

Dietary Shift for Health, Climate and Economic Prosperity



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transforming the UK food system requires fundamental shifts in dietary patterns to address interconnected crises in public health, healthcare costs, economic productivity, widening social inequalities in food access and environmental degradation. Dietary change is one of three interconnected transformations alongside resilient agriculture and smarter land use.¹

Our current food system is faltering on all fronts: the general population does not meet national dietary guidelines,² diet-related diseases cost £268 billion annually,³ and food production drives environmental degradation, causing over one-fifth of all environmental and climate impacts in Europe.⁴ Furthermore, 20% of UK adults self-report as food insecure and 69% report changing their eating habits due to financial pressures.⁵ Widening disparities in access to nutritious food are symptomatic of a system oriented more for profit than human and planetary resilience.

We call for urgent, coordinated action to shift UK dietary patterns as an essential component of transforming the food system to improve public health, planetary wellbeing, and economic prosperity.



THE SCALE OF THE CRISIS

The UK's dietary landscape reveals a population nearing breaking-point. Fewer than 1% of people meet all recommendations,⁶ poor diet is now the leading cause of ill health in the UK,⁷ and nearly two-thirds of adults are overweight or obese.⁸ Diet-related diseases cost £268 billion, more than four times what it would cost to provide healthy diets for all.⁹ In the UK, we eat twice as much meat as the global average, and approximately one third of all meat eaten is processed.¹⁰ Over consumption of processed and red meat have been shown to increase risk of obesity, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, certain cancers and all-cause mortality.¹¹

Food insecurity has surged to alarming levels, with over 7.2 million people now living in food-insecure households, which is approximately 14% of total UK households.¹² Food prices have risen by over 30% since 2021, forcing nearly half of UK consumers to cut back on food quality.¹³ The most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend 45% of their disposable income on food to afford the government's recommended healthy diet, rising to 70% for households with children.¹⁴ This creates a vicious cycle where those most in need of nutritious food are least able to access it.

Diets are also costing the planet. Food production remains one of the most resource-intensive aspects of our economy.¹⁵ Meat and dairy production generates significantly higher greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) than other foods.¹⁶ **Transforming the food system requires fundamental shifts in what we produce and consume.**



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THE PATH FORWARD: CHANGE PRESENTS OPPORTUNITY

To meet climate action obligations, the Climate Change Committee suggests a 25% reduction in meat by 2040, and a 35% reduction in meat by 2050, which equates to just one rasher of bacon, or two chicken nuggets, less a day.^{17,18} These targets align with the 2021 National Food Strategy recommendations¹⁹ and the recent 'Good Food Cycle' priorities,²⁰ which emphasise sustainable sourcing and British origin rather than simply shifting production overseas. People in the UK eat twice as much meat as the global average and almost a third of all meat eaten by men is processed.²¹ Rebalancing diets would bring sub-sections of the population in line with existing public health guidance.

The health benefits of shifting to a higher proportion of plants in diets have been shown to include a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers.^{22,23} If diets are adjusted to more closely follow the Eatwell Guide recommendations, there could be a 7% reduction in mortality risk as well as a 30% reduction in GHGs and a 4-7% reduction of water use.²⁴

The economics of dietary change present a compelling case for action. While providing healthy diets nationwide would require an additional £57 billion investment (a 55% increase in food spending), this cost is substantially less than the £92 billion currently spent on diet-related healthcare annually, and far below the total economic cost of £268 billion attributed to poor diet.²⁵ This represents a clear economic opportunity for diet shift.



ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Structural barriers continue to reinforce unhealthy consumption patterns. Many low-income areas are "food deserts" with limited access to affordable, nutritious food, forcing residents to rely on convenience stores and fast-food outlets offering energy-dense, nutrient-poor options.²⁶ The aggressive marketing of processed foods, particularly targeting children and vulnerable populations, normalises poor dietary habits and undermines public health efforts.²⁷ Conversely, communities with greater access to supermarkets and fresh produce vendors demonstrate healthier dietary patterns and lower rates of diet-related diseases.^{28,29}

Meeting dietary change goals requires the food industry to provide healthy, accessible, affordable, and appealing plant-based alternatives. While some retailers are moving toward protein diversification,³⁰ greater policy intervention is needed to enable the shift towards eating more plant-based proteins.



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AFN NETWORK+ CALL TO ACTION

The AFN Network+ recognises that achieving dietary transformation requires coordinated action across multiple levels: government policy, industry reform, and public engagement.

We call for:

Urgent Policy Interventions

1. Food system reform that prioritises health and sustainability over short-term profit
2. Public procurement transformation to drive demand for healthy, sustainable foods
3. Financial incentives that make nutritious, plant-rich foods more affordable and accessible
4. Marketing regulation to reduce promotion of unhealthy foods, particularly to children
5. Investment in food environment improvement in underserved areas

Industry Accountability

1. Mandatory reporting on progress toward healthier product portfolios
2. Reformulation targets to reduce the amount of foods high in fat, salt, or sugar (HFSS)
3. Supply chain transformation supporting sustainable protein diversification
4. Transparent pricing that reflects true costs of food production including environmental and health impacts

Supporting Vulnerable Populations

1. Targeted interventions ensuring food security for low-income households
2. Education and access programs that don't place burden on individual choice
3. Community-based initiatives that address local food environment challenges
4. Financial support for agricultural workers, especially smallholders, during the transition



CONCLUSION

The transformation of the UK food system is an urgent necessity for our health, our climate, and our economic future. **Shifting towards plant-rich diets provides opportunities to transform the food system, improve public health, and create economic value.**

The current system is unsustainable and inequitable, imposing significant costs on our healthcare system, our productivity, and people's wellbeing. **But the solution is within reach. With coordinated action from government, industry, and civil society, we can create a food system that nourishes both people and planet.**

The AFN Network+ commits to playing a leading role in this transformation, working with stakeholders across the food system to ensure that healthy, sustainable diets become accessible to all. The time for incremental change has passed, we must act now to secure a healthy, sustainable future for the UK.



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