UK Research and Innovation

Briefing: Power in the food system - how to shift it for citizens, farmers & nature

Based on an AFN Network+ webinar, held 20.03.25

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About the speakers & this briefing

About this briefing

This briefing is based on a webinar discussion with Charlie Taverner and Mhairi Brown, given to the AFN Network+ community on the 20th March 2025 and in collaboration with the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC). It is collated and written by Nina Pullman, food systems writer for AFN Network+, who has also lightly edited the transcript to paraphrase in parts. The briefing is edited by Jez Fredenburgh, knowledge exchange fellow at AFN Network+. You can also watch the webinar.

About the webinar topic

Citizens are frustrated with the extreme imbalance of power and profit in the food system, and want political leaders to bring radical change. That was one of the conclusions from the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC)'s engagement with citizens up and down the UK as part of The Food Conversation.

Who holds the power in the food system and who is profiting? What is the impact of this inequality and corporate control on farmers and growers, our health, nature, and ability to tackle climate change? What can be done about it?

In this joint webinar with the FFCC, our speakers share insights from their latest research, which the organisation undertook following concerns raised by citizens in The Food Conversation – and explain why questions of power and profit need to rise up the political agenda.

We explore the headlines from two major reports by the FFCC: The first, Tim Jackson's The False Economy of Big Food, found that unhealthy diets were costing the UK £268bn a year, but the investment for everyone to eat well was far smaller. The second, Paying the Price, by Charlie Taverner, looks at the impact of the push for cheap calories on farming businesses, the agri-food chain, and on communities, nature, food security and resilience.

About Charlie Taverner

Dr Charlie Taverner is the FFCC's farming policy lead. He is an experienced researcher and writer with a professional and personal background in food and farming.

He has a PhD in History from Birkbeck, University of London, specialising in food production, trade and consumption in the past. Before joining FFCC, he was a research fellow at Trinity College Dublin, part of an international project on the history of food and drink in Ireland. His first book, on London's street food sellers, was published in 2023.

Previously, Charlie worked as a business and farming journalist. He was a reporter at Farmers Weekly, mainly covering the dairy, beef, sheep and pig industries, and his writing has appeared in a range of national and trade publications. He was brought up on his family's dairy farm in Devon, where they make very good ice cream. He now lives with his partner and son in North London.

About Mhairi Brown

Mhairi Brown is head of food futures at the FFCC. She is a Registered Nutritionist specialising in public health and food policy who is passionate about creating healthy food systems that support the health of people and the planet.

She leads food and health work for the Commission, including the Food Conversation. Prior to joining FFCC, she led policy and international workstreams at Consensus Action on Salt, Sugar and Health. There, she developed and advocated for policy proposals to reduce excess and unnecessary levels of salt and sugar from foods and drinks sold in the UK, and collaborated with stakeholders in Malaysia, Morocco, China and Peru to translate this work globally.

Mhairi holds a BSc in Environmental and Sustainable Chemistry at the University of Edinburgh and a Masters in International Public Health Nutrition at the University of Westminster. She is now a PhD candidate with Queen Mary University of London, evaluating food and health policies in the UK. Outside of work, Mhairi can often be found hiking, gardening, and dedicating a disproportionate amount of time to preventing her cats from interrupting work calls.

About the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) is an independent charity that helps shape the future of food and farming, land use and the countryside. Its purpose is to bring together people and ideas from different perspectives to find the practical and radical solutions which also tackle the climate, nature, health and economic crises of our time. It does this by curating the latest research and evidence, involving citizens in deliberations, and telling the inspiring stories of people taking action in their businesses and communities.

Summary of key points

In this joint webinar with the FFCC, Charlie Taverner and Mhairi Brown share insights from their latest reports and explain why questions of power and profit need to rise up the political agenda.

Key points from Charlie Taverner

The Treasury is driving short-term decision making in government

- At the Labour Party Conference in Liverpool there was a real sense of stasis because it was before the budget had come out. Now the delay on decisions is down to the spending review.
- So it's clear the Treasury is really dominant within government at the moment, and short-term financial decision making is driving policy.

Citizens are angry about the imbalance of power and profits in the food system

- Two new reports are a culmination of the Food Conversation project, a citizen dialogue process run by the FFCC for the last two years. This involved an extensive series of dialogues with citizens to ask what they want from the food system.
- One of the strong themes that emerged was frustration and anger about the advances of power within the food system. They noted large profits being made while people are struggling to access food.

Paying for everyone to eat healthily would be significantly cheaper than the knock-on costs of unhealthy UK diets

- The False Economy of Big Food report looked at how much the food system is costing the UK. The first part traced links between unhealthy food and chronic disease, before calculating the health, social and welfare costs linked to these poor health outcomes. It also calculated indirect costs, like productivity losses.
- The negative externalities of unhealthy diets were calculated to be about £268 billion pounds a year, at 2024 prices.
- In contrast, for the population to eat a healthy diet (based on the Eatwell Guide), it would cost about £158 billion pounds a year on top of usual food costs. This equates to 50% on top of current spending.
- The amount of potential spending on healthy food is dwarfed by the indirect and direct costs associated with unhealthy diets.

Consolidation and rising shareholder returns have locked-in unhealthy diets

- The emergence of the food processing industry and the consolidation of power across the food chain has given big food companies power over food policy.
- In particular, ultra food processing as a sector is growing faster than the whole food sector and global GDP.
- Over this period of time, there have been increased rates of shareholder returns as a result of hidden costs.

Farmers squeezed by policy changes and rising input costs

- The second report, Paying the Price, analysed the food system from the point of view of farmers.
- The context was recent farming protests that began in 2024 but have exploded over the inheritance tax changes in the budget.
- It is part of a wider challenging period for agriculture after 18 months of input cost spikes after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- The final context is the post-Brexit farming policy shift to reshape subsidies.

Farm income has not risen much in real terms since the 1970s

- Figures on profitability of farming, based on publicly available and government data, show that the majority of farm income in England is not from agricultural activities.
- Once farm income is divided among business owners, family members and farm

workers, the annual income per capita is about £30,000, slightly below median earnings. That figure is also before tax and any reinvestment in the business.
- In real terms, farmer income is similar to the early 70s, when the UK was about to enter the European Economic Community.
- Over 50 years, there has been massive improvement in farming productivity. The UK is producing similar volumes of wheat, milk and beef, more poultry and less veg, while using fewer resources and with a smaller workforce. Farmers haven't benefited from that productivity because the value of produce has fallen.
- The value of food has fallen due to more imports, a growing food supply, increased dominance of supermarkets and the rise of foodservice and processing.

Power is consolidated within a few global food businesses

- There are similar levels of consolidation within the food supply chain, as well as at a retail level. For example, 70% of poultry slaughtered in the UK goes through three major integrated businesses; 2Sisters, Moy Park and Avara.
- Moy Park is the subsidiary of ABS, the Brazil-based multinational and one of the biggest agribusinesses globally.
- Avara is the joint venture between Faccenda and Cargill, itself one of the biggest private companies in the world with interests across Britain's food.
- Frontier is a major input provider, trading about 20% of the UK harvest. It is jointly owned by Cargill and Associated British Foods, which is one of the biggest food manufacturers in the country and specialised in ingredients for processed goods.

The Treasury is a better lever for change in the food system than Defra, but its focus is currently short term

- Many of the major levers for change in food are not controlled by Defra, which has a coordinating role around food, farming and land use strategies.
- For major structural changes, the departments of international trade, business and the Treasury are more influential.
- People working in policy are focusing on what decisions the Treasury is interested in. The Treasury is not interested in hearing arguments for policies that invest now for long-term return, which is a challenge for the food system where most issues are in that timeframe.
- FFCC's Food Conversations with citizens is powerful in that respect, because it changes the tone of the conversation.

Key points from Mhairi Brown

Defra is planning to build on previous work for a new food strategy

- There are some opportunities for food policy at the moment, which in itself is a big change.
- Since the 1990s, there have been around 14 strategies related to obesity, food and health, containing almost 700 policies, with very few making it to implementation.
- The Nourishing Britain report from Henry Dimbleby and Dolly Van Tulleken, interviewed past prime ministers and health ministers. Many of them felt regret for not doing more to promote and protect public health, due to competing priorities, media coverage and nanny state accusations.
- Defra is planning to build on existing food strategy work rather than reinventing the wheel. Civil servants and ministers are keen to listen and work out solutions.

Policy focus is pivoting from consumer awareness to structural change

- There's been a shift from policies that are focused on education and consumer awareness to more structural solutions.
- The Food Conversation dialogues will help counter the narrative around 'nanny state overreach', which suggests the government shouldn't be protecting health.
- The Food Conversation and hearing from citizens has given government a mandate to act. The findings demonstrate that the public wants action around food to protect health, and they understand it is complex.
- There was a clear message throughout the conversations that government should take responsibility.

Campaigning language around food often anticipates failure

- In food campaigning, there is a tendency to frame requests as something that isn't possible or that is likely to be refused.

- Food citizens talk more about systems and reference 'government' rather than specific departments.
- Crucially, citizens position themselves as partners in food system change and recognise that everybody has a responsibility.
- Citizens are less divided on food than the media believes; they are ready to listen and respect other perspectives.

Key points from audience Q&A

Food system consolidation only happened in recent history – an alternative model is possible

- Because of conflict in the 20th century, much legislation and intervention in the market was introduced. But other models for the food system are possible.
- There were alternative economic models in the past that worked, for example when bakers were allowed to make a fixed margin.

Clearer labelling could help give power back to citizens

- Ingredients, origins and marketing make it difficult to locate information on packs.
- In addition to making labelling really clear, there needs to be more control around misleading messages that can give products health halos.
- Labelling can help citizens make informed decisions but it needs to be clear, controlled and designed in partnership.

Local food requires infrastructure investment

- It's helpful to think about local food in terms of infrastructure. Through the centralisation and integration in the food system, this infrastructure has been stripped away and now requires investment.
- As Tim Lang's National Preparedness Commission report makes clear, a decentralised food system that empowers local citizens will help society withstand food shocks. At the moment, this structure is not incentivised by the market.
- One of the key points in the upcoming Citizen Manifesto, published by the FFCC as part of the Food Conversation, is investing in local food systems. Citizens see local food as providing security, connection to and appreciation of local areas, and can connect people to where they live.

Consolidation in farming makes cyber crime and climate change more risky

- 60% of the UK's food by value comes from 8,000 farms, out of more than 90,000 farms in England alone, leaving the food supply open to threat from climate change-related weather events.
- In the machinery sector, 90% of the tractors sold in the UK come from three manufacturers. Modern tractors are increasingly electronic. A cyber attack could hit one of those major manufacturers in the middle of harvest, and as AI develops that risk will be greater.

Webinar transcript

Speakers: Jez Fredenburgh (JF), Charlie Taverner (CT), Mhairi Brown (MB). Prof Neil Ward (NW).

The speakers discussed the findings and significance of two new reports from FFCC, The False Economy of Big Food and Paying the Price, followed by an audience Q&A.

JF: Welcome and thanks so much for joining this AFN Network+ webinar on power in the food system; how to shift it for citizens, farmers and nature. We are really pleased to be able to collaborate today with the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) on this webinar, and to be joined by a couple of members of their team, Charlie Taverner and Mhairi Brown, who I will introduce properly shortly. So I'm Jez Fredenburgh, and I'm going to be your chair today. I'm based at the school Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia, where I'm the knowledge exchange fellow for the AFN Network.

If you've not been to one of our webinars before, AFN is a UKRI-funded project focused on identifying research gaps that could help reduce emissions in the UK agri-food system. We've got around 3,000 members now across the UK, so it's a really good body of collective knowledge. So please do join us, if you haven't already. Also with me today is AFN co-lead, Professor Neil Ward, who's also based at UEA.

So today's topic power in the food system. The FFCC's work with citizens as part of the Food Conversation found that the public is generally frustrated with the extreme imbalance of power and profit in the food system, and wants political leaders to bring radical change. This has led the organisation to research and publish two reports exploring power, its extent in the food system, its impact, and what could be done about it, and generally to help kickstart a conversation about power in the food system.

So today, we're going to be exploring these two reports by the FFCC. The first: 'The False Economy of Big Food' focused on the impacts of power on our health. And the second, the newly published 'Paying the Price' report, which you may have heard quite a bit about. It's been on Radio Four quite a lot last week. The 'Paying the Price' report looked at impacts on farming, the agri-food chain and on communities, nature, food security and resilience.

So Charlie Taverner is the FFCC farming policy lead and author of Paying the Price. He is a researcher and writer specialising in food and farming, and grew up on a family dairy farm before joining the FFCC. Charlie was research fellow at Trinity College Dublin and a business and farming journalist, including at Farmers Weekly, where we actually used to work together, funnily enough, so it's nice to be doing something again with you, Charlie. Anyway, at Farmers Weekly, he was covering the livestock industries.

Mhairi Brown is head of food futures at the FFCC. She's a registered nutritionist specialising in public health and food policy. Prior to joining the organisation, she led policy and international work at Consensus Action on salt, sugar and health, where she collaborated with stakeholders to translate this work globally.

Treasury is driving momentum and decision-making in government

CT: Thank you, Jez. Thank you, Neil for having us. We're delighted to be able to be here and talk about our work and thank you for coming in such good numbers to talk about this. Jez was mentioning there that we used to work together. In fact, we sat next to each other for two years. And one of the things I remember early in our work together at Farmers Weekly was a lot of these conversations coming up about disparities of power within the food system, particularly around supermarkets and the Groceries Code at that time.

Interesting to reflect, maybe in questions and discussion later on, how things have changed or how they haven't changed over that period of time.

I'm going to start with a little bit of background to these pieces of work and give you some information about what we were trying to achieve with them and what we weren't. And then I'll give a bit of an overview and some of the conclusions that we've drawn from that, and then Mhairi and I are going to have a brief discussion about this work and how it connects with both the Food Conversation project and also the current political moment. I'll give a couple of sentences of background about the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, because not everyone will be aware.

So FFCC has been an independent charity since 2020. Formerly it was part of the Royal Society of Arts. We're an independent charity that advocates for healthy food for all, the countryside works for people and nature and farming as a force for change. With it, with a transition to agroecology, we work by curating latest evidence, convening leadership and innovative thinkers and amplifying seldom held heard voices and perspectives and conversation.

And I think it's that latter strand of our work that really forms the background to these couple of reports. Most directly, it was around last summer. We had a strong sense around the time of the election and afterwards that the financial and economic imperatives were probably going to be driving a lot of the decision making, around food and farming policy.

I recall going to the Labour Party Conference in Liverpool. There was a real sense of stasis going on. In any policy discussions, any answer you could try and get out politicians, because they were saying we've got to wait for the budget. We've got to wait for the budget. And that was still a month or two's time ahead. And now, actually the conversation has changed. So we've got to wait for the Spending Review. So you can really see how the Treasury is really dominant within government at the moment, and how short-term financial decision making is driving a lot of what's going on.

Cost of unhealthy diets to country dwarfs cost of healthy food

The important reason that this work was hooked onto was the culmination of the Food Conversation project, which we've been running for the last couple of years as a commission. This involved an extensive series of deliberative dialogues with citizens, many citizens assemblies, really, in all four nations of the UK, looking at what they want out of their food system. And one of the strong themes that was emerging from that was real frustration and anger in some cases, from citizens about the advances of power within the food system.

The large profits being made while people were also struggling to access food, and there were massive impacts on people's health happening. The point of this work, we were very aware that a lot of the analysis, a lot of the research and thinking would not be entirely novel, and certainly not to specialists. We were going to be using existing data. We're going to be using and synthesising existing research. But what was important was the stories we were trying to pull out and where we were focusing political and public attention. So as much as [being about] analysis, these two reports are exercises in storytelling, advocacy and communication.

The first report - 'The False Economy of Big Food' - we asked Tim Jackson if he carried out this piece of work for us leading up to the launch of the Food Conversation, and this ultimately became The False Economy of Big Food. And the question he was set for this piece of work,was, I remember those early meetings, can we put a number on how much the food system is costing us as a nation? To try and connect to that fact that economics and finance was so dominating. Finance was so dominating the conversation.

There's probably two sides to the analysis. The first one was starting by looking at the links between unhealthy food and chronic disease, like heart disease and diabetes, and then carrying out a calculation adding up the healthcare costs, the social care costs, the welfare spending that can be linked to diet, and also looking at other indirect costs, things like productivity losses and also diminished quality of life. The number that you can put on that. Tim ended up with a figure linked to the negative externalities of

unhealthy diets, of about £268 billion pounds a year at 2024 prices. So that's an enormous number. What does that actually mean?

That's more than the annual budget of the NHS. If you added up all the national healthcare spending across the UK, that's how much you get. It's an enormous figure. But what's really interesting, and what Tim would stress if he were here, is the flip side of this. He wanted to calculate how much it would cost for everyone to be able to eat well within the UK. So he did a calculation for the whole population using the Eatwell Guide as a standard diet. How much would that cost? What's the incremental cost on top of current spending on food within households? And he came to a number that we have, that households across the UK collectively would have to be spending about £158 billion pounds a year. So that's an increase of about 50% on top of current spending.

But what's really important is the difference between these two charts, because that incremental cost, or even the entire amount of potential spending on food is dwarfed by the indirect and direct costs associated with unhealthy diets. And then towards the end of the paper, Tim starts talking about what's locking us into them, this false economy, this dysfunction. And he discusses the emergence over several decades, of this new industry of old food processing, and also the consolidation of power across the food chain. And importantly, it's economic power, it's financial power, but also its influence that gives big food companies over food policy decision making. And this dominance of these funds is continuing.Particularly ultra food processing as a sector is growing faster than the whole food sector as a whole, and much faster than global GDP, and also over this period of time, you're seeing increased rates of shareholder returns as these hidden costs have been piling up.

Farmer protests follows torrid time of uncertain policy and rising costs

The second report wanted to look at a similar set of issues within something in the food chain. So the False Economy report described how citizens were suffering at one end in terms of health, but also we've got a system in which farmers are being squeezed at the other. I might also add food workers into that mix as well. It's another important constituency we should think about when we're thinking about this pressure. The immediate context for this work, everyone will be well aware, is that we've had farming protests that actually started early in 2024 but really exploded over the inheritance chapter changes in the October budget.

And that followed a really torrid period of time for agriculture in which they've just experienced what is, 18 months on, effectively, huge input cost spikes after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And then we've been undergoing this massive policy shift post Brexit. And the questions we wanted to answer with this is, why have farmers felt so squeezed, and particularly in the historical context, why have they felt so squeezed over several decades by this push for cheaper food at all costs. Why is this a problem and what can be done about it?

We start in the report by looking at the profitability of farming. So what we did was using the very publicly available and extensive government data that's out there in publications like Agriculture in the UK, farm accounts, to pull out some good salient examples, like the fact that the majority of income on most farms in England is not coming from agricultural activities. In many cases, lots of farms are making a loss from those activities they're reliant on, on the link payments, the changeover from the old Basic Payment Scheme, subsidies, agri environment schemes, and also diversification. Diversification over the last 25 years especially, has really grown as a proportion of agricultural income in the country. We were also really interested in change over time, with another set of officially reported statistics.

So it's total income from farming, which is reported every year. How much money is returned back to the business owners and unpaid workers, family members, usually on farms in the country? Take that big total number, divide it by the number of those business owners and unpaid workers on a full-time basis. And what do you get to? So in the last few years, you get a number that is being returned to those people of a little over £30,000 pounds a year, which is slightly below median earnings, where they are now. But importantly, that's a per capita number in terms of profit, but it's not exactly their wages. That's a gross number that's before any taxes paid, and also before any reinvestment in their business.

And what's interesting about these figures, and what was widely reported off the back of our report, was the fact that if you account for inflation, this is total income for farming for each farmer since the early 1970s. And yes, we've got lots of ups and downs with these figures, which chart very much the ups and downs of recent agricultural history. But in real terms, we're at a similar place in terms of income per farmer, as we were in the early 70s, when the UK was about to enter the European Economic Community. The red line here is a line just to represent median gross annual earnings, also in real terms, just to give you a sense of wage growth too over that time.

Farm productivity hasn't benefited farmer income

We then look at some of the context and explanations to this. So over that 50 years, you've seen a massive improvement in farming productivity to the order of 59-60%. The UK has been producing similar amounts, since the 80s, of major foods like wheat, milk and beef. We're using much more poultry meat, we're producing a little less veg, but we're doing all that with a much more efficient use of our resources, and a much smaller workforce. But the issue is farmers haven't benefited from that increased productivity over time, and one of the major reasons for that is they can produce the same amount of food, but the value of that produce has fallen over time. So these are real terms charts here. Don't worry about numbers, it's the trend that matters here.

These are farmgate prices, effectively for major farm commodities, again, adjusted for inflation over time. And you can see this flattening in some cases, but also a downward trend. It's interesting. The rise we've seen since the financial crisis and this big spike in the last few years, which has changed their dynamics somewhat. There's lots of background for why this is happening. Of course, we're importing more food from abroad, and there's been a growing food supply, which is simple supply and demand economics. And we've also seen the emergence of, or the increased dominance of supermarkets within the UK food system and the rise of the food service sector and the heavy food processing, all of which diminishes the value of farms produce. We go on to talk a little bit about the structure of the agri-food chain, of which farmers are part of, which is another important fact why they've got little bargaining power to shape their prices.

This is a visual representation of the economic size of the UK food system expressed in gross value added. And you can see the primary production end there in blue – farming. And farming and fishing is relatively small compared to those other large sectors, retail and catering and processing. But also, there's another major difference, if you bury down within those numbers. The primary production sector, which is very different, is comprised of largely tens of 1000s of small and medium sized companies, whereas most of these other sectors tend to be dominated by a few very large firms.

And in our work here, we do very much thinking on the two recent IPES reports, Too Big To Feed and Tipping the Scales. I really recommend those if you've not read them. At a global level, what you find in the UK is most linked in the agri food chain, if you think about them as individual markets that are exceeding the threshold for concentration and the dominance of smaller firms beyond the point at which competition starts to decline. So that leads to weakening bargaining powers, more actors, at least less innovation. That leads to growing corporate influence over the policy making decision.

Consolidation has happened within food processors as well as retailers

Now, this concentration is a fact of life for people that work in these sectors. But it's valuable to step back and take quite a broad view and see this level of concentration being repeated again and again. Now everyone will know the very well known examples at the top of the food chain, if you will, like how the top four retailers account for something like two thirds of grocery sales. Other independent, non supermarket retailers are a really minor force within that food chain. But what's striking is down the agri value chain, you've also got similar levels of consolidation happening through waves of mergers and acquisitions, but also the prominence of some of the world's biggest food and agribusinesses within the UK food economy. We take a couple of examples in the report.

For example, poultry, where you've got 70% of chickens being slaughtered in the UK, going through three major integrated businesses, 2Sisters, Moy Park and Avara. One of these is privately owned. Moy Park is the subsidiary of ABS, the Brazil-based multinational, one of the biggest agribusinesses globally. And Avara is the joint venture between Faccenda and Cargill, itself one of the biggest private companies in the entire world. And another of these major agribusiness giants. And Cargill also has interests right across in Britain's food chain. Frontier is the biggest grain merchant and a major input provider, it trades about 20% of the UK harvest, and it's jointly owned by Cargill and Associated British Foods, which is one of the biggest food manufacturers here in the country. And it's particularly specialised in ingredients for processed goods.

We then talk a little bit about why this should matter, not just for farmers and not for people within the food system, but also for the country as a whole, and for citizens. People have, of course, benefited over this period of time from falling real food prices. We looked at a number of basic retail goods, things like sliced bread, things like pints of milk. You can adjust that for inflation. Naturally, they've either risen just below inflation over this long period of time, and actually it's only until this cost of living crisis that over the last few years has caused a major jump. Before that it was significantly below. It's also allowed food spending to fall dramatically as a proportion of income.

As a result of this, we've also seen other effects in much more obviously negative ways. We've seen declining numbers of farms, declining farming workforce, decline in Britain's self sufficiency in lots of important foods. But the essential ones, like fruits and vegetables, we're deriving so much from climate-stress regions. We've also seen through this period of time diminishing resilience within our food and farming system, particularly the qualities of diversity and the capacity to respond, we have got a much more homogenised, in many ways, much more closely integrated food system, which creates real risk. There have also been massive impacts on wildlife, water and air.

UK has worst ratio for agriculture externalities versus economic size

We didn't talk about hidden costs in the second report in the same way, partly because this work had been done very well elsewhere. But it's worth just pointing out the background. Stephen Lord's background paper for the UN's FAO on Hidden Costs and Status of Food and Agriculture a couple of years ago is really fascinating. On this, he works out a ratio for the agricultural externalities of each country relative to the economic size of its agriculture and UK. The UK has one of the worst ratios in the entire world. So effectively, for every pound generated by UK agriculture, we're generating two pounds in external costs. There's few other places that have such a poor ratio. We've also seen, as a result of this consolidation and change, massive increase in financialisation.

We can talk a little bit about that with Mhairi, because it does relate to both reports, and it does relate, I think, to citizens and their interests. We're seeing much more of a focus on short-term financial interests and effort to maximize shareholder value above anything else. Just to quickly round off then.

This report, you could argue, has done that classic NGO, even academic thing, of describing problems with ever increasing levels of complexity and nuance. And that's great, and that's wonderful. But I really hope in the discussion that follows, we can talk a little bit about what can be done and solutions. Tim's work laid out three principles, which he made the case for forming the basis of a new food economy, rooting the right to healthy food and policy, regulating the food environment to stop harms and also redirecting the financial flows, an important point that's cutting through this. This is really much more about an effort to revalue food. So we're not just valuing efficiency, but also health resilience, which is particularly important in a world that's facing climate change and also geopolitical instability.

Ambitious policy making is required to make real change

And also the secondary effect of that revaluation is thinking about where that value is flowing to make sure it's going to people where value is real. Value is being created by communities, regenerative farmers, local and regional food systems. Another important point here is that we're talking about transformative change, major structural change. And I think something that's cut across both reports is just the level of ambition

that's required in policy making to actually drive change for these things. That's joined up policy making, that's cross government work and also looking for synergies. I think we can talk about this in the discussion.

I think there's real scope for seeing the net zero transition in farming as a real opportunity. The net zero transition, more broadly in economy, is an opportunity for food and farming to drive some of the changes that we want to see. What's important? Who and shouldn't be missed? There's a huge political aspect of this too. For one should draw out that distinction, and this transformative change is a real political challenge, and we've got a very strong evidence base.

We've got lots of public policy thinking that's been done on this, but we've got to make a political and public case for the level of change that's required that fits into the current political moment. So we might think we need to start thinking much more clearly about what are the avenues for real change at the moment in politics that we're seeing? It might be the cost of living crisis and reevaluation that's causing it, it might be the political instability that we're seeing because of war in Eastern Europe. It might be the actions of Trump, also climate adaptation, as we cope with all these much more regular extreme weather events.

Food policy actually has some opportunity in current climate

I'm going to stop there and bring in Mhairi. Let's talk about what's happening at the moment in terms of policy development in these areas. It's all well and good us putting out reports into the ether. But what's actually being developed at decision-making level around food, especially on your front at the moment, that we need to be influencing and trying to shape?

MB: I think it's such an important question. And I think for food especially, it does feel as if there's some opportunities at the moment, but for many years, it hasn't felt as if those opportunities are there at all. I'm sure many people on the call today will know of the research that shows that since the 1990s we've had something like 14 strategies related to obesity and food and health, containing almost 700 policies, and not many of them have made it to implementation. It has been very frustrating. And there was a report called Nourishing Britain from Henry Dimbleby and Dolly Van Tulleken, looking at what's happened there and interviewing past prime ministers and health ministers.

And many of them felt regret for not doing more to promote and protect public health. They said that they were up against competing priorities, was one of the reasons. And of course, that's understandable, but less understandable is that they were up against nanny state accusations, and if they did propose things, or if they did try to act, then there's people in Westminster, but also the media that would push back against that. But where we are now?

In December of last year, Defra did announce that they're developing a food strategy, and obviously, in parallel to that, they're working on Land Use plans and a 25-year farming plan. I think there are some positives within there that we're hearing on the food strategy. They're not looking to reinvent the wheel. They're looking to build upon work that's happened. And look at the National Food Strategy from Henry Dimbleby, which did contain those more structural approaches that are needed. They want to work across the nations to align the approach to just a real, important recognition that is a UK food system. And while the responsibilities are devolved, we do need to work together and collaborate.

I think the pillars of the food strategy as well, so health, economic growth, looking at the environment and food security as well. They're all very worthy pillars. We're hearing that as part of that, civil servants and ministers are really keen to try a different approach, to listen to people, to talk to people, to work out solutions. What that looks like in practice does remain to be seen. But I think at FFCC, we've had some interest in the work that we've done, citizens and their viewpoints. And so I'd say from a food perspective, there does seem to be those opportunities. But I wonder, Charlie, how it feels from the farming side.

Farmers are shell-shocked by inheritance tax changes followed by Sustainable Farming Incentive halt

CT: On the farming side, everyone involved in agriculture, I think, feels slightly shell shocked from announcements that have just kept coming over the last few months, and also the strength of reaction that's emerged from it. This feels like a bit of a whirlwind. I think last week's news about the pause or reset or call it what you will, of the Sustainable Farming Incentive was very powerful in that it drew such a strong reaction from all sides of the political debate around farming.

In many ways, because you've had the sense that there were lots of flaws in things like sustainable farming incentives. So this is one of the problems of the new Environmental Land Management scheme, which is replacing in England the old farming subsidies. They basically worried about overspending because it was relatively open-ended, so the government decided to close it for new applicants for the time being, and we're currently unsure exactly what budget will be available for it.

Defra is also carrying out a review in that space. But I think talking about that in the context of this 25-year farming road map that's being developed is very, very interesting, because there's a question, and this emerges from the report we talked about. It's the reliance of agriculture in the UK on agri environment schemes, on the out-going BPS subsidies for so much farming income. And if that money is, as we know, going to be reduced, certainly on the direct subsidy side, and perhaps from public spending around agri environment, what's going to fill that void? Literally, who's going to plug that gap?

Now there's been such a development in the last few years of private finance, particularly in the nature space, farmers being paid for all sorts of goods at an individual farm level, at a landscape level, potentially. And that's really, really important. But I think there should be a real strong emphasis in that 25-year roadmap. It's going to be important what government's role is in regulating that private finance market, to deliver the goods that we need as a country, both for climate and nature. It's really critical.

There is political momentum for net zero thanks to Ed Miliband

And I think that there's also an opportunity, on the net zero side as well. Politically there is very strong political momentum driven by Miliband, regardless of what is going on at Treasury and all that. There is a lot of effort and energy being expended in this area, which is great to see. And there are decarbonisation plans for different sectors of the economy that are being developed by the department. And so I think talking about synergies and linking things together, I think we should see that as a potential opportunity. Because we can decarbonise and move to net zero in a way that is positive and equitable, or we can do so in a way that entrenches some of these problematic aspects of our political economy that we have at the moment.

What do you think, Mhairi, about politics at the moment, in terms of what's in the zeitgeist? If we're interested in food systems transformation, what things are being talked about, what initiatives, what political parties, what movements seem to offer more threats and opportunities? What have you seen?

MB: I think what's interesting from food, given that we've had that length of time of opposing policies, I think over time, the types of policies that are being proposed, that are going into government, strategies that are coming from research and different organisations. We have seen a shift from policies that are more focused on education and consumer awareness to things that are more structural. And for the past 10 years, I'd say we're seeing things being re-proposed and re-proposed. And so it feels a little bit like, not to be too geeky, but if you think about these policy change theories, what we need is a shock to the system. And I really feel that having somebody else add their voice to this, having citizens actually speak up on this, could be a bit of an unlocking moment.

And I say that because of that nanny state overreach and the dominant narrative for so many years that the government shouldn't be fulfilling that essential role that they're supposed to be playing, that all the public cares about is cheap food. And as we've investigated, it's cheap on the surface, but it's masking so much more. What do people actually want? Has anybody actually asked them? And I think that that's ultimately what we set out to achieve with the Food Conversation, and talking to people across the country, do they just want cheap food on supermarket shelves, or do they want something different?

And what we found is a lot of concern, and levels of anger about the state of things at the moment, concern about finding and affording the healthy, nourishing food that's around them. Concern about big food businesses, which we talk about a little bit more, concern about farmers as humans and how they're coping, as well as concerns around the environment and so much more. Really, it's not what that dominant narrative has said for years. And I think just getting voices out there has really opened up a bit of a political opportunity, and it is still, at the moment, an opportunity that does need to be seized.

Food Conversation project has given government a mandate to act

This isn't about FFCC. It's about really hearing from people across the country and making sure that decision-makers really act on that. It's given government a bit of a mandate to act. The public actually wants this. They support you. They want to see those actions, and they understand that it's complex as well. They're not expecting quick fixes. So I do think there is a chance here to make sure that food strategy, whatever that does end up looking like, is built around some of what citizens have asked for. And there's so many policies out there that have so much research and proof of concept behind them that are ready to go.

It's been so interesting for me in the time I've been at FFCC, watching the Food Conversation project roll out, and I've been so impressed by the power of those deliberative dialogues to try and improve the quality of the conversation about various issues. We're thinking about developing the same thing in the farming and rural communities space, which I think will be really good, particularly in a moment where it feels very fractured and there's a lot of reactionary politics going on, which is leading in quite a negative direction, and distrust of government, which is really concerning. Government and institutions, actually, which is really concerning when we need a lot of collective action around these big questions that are big and difficult around food, climate and nature.

Questions from the audience

JF: How can we square consumer focus on retail prices with the need to consider the whole food chain in policy?

MB: I think within the Food Conversation, we weren't just there to talk to them about the food that they buy in supermarkets, but I think we do need to be appreciative of the fact that is where people largely interact with the food system. It's going to these supermarkets and seeing what's there and buying what they can afford to. Within our project, we did give them a much fuller view of the food system and covering things like food and health, farming, nature as well as power and injustice and inequalities.

And I would say in just thinking about the citizens' understanding of power, many of the participants do link power to money. So those with lots of money, like great food companies, have lots of power. They think it's very hidden as well, though. So when we talk to them about a handful of global food manufacturers being responsible for a lot of food brands sold in supermarkets, which is based on Oxfam research, they really reacted so strongly to that.

They found that quite shocking, and thought of power and profit as quite a circular thing, that the larger the profits, the larger the power within that. They also thought that government has power in the food system. They can use policies and taxes and other levers, but questioned a lot of the time whether government had a will to actually use that power, whether they would be willing to challenge food companies and set the policies to make things healthier and taken a permanent health lens. We know about the range of tactics that are being used that can support those views. But citizens were also very appreciative of the fact that healthier food, calorie per calorie, is more expensive than the healthy food that is so dominant on shelves.

But they did speak as well about housing costs, about energy costs, about paying so much to travel to get to somewhere that's got more of a range of food available. And I think it's the deliberation process that we can use and have workshops and focus groups. It's the power of the liberation that gets people to really interact

with this evidence, to process that, to come to terms with the anger that they feel about it, and then also think about the solutions. And so I would truly recommend that type of process to Defra in developing these types of solutions.

JF: Is there any evidence to compare what people are saying in the Food Conversation, with what citizens might have been thinking several years ago, particularly around the ambition for government to do something?

MB: I really would recommend the Nourishing Britain report as a really useful read, but also because the transcripts that inform that report are publicly available as well, and when the politicians and the health ministers, the past prime ministers, were talking about those accusations, they were talking more so from those within Westminster who have a slightly more libertarian view, really pushing back against these types of actions, and the media really driving that narrative. The extent to which citizens felt that, I think, is really unclear, and I would propose it's not as large a sentiment among citizens as we've been led to believe with that narrative.

I think just judging from when citizens joined us in the Food Conversation, they did see themselves as individuals, as consumers, with not a lot of power to change things. But they were very clear that it was government's responsibility to change things, even without us. It was one of the key questions we asked them from the outset, who was responsible for change? And we asked that throughout the process and all the way through it was government. Government should take responsibility.

JF: How can we get these messages through more effectively to policymakers? Do we need to be going up to the level of Treasury rather than focusing on Defra?

CT We did a very simple tabling at the end of the second report on a bunch of policy levers that you can move in this space. And it's very striking how a lot of the big guns that you can use in this space do not sit in the hands of Defra, which has really important coordinating role around these food and farming strategies and land use strategies. But actually, if you really want to turn the dial and think about these things, we need to think about international trade. You think about the department for business. People talk to Daniel Zeichner and Steve Reed about the Groceries Code but that's overseen by the business department. We need to think a little bit more cleverly. And of course, ultimately, the Treasury is driving so many decisions.

I've heard some really interesting things from people that we're having conversations with, about the arguments that are potentially influential in the Treasury at the moment, and what they are not. Apparently, I'm told, things about investing now and you'll see a benefit in the long run, is not a great argument right now. Neither is if you don't invest now, you'll see a massive risk weight. That's not a good argument that people who make decisions, that ministers want to hear in the department. So that's a real challenge for us, because that's actually what we're doing when it comes to a lot of the areas that we're trying to intervene in.

I think the citizens' voice work is so powerful, in this respect, because I think it changes the tone of the conversation. We all end up speaking quite common and sometimes quite wonky language, all of us probably on this call, which is not very helpful. I think what we do have here is not a lack of evidence, and not a lack of analysis. What we have here is a real problem about the story that we're telling, but also, I think the power that we have to tell that story, because a lot of the voices in the most influential spaces are not telling the same narrative.

MB: I would agree with that. And I think coming from a bit of a campaigning background, I would say that we do tend to communicate as though we're asking for something that isn't possible, that we've already lost. That government is never going to do this. And we bring in language around failure. The government has failed to act, or they must act now, otherwise it's going to be catastrophic. And we tend to talk about the more negative side of things. I think what citizens have been able to do so well, is that, first of all, they talk in systems. They're not talking specifically to Defra or to the Department of Health or to the Treasury.

They're talking to government. And they're saying this needs to happen - the systems change. It's almost changing the terms of that negotiation almost, and something much more positive comes out of it. They're almost framing it as this is a no brainer, but we do recognise it's challenging to put in place. And I think crucially, they position themselves as partners, that they recognise that everybody in this system has a responsibility, and having gone through this process, they're willing to work in partnership with government. I think it's slightly different to how we tend to communicate.

JF: Have you any thoughts on what organisations could put those citizen voices out there, other than the FFCC?

MB: I think we are really appreciative that the size and scale of what we've been able to do, that this project really isn't just for us. It is for the sector as a whole. And one of the things that we've done to widen that message and make it as usable for others in the field as possible, is to make films of the citizens themselves. So you're not reading an FFCC report, although, in writing those they're wonderful, but the videos there are the citizens own voices, which is just another level. They're very shareable. They're very sharp and slick in how they've been edited. And we hope that these will be tools that people can continue to use.

CT: The Food Foundation ambassadors stuff is a great example, isn't it? That accompanied the recent Broken Plate reports.

JF: Can we deliver the transformation that needs to happen without dealing with competition and shareholder value, two areas that sit outside the food system itself?

CT: It's the challenge that we face when you have a system that is entirely critical to human health and prosperity on the planet, that is commercialised. So that's a big challenge. I think that's something that's very shocking. It's about making this politically interesting and powerful. I think this financialisation of so much of the food system is incredibly shocking to a lot of people when they realise the extraction and values happening on a regular basis. You can see it already happening in a slightly perverse way in farming around conspiracy theories and Black Rock and the role of private equity and financial actors buying up farmland, and that's being spun off in a slightly different direction, but there's a grain of something in there, which is those things are actually happening to us to a degree.

Going back to the two IPES reports I talked about earlier, looking at the growing ownership of some of these big food, Big Ag companies by some of the biggest asset management companies globally, accepting a really powerful control now. Lots of people's pensions, we are all connected to this in many ways. So it's a real big challenge we have got to face. But I think there's something quite powerful, and politically here to talk about the way that something that's critical to us is being financialised, and value is literally being extracted between billions and billions of dollars. That is value that's being extracted that helps us in the profiteering side as well, that James mentioned earlier as well, because it is true. I've read the CMA report you're talking about. These margins are not massive. There's not obvious evidence of profiteering, but there is value being extracted by different actors within the chain. That's something that we can pin down.

JF: In sessions such as these, the supermarkets often seem to be missing. How can we get them more engaged?

MB: Yeah, we tried. We tried very hard. And I think it was very important from the outset of the Food Conversation, to ensure that we're presenting a really full view of the food system to the citizens. And as part of that, the food industry are obviously a key component, but in trying to find food industry representatives who were willing to attend those workshops and enter into that space as citizens themselves.

We're all citizens of this earth, and just come and talk to us about what your company does, where the challenges are, where the barriers are, what you think the opportunities are, and what you would like to see?

What was happening policy wise was, I think, too big an ask of them. And so we really struggled to get that representation. We did manage to find a couple of representatives who were willing to speak on a couple of the panel discussions that we had. Where that was that felt a little bit safer potentially, but, yeah, it's true. They need to be part of the conversation as well.

CT: Where are the supermarkets, but I'll also say, where are the meat processors? We actually talk a lot about supermarkets. And actually a lot of these issues we've talked about are structural, and the profit margins are relatively low as a sector. And it is incredibly competitive, but the competition is largely based on price, and as we're going to see, what's going to happen in the coming months, as they try and sort out their balance sheet by cost cutting and pressure on their supply chains. And they've already done things like dropping their Better Chicken pledge. So these things are concerning.

But what's interesting is they're a very tangible point of entry, because they are the way we, most of us, access the food system, on a regular basis, or the food economy. And I think what's really important too is you have to step back and say these are massive employers. Tesco is one of the biggest employers outside the NHS, the entire country. And these are economically very, very important. So we've got to be pragmatic about this.

It is not like in this food space and wonderful food systems transformation that we all talk about in a very abstract way. It's not about blowing things up as they are, that's just not realistic. And lots of people rely on the system as it is. So it's about changing things as they are at the moment and shifting those incentives. And actually, I think the problem is the consolidation, not the big businesses, and the impact of that consolidation, and the reason that consolidation has been happening. Not necessarily the big businesses and all the access within those.

And another point with the supermarkets as well, is being aware of that distinction internally as well, between people that work on agriculture and sustainability and people that work in time. There is interaction, obviously, between those two sides. One is very fierce in terms of trying to fight for the margin and fight for the business. And the other is about supporting the supply chain. It does generate big headlines and is doing good work in many cases, but there is sometimes some of that separation, too. Y

JF: It's hard to find fair and balanced conversation about shared goals. How do you find the common ground?

NW: It just struck me how similar the picture is to 35 years ago. The names of the companies change, but the structure is very, very similar. It doesn't seem to have shifted that much, whereas in the preceding 25-30 years, it changed a lot. From the early 1960s to the mid 1980s there was massive structural change in the food system and the balance of power between the processors,manufacturers and retailers, but the market concentration happened quite quickly over just a couple of decades, up to the 1980s and then it looks as if it's relatively stable.

Since then, there's an awful lot of competition between the big supermarkets, of course. And you might argue from a consumer point of view, a hugely successful development in terms of convenience, a range of products, opening hours and all that sort of stuff. But I don't think we ask enough about why is the system structured in the way that it is? And I think you have to look back to the policy and regulatory changes in the 1960s to understand why. And I don't know whether they are retrievable in the current political context, but that seems to be absent when we talk about it.

CT: I'll add into the mix, in response to the point about price regulation and the ripping up of that. My academic background is early modern history, so the economic history of food broadly. And so I'm very used to imagining myself in a world in which food prices are locally set, very specifically. And also margins are set. And we have had models in the past like the size of bread, which allowed bakers to make a fixed margin on certain goods. And obviously, as Neil's alluding to, as well, in the 20th century, because of conflict, we revived a lot of legislation and intervention in the market. These things have happened before. I'm not advocating for any particular policy change here, but my point is, we can [have] very different futures, because we've lived very different paths.

JF: What role could labels and Life Cycle Assessments play without putting an additional burden on farmers and primary producers?

MB: I think it is a part of the puzzle, and it is something that citizens have talked about themselves. What I would say with food labelling is we're probably at a point where we have more information than we've ever had, and it's very difficult to figure out when you're looking at packaging, when you consider things like ingredients, sources, about all of the other marketing that's on that package, it can be very difficult to actually locate the information you need.

And so I think in addition to just making labeling really clear and developing a system with citizens that they're going to find most useful, we also need to think about controlling the types of marketing that can be very misleading, that can give a lot of products health halos, remove anything that's going to be really distracting and that is a very big ask. Like you say, it's taken a long time for us to get there. We're used to seeing certain claims and certain lovely images on packaging, but if we're thinking about giving power back to citizens, it needs to actually be given back to them through labelling.

JF: Is it possible to move back to a more localised food system as a way to counter this power imbalance?

CT: I think it's helpful to think about this as infrastructure. A lot of that infrastructure by nature of centralisation and integration in the food system, has been stripped away. And it requires investment. And where the finance product investment is going to come wrong, is because it doesn't deliver returns that will match those expected. So that's a thought. Is it the state? Is it philanthropy? There are creative ways that we can think about that, but it's always so critical, not just for things we talked about, equity is incredibly important. But as Tim Lang's National Preparedness Commission report makes abundantly clear, we'd need a much more dispersed, decentralised food system in which we're all empowered locally. And the question is, where does that come from? Because that thing's not rewarding the market.

MB: I think citizens definitely see it as a way of moving forward. We're releasing their manifesto next week, and one of the key points on there is investing in local food systems. And when they talk about it, they're not using words like resilience, but that's essentially what they're meaning, just bringing back a bit of security, connection and appreciation of how food is produced to these local areas and connecting with food and people where they live.

We as FFCC are involved in a local food project with various other organisations, looking at how we can grow the local food sector, and we're looking at areas like infrastructure policy, investment, marketing, these key pillars. I would say that there is a lot happening. It gets really drowned out. But there are lots of projects already in place. A lot of the work that the Sustainable Food Places network are doing, regions, communities, areas across the UK, are working on what they want to see. There's a lot that could be learned, and I do hope that as part of the food strategy, that will be part of the processof learning about what already works and how we scale that up. I think that's going to be really, really crucial.

JF: Could you expand on risk and resilience, as current policy and practice developed over the last 70 years assumes a largely stable and predictable climate, but that isn't the world we live in anymore?

CT: What's really concerning, I think, is the consolidation of the sector. I don't just mean like market concentration, I also mean it in terms of farming as well. Some of the statistics about the concentration of farming, how in England, I think 60% of our food by value comes from 8,000 out of more than 90,000 farms in England alone. So that's a risk resilience in and of itself. And there are also big issues in terms of the farming practices as well, be that genetic diversity of animals, disease, resistance, resilience. These are issues in terms of the standardisation that we don't have to deal with. But it's also a massive risk in the food supply

chain as well, that level of concentration in those big sectors, in the face of a much more unstable global climate and political climatic situation.

Just the fact that 90% of the tractors sold in the UK come from three manufacturers. It's that level of extreme consolidation. These are increasingly electronic pieces of machinery. If there was some cyber attack, for example, hit one of those major manufacturers in the middle of harvest, in the summer. That's the thing we've got to be slightly conscious and that's only going to become more worrisome as AI develops as well, because that's another big thing that's going to happen very quickly down the track. We need to think about how we deal with all that.

MB: I think what has been really interesting about the citizens interaction with issues around climate is that we saw that not all of the citizens who were coming into the process agreed with the totality of evidence around climate change, but it is the lens of food that allows them to interact with that in a really meaningful way, and to think about climate beyond just cars and local transport and planes. And thinking about what is actually happening as a result of the food system.

And so when they're talking about local approaches, I think they're linking that much more strongly to an idea of resilience or security, because they're saying, well, at least if there's something in our area, then we don't need to worry so much, as much as I'm now worrying about what might happen if some of these much more global issues collapse.

And what they reflected to us in several locations, was just this huge concern that we're not talking about the UK system. This is global, and where does that position us, and what does that actually mean for us? And surely we need to be collaborating and cooperating and working much more widely. So I think it's there just under slightly different terminology, perhaps.

JF: Given the huge size of catering and the proportion of public catering within that, how do you see the opportunity for public sector catering to drive change, and rebalance power?

CT: I think it's massively important. As FFCC, we're very strongly influenced by a more mission-oriented, public value, thinking around a lot of this, and thinking about how the state can be much more strategic and involved in a lot of these things in a more creative, dynamic way. School meals, for example, offer enormous opportunities, if you think about that as a much more complex intervention than purely just buying food from local producers. And if you think about that as investment in public health, about food education, about quality jobs as well, in terms of the people that are involved in the chain that gets there. And also think what's critical in this policy is conditionality on a lot of these contracts.

You say, right, great, you can get a contract to supply extra work, but you've got to do these things in terms of public goods, outcomes, things around climate, nature. I think the big issue though, and why it gets tossed around a lot politically, is it's very easy to talk about and incredibly hard to do because it involves council, local authority officials, doing quite difficult things, and deal with contracts and make all sorts of judgments and find suppliers. And do this on an incredibly tight budget. So it needs resource and capacity as well. It needs to be invested in. We probably need to spend more on it as well, because that's the thing we talk about, how much the contract is currently, but we might need to invest more in it. Yeah, I think it's a massively powerful lever for shaping the market.

JF: What would be your key takeaway?

MB: So as we come to the end of this phase of the conversation, next week, on Tuesday, we'll be releasing the Citizens Food manifesto, their key asks for government, and we'll have a parliamentary event. And then in April, we will have a final report of the findings that have come out of this phase. And if I could just say quickly, I think that through this process, we've seen a lot of anger expressed by citizens.

I think deliberation is the type of process where we can understand it, help people process it, and then come out with much more solutions focused around that. There's a lot of people that look to polarise and divide us, and we get a sense from the media that we are a very polarised, divided country. And going to locations around the country with the Food Conversation, all I saw was respect and care and listening and talking. And I think I would just like to leave that message with everyone, and please do look out for our report in April.

CT: I think a lot of solutions and good thinking are based on people hearing each other, and high quality conversations about all these things. And it's great that government, especially around policy making, is much more interested in things like co-design and bringing a much broader sense of public consultation. But I think what's really important, and maybe it supplies our academic work as well, in terms of research, is the amount of time that's needed to focus on particular issues and to come up with solutions. It's an investment, and that affects things like grant proposals and how we go about doing this work. It massively affects the quality and the constructiveness of what you get out I think it's really critical and it can start to bridge some of this division.

JF: Thank you everybody for coming and asking many questions. Look out for Mhairi's report on the Food Conversation and Citizen Engagement. We've also got a webinar coming up in April with Mhairi about this. Before then, we've also got another webinar with the Climate Change Committee to dig a bit deeper into the seventh carbon carbon budget and that will be in a couple of weeks.

About the AFN Network+

The AFN Network+ (UKRI Agri-food for Net Zero Network+) is a unique network of 2,500+ academics, researchers, third sector organisations, policy makers, and agri-food industry professionals from farmers to retailers.

Together, we are working to identify key research gaps that may be holding the UK food system back from transitioning towards a net zero UK by 2050, while also enhancing biodiversity and healthy ecosystems, nurturing livelihoods, supporting healthy consumer habits, and minimising the environmental impacts of overseas trade. Our findings will inform the next decade of research investments in this area by UKRI (our funder and the UK research councils umbrella organisation).

Alongside our core research, we run in-person and online events, produce topical resources, and give out hundreds of thousands of pounds of funding a year.

The AFN Network+ is coordinated by the University of East Anglia, University of the West of England, University of York, and University of Leeds, and is a £5m, 3-year project funded by four research councils; the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, and the Natural Environment Research Council.

Website: www.agrifood4netzero.net

Email: contact@agrifood4netzero.net

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/agrifood4netzero/

X/Twitter: @AFNnetwork