

WE'RE FED UP!

A people-powered call for healthy, affordable food



 **RECIPE**
 **FOR**
 **CHANGE**

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Foreword

When I was revising for my GCSEs in Leicester, I was hearing from Uber Eats more often than from my own granny. Junk food ads followed me from my phone to the bus stop to the walk home from school. I started campaigning to end it at 14, and six years later, the world's first ban on online junk food advertising came into force.

But banning the ads did not fix the food. Walk into any corner shop in this country. The shelves tell you everything. Ultra-processed products, full of sugar and salt, at children's eye level. Cartoon characters on the packaging. Bright colours designed to catch a child's hand before their parent reads the label. These companies have been shaping what we crave since before we could walk. Junk food is the cultural wallpaper of childhood in this country. So normal that most people have stopped seeing it. The health consequences have not.

I helped facilitate the youth sessions behind this charter. The young people I sat with had been paying attention and they had run out of patience. A food system rigged

against them from the moment they leave the school gates. Chicken shops that cost half of what's offered in the school canteen. Healthier options that barely exist where they live. Adults and parents told the same story. High streets where fast food dominates. Affordable fresh food all but gone. A daily fight to feed their families inside a system designed to work against them. Nobody was confused about healthy eating. They were blocked from it, and nobody in power seemed to think that was their problem to fix.

That frustration runs through every page of this document. People know exactly what is wrong with the food system. They know it is not their fault. They are asking food companies one question: when will our health matter more than your margins? And they are asking Parliament to hold them to the answer. Health over profits. That is what this charter demands.



Dev Sharma,
Youth activist



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Why is this call for change needed?

Eating well should be easy. Most people understand what it means to eat healthily and want options for themselves and their families that support this. Yet all around us, unhealthy food and drink products are often cheaper, easier to buy and more visible to us than healthier ones. Our shops and high streets are flooded with unhealthy food and, from rising prices and confusing labels to constant advertising, families can feel like the system is stacked against them. These messages were clear across the workshops and conversations we held with parents, young people and families across different communities in the UK.

This also reflects a wider national picture: **nearly half of Brits (47%) now say it is harder for families to eat a balanced diet than 20 years ago**, with rising food prices and the lower cost of unhealthy food seen as key reasons.¹

In our conversations, we also consistently heard a frustration with a food system that too often puts shareholder profits above the nation's health. This frustration is seen nationally too, with **63% of people believing food companies have increased prices more than necessary to boost profits**.²

Yet responsibility for eating well is still placed mainly on individuals, while the policies shaping what food is produced, promoted and sold have lagged behind. Research has consistently shown that voluntary action from food companies has failed to significantly improve products, and food-related ill health continues to rise, particularly in lower-income communities.³

Where government has acted decisively, progress has followed. The Soft Drinks Industry Levy shows that using our tax system can change company behaviour, reduce sugar and improve public health without relying on individuals to make harder choices. **Structural problems require structural solutions.** Stronger, mandatory policies and clearer limits on industry influence are essential if healthy food is to become the norm rather than the exception.

Recipe for Change is a campaign for stronger regulation of the food industry, including expanding the Soft Drinks Industry Levy to unhealthy food to incentivise companies to change their recipes, and invest any revenues in programmes to support children's health. While the evidence for action is clear, we know policy must also reflect people's everyday realities. This charter combines expert research with the lived experience of families, parents and young people to ensure the solutions proposed are both effective and grounded in real life.

"It's just plain sense, common sense, that we need to have good food for everyone."

Emma, 37, Kingston

Methodology

This work draws on multiple sources of evidence and engagement:

- **Qualitative research with low-income families, led by ActivMob**, in summer 2025, which explored concerns and frustrations about food shopping and healthy eating, as well as perceptions of an industry levy to make food healthier. This included:
 - 24 people spoken to across two phases of interviews and focus groups all who identified as “just coping” or trying to manage the cost-of-living crisis.
 - Participants were in Kent, London, Cornwall and Southampton.
- **Deliberative focus groups led by Sustain and the Food Foundation** throughout December 2025 – February 2026, prioritising parents, young people and people with experience of food insecurity. The process involved:
 - 5 initial sessions in the first round, involving 36 people; followed by a second round of sessions, involving 14 people from across the first groups.
 - Participants were spread across the whole of the UK.
- **Nationally representative polling conducted by YouGov**
 - This polling, carried out in March 2026, captured public attitudes towards food affordability, industry behaviour and support for stronger regulation.
 - The total sample size was 2,087 adults, representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

Together, these insights provide a clear picture of the challenges people face and the changes they want to see in the food system.



The current challenges faced by citizens

Healthy food costs more than many families can afford

For many, the biggest barrier to eating well was simple: cost. Participants described constantly weighing up their health against their budget, with healthier options often priced out of reach.

If I was to go and buy a five-pack of chocolate bars, very often that can be cheaper than buying raspberries or blueberries.

Kirsty, 38, Bristol

For young people and families on tight budgets, price often drives decisions in the moment.

As a sixth form student, you tend to end up buying fast food during your lunch rather than actually going to buy healthy food just because fast food is cheaper... that's really all you can afford.

Deborah, 17, London

Nationally, **81%** of people say rising food prices are a key reason it has become harder to eat well, and **70%** say unhealthy food is often cheaper than healthier options.⁴

Healthier foods are more than twice as expensive per calorie as less healthy foods, meaning families often pay more to eat well.⁵

For too many families, healthy eating feels like a luxury, not the default, creating a sense of frustration and loss of control.

You need to have control over what you're putting in your mouth and if you don't have the money, you don't have that control.

Dave, 50, Bristol

Companies are seen to be putting profit before people's health

Many felt that a food system designed to maximise sales and profits is coming at the expense of their own health. Participants pointed to promotions and product placements that push less healthy food.

It's more money for the companies and you're losing more than anything.

Marta, 18, Bristol

They also questioned why so many everyday products are high in sugar, salt and additives.

Up to **85%** of the salt we consume is already present in food we buy⁶, and in the UK, **66%** of children exceed recommended salt limits and **95%** exceed sugar recommendations.⁷

It's really hard because you're asking individuals to change their behaviour, but in a system which is actively trying to make you buy more and buy loads of crap... it's like you're asking [people] to fight against the system just in their daily shop.

Emma, 37, Kingston

At the same time, major retailers and manufacturers continue to report significant profits. For example, the UK's largest supermarket **Tesco reported profits of more than £3 billion last year.**⁸ Many felt responsibility must shift towards the companies who are shaping what we see, what we can afford and what ends up in our baskets.

Public trust is also low. **70%** of people say food companies are not honest about the health impacts of their products, and **79%** are not confident companies will improve food without government action.⁹

For many, there is a sense that profiteering has increased and that the government must step in and shift that balance back towards the nation's health. Not all growth is good growth if it comes at the expense of our health and costs to the NHS.

Time and energy are real barriers, especially for parents

For many parents and carers, the challenge is not just money or access, but time. Cooking from scratch often feels unrealistic alongside work, childcare and everyday pressures.

For some, practical barriers compound this further: limited kitchen space, lack of equipment, or overcrowded housing can make home cooking difficult even when the time and will are there.

I haven't really got the time... I've got half an hour and I've got to feed [them] all and then I might have to jump on a Zoom, so life's just got way too busy.

Kirsty, 38, Bristol

Affordability isn't only finances it's also time.

Tapiwa, 21, London

Without convenient, nutritious options, less healthy foods often win.

This reflects wider pressures, with nearly half of people (**48%**) pointing to busy lifestyles as a barrier to eating well.¹⁰

Healthy food isn't always easy to find locally

Beyond price, simply finding healthy food nearby can be difficult. In some neighbourhoods, fresh and nutritious options feel scarce while fast food outlets dominate the high street.

For those without a car or reliable public transport, travelling to a larger supermarket or market can be an additional barrier, making whatever is closest the only realistic option.

I would like to have access to good quality healthy food that I can afford. I'd love to be able to shop local and support local businesses and feel more connected to who's supplying my food.

Zoe, 48, Bexley

If its not a fast food outlet or a nail salon, it's an off license or a betting shop.

Penny 59, Newcastle

Nationally, **a quarter** of food outlets in England are fast food businesses, rising to **nearly one in three** in the most deprived areas.¹¹

Some citizens told us that while they want better access to fresh food, they also recognise that families will continue using local takeaways. They want those options to be healthier too.

Even if we know our kids are passing there and getting something to eat, there should be some form of goodness in the fast food... not just crap.

Janie, 46, Bristol

Where you live should not determine how easy it is to eat well, yet many feel unhealthy food is simply the most convenient or available option.

Advertising and marketing push unhealthy food as the norm

Participants described feeling constantly surrounded by advertising for fast food, sugary drinks and snacks, while healthier options are rarely visible.

When I walk out of my estate, it's probably 30 to 45 minutes before I see any fruit or veg advertised... before you get to that, you're going past all the cafes, restaurants and takeaways.

Keira, 17

On buses and around the town it's usually fast food and unhealthy food, and they've labelled it with a cheaper price tag.

Rushda, 17, Halifax

These experiences are backed up by evidence: **36%** of food and drink advertising spend promotes confectionery, snacks, desserts and soft drinks, compared to just **2%** on fruit and vegetables.¹² Children in more deprived areas are exposed to even higher levels. Marketing should support healthier options, not undermine them.

Labels and information are often confusing or misleading

Many participants said they want to make healthier choices but struggle to trust the information provided. Several described being drawn in by labels such as "high in protein", "source of fibre" or "natural", only to realise later that products are still high in sugar, salt or additives.

If you go to the processed food... it says a source of protein and high in fibre. But it's not giving you the badness on it as well. It's trying to portray a fake thing for me.

Aishfaq, 37, Bristol

It angers me how children's foods use health claims on the packaging to look nutritious, when they're actually loaded with sugar. It feels manipulative, and I'm frustrated that the government doesn't regulate this more strictly to better protect families.

Victoria, 43, London

Less than half (47%) of shoppers say labels are easy to understand¹³, and just **21%** of the public believe food companies are honest about the health impacts of their products.¹⁴

Young people also described seeing conflicting advice online, making it harder to know what "healthy" really means.

Citizens want clear, trustworthy information that makes healthy choices obvious.

The next section sets out what citizens believe needs to happen to make this a reality.

Recipe for Change: What are citizens calling for?

- 1. Make our food healthier, more affordable and accessible, no matter where we live**
 - 2. Hold food companies accountable for improving our health, not undermining it**
 - 3. Protect our children from harmful food marketing**
 - 4. Give us clear, honest information that we can trust**
 - 5. Put us and our communities at the heart of decisions about our local food system**
 - 6. Create welcoming community spaces where we can all access and share healthy food**
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To turn this vision into reality, we need bold action and the public has made it clear they back this. **61%** of people think government should do more to make healthy food available, and **71%** say food companies should do more.¹⁵

The following pages explore each call in more detail, including some example policies and programmes which reflect the change that the citizens' wanted to see.



1.



Make our food healthier, more affordable and accessible, no matter where we live

Citizens want a food system where healthy choices are realistically within reach for everyone. This means not just lower prices, but making it easier to buy, prepare and access healthier food in everyday life. As one participant reflected, *"I try to cook from home... but the cost compounds really easily when trying to make a whole meal."*

Participants were interested in practical ways to shift this balance. This could include expanding schemes that support families to access nutritious food, improving how healthier options are promoted and priced in shops, and increasing the availability of affordable fresh food locally. There was also strong support for reinvesting funding from measures such as the Soft Drinks Industry Levy into improving access to healthy food in communities.

2.



Hold food companies accountable for improving our health, not undermining it

Citizens want to see a shift in responsibility, with food companies expected to actively support better health outcomes. There was a strong sense that change needs to happen at a system level, not just through individual choices.

Participants pointed to the Soft Drinks Industry Levy as evidence that policy can drive meaningful product improvements, and were interested in applying similar approaches to excessive sugar, salt and processing levels. They also wanted clearer expectations for companies to improve nutritional quality.

This could involve setting stronger targets, improving transparency on product healthiness, and ensuring progress is tracked and enforced. Participants felt strongly that decision-making should be guided by public health priorities, with safeguards to limit industry influence on policy design.

This reflects broader public support for action, including regulating levels of sugar (**73%**), salt (**71%**) and saturated fat (**73%**) in food. **64%** also support expanding levies on unhealthy products if revenue raised supports children's health.¹⁶

3.



Protect our children from harmful food marketing

Parents want their children to grow up in environments where healthier options are supported, not undermined. Many felt that current levels of marketing for unhealthy food shape habits early and make it harder for families to make informed decisions.

"You're made to believe your choices are good choices," as one participant put it.

Focus group participants expressed interest in stronger limits on how unhealthy food is marketed, particularly in spaces where children spend time, including online and in public. This could include clearer rules on advertising, promotions and branding aimed at children, alongside stronger enforcement to ensure these rules are meaningful in practice.

4.



Give us clear, honest information we can trust

Citizens want to feel confident in the information they use to make decisions about food. At the moment, many feel that understanding what is healthy requires too much effort.

"It can be confusing to wade through what are personal perspectives and what is objective truth," one participant explained when speaking about the different sources of healthy eating advice on social media.

Participants were interested in clearer, more consistent ways of presenting information, so that healthier options are easier to identify at a glance. This could include simpler front-of-pack labelling and action to reduce misleading claims, helping people make informed choices more quickly and confidently.



Put us and our communities at the heart of decisions about our local food system

Alongside their frustrations, the citizens we spoke to also expressed hope. They can already see solutions grounded in their lived experience of the food system, and their hope and expertise should be a driving force in making government policy robust and successful. Their inclusion would build the public trust that is critical for effective policymaking.

Citizens want a stronger voice in shaping the food environments around them. Many spoke about the potential for communities to play a more active role in creating healthier, more supportive local food systems.

"What I'd really like is somewhere that sells affordable fresh food... that power really feels like it's gone in the area and you don't have much of a say," one participant said.

Participants expressed interest in approaches that give communities more influence and resources, such as local food partnerships, community growing and cooking initiatives, and better use of public spaces. For many, this is about creating local solutions that reflect the needs and priorities of the people who live there.



Create welcoming community spaces where we can all access and share healthy food

Participants highlighted the importance of community spaces where people can come together around food - not just to eat, but to reduce isolation, share cultures and support one another, particularly for parents, carers and those experiencing food insecurity.

There was a strong emphasis on making these spaces inclusive and culturally relevant, reflecting the diversity of local communities, where different food traditions are recognised and people feel a sense of belonging, regardless of income or background. *"It's about having a night off... a break,"* as one participant put it.

This could include community kitchens, shared meals or wider hubs bringing together food, wellbeing and support. Alongside wider policy change, these spaces can help make healthy food more accessible, social and rooted in everyday life.

Where next: turning the public's calls into action

For the people of the UK it's clear that improving the food we eat cannot rely on individual effort alone. Food companies shape what is produced, priced, promoted and placed in front of us every day. They therefore share responsibility for the health impacts of those decisions and must not leave families to carry all the burden while companies continue to prioritise profits. At the same time, people want practical support in their own communities, from better local access to affordable healthy food to options that fit around busy lives.

The UK already has strong evidence about what works. For example, mandatory, well-designed regulations can change corporate behaviour quickly and fairly, as the Soft Drinks Industry Levy shows clearly.¹⁷ Announced in 2016 and introduced in 2018, the levy charged more on high-sugar drinks and less or nothing on lower sugar options. Most manufacturers reduced sugar in their products, kept a wide range of choice on the shelf, and prices did not spike. It led to a fall in sugar consumed in soft drinks, with a positive effect on reducing dental caries and avoiding cases of obesity for many children. The levy put health first, without harming company profits.

Its design offers important lessons for future regulation of the food industry aiming to improve public health. The levy was:

- Mandatory rather than voluntary
- It targeted manufacturers rather than shoppers
- It aimed primarily to improve products rather than raise revenue
- Companies had flexibility in how they responded, whether by reducing sugar, changing portion sizes or promoting lower-sugar options, but they were expected to act
- Companies were consulted but could not directly design the policy
- Clear rules created a level playing field and drove change across the sector

Similar approaches are needed across the wider food system. Voluntary pledges and partnerships have delivered limited progress, while unhealthy products remain cheaper, more visible and heavily promoted. Strong fiscal levers and enforceable regulations can ensure companies take responsibility for the health consequences of their products. Confidence in voluntary action is low, with nearly **8 in 10 people saying they do not believe companies will improve food without government intervention.**¹⁸

Public health policy must also be safeguarded from industry interference, so decisions are driven by evidence and health outcomes rather than commercial interests.

Citizens are asking for a fair system where companies are held accountable and public health comes first.

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Public:

Add your name to the call for a food system that puts the nation's health before company profits. Share your experiences and urge decision-makers to back stronger rules that make healthy food affordable and accessible for everyone.

Parliamentarians:

The public wants action, and people don't trust big food companies to put our health first. **Support our calls** to hold food companies accountable for providing healthier, more affordable food.

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