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Business Forum Report, February 2023

## **Sound the consumer alarm**

What difference for food brands if there were no longer 'consumers', only food citizens?

## Food price inflation

It has often been said that consumer is king or queen, but does this still hold true in 2023? The multiple crises of the climate and nature emergency, global instability and inequality have turned many old adages on their heads. People today are thinking more about the story behind the food they buy, and are increasingly engaged in ideas of fairness, ethics and decency. However, the opportunities for engaging in and shaping the food system as a ‘consumer’ are incredibly limited, particularly under an inequality and cost-of-living crisis that has left many people with little spending power. People want and need more. They want to participate in the food system as a whole, not just be passive consumers at the end of a supply chain. The food businesses and brands who authentically embrace this are part of the antidote to passive consumerism, working collaboratively and dynamically to treat their customers, partners and communities as citizens, valuable in their own right. They are unlocking and activating the food citizenship world.

## What’s the big deal with the word ‘consumer’?

Why should we challenge ourselves as businesses not to use ‘consumer’? It’s just a word surely? Does it really make a difference to how people act and feel? [It does.](#) The word consumer tells a big story. A story of human being as things that just consume. It doesn’t capture any of our humanity, or empathy or creativity. Consumerism limits our agency in shaping the food system we want. It disengages people by painting humanity as more concerned with self interest than collaborative empathy.

## The Citizen Shift

There is another way. A way that is emerging in big and small ways across the world, supporting businesses and communities to transition to a different way of relating to each other. This is the Citizen shift. This is a way of seeing and being in the world that tells us that people are best understood as **Citizens**. That when we’re given meaningful opportunities, we want to and can shape what the choices are (not just choose between products or services) and seek the best outcome for all. The more we see and hear the word citizens - the more we feel the potential of it, and the potential of ourselves to make change.

## Food Citizenship

Food citizenship explores the idea that we are not just consumers at the end of the food chain, but

participants in the food system as a whole - that we can engage beyond our pockets to create nourishing, thriving food communities.

It is the important belief that people care about other people, about animals and about the planet. But we need to have meaningful power to make a difference to nourish that instinct. The challenge is then to nurture that power, and to make it meaningful, creative and joyful to exercise it.

There is an important space here for food businesses to engage with. People want, need and expect more from the businesses and brands that play a role in their lives. And they will form strong attachments with the businesses and brands that find ways to genuinely facilitate participation, debate, challenge and collective action.

In research with New Citizenship Project on the what and the how of food citizenship, the Food Ethics Council heard time and again how the need and respect for purpose has enormous potential to engage people and encourage active participation (in our organisations, our communities, our businesses). The businesses that have begun this journey, referring to people as citizens, and treating them as such, as people who have ideas and tools and energy to contribute, have seen the benefit of opening their doors (literal and figurative) and welcoming the creativity, empathy and enthusiasm that follows. They have opened their doors, in different ways, using different tools, at different times.

## Relationships – collaboration not competition

Food citizenship supports us to see ourselves as an important part of a greater whole, and through talking, challenging, supporting and sharing, to be able to find our role within the complexity of the food system. To be able to see and sense that we need each other as businesses, brands and organisations and that to be resilient, it is authentic and open relationships that we need to nourish.

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“There is more to be gained from cooperation and long-term relationships than there is from competition and short term relationships.”

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From our speakers, we heard the deep value in approaching the food system as an ecosystem, and

seeking to nurture partners and collaborators, rather than seeing others as only competitors or suppliers.

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“Our vision is cooperating. For a fairer world.”

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### Collective Missions

This ecosystem approach opens up more possibilities too. It unlocks our capacity to identify and feel part of movements and missions seeking opportunities to collaborate instead of compete. This pursuit of a collective purpose allows business and brands to tell richer, more hopeful stories about the food system. And magnifies the impact they can have on these collective missions.

We heard great examples of businesses sharing their knowledge and expertise, rather than locking them away behind corporate walls. Whether by working in the open or by developing new relationships with exchange and mutual education as founding principles, businesses treating each other like citizens is an inspiring and important step towards a food citizen world. One example we heard was an organisation doing hard, expensive research and development into compostable packaging and when they'd cracked it, sharing the results openly, so others could use what they'd learned.

Working in the open like this has to come with an acceptance that some may choose to use the results of your endeavours in pursuit of their own singular mission. This acceptance will be based in the knowledge that far more organisations will use it as part of the collective mission, amplifying impact and strengthening bonds.

Companionship feels like an important element here. Feeling like others are with you, enjoying and celebrating you, and also commiserating and supporting you in the hard times, is again a key component of resilience, as much for businesses as individuals.

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“Citizen literally means ‘together people’ – not so far away from ‘companion’.”

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### Living your values

Each of our speakers talked about the importance of living their values as a business, and building this into the relationship with those who work for them. This presented in many ways – from businesses being founded on principles of collective decision making and group ownership, to those that transitioned to employee ownership when this felt like the necessary next step of their journey. Practically, this means working in ways that ensure that people have a voice or a vote in strategic decisions within the business, and can also include terms and conditions that facilitate active participation outside of the business i.e. in the form of paid volunteering or activism days.

### Opportunities to participate

On the importance of participation, there was deep agreement and energy in the discussion about why it is important *and* useful to open up ways for people in your communities to be a part of your mission. We also heard lots of great examples about how to do it – in big and small ways. Consultations, creating comms channels for comments and suggestions, ideas and complaints, activity days – there are really countless opportunities to get people involved.

It is important to be clear that active participation in strategic decision making, product design, problem solving and more will not always be positive. It will create some challenges that need to be solved. But once you have opened the door to people to hear their views, most often they are willing and able to roll up their sleeves to help find solutions.

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“What's really interesting is that when you offer the opportunities or you leave the door open to participatory opportunities, it tends to have a broader impact on the whole way the whole organisation is perceived.”

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Jon Alexander, [author of Citizens](#), spoke about experimenting with this idea, and finding that even relatively small opportunities for participating resulted in big changes in how people felt about the business. It creates an opportunity for a two way relationship.

## Progress not perfection

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“It can be a simple switch of language or a small nudge.”

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So where to from here? It is clear that many businesses believe in the power of people and want to engage and empower people get involved. They want to create a food system that is resilient and fair for people, animals and the planet, but may feel stuck about where to start, or how to continue, and deeply frustrated with the external challenges that are barriers to how they want to be. It is clear that none of us is alone in this. We are in this together. It does not have to be all or nothing. There is significant, immediate value in small steps, as well as the big swings. We need both on the road to a food citizen world.

### Further resources

#### Other relevant Business Forum reports:

- **A Fair Pay Food Sector** [see [here](#)]
- **Engaging Others in Your Food Policy** [see [here](#)]
- **Ethical Consumerism: An Oxymoron?** [see [here](#)]
- **Purpose Driven Business** [see [here](#)]
- **Food Choices, Ethics and Advertising** [see [here](#)]

#### Food Citizenship resources:

- **Harnessing the power of Food Citizenship** [see [here](#)]
- **Food Citizenship: A Communications Toolkit** [see [here](#)]
- **This Is The Citizen Shift** [see [here](#)]
- **Progress Not Perfection: The Business of Food Citizenship** [see [here](#)]

This is a report of the Business Forum meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2023. Speakers were **Helen Quaye**, Senior Policy Development and Campaigns Manager at Co-op, **Guy Singh-Watson**, farmer and founder of Riverford and **Louise Ziane**, Chief Operating Officer and co-founder of Toast Ale. **Beth Bell**, Food Citizenship Lead at the Food Ethics Council chaired the meeting. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Food Ethics Council, nor its members. For more information on the Business Forum, contact Dan Crossley [dan@foodethicscouncil.org](mailto:dan@foodethicscouncil.org) +44 (0) 333 012 4147.