

Ensuring Food Science and Technology is a Priority on the UK Political Agenda

The general election on 12 December offers an opportunity for all of us to raise awareness of the importance of food science and technology to ensuring UK food security and continued success of our UK agri-food sector. We would encourage you to help ensure this is highlighted during the weeks leading up to the General Election.

Institute of Food Science and Technology (IFST) wants to help make sure that all parties and candidates have the best information on how to support the UK agri-food sector with access to a skilled workforce and to food science and technology innovation for the benefit, safety and health of the public.

Sustainable, safe and nutritious food provision for the UK population is reliant on the supply of foodstuffs and other vital resources (energy, water, suitable soils, skilled labour), as well as access to new scientific and technological developments.

We have recently provided our IFST response to the National Food Strategy consultation outlining the critical elements which we recommend should be addressed. You can read and share the full IFST briefing note here <<https://www.ifst.org/sites/default/files/IFST%20National%20Food%20Strategy%20DEFRA%20consultation%20response%2024%20October%202019%20FINAL.pdf>>.

Investment is needed to improve access to innovation and to support technology implementation across the UK.

Continued access to funds and investment from UK and EU sources is essential for high performing agri-food research and for effective implementation of innovation to support a thriving UK agri-food sector and continued food security for the UK population. In particular investment is needed to move forward cross-sector digitisation to allow application of new information technologies and the productivity initiatives required to progress sustainable intensification approaches for agri-food production, reuse of surplus and potential waste and more efficient use of all resources.

Issues with access to skilled workforce and scientists in the agri-food sector.

Access to sufficient skilled workforce and to on-going education and training are critical in maintaining high standards in food safety and ensuring capable, productive and resilient UK food system which is fit for the future. It is vital that scientific and technological skills can be accessed from a global pool of talent to manage and regulate a complex food chain, to develop new knowledge, understanding and tools relevant to the food system, and to teach and train future food scientists and technologists. Scientific and technological roles in food production are often highly specialised roles, requiring tertiary education and/or technical apprenticeships, and continuing professional development.

Investment in food education

Targeted investment is needed to integrate food education across the curriculum to update and re-educate the UK population to better understand the food we eat and the importance of a healthy, balanced diet. Improved access to technical skills training will help to address the growing UK agri-food system skills crisis. Therefore IFST is recommending increased access to education on agri-food, food processing/preparation and diet across the personal, social, health and economic and citizenship curricula in both primary and secondary schools; the re-establishment of food science and technology as a core element across the science, technology, engineering and mathematics curricula; and instigation of increased access to funding for tertiary training and on-going technical professional development.

Collaboration and cooperation against an integrated UK Food Strategy

A paradigm shift in behaviour across food system actors and stakeholders is needed to establish the level of collaboration and cooperation required to deliver an effective UK Food Strategy. Support for sustainable farming and food processing and the delivery of safe, sustainable food for the UK should be on everyone's agenda. A forum to facilitate this new way of working would provide balance and consistency in policy, positions and communications across all regions and nations in the UK.

If you contact or meet your local parliamentary candidates, or attend any candidate hustings, we would encourage you to raise some of the following issues with them.

Here are some ready-made talking points to raise with your parliamentary candidates:

Ask about funding: Investment in research, development and science is vital for new discoveries, our prosperity and well-being. Will you support making sure the UK becomes and stays one of the top 3 investors in research and development as a % of GDP and continued UK participation in EU Research and Innovation programmes?

Ask about access to skilled workforce: Will you support increased access to education and training in the agri-food sector to ensure skills are retained and fit for the future? Will you support changes to make it much easier for talented workers and scientists from around the world to visit the UK for scientific purposes and to work here, including radically cutting visa costs?

Ask about tackling waste: Given the context of widespread concerns about waste, including food and food packaging waste, do you agree that scientific research will be an essential part of long-term solutions to address waste? and Will you support government collaborating with academia/researchers and industry to explore scientific solutions, as well as introducing science-informed policies to tackle waste?

Ask about technical education: How would you address the skills gap in the agri-food sector and improving the wider UK population understanding of sustainable positive nutrition and safe food preparation? School food education has been eroded and What would you put in place to re-establish and support integrated food education throughout primary, secondary and tertiary education? Uptake of apprenticeships, HNCs and HNDs in agricultural and food science and food technology is very low compared to other subject areas; What would you put in place to increase the number of apprentices and students taking these routes?

Ask about food science and technology careers: Many young people do not feel well-informed about the skilled scientific, technical and engineering roles that the agri-food sector can offer them. Science organisations are doing what they can to promote the wide range of options that the agri-food sector and supporting scientific service industries can offer to influence the world in a meaningful and important way. What government policies would you support to ensure all young people gain an understanding of career options in the agri-food sector, enabling them to make informed choices?

For more information on IFST's resources and policy work, please see here: <https://www.ifst.org/science-policy>. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us via info@ifst.org.

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