

Real Bread Manifesto: what the next government should do

The Real Bread Campaign believes everyone in the UK should have a realistic chance to choose Real Bread. Alongside home baking (see below), key to this are the small, independent Real Bread bakeries at the beating heart of our local communities.

Vibrant high streets, full of diverse local businesses such as these, are key to the UK's economic success. Many SME bakeries are, however, under threat of closure. This is largely due to skyrocketing costs of energy, rent, ingredients and employing people. At the same time, tightening budgets on the other side of the counter are limiting customers' spending ability. Far too many of the UK's local bakeries are now facing financial crisis and at risk of following previously thriving businesses that have been forced to close in recent years.¹

- There are around 2,500 micro and small bakeries in the UK.
- They represent the majority of businesses (and are the key innovators) in the bakery sector.
- Through feeding people in their neighbourhoods, small bakeries create tens of thousands skilled, rewarding jobs for people in their communities, generating a high local economic multiplier effect and helping to keep our high streets alive.

For more information or to explore the possibility of arranging a visit to a Real Bread bakery, please contact Real Bread Campaign coordinator Chris Young:
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¹ Sustaining small bakery businesses: Looking to the future in challenging times, the Open University, November 2022 www.sustainweb.org/reports/nov22-sustaining-small-bakery-businesses

Key policy recommendations

Ministers can support SME bakeries, their employees, customers and wider communities. The Real Bread Campaign proposes that the next Government:

- Raises the small business rates relief threshold for SME bakeries.
- Allows micro and small bakeries to reclaim VAT on energy costs.
- Helps staff retention by introducing tax relief contributions for employees who have worked at the same SME bakery for at least two years.
- Introduces easy-to-apply for grants to cover increases in operational costs.
- Establishes a government-backed, not-for-profit body for collective procurement of energy and flour at discounted rates.
- Empowers local authorities to make long-term closed shops available to SME bakery businesses.
- Provides support in covering the costs of redundancies; dilapidations to buildings and early surrender costs on leases in the case that a small business is forced out of business.

Further recommendations

In the medium to long-term, the Real Bread Campaign also calls for:

Breadmaking skills and knowledge being added to the curriculum and shared in every school. Being empowered with these can enable virtually anyone to enjoy this delicious, nutritious staple food for pence. Funding should also be made available to support charitable, social enterprise and community initiatives offering subsidised (and even free-to-learner) bread making workshops to adults.

Green energy grants (similar to the scheme available in Tees Valley²) to enable micro and small bakeries get advice and assistance on reducing energy usage and become more energy-efficient. Support would also be offered on switching to non-polluting renewables and with necessary equipment refurbishment or replacement, insulation installation etc.

An Honest Crust Act of updated and improved composition, labelling and marketing legislation. At low-to-no cost to the government / taxpayers, these measures will help to level out the playing field on which small bakery businesses would have a better chance of surviving and thriving. The proposed improvements will also give shoppers greater confidence that they will get what they think they're buying. See more below.

² SME Energy Efficiency Scheme (SMEES) www.gov.uk/business-finance-support/sme-energy-efficiency-scheme-smees

A local food voucher scheme to support people hit hardest by the cost of everything crisis. The vouchers would be redeemable at independent outlets including Real Bread bakeries, market stalls that sell fresh veg and other locally-owned retailers.

Real Bread on the Menu: serving Real Bread already helps caterers qualify for a Food For Life catering mark³. The Campaign would like to see more public sector caterers offering delicious, nutritious Real Bread – made in-house or bought from local, independent bakeries.

Meanwhile, the Campaign urges the government to make it easier for SMEs to bid for and win public sector supply contracts. Some very large contracts are awarded to single companies, rather than distributing the opportunities and wealth more widely. In 2020, for example, the £6.4 million contract to supply bread to all prisons in England and Wales was awarded to just one company.⁴ This has been awarded to the same company every time it has been put to tender since prison supply contracts were centralised in 2007.⁵

Non-commodity grain webs: supporting and promoting regional networks/alliances to ensure a resilient, equitable supply. In the face of the climate emergency, this will focus on heritage varieties and landrace populations, grown in low-input, agroecological systems, then milled and turned into Real Bread in ways that minimise wastage and retain (even enhance) nutritional value.

Investment in consumer protection. A December 2023 email to the Campaign from a local trading standards department spelled out that: 'Trading Standards departments have seen budget cuts of more than 50%, despite many of their functions, such as food labelling, being statutory functions. This has now reached the point where the Food Standards Agency has identified a critical shortage in Food Safety and Food Standards inspectors.' This has a huge negative impact on their ability to protect all of us, not only from danger but also from being misled. The government needs to provide proper funding to enable them to carry out their crucial functions.

Assurance that the Retained EU Law (Reform and Revocation) Bill will not result in people in the UK being exposed to azodicarbonimide, potassium bromate, or any other flour bleaching agents or industrial baking additives that are banned across the EU but legal in some other countries.⁶

³ A decade of Real Bread as Food For Life www.sustainweb.org/news/sep23-10-years-decade-of-real-bread-as-food-for-life

⁴ Prisoner and Non-Prisoner Fresh Bread and Morning Goods, Ministry of Justice, 21 September 2020 www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/fd82dc04-3867-49a5-bb95-501055a8bdaa?

⁵ Though going by different names (British Bakeries, Premier Foods and Hovis) it is the same rebranded company that was awarded the contract in 2007, 2012, 2016 and 2020.

⁶ Bleached bread coming to a supermarket near you? www.sustainweb.org/news/jan23-bleached-bread-coming-to-a-supermarket-near-you

The UK's bread makers and buyers need an Honest Crust Act

In support of local, independent bakery SMEs, shoppers and woefully-underfunded consumer protection bodies (see above), the Real Bread Campaign proposes an Honest Crust Act of updated and improved composition, labelling and marketing standards.

Did you know that...

- Products made a long time ago at a factory far, far away, then merely re-baked in-store (using what the Campaign calls a loaf tanning salon) are being marketed as 'freshly baked', 'baked in store', 'baked throughout the day' and similar.
- Despite governmental advice to eat more wholegrain foods, there is no legal definition of the word or regulation of its use. A 'wholegrain' loaf could contain just a few grams of wholemeal flour.⁷
- Retailers don't have to display ingredient lists for loaves sold unwrapped, so shoppers can't easily know what ingredients and additives have been used.
- Additives deemed to be 'processing aids' don't even have to appear on ingredients lists of products that are labelled.⁸
- There is no legal definition of marketing terms including sourdough⁹, craft bakery, artisan bread, and heritage grain, or regulation of their use. This means there is little to prevent manufacturers and retailers using such terms being used to convince shoppers to pay (perhaps a premium) for any product, made anyhow by anyone.

For whatever reasons a shopper needs or wants this important information, key points of the Campaign's proposals are:

- Mandatory display of full ingredients lists at point of sale for baked products that are sold loose / unwrapped.
- Mandatory naming of all additives on ingredients lists, including those deemed to be 'processing aids'.
- Meaningful, legal definitions of commonly-used bakery descriptors / marketing terms and regulation of their use.

You can read the Real Bread Campaign's submission to Defra on updating and improving the Bread and Flour Regulations here www.sustainweb.org/news/sep21-defra-bread-flour-technical-working-group-submission

⁷ Wholegrain definition kicked into the long grass www.sustainweb.org/news/nov23-wholegrain-definition-kicked-into-the-long-grass

⁸ 'Processing aids' www.sustainweb.org/realbread/processing_aids

⁹ Sourdough: The case for a legal definition www.sustainweb.org/realbread/articles/ian22-case-for-legal-definition-of-sourdough-bread