

A Vision for a UK-wide Food Strategy

Executive Summary

The Institute of Food Science and Technology is the UK's leading professional body that aims to advance the application of food science and technology for the benefit, safety and health of the public. Our wide-ranging professional membership comprises stakeholders working in all corners of the food system, who are directly involved in the evolution of the UK food sector.

Our values place scientific evidence at the core of any engagement with the public, policy makers and members, ensuring that evidence remains central to future UK food system developments.

We lay out IFST's vision for an inclusive UK-wide Food Strategy, highlighting our key imperatives and reiterating our commitment to support Government, industry, academia, citizens and IFST members in achieving this vision.

In this call to action, we propose evidence-based changes needed to bolster a professional, resilient and innovative UK food sector. These key aspects require urgent attention to enable future support for the UK population locally at a personal level, at a professional level and at a national level.

IFST's Call to Action

A long term, UK-wide food strategy

A UK-wide food strategy aligned across governments and agencies, with strong, focused Ministerial leadership and which considers the entire food system, is needed to ensure a resilient, capable and innovative UK food system. This strategy needs to be evidence-based, impartial of party political positions and measurable against clear targets and goals.

Investment in the food sector

Building a competent, innovative and resilient industry with strong foundations in science and technology. This support will ensure food safety, sustainability, good nutrition, profitability and a highly skilled workforce.

Consumer focus to inform and educate our population on healthy, sustainable diets

Developing the relevant skills to make the wise choice. This process empowers consumers to eat sustainably from both an accessibility (convenience and cost) and a skills perspective.

Key facts

- The food and drink supply chain is the UK's largest employment sector with over 4 million employees
- Positive action in food systems supports progress in many of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- In the UK 67% of adult men and 60% of adult women are overweight or obese and 20% of year 6 children are considered obese
- >90% of UK food operators are SMEs
- The industry will need an additional 140,000 recruits by 2024 to plug this skills gap
- The global food system contributes up to 37% of all greenhouse gas emissions
- UK government has committed to net zero by 2050
- 16 government departments are responsible for food policy in England alone

Areas of Action

1. Healthy balanced diets

All people should have access to nutritious, safe, affordable, and sustainable food. A UK-wide food strategy needs to have every person's wellbeing at its centre, to help consumers follow a healthy lifestyle and balanced diet. IFST supports food industry's continual improvements in the nutritional make-up of foods, to ensure that safe, accessible and affordable food choices are available to meet diverse social and cultural needs.

2. Food information, education and culinary skills development

Food education needs to be strengthened to help citizens follow a culturally relevant, healthy and sustainable diet. School curricula can help to support this, as well as tertiary training and a commitment to a food systems emphasis in all education and training. Provision of clear labelling, marketing and promotional material can all help people improve their understanding of food provided, food sources, and the importance of eating a balanced diet.

3. Food system resilience

Resilience should be built-in to the UK food system, to ensure it can survive shocks and adapt to change. This requires fostering the development of a skilled labour force and implementation of technologies needed to support future resilience. Technological advancement in areas including digitisation, processing and packaging will help to produce an efficient and safe food system.

4. Sustainability and the environment

The UK government has committed to net zero emissions by 2050, which requires significant contribution from the food sector. In a Zero Carbon economy, the way we grow, process, transport, store and retail food need to represent the 'true cost' of production. Resources including soil, water, energy, packaging and waste need to be managed safely and efficiently. Decisions on all areas of sustainability need to be evidence-based, considering trade-offs and unintended negative consequences around food safety, environmental sustainability and affordability.

5. Investment in industry-leading food research

The UK is a global thought leader in food research and development, driving innovation and providing technological solutions fit for the future. Technological advancement is critical in providing solutions, not just for a resilient system, but also for an environmentally sustainable food system. Biological technology needs to be a part of future strategies and significant investment is needed to support R&D and improve access to innovation, particularly for primary processors post-farm gate and for the SMEs.

6. Integrated Governance

We need aligned, integrated government and a systems-based approach to provide capable and strategic governance relating to food. Strategically focussing on food in UK government at the highest level is urgently needed to assure food sector resilience and growth. A forum of collaboration and cooperation to facilitate this new way of working, across all actors, would provide balance and consistency across policy, positions and communications. The holistic impact of food systems would benefit from a supportive framework to measure all critical factors including, but not limited to, sustainability, safety, authenticity, affordability and ethical welfare.