



# Open letter: Actions on food for an incoming Labour government

The UK's food system needs attention. Current polls suggest that the next government of the UK – likely to be elected in 2024 – will be Labour, or at least Labour-led. Here we present a list of actions an incoming Labour government could implement on taking office, or negotiate with coalition partners.

## Locating food policy within the '5 missions'

The proposals made in the following sections assume high-level interest in food matters. There are many political grounds for this, including: shocking levels of food poverty, the importance of tackling food as part of the drive to Net Zero, concerns about UK food security, and trade policy. Labour's '5 missions for a better Britain',<sup>i</sup> announced in February 2023, are broad but within them there are hooks for a progressive food policy that would provide stability after a decade of incoherence and policy drift.

The suggestions made below assume that the Labour shadow Front Bench team plans ahead to ensure agri-food is embedded in the delivery of:

- the 'Stronger green and digital future' agenda,<sup>ii</sup> which aims to cut emissions, reverse the decline of nature, buy, make and sell more in Britain, and manage a fair and prosperous transition to net zero;
- the health agenda, by contributing to the prevention of diet-related ill-health;<sup>iii</sup>
- energy and Net Zero policies, to reduce UK food footprints and plan lower energy demand;<sup>iv</sup>
- better trade policies, not least to prevent the erosion of food standards (as is expected from the Australia and New Zealand trade agreements);<sup>v</sup> and to rebuild relations with the EU from which the UK derives more than a quarter of its food.<sup>vi</sup>

## Immediate low-cost measures Labour could take if elected

1. **Set up a permanent National Council for Food Strategy, or National Food Council**, to provide scientific and policy coherence currently lacking. It could sit in any one of a number of places, e.g. under the government's Chief Scientific Adviser, in the Cabinet Office or in a relevant department (Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Department for Health and Social Care).
2. **Create a standing agri-food political liaison committee across the four nations** (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, England), together with civil service infrastructure. This would to connect and integrate Westminster policy with devolved nations' food strategies.
3. **Create a Cabinet Sub-Committee on Food Resilience & Sustainability**, or give a clear food role to an existing or new sub-committee charged with protecting resilience and

<sup>i</sup> Keir Starmer (2023) Labour's 5 Missions <https://labour.org.uk/missions/>

<sup>ii</sup> Labour's Green & Digital Future (2022) <https://labour.org.uk/stronger-together/a-fairer-greener-future/green-and-digital-future/>

<sup>iii</sup> Eg Marmot Review 10 Years on (2020) <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

<sup>iv</sup> Labour Party (2022) Green & Digital Future. <https://labour.org.uk/stronger-together/britain-2030/green-and-digital-future/>

<sup>v</sup> Emily Thornberry (2021) Labour's Trade Policy. <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Trade-Policy-2021.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> UK Food Security Report (2021) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021-theme-2-uk-food-supply-sources#:~:text=In%202020%2C%2054%25%20of%20domestic,%2C%20and%2027%20of%2080%25.>



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sustainability (i.e., food to be a defined strand within a more general sub-committee).

4. **Signal that the UK should raise its food production above the current 54% level of supply,**<sup>vii</sup> and do this measured against sustainability criteria, while aiming to *diversify* rather than *concentrate* sourcing of supply.
  - Within this goal, set up a *priority horticulture initiative* to test where and how production can be sustainably increased, drawing on lessons from pioneers (e.g., Riverford).<sup>viii</sup>
5. **Create an inter-departmental taskforce on household food insecurity reduction** to identify a series of actions to begin to reduce dietary and health inequalities (Marmot goals<sup>ix</sup>) and to end the role of food banks as privatized sub-welfare. (Note: this will not be cost-free.)
  - Assess the viability of different options: Universal Credit, school meals eligibility, other benefits, food vouchers.
6. **Inject a food strand into any moves to create a more regional devolution**, as flagged in the report from the Commission on the UK's Future.<sup>x</sup>
7. **Confirm the existence and strengthen the remit of the Grocery Code Adjudicator.**
  - Require supply-chain fair dealing agreements in key food supply chains.
8. **Immediately expand the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS)** from 30,000 (now 45,000)<sup>xi</sup> to 100,000. This would encourage the horticultural industry to plant food.
  - At the same time, create an immediate review of seasonal labour.
9. **Initiate a review of options for repairing the food security damage caused by leaving the Single Market.**
10. **Convert the current Eatwell Plate (the national dietary recommendations)<sup>xii</sup> into a more appropriate sustainable diet guide**, linking human and ecosystems health. This should involve the Food Standards Agency, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Environment Agency. This is to provide a framework for Net Zero and food chain benchmarks, as well as public sector and consumer advice.
11. **Create a new Food & Farming Skills Board**, and use existing Skills Councils to organise national standards to develop 'green' farming and food skills throughout the food chain. Colleges and universities to provide local skills delivery to these green standards and so help build more sustainable jobs, with proper rewards determined by the Board.

## Medium-term actions to cement new directions

It is widely agreed that for the UK's agri-food system to be put on a sustainable basis, there need to be structural changes backed by legislation. These are medium-term requirements. They include:

1. **Legislation to set targets to make all food sectors and civil society more prepared for shocks and change in the food system.** Legislation could:
  - a) *Either* be given a specific Food Bill, e.g. a Food Security and Resilience Act;
  - b) *Or* be a food strand within a more general, cross-government framework provided by the mooted Resilience Act.
2. **Development and encouragement of regional food hubs** within the proposed new regional devolution structures.<sup>xiii</sup> Whatever emerges should incorporate current, limited bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships, which replaced previous regional development agencies but lack resources and influence.
3. Creation of **food poverty reduction targets within an inequality reduction strategy**; this to include accurate food costings in Minimum Income Standards, Living Wage and Universal Credit levels.

vii UK Food Security Report (2021): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021-theme-2-uk-food-supply-sources#:~:text=In%202020%2C%2054%25%20of%20domestic,%2C%20and%2027%20for%2080%25>

viii Riverford website <https://www.riverford.co.uk/>

ix Marmot Review Ten Years on (2020). <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

x Gordon Brown, chair (2022) *Renewing our Democracy and Rebuilding our Economy - report of the Commission on the UK's future*. <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Commission-on-the-UKs-Future.pdf>

xi See Defra (2023) note on food shortages (a) expanding SAWS and (b) opening US maize imports <https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2023/02/22/fruit-and-vegetable-supply/>

xii NHS (2016) *Eatwell Plate* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide>

xiii Gordon Brown, chair (2022) *Renewing our Democracy and Rebuilding our Economy - report of the Commission on the UK's future*. <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Commission-on-the-UKs-Future.pdf>



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