wages Board in England so that every part of the UK is covered.
- The Green Party in 2015 referred to “decent rural livelihoods” and in 2019 to “putting control over resources... into the hands of communities and workers across the food system”.
- While several parties referred to workers’ rights, this did not tend to be specifically linked to the rights of workers in food, farming and fishing.

Implications - why is this significant?

All political parties should uphold and further strengthen the working conditions and rights of food and agricultural workers in the UK (critically including migrant workers) and internationally. As the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted, those working in the food system are key workers, and should be treated and valued as such.

What we would like to see


We believe everyone working in food and farming should have the right to safe working conditions, fair treatment and a real living wage. We would like to see an Agricultural Wages Board (or equivalent) re-established across the whole of the UK. We want a collective bargaining body for farm workers. Internationally, we want national governments to protect and strengthen workers’ rights in all food value chains. There is no place for forced labour or unfair treatment of workers in any part of our food systems, whether food is produced in the UK or imported. Fair trade is not just of interest to ethically concerned individuals, it should be part of public policy as well.

Our activity in this area

Our [Food Justice: Report of the Food and Fairness Inquiry](#) remains a flagship publication and continues to be widely used. We have held events on workers, workers’ rights and fairness over many years, including our Food Talks on [Workers: who’s going to make our food in the future?](#) and a Business Forum on [how business can tackle ethical issues relating to the food and farming workforce post-Brexit](#). We have also been involved in joint advocacy to protect and enhance workers’ rights, such as this [joint letter on the condition of work and workers behind the UK food system](#).

Taking the long view





We acknowledge – and welcome – the positive shifts in several areas relating to food and farming in party manifestos from 2015 to 2019. Nevertheless, there are important issues that we would want to be more prominent and nuanced in all manifestos.

The Food Ethics Council wants to see processes to ensure citizens have a genuine say in food policy, as well as concrete measures to address power imbalances and fairness concerns in food and farming systems. This includes addressing unfair trading practices in food supply chains. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats mention support for the Groceries Code Adjudicator ('GCA') in 2015 manifestos, but the Liberal Democrats are the only ones in 2019 to mention the GCA at all, where they say they will "support producers by broadening the remit of the Groceries Code Adjudicator...". This does not get mentioned in the Labour party's 2019 manifesto, despite being called for in its 2017 manifesto (outside of the scope of this review). We have called for [the strengthening and broadening of the GCA's remit](#) via our active involvement in the Groceries Code Action Network, co-ordinated by Sustain and Traidcraft.

We are working to address these and other gaps. We work on medium-term and pressing issues, such as supporting the emergency food responses to COVID-19. However, our approach is also to spotlight more entrenched, long-term issues, frequently sidelined in a system of political short-termism, and to work with others to build movements and alliances to take these concerns into the mainstream of public and political consciousness. Accordingly, we are coupling this support of emergency food responses to the current crisis, with co-designing an exit strategy from a system which relies on emergency food provision. We will imagine and create a world where the root cause of household food insecurity is addressed and we end the need for food banks and other forms of charitable food aid.

Two key threads orient our long-term thinking:

i. Transformation of the food and farming research agenda.

Much current food and farming research supports dominant, industrial food and farming systems. However, flaws in these systems means that too often research delivers for private gain, rather than public good. We need a research agenda which puts citizens and farmers at its heart and focuses on creating fair, healthy, sustainable food systems. 14 years ago we launched our flagship '[Just knowledge](#)' report, showing how deeply entrenched these issues are. A decade later we dedicated a [special issue of our e-magazine](#) to identifying nodes of power in the food and farming research agenda and subsequently led joint advocacy to place agroecology at the centre of the research agenda. Some shifts are starting to happen, as shown by UKRI's recent £25 million call for research aimed at transforming the UK food system for people and the planet,⁸ but encouraging these shifts requires concerted, long-term attention.

ii. Promoting the shift to a food citizenship mindset.

We believe that treating each other as food citizens first and foremost, rather than consumers, opens up lots of untapped opportunities to make our society and our food systems more just, more compassionate and more resilient for the long-term. We published our '[Harnessing the power of food citizenship](#)' report in 2019. This mindset shift we are encouraging will not happen overnight. However, catalysed by our friends at the New Citizenship Project, we are successfully building a food citizenship movement.

An eye to the future



The world as we know it has been turned on its head by COVID-19 in 2020, and, with it, our food systems. More than ever, we need the right mix of government interventions, incentives and support to enable all of us to address the short and long-term emergencies we face. COVID-19 is the most present and pressing issue but it should not be an excuse for inaction on critical issues like the climate crisis, loss of soil and soil quality, diet-related ill health and poor treatment of food workers. If anything, it indicates how vulnerable our food system is and how urgent the task of building resilience is. Resilient food systems should mitigate shocks, protect those most at risk and be based on respect for the natural world that we are part of and reliant upon.

This manifesto review has highlighted that there have indeed been positive shifts forward in a number of areas in the last five years. Food ethics concerns are increasingly informing the political agenda, which we strongly welcome. The Food Ethics Council has played a part in encouraging these positive shifts. We have worked on the individual issues fleshed out in this analysis, from working to improve farm animal welfare standards to tackling household food insecurity. We have also worked to bring long-term, cross-cutting issues and food citizenship thinking to the centre of decision-making.

The job is far from done, however, and this review clearly shows that no one political party has all the answers. We want to engage constructively with all political parties to accelerate the shift towards fair food systems that respect people, animals and the planet. We believe our role is more vital than ever.

Crucially there is (under our current voting system) usually only one party in power and it is the most recent manifesto of that party that is most important.

We invite you to join us in working with the UK government to strengthen and deliver on the food promises it has made – and to hold it to account if it fails to do so. We welcome some of the commitments from the Conservative Government in its 2019 manifesto, including:

1. A promise not to compromise on high environmental protection, food quality and animal welfare standards during Brexit-related trade negotiations and in the coming years.
2. A farmer payment scheme founded on the principle of ‘public money for public goods,’ where farmers are rewarded for farming “in a way that protects and enhances our natural environment, as well as safeguarding high standards of animal welfare.”
3. That Britain should “lead the world in the quality of our food, agriculture and land management, driven by science-led, evidence-based policy.”
4. A promise to “bring in new laws on animal sentience”

The manifestos of other parties are important too, not least to stretch current and future governments into bolder territory when it comes to food and farming. Due to resource constraints, we have not in this review been able to include general election manifestos from other parties such as the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru. However, we recognise that the Devolved Nations are making strides forward on food (e.g. Good Food Nation Bill) that the UK government can and should learn from.

There are lots of ways you can help us push for stronger, joined up policymaking relating to food and farming. For example, we would love you to get involved in our [Food Policy on Trial](#) events where we critically explore emerging policy ideas and through our [food citizenship](#) work, which includes shining a spotlight on others doing citizen-led policymaking.

We will work hard to ensure that food promises from the manifestos are kept and strengthened, not relaxed or ignored. We hope you will join us.



Appendix



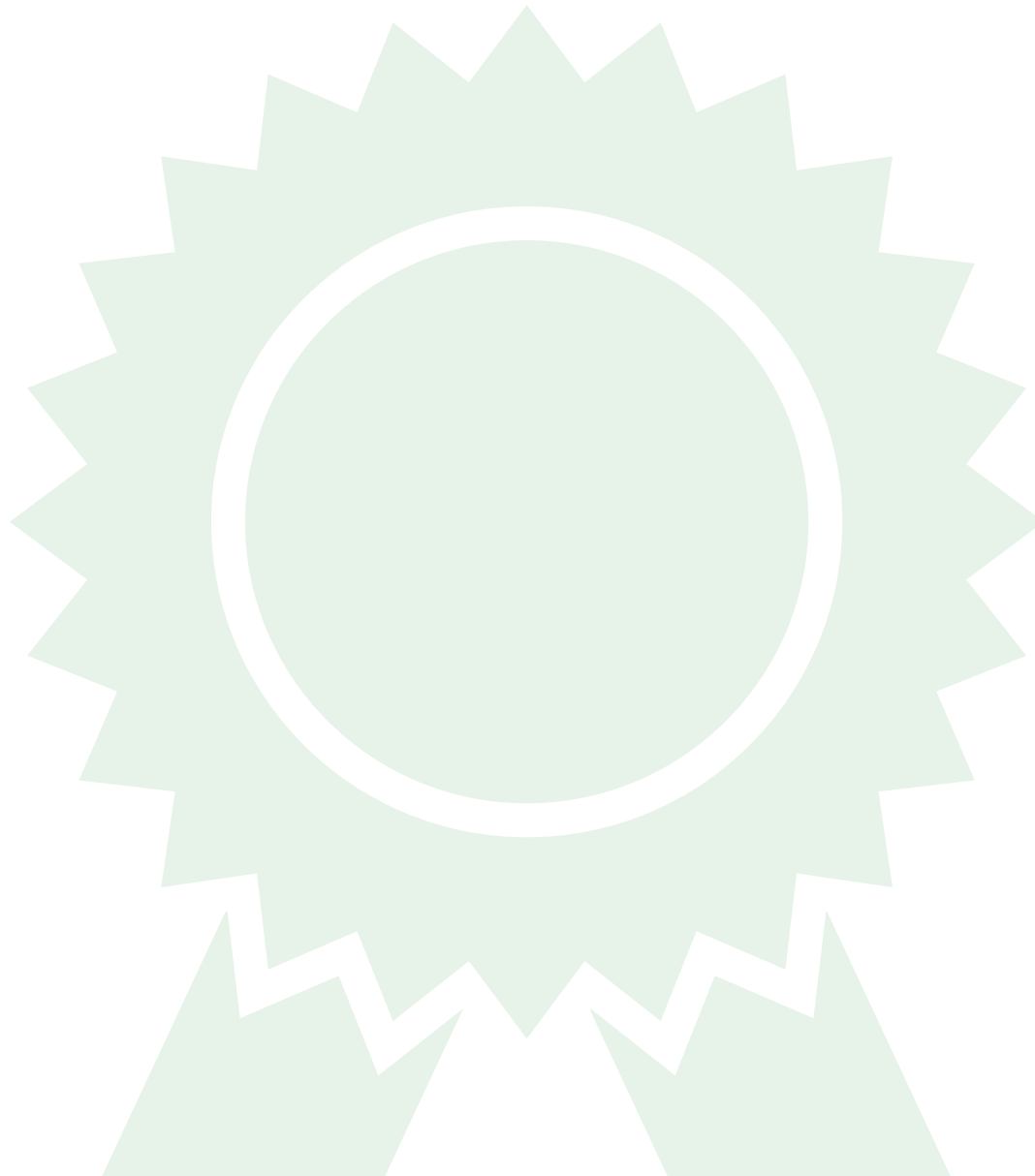
A detailed breakdown of our methods

The 2015 and 2019 manifestos of the Greens, the Conservatives, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats were compiled, along with the extra Animal Welfare manifesto of the Labour Party. We then went through several steps:

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- We brainstormed a list of words that reflect different aspects of the food system – health, animal welfare, climate change, fairness etc – and condensed that into a list of 15 priority word groups and 15 less-important word groups. We did word counts of how often those terms appeared in each of our eight manifestos primarily in order to focus our more detailed textual analysis.
 - We compiled a spreadsheet of all manifesto text that referred in some way to our 15 priority word groups; this made it easy to see what the four parties said about, for example, animal welfare in 2015 versus 2019. We then took out all text that referred to previous achievements, leaving only current policy commitments. We also took out all text that did not explicitly refer to food issues; for example, text that referred to climate change in terms of energy policy or transport policy, or text that discussed animal welfare of pets. This left us with a spreadsheet that focused on future policy commitments explicitly referring to food.
 - We also looked at the overall prevalence of food issues in each manifesto, by examining word counts and document structure. For example, we found that while the Green Party manifesto for 2019 was roughly half the length of its 2015 manifesto, there was more text about food in the 2019 manifesto.
 - We then looked closely at the changes in how each party addressed our different food issues, and more broadly at the cross-party emergence of key themes over time, such as the wider recognition of farming as an important means of environmental management rather than simply a way of producing as much food as possible.
 - It should be emphasised that this work was tailored to meet a specific limited objective, and we are not claiming it is a comprehensive analysis of party policy. Specifically:
 - We are not discourse specialists and have not attempted to do a formal discourse analysis.
 - We only looked at four political parties; we did not look at Welsh, Scottish or Irish parties, or single-issue parties such as UKIP.
 - Our list of word groups/ issues reflects those in which the Food Ethics Council has worked on. Although we take a holistic approach to the food sector, the issues covered in this review are not comprehensive.
 - While we have tracked changes in food issues that are of concern to the Food Ethics Council, we are not claiming that our work is the (sole) cause of these changes.

References

- 1 IPCC (2019) Climate change and land <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl>
- 2 IPBES (2019) Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>
- 3 Our Food Issues Census 2017 noted that "Our estimate is that at best 2% of charity and voluntary sector income is spent on food and farming issues, but it might be closer to the less than 1% estimated in the 2011 census. Put in context against the scale of environmental, health, social justice and animal welfare issues that food is responsible for, [our best estimate is that just] £1-£2 in every £100 spent by the sector [is] going towards tackling food or farming-related ills..."
- 4 Defra (March 2020) Food Statistics in your pocket: Food Chain <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/food-statistics-pocketbook/food-statistics-in-your-pocket-food-chain>
- 5 Monteiro, Carlos & Moubarac, Jean-Claude & Levy, Renata & Canella, Daniela & Louzada, Maria Laura & Cannon, Geoffrey (2018) Household availability of ultra-processed foods and obesity in nineteen European countries. Public Health Nutrition. 21. 1-9. 10.1017/S1368980017001379.
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- 8 UKRI BBSRC (2019) <https://bbsrc.ukri.org/funding/filter/transforming-the-uk-food-system-for-healthy-people-and-a-healthy-environment-call>





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