

# The Right to Food



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March 2022



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# Executive Summary

The way we grow, process, distribute and consume food produces a range of interlinked social and environmental problems. In the United Kingdom, hunger, food insecurity and nutritional issues continue to impact the lives of millions of citizens. People subject to precarious working conditions and low pay endured by millions of workers and families are currently encountering spiralling food costs and supply chain issues, making a healthy diet increasingly inaccessible to many. At the other end of the food chain, the social and environmental impacts of the contemporary agricultural system grow ever starker. Food production is linked to ecological and environmental harm in numerous ways, from air and water pollution to deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions. This comes in addition to the social impacts of our dependence on so-called 'cheap food': low wages, gruelling work dependent on migrant labour and precarity for small food producers worldwide. What this report tries to do is ensure that these two problems - hunger, and the environmental impact of the food system - are considered inseparable. Rather than suggesting that in order to ensure people are fed we must turn a blind eye to the damage caused by intensive agriculture, this report proposes ways forward which attempt to ensure that problems related to consumption and production are address simultaneously.

In order to do this the report enters the debate surrounding the legal establishment of a Right to Food in the United Kingdom. Calls for a legally defined Right to Food have grown across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland in recent years. This report looks to build on the existing campaign by connecting the argument for a legally defined Right to Food with the need for a Right to Food Systems that uses the legislation and momentum of a legal Right to Food and the responsibilities it creates as a starting point for food systems transformation. This transformation, inspired by campaigns advocating for food sovereignty and widespread community-led efforts to develop alternative food networks, would be built on policies that facilitate and support the development of institutions and infrastructure that would create resilient shorter supply chains. This represents an effort to develop diverse means by which the public, particularly those currently facing food insecurity, could access more produce grown in the United Kingdom to high social and environmental standards. In doing so it would look to create greater citizen involvement, ownership and power in the way food is grown and shared.

To help set out how this transition might look in practice this report sets out three speculative future food chains based on a Right to Food and a Right to Food Systems. The first explores the production of a fruit salad for a universally free school meal. The second envisions the production of a curry at a community restaurant. The final scenario follows the supply chain for a loaf of bread baked by a cooperative and sold at a community shop.

The final section of the report then offers some programmatic suggestions for the policies and practices which could help ensure that a Right to Food serves as a platform for broader food systems change. These suggestions fall into three interlinked categories: legislating for a Right to Food, national level policies and local actions. The discussion around legislating for a Right to Food explores the responsibilities required of national and local government to help catalyse this transition, as well as reflecting on the institutions and governance required to ensure that change was happening effectively. The national-level policies look to embed this vision in a broader programme of agricultural and social transformation that makes scaling

out and refining more ecological ways of farming possible. This includes ensuring suitable supportive investment, policies for facilitating alternative ownership models and plans to make land ownership more equitable across the nations of the United Kingdom. Finally, the section exploring the role local authorities can play in this transition looks to build a bridge between the campaign for a Right to Food, the vision of agricultural change set out above and the growing movement promoting Community Wealth Building as a central tenet of fairer, local governance in the future.

In all, this report attempts to offer progressive solutions to complex interlinked social and environmental problems across the food chain. It recognises that systemic change is needed to guarantee food justice in the United Kingdom and across the world, but as a first step looks to offer some ways forward to begin building the institutions and frameworks to make this change both possible and lasting.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1

## Hunger

In April 2021 the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee published sobering statistics on the scale of hunger in the UK: 5.9 million adults had experienced food poverty in the six months before February 2021. 1.7 million children were living in food insecure households.<sup>1</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened people's ability to access healthy or nutritious food by a factor of five, with the impact further multiplied by existing racial inequalities.<sup>2</sup> But this is not a problem created by Covid-19. A decade of austerity has decimated much of the social infrastructure that has helped people access food in the past.<sup>3</sup> Merciless cuts to welfare payments have worsened the situation.<sup>4</sup>

The public health issues around what we eat are also entangled with entrenched socio-economic inequalities. People in deprived areas of England are twice as likely to be admitted to hospital for weight-related health problems.<sup>5</sup>

If this situation was not troubling enough rising inflation and soaring food costs look set to exacerbate these problems even further. As recent campaigning efforts by Jack Munroe have shown, it is those who can least afford to pay for these increases that are most impacted.<sup>6</sup> The prices of cheaper basic commodities like rice and vegetable stock have doubled or more in recent years.<sup>7</sup> This is despite typical measurements of inflation putting ongoing cost increases

around an already significant 5 percent.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of these injustices, calls for the legal recognition of any and every citizen's right to access healthy and nutritious food, or a "Right to Food", have emerged as a strategy to tackle hunger, poverty, and inequality.

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## 1.2

## The Right to Food

In the 20th century international agreements including the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights<sup>9</sup> began to codify efforts to provide legal guarantees against hunger. Since then, the right to food and its delivery has been a site of contestation. Definitions vary as to what a right to food would look like in practice. The academics Elizabeth Dowler and Deirdre O'Connor highlight<sup>10</sup> three aspects of delivering on a Right to Food in the UK which serve as a good starting point:

1. A legal obligation to respect existing access to adequate food and not compromise such access.
2. A legal obligation to facilitate people's access to food by ensuring, for example, a living wage.
3. A legal obligation to, where necessary or desirable, provide food.

Campaigns for a Right to Food that delivers on these ideas are gaining momentum across the UK. The Scottish Government recently introduced the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, legislation which recognises the existing international legal precedents for a Right to Food.<sup>11</sup> City leaders in Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham support a Right to Food.<sup>12,13</sup>

A motion supporting a Right to Food policy was passed at Labour Party conference in 2021. This motion represents continued support for the policy in the party's 2019 manifesto<sup>14</sup> which called for a Right to Food and the establishment of a National Food Commission, a policy which gained the support of the National Farmers' Union.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, grassroots organisations such as the National Food Service and Fans Supporting Foodbanks are building local social infrastructures that fights hunger whilst championing the need for systemic change.<sup>16,17</sup>

# 1.3

## A Right to Food Systems

There is still much to do. England's recent National Food Strategy<sup>18</sup>, a landmark document commissioned in 2019 and intended to offer a more holistic overview of the contemporary food system, overlooked calls for a Right to Food. This was despite notable efforts by campaigners for its inclusion<sup>19</sup>. This represents a missed opportunity because, as the National Food Strategy demonstrates, hunger and food inequality are inseparable from the structural issues created by our food system.

Hunger and malnutrition are not social anomalies. They are products of the same food system which concentrates land and power in the hand of a select few, relies on complex global webs of trade and processing and exacerbates the growing dereliction of local high streets and the disappearance of smaller retailers. They are also produced by the same food systems that cause environmental and ecological damage across the world.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that globally the food chain accounts for around 33 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>20</sup> In the UK, agriculture alone accounts for around 10 percent of emissions, without considering imported food or processing.<sup>21</sup> But climate change is not the only environmental challenge posed by global food systems. In the UK, agriculture is a significant driver of biodiversity loss<sup>22</sup> and can also harm air<sup>23</sup> and water quality.<sup>24</sup> A Right to Food should not just ensure that citizens have access to food with a high environmental and social cost but also serve to actively improve environmentally harmful aspects of the food system.

This briefing looks to connect the growing campaign for a Right to Food with these systemic issues. It explores how the Right to Food can combine with efforts to both bolster UK food security and help spark agricultural transformation that creates fairer and more sustainable food chains that produce affordable food.

When it comes to food and hunger price and cost are, of course, central. What the approach taken here looks to do, however, is increase the access people have to nutritious food produced by short supply chains. On the one hand this will come from demand-side measures that grant people on low incomes easier access to such produce. On the other hand, supply-oriented policies must ensure that taking risks and farming in a nature-friendly way is suitably supported through public investment at a national and local level. At the heart of this approach is a simple message agreed upon by environmental campaigners and farmers alike: we should take greater responsibility for growing the food that we eat across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

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## 1.4

## A Right to Food Sovereignty

To realise this just transformation within the food system greater democratic control over how food is produced is required. We must think about how the Right to Food serves as a starting point for a Right to Food Systems. This links this project with the idea of food sovereignty. The Land Workers' Alliance assert that the six pillars of food sovereignty are:

1. Food is for people; it is not a commodity for the enrichment of global corporations.
2. Food producers should be fairly rewarded, protected, and respected for their work.
3. Short supply chains should be developed, and local food provided as far as possible.
4. Communities, not agri-business, should democratically control our shared food systems.
5. Knowledge, skills and information should be shared and exchanged freely, not commodified.
6. Food systems should work to restore and regenerate nature, not degrade it.<sup>25</sup>

A Right to Food could act as a statutory catalyst for a programme of systemic change in UK food production. Unfortunately, it will also take a broader range of transformative policies to tackle the precarity, low wages and high living costs which drive people into food insecurity. But these policies represent a vital starting point to ending food poverty by building better local food systems that meet people's cultural and nutritional needs, rather than the needs of agri-business and supermarkets.

Eventually, a society built on solidarity and equality in which a Right to Food was enshrined and protected may not require some of the mechanisms below. Legislating for a Right to Food alone won't make this happen. However, this report is intended to illustrate how a legal Right to Food could instigate a transitional phase of institutional development that could lead to the delivery of a Right to Food Systems. Further, this is a vision which is based not on an individualistic idea of a Right to Food, but rather a pathway rooted in social solidarity that



looks to link a Right to Food with calls for commoning, universal public services, a fair deal for food producers and ecologically regenerative food production.

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## 1.5 Envisioning the Transition to a Right to Food

It is time to explore how this may look in practice. To do this, this research offers three imagined and hypothetical supply chains created by and supported by a Right to Food and the reforms it could instigate.

- One explores the origins of a fruit salad served as part of a universal free school meal.
- Another looks at the supply chain of a curry served at a social eating space at a Community Kitchen.
- The other examines the provenance of a loaf of bread acquired at a community food shop.
- After these supply chains are explored, this research sets out the policies that would help make these scenarios a reality at local and national level.
- In exploring these food chains, you can start where you like, and progress through one, two or all of them before moving towards the policy proposals that serve as a conclusion.

# 2 Envisioning Right to Food Supply Chains

## 2.3

## Free School Meal Fruit Salad

### 2.3.1 Universalist Canteens

Our first food chain starts in a primary school canteen with a fruit salad of apples, pears and blackberries served as part of a free school meal. In this scenario, free school meals are universally available as a result of reforms associated with a Right to Food.

The existing system means that, despite experiencing hunger, many children remain unable to access free school meals. According to the BBC and Department for Work and Pensions estimates, 4.1 million children live in relative poverty in Great Britain, yet less than 2 million pupils are eligible for free school meals in Scotland, Wales, and England.<sup>26</sup>

Universal free school meals would ensure children's right to access healthy and nutritious food, create more egalitarian school canteens and enrich pupils' education about food and the food system. Recent media attention to school meals and holiday hunger has encouraged moves in the right direction across the UK. The Scottish Government has promised to introduce universal free school meals for all primary school pupils.<sup>27</sup> Wales looks set to follow suit in this respect.<sup>28</sup> Yet these measures don't go far enough to realising the change that is required.

The costs of universal free school meals would obviously go beyond existing budgets. Based on current average spends per pupil, current pupil numbers and terms lengths the annual cost for total universal free school meal provision would be £3.89 billion in England, £288 million in Scotland, £226 million in Wales and £181 million in Northern Ireland.<sup>29</sup> Raising £1.7 billion by closing tax loopholes on private schools could go a significant way to financing this policy for all primary school pupils in the first instance.<sup>30</sup>

### 2.3.2 Creating Demand, Catalysing Change

These are significant sums of money. This programme would, however, offer value in terms of the returns it offers as part of a revolution in school meal preparation, procurement, and production. This would be a revolution that facilitates supply chains that build wealth in communities and offer significant multipliers in terms of not just reduced environmental harms

and public health improvements but also in the creation of skilled jobs and more resilient local economies.

We return, then, to the apples, pears, and blackberries in the fruit salad. The fruit provided are seasonal and locally sourced. The dish is offered as the dessert of a larger meal prepared from scratch by unionised, in-house kitchen staff paid a good hourly wage for guaranteed hours. This in contrast to the precarious employment terms currently faced by many.<sup>31</sup> The broader meals offered always include a plant-based main course option. Meat or fish are not served every day and when they are their portion size is reduced relative to the meal in order to meet the need for less and better meat consumption, in line with the recommendations of the Climate Change Committee<sup>32</sup> and growing public opinion.<sup>33</sup> Beyond statutory dietary rules set at national levels the choice of what to serve should be informed by decision-making at school level, which includes pupils, teachers, and school chefs.

This may seem far from current conceptions of school meal provision. Yet many schools across the UK in places like Oldham and Leicester are taking steps in this direction by working with local authorities<sup>34</sup>, local food partnerships<sup>35</sup> and schemes like Food for Life.<sup>36</sup> This is facilitating a transition towards healthier, seasonal and, where possible, local food cooked from scratch by in-house staff. But support and legislation are required to help make public procurement a force for agricultural and dietary change, as the recent report by the cross-party EFRA Parliamentary Committee<sup>37</sup> and the National Food Strategy for England assert.

### 2.3.3 Connecting schools with producers

This is particularly the case when it comes to linking larger institutions like schools and local authorities with small and medium-sized producers in their region. As research<sup>38</sup> by the Soil Association shows, this can be facilitated by food hubs and dynamic purchasing systems that use technology to links producers and customers. This allows for smaller and medium-sized growers to pool together to supply public institutions and build community wealth, as has been trialled in Bath and North East Somerset.<sup>39</sup> Further institutional support is required though to make this a reality. As far as possible, public investment should encourage such social infrastructure to be locally run by the community such as by social enterprises or co-operatives formed of growers themselves.

The ingredients in our fruit salad are grown in the region, are seasonal and are brought to schools by a local logistics co-operative working for a food hub run as a social enterprise and supported by the local authority. Such hubs would allow local growers to serve the increased demand for school meals created by a move to universal provision. The apples and pears in question could have been grown as part of an integrated agroforestry project that grows cereals and tree fruit in an integrated system within the local county.<sup>40</sup> The blackberries could have come from an urban horticultural project set up to grow soft fruit in polytunnels on a brownfields site leased from the council at an affordable rent.<sup>41</sup>

In this supply chain, legislation creating and supporting a Right to Food serves as the trigger for a programme of investment that leaves no pupil hungry, fosters sociable healthy eating in schools, supports good, skilled jobs for kitchen staff, contributes to local infrastructure that facilitates resilient, diverse, and regional supply chains and ensures public money supports innovative, agroecological farming in the local area. In doing so, it helps lay the foundation for

a future food system where locally sourced fruit are available at low cost to communities.

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## 2.4

## Community Kitchen Curry

### 2.4.1 Dining in Solidarity

Community kitchens or restaurants would represent another pillar of delivering a Right to Food that could in turn help foster a move towards a more sustainable food system. We take as our illustrative example here the consumption, preparation, processing, and production of a vegetable curry consisting of cauliflower, split peas, tomato, onion, garlic, and chilli peppers, served with a side of potatoes, and cooked with the necessary spices.

In our scenario this meal is served as a lunch at a community kitchen run as a [public-common partnership](#) between a local authority and a community organisation.<sup>42</sup> Public-common partnerships are an organisational model based on shared ownership between a public authority, such as a council, and a commoners' association or community organisation. Additional collaboration on governance is provided by a coalition of relevant practitioners. In the case of a community kitchen this could be a collaboration between a local authority and a community-led group, with additional input from, perhaps, a local union of hospitality workers and/or a regional co-operative of food producers.

The space could be in a school canteen, community centre, church, or disused restaurant premises. It would be open for lunch and dinner six days a week and bookable for community events when food service is not taking place. On the day that the curry is served, we encounter a diverse mixture of diners that reflects the local community: students from the local further education college, young parents with their pre-school age children and a sizable contingent of older people, many of whom face a mixture of food insecurity and social isolation.<sup>43</sup> Everyone is eating on long wooden benches. Some eat alone but most are talking in small groups. The space is light and airy, and the food is hot, fragrant, and filling.

In contemporary society, it can be difficult to imagine this kind of shared public space. Yet such institutions are not without precedent. Popular restaurants in Belo Horizonte provide 10,600 meals a day for less than \$1.<sup>44</sup> Every day, Sikhs across the world feed hundreds of thousands for free as an act of community, solidarity and faith inspired by the concept of langar.<sup>45</sup> In England, Wales and Scotland, the National Food Service campaign acts as a network and rallying point for community kitchens feeding their localities from Falmouth to Glasgow.<sup>46</sup>

### 2.4.2 Logistics of Community Kitchens

These prefigurative practices serve as an inspiration. Research by the Social Prosperity Network examining the provision of food as a Universal Basic Service (UBS) offers two possible pathways: providing one third of meals to 8% of people considered to be food insecure, costed at £4 billion a year, or total community food provisioning, estimated at £21 billion a year.<sup>47</sup> The model in our scenario is closer to the first. Money spent on these supply chains, however, would be an investment in the local economy and in promoting sustainable farming, all whilst tackling hunger and food insecurity.

For the purposes of our curry, payment is by membership card or fob. Certain members of the community facing food insecurity or precarity such as older people and families or individuals facing financial hardship are in receipt of free membership and a set number of meals a month, around a third as proposed by the Social Prosperity Network, so 30 meals a month or one meal a day per person. Other members of the community pay a monthly or annual subscription for a pre-determined number of meals a month. Uneaten meals from these members would be added to a pool for those in need of more than 30 meals a month. Subsidised rates could be offered to those in full time education. Most standard members would pay the cost price equivalent for their agreed number of meals, at about £2.50 a meal, taking the suggestion of £1.87 by the Social Prosperity Network<sup>48</sup> and adjusting for inflation and higher quality.

The curry is prepared from scratch by paid full-time kitchen staff. They are members of the public-common partnership. The facility would benefit from volunteer input from diners, locals, and other community groups. This could include cooking, particularly where certain communities may be under catered for by the repertoire of the full-time staff. Voluntary work could be paid in kind with additional meal credits. This is an experimental organisational form, and, in these imagined scenarios, different things are being tried in different local authorities to help make good on a statutory Right to Food.

## 2.4.2 Provisioning Community Dining

Returning to the meal: cauliflower, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, and garlic are already produced by UK growers and could be sourced directly from suppliers, including via the food hubs discussed above or directly from farmers. A subscription-based service would help procurement match demand. But the horticultural sector is on the decline in the UK and support is required to help facilitate the production of the fruits and vegetables required for the diverse plant-based diets the 21st century necessitates.<sup>49</sup> A similar programme of research and investment should also address increasing production of legumes like the split peas in our curry, vital crops that help fix nitrogen and assure future soil fertility.

Access to the spices vital to produce a good curry also highlights the fact that the Right to Food must be a right to culturally appropriate food. It is reminder that, in any circumstances, importing certain foods and products will remain important. What is possible, however, is assuring that where supply chains must be long geographically, they should be as short as possible in terms of the actors involved. Firms like the co-operative Suma which work to import spices as fairly as possible suggest a way forward.<sup>50</sup> But there is also space provided by supply chains to extend the sphere of community wealth building towards an internationalism that shares wealth between communities whilst developing municipal and social links and solidarity.

Efforts such as this already exist, like the Twin Café in Sheffield which works with coffee co-operatives in Nicaragua to build long term networks of both fair commodity and enriching cultural exchange.<sup>51</sup> Such efforts should be incubated and supported by local authorities when considering the right to food and bolstered by legislation at a national level that puts justice before extraction when it comes to trade.

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## 2.5

## Food Co-operative Loaf

### 2.5.1 Our Daily Bread

Our last example starts with buying a loaf of bread from the shop. Around 11 million loaves of bread are sold every day in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This is a market where power and ownership are highly concentrated: 75% of sales are accounted for by Kingsmill, Hovis, and Warburton's.<sup>52</sup>

Such monopolisation and industrialisation have helped to keep costs down. The price of bread in 2019 was notably cheaper than it was in 1988.<sup>53</sup> Yet this raises important questions about the “true” cost of food and the impact of these prices on producers and their rural ecologies. But advocates of “real bread” are often those spending upwards of three times the cost of a supermarket loaf on a single loaf. This is a luxury inaccessible to many. Interventions and innovations are required to make freshly baked and sustainably sourced bread as widely available and accessible as possible.

In this scenario our bread is grown, milled, and baked by cooperative of farmers, millers and bakers and retailed at a community shop.

### 2.5.2 Community Retail, Co-operative Processing

Community shops take a variety of forms across the country, ranging from those in urban areas looking to common surpluses generated elsewhere in the food system to those oriented to ensuring a sustained retail presence in a rural community. What is central in any case is local democratic control and management of the shop and an orientation towards serving the public needs rather than making a profit.<sup>54</sup> Across the country a number of community bakeries have been set up such as Homebaked<sup>55</sup> in Liverpool and High-Rise Bakers in Glasgow.<sup>56</sup> In our example though, our wholemeal sandwich loaf has been from a more multi-purpose retail space run in a high-street premises in a medium-sized town at favourable business rates. It is managed by a team of full-time staff with some assistance from local volunteers. Membership to the shop is free those who volunteer some time regularly or who are facing social or economic difficulties. Alongside commoning food surpluses and veg boxes, a range of produce is on offer

including bread baked nearby by a social enterprise. Members are offered a discounted price subsidised indirectly by public money. This loaf is purchased early on a Saturday morning by someone who recently became a member of the community shop after losing their job. It is taken home and enjoyed in whatever way its new owner and those sharing it see fit.

Community shops can stimulate the local economy by plugging into local networks of production and working with other firms opting for alternative ownership models. The bread has come that morning from an industrial park a short cycle away across town where it is baked by members of a co-operative that also includes the people who milled it and those who grew it in the first place. The bakery is an unassuming facility but, thanks to a capital investment grant designed to help such co-operatives, it is equipped with modern and energy-efficient equipment. It is powered to a great extent by solar panels situated on the roof installed with the assistance of a local community energy company. Staff are all members of the cooperatives and share in decision-making along the supply chain. The flour brought in doesn't have far to travel from the mill staffed by fellow co-operative members a few hundred meters away in the same industrial park. As well as serving our community shop and other local retailers and cafes, a subscription home-delivery service is available.

## 2.6.1. Integration and Community Wealth

The baking and milling co-operative were, in the first instance, an offshoot of a local co-operative of farmers growing wheat. This is a sector where large co-operatives of growers like Openfield and Camgrain have long succeeded to work together to raise cereals. However, the opportunity to reduce the number of stages between growers and consumers was seen as too good to miss. This integration helps ensure growers get a fair share of the revenues from growing whilst taking ownership of the means of production and keeping costs down for local communities. The co-operative has also served as a space for agroecological experimentation and diversification, with shared research and efforts going towards growing diverse varieties of wheat and other grains that require fewer pesticides and fertilisers supported by public money and advice.

These processes took place in dialogue with the millers and bakers to form a community of knowledge centred around working with the wheat that ends up in the community shop. This openness to experimentation has also served to open up the co-operative to supporting new entrants to farming. Some of whom have taken advantage of policies oriented to create a more diverse and egalitarian agricultural sector by promoting access to land, others who were formerly millers or bakers but now combine their roles with farming have – via a co-operative buy out – succeeded farmers who looked to retire or were unable to continue farming yet had no one in the family to take on their land.

# 3 Creating a Right to Food and Ensuring a Right to Food Systems

These three examples show the sort of supply chains that could be instigated by an ambitious Right to Food programme. They also hint at the policy platform and investment that would be required to make this situation a reality. This final section sets out the required pathway in much more programmatic terms, dividing the policy recommendations into three interlinked groups:

1. Legislating for a Right to Food
2. National Policies: Kickstarting an Agricultural Revolution
3. Local Policies: Community Wealth Building and Resilient Local Food Systems

Whereas many previous approaches advocating for a Right to Food have encouraged a UK-wide approach, it is important to recognise that food and farming policy is a devolved competency. Many of these approaches could be taken forward to a certain degree by any of the parliaments of the UK as they adapt their agricultural subsidy regimes and food policy approaches post-Brexit.

The below policy programme would, however, help drive this change further and link it to efforts to eradicate food poverty via a Right to Food. Alone they would not be enough to tackle food poverty and insecurity; reforms that guarantee a higher living wage and better-quality housing are required for a start. But what these policies do offer is a way to start commoning and decommodifying food through public provision. They would also create demand and institutions to support food chains based on agroecological growing and common ownership. To start this process a firm legislative footing is required.



## 3.1

# Legislating for a Right to Food

### 3.1.1 A Right to Food Act

The creation of a statutory right to access adequate, nutritious food for every person residing in the relevant jurisdiction, regardless of their age, nationality, citizenship status or economic position, is integral to this vision. Existing suggestions in circulation about how to do this include an amendment to the Agriculture Bill<sup>57</sup> and, in Scotland, via The Good Food Nation Bill.<sup>58</sup> The window for the former approach has perhaps now closed in England at least as a result of the bill receiving Royal Assent. The latter option being taken forward in Scotland mandates the creation of a national food plan that regards international precedents of a Right to Food. This is a start, but it does not go far enough.

Primary legislation is required that apportions relevant responsibilities and creates appropriate mechanisms for delivery, collaboration, and accountability. As such, this would represent a “framework law” approach.<sup>59</sup> This would in turn create empowerments for relevant ministers to create further secondary legislation that ensures the delivery of a Right to Food and its links with agricultural change. Such prospective legislation could be titled the “Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Bill”. The exact drafting of this legislation requires extensive consultation and public participation. Below, however, are some key elements and provisional suggestions for guiding this procedure.

### 3.1.2 National Governmental Responsibilities

This legislation must place responsibilities on the government and ministers to ensure citizen’s Right to Food. As highlighted above, these responsibilities could include, as a start, the provision of universal free school meals. Government should also be required to audit existing legislation and future-proof emergent laws regarding their impact on people’s capacity to access nutritious food.<sup>60</sup> This could also be the legislative vehicle for proposed reforms on public procurement, making ecological and geographical considerations relevant to purchasing decisions by public bodies. Ensuring a connection between these responsibilities and agricultural and environmental policy here is also significant. This could be done institutionally via the enhanced remit of the Food Standards and Security Agency discussed further below or by creating responsibilities on the relevant ministers and departments to work together in this regard. However, targets could also be set here in terms of levels of domestic organic and horticultural production, waste, the provision, and promotion of consumption of regionally produced foods and messaging around dietary guidelines and the need to consume less and better meat. These would constitute the food sovereignty aspect of the bill.

The bridge between a Right to Food and a Right to Food Systems at national level could also be ensured by a statutory requirement for greater levels of public participation in national-level policymaking in this area via citizens juries, greater efforts at stakeholder engagement

with workers, unions, and liaison with community groups and charities across the food chain. Finally, requirements would be made for national government to ensure that local authorities are sufficiently financed and institutionally equipped to deliver on their responsibilities on the ground.

### 3.1.3 Local Authority Responsibilities

Local authorities would be also made responsible for ensuring people's right to food is delivered. How this would be delivered on the ground would be left to a great extent to local authorities. Yet the determination of this programme would be supported by the statutory creation of Food Partnerships in each local authority. Many such food partnerships already exist, serving to bring together local authorities, civil society, and the private sector together to determine food policy at the local level.<sup>61</sup> These food partnerships would be required to demonstrate a commitment to ensuring collaboration, participation, and direct democracy in their efforts via stakeholder engagement, public forums and liaising with charities, community organisations and public institutions like schools and hospitals. This would again ensure a bridge between the Right to Food and the Right to Food systems. An alternative or complement to these partnerships could be the adoption of a more regionalised approach, as has been demonstrated in England through the approach taken to delivering Local Nature Recovery Strategies<sup>62</sup>.

Legislatively defining the exact responsibilities of local authorities to deliver on a Right to Food would require some minimum criteria. For example, a requirement for local authorities to establish spaces for the provision of hot meals to food insecure citizens, either directly or in partnership with community organisations charities or social enterprises. Again, the exact drafting of the requirements requires collaboration and scrutiny, but local authorities should be tasked with a combination of facilitating food access and, where necessary, direct provision. Community kitchens, whether run by the local authority via a school canteen or by a public-common partnership in a community space, would be a vital part of ensuring this provision. Given cuts to local authorities during more than a decade of politically motivated "austerity", it is understandable that this seems beyond the capacities for existing local authority services, as such an implementation period would be required, along with financial and institutional backing from central government.

### 3.1.4 A Food Standards and Security Agency

Calls for a Right to Food or similar reforms have recommended a variety of institutional forms for monitoring and assuring such a right is being met by the relevant competent authorities. This includes National Observatories<sup>63</sup>, a UK Food Commission<sup>64</sup>, or a National Food Policy Council<sup>65</sup>.

The suggestion, however, to enhance the remit of the Food Standards Agency into a Food Standards and Security agency forwarded by Ian Byrne, Shami Chakrabarti and other campaigners seems the most holistic and workable.<sup>66</sup> The existing Food Standards Agency currently operates in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland with a mosaic of responsibilities and different accountable ministers. Food Standards Scotland fulfils these same obligations

independently in Scotland. As such these bodies have experience of working collaboratively across devolved contexts as required. In addition, these agencies provide existing relationships and institutional experience of working with local authorities, who are responsible for the local delivery of food hygiene legislation, and with government departments on an independent basis.

The role, then, of a Food Standards and Security Agency would be to scrutinise the extent to which a Right to Food was being met by national and local government. The encapsulation of food security within this remit could also mean providing an oversight role in targets oriented towards boosting domestic production of fruit and vegetables, ensuring environmentally sound trade, and promoting resilient, regional food systems. Given this extended remit, consideration of altering the agency's ministerial overseer to agricultural departments rather than public health departments may be required, as well as a greater budget.

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## 3.2 National Policies: Kickstarting an Agroecological Revolution

A legislative Right to Food must also be linked to ambitious policies intended to boost UK food sovereignty by developing shorter supply chains and promoting agroecological production. These, in turn, must be supported by programmes that look to promote alternative models of ownership within the food system, creating co-operatives, public-common partnerships, social enterprises and community land trusts across the UK. Finally, these policies must address the capacity issues facing local authorities tasked with delivering a Right to Food, establishing the institutional infrastructure on a regional basis to make a Right to Food part of broader food systems transformation that puts communities, growers, and people ahead of corporate profit and power.

### 3.2.1 Articulation with agricultural and environmental policy approach

The power dynamics and political economy of the contemporary food system make delivering ecologically produced, nutritious food at affordable prices difficult. Current subsidy regimes and the programmes designed to replace them will not go far enough in altering this systemic reality. In fact, new proposals for the Environmental Land Management Scheme in England may serve to foster a two-tiered system of food production reliant on intensification and cheap imports to keep food prices low.<sup>67</sup>

Financial and institutional support is required to scale up and scale out agroecological forms of farming and support farmers who take a risk in transitioning away from existing models of fossil-fuel dependent agriculture. As highlighted in the examples above, innovative farming methods like agroforestry require support. Further, subsidies tailored towards increasing strategic sectors of food production like horticulture and legumes would help make the UK more

food secure, bolster regional food sovereignty and help feed the nation. These, in turn, must be supported by significant public investment in, for example, ensuring farmers are equipped to deal with climate change and the stresses it will put on, for example, water supply. The People's Food Policy<sup>68</sup> document sets out many suitable policies, but, given the scale of the challenge, a Green New Deal-style programme of investment may be required.

This transformation should be supported by a land use strategy that uses data and regional-level planning to incentivise the creation of regional food systems. Public investment in agroecological, rather than conventional, agricultural research via regionally led public advisory networks would also help facilitate greater sustainable food production in a democratic way that links farmers and communities.<sup>69</sup> Finally, measures to ensure the consumption of less and better meat, such as support for extensive grazing systems and regulations targeting imported animal feed would help balance diets and reduce carbon emissions whilst ensuring rural communities and livelihoods are protected.<sup>70</sup>

### 3.2.2 Right to Food Systems

The proposed policy platform set out also requires measures that democratise food systems by facilitating access to land for new entrants to farming, supporting community organisations and co-operatives, as well as facilitating greater capacity for agriculture and horticulture in urban areas, particularly in areas where access to both fresh fruit and vegetables and green space is low. This can be achieved via a suite of policies that looks to rebalance power in the agricultural sector via mechanisms such as legislative and financial support for community land trusts and land reform<sup>71</sup>, as has been championed in Scotland.<sup>72</sup> Further, ensuring a supportive legislative environment for farms to remain as agricultural land, such as via community or co-operative buy outs could stem the tide of agricultural land consolidation. "Land for the Many", an independent report commissioned by the Labour Party in 2019, sets out further policies in this direction as well as ideas to pay for them, including a progressive land value tax.<sup>73</sup> County farms and greater public ownership of agricultural land would also contribute significantly to this cause.<sup>74</sup>

In terms of facilitating urban and small-scale agriculture, smaller farms below five hectares should be made eligible for governmental subsidies and, if a public money for public goods approach is adopted, their social benefits should be recognised and rewarded. Amendments to the Allotments Act 1908 and national planning policy guidelines should encourage further urban food growing and compel local authorities to make land available wherever possible.<sup>75</sup>

Sheltering and encouraging the participation of alternative models of ownership across the food system will be vital to instigating community food power. A shelter organisation for food and farming co-operatives should be established, with support provided for such organisations to begin articulating with emergent public procurement programmes and right to food institutions.<sup>76</sup> These institutions will serve as a counterpoint to corporate food power, whose monopoly over processing and retail must be challenged by fairer rules and adjudication and, where necessary, anti-trust measures.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, institutional support is initially required to enable local authorities to make good on their statutory duty to ensure citizens' Right to Food. This would also encourage collaboration

between regions, and help foster networks of policy development, knowledge exchange and best practice. The statutory creation of Local Food Partnerships or regional structures described above would help in this regard, with the relevant ministries also convening regular opportunities for research, deliberation, and knowledge exchange.

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## 3.3 Local Policies: Community Wealth Building & Resilient Local Food Systems

There are also a range of policies which local authorities can adopt to help build the resilient food economies that will ensure a Right to Food can be satisfied and linked with community food systems power. Many of these approaches are already available to local authorities, although resources and budgets remain tight.

### 3.3.1 Community Wealth Building

Applying community [wealth](#) building strategies to developing local food economies is a first step that many local authorities could take now. Often associated with the “Preston Model”, community wealth building for local food economies would ensure that public procurement looked to use regional produce suppliers wherever possible.<sup>78</sup> Keeping staff, such as those responsible for public food processing or logistics, in-house would also be important. This should not just apply to council-run eating spaces such as schools and council premises and co-operation with “anchor institutions” like universities and hospitals would offer a significant multiplier in the demand for these short regional supply chains. Successful examples of these strategies are already demonstrated by local authorities in Bristol<sup>79</sup> and Brighton.<sup>80</sup>

Investment in dynamic purchasing systems<sup>81</sup>, local markets<sup>82</sup>, and, particularly, food hubs<sup>83</sup> for processing and distribution are required to build the necessary links between food producers, consumers, and the institutions in question. By shortening supply chains, consumers can access quality produce and growers and local enterprises retain a greater share of the costs, helping keep money in the community as research has shown by the New Economics Foundation<sup>84</sup> and the Campaign to Protect Rural England.<sup>85</sup> Each local authority will face a distinct and unique set of challenges in delivering a Right to Food. In practice, success will require experimentation and collaboration with other stakeholders like existing food hubs, box schemes and community supported agriculture. However, by ensuring there is public institutional support for such schemes, it will be possible to begin building an alternative food system that is increasingly accessible in terms of price and retail.

### 3.3.2 Access to Land and Premises

Councils can also take a more interventionist approach to ensuring local efforts at food growing, processing and distribution are facilitated. Several of these strategies are highlighted

in the example above, including favourable planning approaches towards schemes designed to boost community food production. The provision of public land at market or below-market rents to community organisations looking to produce, process, distribute or serve food is also possible, helping spark a rise in the number of community stores or urban horticultural sites in towns and cities. Rents for market stalls for fresh produce suppliers could also be kept low to ensure affordable prices. Working with public-common partnerships and similar community organisations would also allow for community-led efforts to rejuvenate high streets and use existing unoccupied buildings to serve the community, as has been shown by ongoing efforts in Plymouth.<sup>86</sup> Going further, a more ambitious approach would see local authorities able to get on the front foot and begin taking land back into public hands as county farms, to help new entrants to food systems and allow for agroecological research and innovation. These local approaches to promoting access to alternative routes to market would help ensure that guaranteeing a Right to Food would also instigate moves towards alternative supply chains and community-led change, rather than relying on corporate surpluses.

## 4 Conclusion

This research has set out to link the growing campaign for a Right to Food with a vision for greater food sovereignty for UK communities and greater community power over local food systems.

In doing so it has attempted to show what a Right to Food might look like in practice, highlighting some of the institutional options possible that could make the campaign's demands a reality. This has shown that arguments for a Right to Food should be taken up by agricultural and environmental campaigners keen to see greater food sovereignty in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Although the drivers of food insecurity extend beyond the production and distribution of food itself to include precarious work, low wages, insufficient benefits, poor housing, and other factors, legislating for a Right to Food will ensure that hunger is addressed urgently. With food prices rising substantially, particularly driven by increases in the cost of synthetic agricultural fertilisers, the time for a Right to Food and greater food sovereignty and agroecological transformation is now.

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Country	Number of pupils	Average Meal £	School Days	Total
England	8,900,000	£2.30	190	£3.89 billion
Scotland	704,000	£2.15	190	£288 million
Wales	475,000	£2.50	190	£226 million
Northern Ireland	352,000	£2.70	190	£181 million

Figures for number of pupils derived from <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics> (England), <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland/> (Scotland), <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Pupils/pupils-present-census-day-by-local-authority-region-sector> (Wales), <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data> (Northern Ireland)

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