

**#FoodPolicyOnTrial: in the dock – ‘80% from UK’ target for publicly-procured food  
27<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

**JURY’S VERDICT AND SUMMARY**

This paper represents a summary of the Food Ethics Council’s latest *Food Policy On Trial* event, critically exploring the idea of whether having an ‘80% from UK’ target for publicly-procured food would be likely to contribute to fairer food systems. The event was held online on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2023, with five expert witnesses being questioned both by a jury panel of members of the Food Ethics Council and event participants.

**1. JURY’S ‘IN THE ROUND’ JUDGEMENT – FOR THE ATTENTION OF PUBLIC POLICY MAKERS**

**1.1 Our jury judged that an ‘80% from UK’ target for publicly procured food is a **FLAWED** idea if it is centred only on *where* the food is grown, reared or produced.** Localised food systems can have multiple benefits, but ‘local’ does not necessarily always equate to better. Sourcing nationally is not necessarily the same thing as sourcing locally, hence fixating on national level targets can be problematic. South-east England is closer to Northern France than the highlands of Scotland, so there is a question about geographic relevance. Why the UK rather than the EU? Why the UK not Scotland or even the Shetlands?

**1.2 However, a target to source more of *certain* foods that *can readily be produced* in the UK could be promising, IF stipulations are also in place for *how* these foods are produced.** For example, vegetables and crops should be produced regeneratively/ sustainably/ agroecologically, as well as being sourced from the UK. In a snapshot poll of participants at the mock trial, the most popular response was that the policy idea was ‘promising’. So, it is worth exploring further, as long as we widen the circle of concern beyond provenance. We need to look beyond the source. What and how much we eat directly affects what is, and how much, is produced.

**1.3 It is not realistic or desirable to argue for, or strive for, *total* self-sufficiency in the UK.** We should not be complacent or arrogant that something grown or produced in the UK is automatically ‘better’ or fairer for people, animals and planet. It is unrealistic to think that the UK will stop buying products to which we’ve become accustomed, which are not feasible or easy to produce in the UK e.g. bananas, rice, oranges or melons. Can we promote both localised and global food systems that are healthy and sustainable?

**1.4 There are strong arguments though to strive for greater self-sufficiency in certain categories, notably fruit and vegetables that are readily grown in the UK.** Targets for horticulture might focus the mind of the UK government and encourage greater support and investment for vital sectors. There is a clearer logic for sourcing crops that can be grown seasonally in the UK, that have relatively short shelf-lives and can be grown in the UK with often lower environmental footprints than those sourced from overseas. Ratchetting up a target on specific categories, such as fruit and vegetables, over time seems more pragmatic and achievable than simply setting one overall target, which may feel unrealistic.

**1.5 We must accept responsibility as global citizens for the impacts of food we consume,** wherever they are produced, rather than offshoring the climate or biodiversity impacts of imported food and drink. From a global point of view, we should strive for any imported food and drink being ethically traded and fairly sourced. Our ethics and moral courage should go beyond the borders of the UK. We have a responsibility to treat those producing our food well, whether in the UK or overseas. Whilst we individually are all citizens of the planet, the UK too is in some senses a global citizen, with responsibilities attached.

**1.6 Public food procurement can be a powerful lever to drive positive change.** The public sector has the potential to create a better food culture and provide a long-term market for sustainably produced UK food and drink. At the moment, decisions about public food are mostly based on cost. Spend on the public food plate should be considered an *investment* – in the future health of the nation and the planet – rather than as a *cost* in a cost-of-living constrained world. Public finances are squeezed harder than ever, but talking about cost is arguably not as important as talking about the value of our food. Many of us have lost our connection with food in the UK, as we are immersed in a pile ‘em high, sell ‘em cheap food culture. The investment of public money in the procurement of good food can catalyse positive change on lots of fronts by addressing intersecting public health, climate and biodiversity concerns. It is imperative that governments see public food as an opportunity for widespread change, by raising minimum standards on environmental sustainability, health, animal welfare and the working conditions of those who supply the food. Doing so will send market signals to local producers that there is an opportunity to provide more ethical food and drink to local customers.

## **2. SUMMARY OF KEY EVIDENCE AND ARGUMENTS FROM EXPERT WITNESSES**

The following is a summary of selected evidence and arguments from expert witnesses, who were chosen to provide a range of views and evidence on this policy idea, drawing on their own experiences and expertise. *To explore the full evidence presented, please refer to [the video recording of the event](#).*

**2.1 Definitions matter** - What is a UK product? Does that mean it all has to be made and packed exclusively in the UK, with all ingredients from the UK? Furthermore, is ‘80%’ calculated by *volume* or by *value*? These differences matter. Clear definitions of a) what is meant by ‘from the UK’, and b) how percentages are calculated, are vital. In addition, a pertinent question raised by participants, that would reframe the challenge, was whether we should instead measure the UK’s self-sufficiency in terms of nutrients required for a healthy and sustainable diet.

**2.2. ‘How’ not ‘where’** – There are potential benefits of a more localised approach, including food security, support for UK businesses including UK farmers, community resilience and sometimes lower emissions from reduced food miles. However, it brings questions about cost, health, animal welfare, environmental issues and whether overall carbon impact is lower. The question was raised as to why we should focus on provenance rather than any other aspect of the food system? Other factors are important too. For example, it was suggested that **seasonality can be a greater indicator** of sustainability than geographical proximity. The differences in environmental footprint can be stark. For example, a 250g punnet of strawberries grown locally in the UK during season has a carbon footprint of about 490 grams. If you have locally grown strawberries out of season in a hothouse, the same sized punnet of strawberries will have a footprint of 3.5kg of carbon, around seven times greater.

**2.3 Historical context** – Self-sufficiency rates have varied quite considerably over time, influenced by multiple factors. In 1939, the UK imported well over 65% of its food – most of that from the British Empire. It was argued that only the threat of invasion led to questioning whether it was rational to do that. Throughout 1940s, 50s and early 60s, there was a real attempt to bring the UK back to greater self-sufficiency, driven by factors such as responding to war and the geopolitical situation. It was suggested that self-sufficiency rates peaked in the late 1960s, 70s and 80s, then began to decline. Now [just over half \(54%\) of food on plates is produced in the UK](#). This includes the majority of grains, meat, dairy, and eggs, but it varies widely depending on the sector.

**2.4 The external context** – It was argued that introducing an ‘80% from UK’ target would be difficult in the middle of the severe international and UK supplier difficulties faced due to international conflicts, climate change concerns and labour supply challenges, plus increasing costs of production.

Others argued that we should value food more and that the external context should not be an excuse for inaction, as there is a greater urgency for change now.

**2.5 The power of the public plate** – Over £2.4 billion is spent annually in the UK on public sector food procurement, hence this is a very important market for farmers and growers. This equates to about 5.5% of total food sales. It is one of four essential markets: retail, out of home, exports and public sector. There are lots of opportunities to use the public food procurement lever much more. Public procurement can be a steady market for producers and therefore a helpful guaranteed source of income. Procuring healthy, sustainable food can, at the same time, be transformational for those eating at public institutions, such as patients and staff in the NHS, with potential for a wider ripple effect on public health. Over two million people a day in the UK rely on donated food for their main meal, sometimes their only meal, of the day – which is sometimes in a public setting. Relating to that are questions of choice and dignity. Food procurement in hospitals, schools and other public institutions has a vital role to play in providing those facing poverty with local, nutritious food.

**2.6 Infrastructure and capacity** - it was raised that there is a need to ensure growing capacity and readiness for any new target. It is important to consider the entire lifecycle of food, from production to consumption, and food waste, and whether there the infrastructure, networks, investment and people exist to support such a move within the UK.

**2.7 Global diets** – It was argued that we should continue to source from the ‘global food larder’. Public caterers have embraced global food trends and enabled a wide range of choices from around the world. International street food is seen as a staple option for many young people, patients and residents. There is also a question of **realism** right now. UK self-sufficiency is c.54% in fresh vegetables, but only 16% in fruit, according to Defra figures. It was suggested that there are very few things for which the UK could possibly be self-sufficient: sheep meat, milk and eggs being the most obvious examples. The UK is home to rich cultural diversity and varied diets, many of which are reliant on products such as rice – which we import 100% of. Higher levels of self-sufficiency would mean a significant shift in diets. It was argued that we should ensure that whatever food we import meets the same standards as UK standards on the environment, food safety, workers’ rights and animal welfare.

**2.8 Pride** – Striving for greater self-sufficiency for some foods can be a source of national pride, including giving farmers pride and purpose in what they do, particularly if they know their food is being enjoyed by those in e.g. schools and hospitals in their locality.

**2.9 Portion distortion?** – An expert witness argued that we have portion distortion in this country, to a level contributing to rising obesity and that this also impacts on what we produce, meaning we need to import more because we eat more. It was argued that it is better to focus targets on specific foods that can be sustainably grown in the UK. Obesity is driven by a range of factors, not least an obesogenic food environment and cheap but unhealthy sources of calories.

**2.10 Following the rules** – It was noted that there are rules that affect public procurement that might make some of the targeting impractical. Government lawyers have said the UK needs to be compliant with State Aid rules in relation to public procurement. However, it was argued that there can be ways around this e.g. as with London Olympics, where food was 100% British sourced. The Labour party has reportedly said it would put a 50% target in place. Separately, the Crown Commercial contract, feeding people three meals in the NHS every day, has a very low budget of less than £3.50 per person, which could make shifting to a more localised approach difficult.

**2.11 Reciprocity and consequences** – We should consider unintended consequences of this kind of target, including recognising that the impacts on some of the supplier nations with which the UK trades

could be significant e.g. on the Republic of Ireland and its economy, with Ireland being the UK's biggest agri-food trading partner. If the UK does not import other countries' goods, it is likely they will do the same to the UK, in an increasingly protectionist world. It is important to think through the implications of such a target for competitiveness, efficiency of the whole system and trade - including the potential for 'tit for tat' protectionism. We should have concern for ethical values in other parts of the world. Any exit planning from an overseas market needs to be carefully considered. The UK plays an important role as a global citizen – as importer and exporter. How would our fragile rural economies be impacted if major export markets declined because more land and more focus was dedicated to domestic production?

**2.12 Technology and the free market** – Some argue that advances in technology e.g. vertical farming will have an impact on availability of food in the UK and/ or that 'leaving it to market forces' will be sufficient. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Britain and Ireland was self-sufficient in avocados. Free market proponents may argue that items should go to the highest bidder, farmers should not be charities and the food they produce should be sold to whoever wants it, regardless of geography. However, others argue that further intervention in the market is needed.

**2.13 Ratchetting up a self-sufficiency target** – A strong, realistic target can focus the mind and focus efforts. Would it be better to have incremental targets that are ratcheted up over time and that apply to some sectors only? That would need to be properly managed, not least for the cost implications.

**2.14 Opportunities in the Devolved Administrations** - In Scotland, for example the Good Food Nation Act places a duty on Scottish governments, local authorities and Health Boards to produce action plans detailing how Scotland will become a Good Food Nation. That will include actions, targets, outcomes, measures. That could include a target for local food, but also for *how* that food is grown, and that could bring multiple benefits.

**2.15 Accredited public meals** - Over half of Scottish local authorities are providing meals accredited by Soil Association's Food for Life Served Here programme, which demonstrates the commitment to providing sustainable, local and ethical food. Food for Life also operates in other parts of the UK.

### **3. PROCESS**

**3.1** Food Policy on Trial events are intended to allow a quickfire evaluation of a policy idea, consider different arguments and explore whether the idea has potential to make an 'in the round' positive contribution to fair food systems. The Food Ethics Council believes it is important to take an 'all things considered' perspective and to consider likely impacts of particular courses of action for the UK, within a global context. There are unlikely to be many interventions that are win-win-win-win (across environment, human health, animal welfare and social justice dimensions), hence weighing up trade-offs may be necessary. In doing so, it is important to understand who the biggest losers are likely to be from any policy intervention, whether those losses are justified, and where they are not, to take mitigating steps.

**3.2** There are many arguments for and against this policy idea. In this event, we sought to unpick some of these arguments and have a nuanced debate that allows people to come to their own judgements.

**3.3** This *Food Policy On Trial* event adopted a select committee style format. A panel of members of the Food Ethics Council took evidence from, and asked questions of, five eminent expert witnesses on the idea of an '80% from UK' target for publicly procured food. This was enriched by additional insights and questions from the audience, before jury deliberation and judgement.

### 3.4 List of expert witnesses:

1. **Minette Batters** (President, NFU)
2. **Ian Wright** (Co-Chair, Food & Drink Export Council; Columnist for The Grocer, Partner at Acuti Associates; and former Chief Executive of Food and Drink Federation)
3. **Catherine McBride** (Economist, Senior fellow at the Centre for Brexit Policy and Trade & Agriculture Commission member)
4. **Tim Radcliffe** (Net Zero Food Programme Manager, NHS England)
5. **Jayne Jones** (Immediate past chair of local authority group ASSIST FM; former Senior Manager, Catering, Cleaning, Commercial events, food strategy, Argyll and Bute Council; now Assistant Director, Facilities and Production at NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde)

### 3.5 Jury of [members of the Food Ethics Council](#):

- **Pete Ritchie** (Director, Nourish Scotland) - **chairing the discussion**
- **Dr Nigel Dower** (Honorary Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Aberdeen)
- **Elta Smith** (Independent researcher, writer and consultant)
- **Albert Tucker** (Independent consultant, social entrepreneur + Chair, Karma Cola Foundation)

### 3.6 Caveats to the process:

- Evidence was limited to five expert witnesses, chosen by the Food Ethics Council, and comments from audience members and the panel.
- It was a short process, not a comprehensive analysis. It was designed to raise important ethical concerns and encourage 'in the round' deliberative thinking about policy.

**3.7** Nevertheless, we believe it is possible to come to an initial broad-based judgement founded on the evidence and viewpoints raised, to help with developing policy in this area. As well as the outcome, the *process* of encouraging 'in the round' consideration of food policies is in itself important. The Food Ethics Council is committed to 'joining the dots' across public health, animal and human welfare, and the natural environment, in consideration of the food system. It provides space to help people come to practical, ethical decisions, with an 'all things considered' approach.

**3.8** We strongly encourage people to listen to the evidence from the Food Policy on Trial event (and other evidence) and to form their own judgements.

## 4. USEFUL RESOURCES

A select few resources that may be useful are shown below. These are by no means an exhaustive list:

- <https://ffcc.co.uk/publications/farming-for-change-charting-a-course-that-works-for-all>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-food-strategy/government-food-strategy>
- <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/sourcing/how-can-the-uk-be-more-self-sufficient-in-food/653103.article>
- <https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/news/the-uk-potentially-food-self-sufficient>
- <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/fruit-and-veg/uk-self-sufficiency-contracting-industry-leaders-warn-efra-committee/673310.article>
- <https://www.briefingsforbritain.co.uk/food-security-does-not-require-self-sufficiency/>
- <https://www.briefingsforbritain.co.uk/food-security-does-not-require-self-sufficiency-2/>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/sep/06/cucumber-capital-growers-selling-up-as-brex-it-and-energy-crisis-hits-britains-vegetable-industry>