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TABLE

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Stuck in Motion:

Why UK food system transformation is more than a knowledge problem

UK National Insight Report

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TABLE helps people navigate the evidence, values and visions shaping global debates about the future of sustainable food systems. Both scientific evidence and our personal biases play roles in these crucial conversations: TABLE provides clarity on where, how and why we disagree in order to support inclusive dialogue and drive much-needed action. Originally founded as a collaboration between the University of Oxford, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) and Wageningen University & Research (WUR), the TABLE network has since expanded to include la Universidad de los Andes (Colombia) and la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

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Introduction

For years, food system change — and increasingly transformation — has been presented as an urgent and necessary priority in the UK[1-10]. Successive governments have set out strategies and visions for healthier, more sustainable and resilient food systems[1,11–15]. Civil society organisations are campaigning, convening and building cross-sector alliances; businesses, retailers and investors are engaging more actively; and new efforts are emerging to improve coordination across sectors[4,6–8,16–25]. Brexit created new space to redesign parts of domestic food and farming policy, while climate change, geopolitical instability and recent shocks to food supply chains have made the need for action harder to ignore[9,16,26–28]. The UK also has a long-standing and substantial research community working across food policy, public health, sustainability, agriculture and food systems, alongside decades of evidence about both the problems and possible responses[29–36].

Yet progress remains limited, slow and often difficult to see at anything like the scale or pace the challenges demand[11,16,21,28,37–42]. This raises a fundamental question: ***why?*** We often assume that inaction is, at its heart, a problem of knowledge or buy-in – if decision-makers had better evidence, if researchers asked the right questions, or if the right policymakers, businesses or funders were persuaded, then change would follow. But the UK already appears to have many of those ingredients — evidence, expertise, active organisations, policy attention, emerging coordination and broad stated commitment to change. **So what is actually stalling progress?**

This question is the foundation of this report. Rather than asking what problems arise from the current food system or what a healthier, more sustainable and equitable food system should look like, we focus on how people and organisations are already trying to make change happen. We refer to these actors as **changemakers**: stakeholders and researchers who are actively working to influence or enable food system change. We examine the routes they are using, where they feel progress is getting stuck, what kinds of evidence and support they actually need, and where they see opportunities to move from ambition towards action.

REPORT CONTEXT

This is one of a series of national insight reports exploring different contexts for food system transformation across Europe and the UK. It draws on a Wellcome-funded project undertaken by TABLE, in partnership with the Environmental Change Institute at the University of Oxford, the Centre for Food Policy at City St George's, University of London, IDDRI and Wageningen University to map food system change work across Europe and the UK and explore how evidence could better be put into action to achieve healthier, more sustainable and more equitable food systems.

We also partnered with European think tanks Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP), Sustainable Economy Institute (IZG), Alinnea and Clingendael who oversaw the research and report drafting for the other countries.

The full project consisted of 68 semi-structured interviews across eight geographic regions (UK, France, Germany, Spain, Poland, the Netherlands, Ireland and the wider European policy space), eight national workshops, one international synthesis workshop, a researcher survey, an academic scoping review and a bibliographic mapping of policy documents and related academic literature and funding grants. Participants and organisations quoted or named in this report were also consulted during the revision process, and their feedback was used to validate and refine the final national report.

You can find more details on the Wellcome website and in the main project report. National reports are also available for France, Ireland, Spain and Poland.

Dietary shift emerged across the project as one of the clearest priorities for food system change, so it is a central focus of this report. In this context, *dietary shift* means movement towards healthier and more sustainable eating patterns — including more fruit and vegetables; less excessive consumption of foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS); and movement away from high-impact or excessive consumption of animal-source foods (ASF). This describes a *broad direction of change* rather than one prescribed diet or pathway. The UK findings draw mainly on interviews and a national workshop, together representing 20 organisations across civil society, policy, farming, industry, retail and other parts of the food system.

The report is organised in three parts. Part 1 sets the scene, examining some of the main pressures shaping the UK food system and how policy is responding to them. Part 2 examines who the UK changemakers are and the routes they use to pursue change. Part 3 looks at the barriers they face, what they say they need, and where they see opportunities for greater impact.

Part 1: National context in detail

To understand what UK changemakers are trying to change, it helps to start with the landscape they are working in. This section looks at two things: the pressures currently shaping the food system, and how policy has responded as those pressures have become more connected and more difficult to ignore.

1.1 Devolved and siloed responsibilities

Food policy in the UK is not made in one place. The UK itself is a devolved country, which means that significant areas of food, agriculture, health and environmental policy are shared responsibilities across the governments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Responsibility is also spread widely across the different departments within these governments. In England alone, a 2020 mapping exercise identified at least 16 government departments and public bodies involved in national food policy, with no single body responsible for bringing the whole system together[34,35]. Delivery also depends heavily on local authorities, businesses, farmers, civil-society organisations and communities[43].

This report considers the UK food system as a whole while recognising these differences. We use UK-wide evidence wherever possible and identify when policies or data apply only to England. England-specific policy still matters to the wider picture because food markets, supply chains, trade and many regulatory arrangements connect the four nations. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also have their own food policy frameworks, including Scotland's first statutory *National Good Food Nation Plan*, *Food Matters: Wales* and the *Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework*[44–47]. A detailed comparison of the four nations is beyond the scope of this report, but devolution was considered in the project and informs how we interpret the findings.

1.2 Food system challenges and UK policy responses

Several pressures are changing both how the UK food system works and the way policymakers think about it. Below, we look at four particularly important areas, what they mean in practice and how policy is beginning to respond.

DIET AND HEALTH

Diet and health remain an obvious example of how actions do not align with national recommendations. The latest National Diet and Nutrition Survey (2024) found that only 17% of UK adults met the recommendation to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. For children, these statistics are even more stark: only 9% met the 5-a-day recommendation[48]. Dietary ill health and obesity trends are also on the rise, with 66% of English adults diagnosed as overweight or living with obesity in 2024, including 30% living with obesity[48,49]. Obesity rates have also risen substantially over the longer term: the proportion of adults living with obesity increased from 15% in 1993 to 30% in 2024[49].

With this evidence building up, policymakers have gradually started to recognise the importance of *food environments* in shaping how we source, buy, consume and dispose of food – rather than automatically relying on the individual to make 'better' food choices. Some policy interventions include: the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, restrictions on the promotion and advertising of less healthy foods and changes to public food provision – the last of which includes a review of school food standards[50–53]. From January 2026, UK-wide restrictions introduced a 9pm watershed for television advertising of less healthy food and drink products and restricted paid online advertising[50]. The proposed Healthier Food Targets and Reporting scheme would go further by asking large food businesses to measure and improve the healthiness of their sales[54]. All of these schemes target different structural elements of food which shape consumers' choices – through advertising, pricing, provision and accessibility[50].

FOOD ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

An individual's ability to **access healthy food** is strongly shaped by household circumstances. In 2024 to 2025, around 9% of UK households experienced low or very low food security, rising to 12% among households with children. This is on top of a baseline of food insecurity that was already substantially higher for vulnerable populations, including households receiving income-related benefits and those living in social rented housing[55]. Food prices had also risen by more than 30% in the three years leading up to March 2024, showing how wider economic and supply-chain pressures can quickly reach households[56,57].

Recent policies have responded by putting somewhat greater emphasis on provision of economic access to food as well as informing consumer choice. In England, eligibility for free school meals expanded in the 2026/27 academic year to children in households receiving Universal Credit, the UK's main means-tested working-age benefit, while the School Food Standards are also being updated[52,53]. Debate around a possible statutory Right to Food has also grown. The independent Right To Food UK Commission has been gathering evidence across all four UK nations and developing a roadmap for potential legislation, although a statutory right has not yet been adopted as UK Government policy[58,59].

RESILIENCE IN FOOD SECURITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Alongside this, **food security** is increasingly being understood as more than just whether or not enough food is available nationally[15,16,33,40,56,57,60,61]. Recent shocks, including Brexit adjustment, the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, energy and agricultural input-price increases and labour shortages, exposed vulnerabilities across production, trade, transport and other parts of food supply chains[16,17,37–39]. Partly in response to this, the UK Food Security Report and subsequent annual Food Security Digest now look across global food availability, domestic production, supply-chain resilience and household access rather than treating food security simply as whether enough food is available nationally[56,57].

Climate change adds another layer of pressure and urgency. Summer 2026 provided a particularly visible example: by 20 August, 71% of England's land area was classified as being in drought, around 29 million people were subject to restrictions on water use and more than 1,500 restrictions on agricultural water use were in place[62–64]. The Environment Agency reported poor crop yields, reduced grass growth, critically low farm reservoirs and difficulties harvesting some crops because of exceptionally hard ground[62]. With UK summers expected to become hotter and drier and extreme heat becoming more frequent and intense, resilience is increasingly a practical question about whether farms, supply chains and infrastructure can continue functioning under more volatile conditions[63–65].

These concerns are becoming more visible in policy. Food security is increasingly recognised as a national security and defence challenge, prominently featuring in political debates about how to increase the UK's resilience in the context of an uncertain and volatile future[16,43,61,66]. For example, Parliament's ongoing inquiry into food supply-chain resilience and fairness is examining domestic food production, healthy and affordable food, supply-chain relationships and vulnerability to external shocks through one, holistic approach[67,68]. This broader framing explicitly connects questions that were historically kept separated and siloed, from climate adaptation and national food supply to household access and the economic health of food businesses.

FARMING, LAND USE AND SUPPLY CHAINS

Farmers are also dealing directly with this uncertainty and volatility, with some – including Prime Minister Andy Burnham – arguing that they're being forced to take an unfair share of the risks[69–72]. Rising input costs and severe weather have coincided with a major transition in agricultural policy following the UK's departure from the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy[26,37,42,66]. In England, this has meant moving towards a new system of support under the Agriculture Act 2020, alongside wider efforts to rethink how a limited amount of land can support food production, environmental recovery and other public needs through policies such as the recently published Land Use Framework[73–75].

This creates a difficult balancing act. Farmers are expected to produce food, remain economically profitable – or at least viable –, adapt to a changing climate and contribute to environmental goals, while the resources and markets around them are constantly changing. Concerns about farm profitability, domestic food production and long-term resilience have therefore gained political prominence[67,68,76]. The independent Farming Profitability Review and the Government's subsequent *Farming Roadmap 2050* respond directly to these pressures, bringing profitability and productivity together with food production, environmental sustainability and resilience rather than treating them as separate objectives[77,78].

This question of who carries risk extends far beyond the farmgate, however. Farmers' ability to respond to higher costs, severe weather or new environmental expectations also depends on the prices they receive for their products and their relationships with processors, manufacturers and retailers. Because of this, questions around how value, risk and power are distributed through the food supply chain increasingly sit alongside debates about farming and resilience[21,37,66,79]. Parliament's ongoing inquiry into food supply-chain resilience and fairness is examining these relationships

alongside domestic production, healthy and affordable food and vulnerability to external shocks[67,68]. Responsibility for sponsoring the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which oversees how the UK's largest grocery retailers treat their direct suppliers, also recently moved to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in 2026 as part of an effort to bring these issues together more closely[68].

1.3 A more connected policy agenda

Taken together, these developments point to a gradual change in how food policy is being approached across the UK. Health, affordability, food security, farming, environmental sustainability and resilience are increasingly being discussed as connected challenges rather than entirely separate policy areas.

This shift is particularly visible in the succession of broader food strategies developed over the past several years. In England, the independent National Food Strategy evidence report published in 2020 and 2021 looked across the food chain and brought together health, food poverty, environmental sustainability, trade and food security[1,12]. The *Government Food Strategy* followed in 2022, setting out objectives around a prosperous agri-food sector, secure food supply, healthier and more sustainable diets and a nature-positive food system[14,41,80]. The first milestone of the ongoing food strategy process was a vision document, *Towards a Good Food Cycle*, published in 2025, which went further in explicitly bringing together health, affordability, sustainable production, supply-chain fairness and resilience within a shared vision for the food system[13]. This is a strategic guidance document which sets out a broad vision and outcome goals, although specific policies, targets and delivery architecture are still being developed. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have also been working to develop their own food policy frameworks, though their approaches, priorities and levels of legal commitment differ[44–47].

This does not mean that priorities are now fully aligned or that coordination problems have disappeared[20,41]. Responsibilities remain spread across governments, departments and other actors, while different goals and interests can still pull in different directions[34–36]. Yet we are beginning to see signals that the links between these issues are harder to ignore[20,25]. Disruptions are well-known for forcing adaptation, change and even transformation[2,6,81–85]. The important change is that the connections between these issues are becoming harder to ignore. This creates new openings for changemakers, but leaves the central question of this report unresolved: ***how can broad ambitions for change be translated into coordinated and sustained action?*** More specifically, how do we navigate competing interests, fragmented responsibilities and uncertainty in an aligned, coordinated and collaborative way?

Part 2: Changemakers and their approaches to change

This section looks at who the UK changemakers involved in this study are and how they try to create food system change in practice. It uses the wider European and UK typology developed through the project to explore the different routes changemakers take, how these routes overlap and how they are shaped by the UK context.

2.1 UK changemakers

The UK changemakers involved in the project represented a varied field of actors, but tended to focus on civil society or policy-facing work. Most interviewees worked in the third sector, although many also worked closely with policymakers or held additional roles as advisers, funders or investors. Private-sector perspectives included farmers and actors from the food industry and retail. Many organisations

crossed conventional sector boundaries rather than fitting neatly into a single actor category.

This matters for how the routes to change are interpreted. Changemakers rarely described their work as belonging exclusively to one pathway, instead combining different approaches depending on the issue and opportunities available. The three routes are therefore most useful for showing where changemakers place particular emphasis, rather than assigning organisations permanently to one category.

The sample also has some important limitations. Civil-society and policy-facing organisations were particularly well represented, while smaller grassroots and community organisations were harder to reach within the time and resources available for the study. As discussed below, this may partly explain why the local or citizen-led route appeared less prominent among changemakers than policy-focused approaches. The findings should therefore be read as an account of the approaches represented within this study rather than a complete map of food system change activity across the UK.

2.2 Three routes to food system change

Across the European and UK interviews, three broad routes to transformation emerged (see Figure 1). These describe the main mechanisms through which changemakers aim to contribute to change and the actors or institutions they seek to influence:

- **The policy route**, where change is pursued by engaging directly with how policies are developed and implemented;
- **The market route**, where market innovation, commercial practices, investment or other financial mechanisms are used to change how food is produced, sold or consumed.
- **The local or citizen-led route**, where change is pursued through place-based action, local food systems, citizen participation or community empowerment.

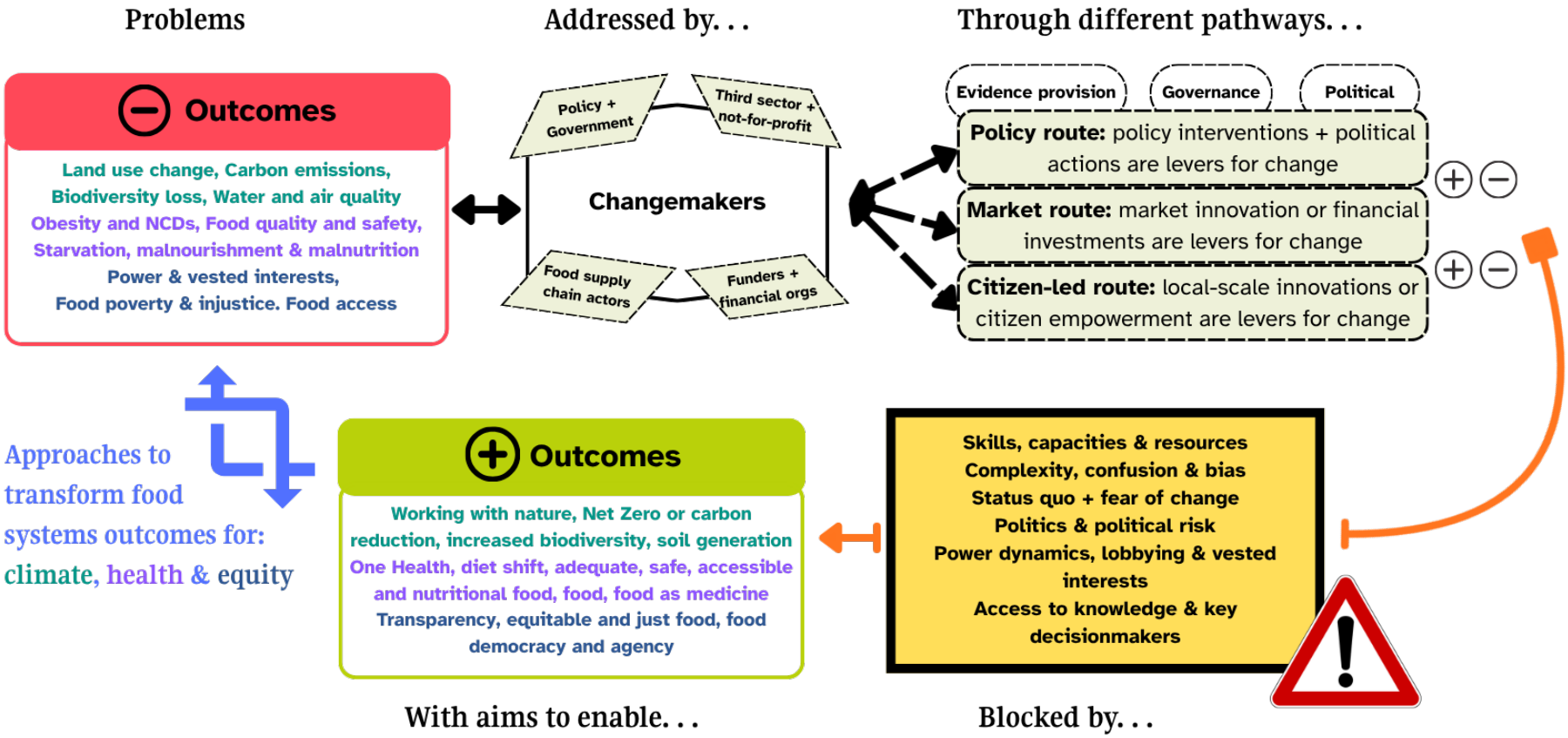
These are not fixed categories. Changemakers may use several routes at the same time, shift between them as political or economic conditions change, or use activity in one route to create opportunities in another. The typology is intended to help distinguish between different approaches to change rather than rank them.

UK APPROACHES TO CHANGE

UK changemakers broadly recognised these three routes when they were presented during the national workshop. Many were already familiar with these pathways from previous work[86,87], so found the typology easy to understand. Some, however, questioned whether the typology adequately captured approaches centred on social justice, values, culture and particularly narrative change. They suggested that a distinct “cultural” route might better reflect efforts to change how food issues are understood and discussed. Rather than treating this as a separate route, we instead treat narrative and cultural change as activities that can work across policy, market and local approaches.

Workshop participants also raised questions about how the routes interact in practice. One recurring tension concerned the role of industry: whether greater engagement with powerful food system businesses risks reinforcing existing power imbalances, or whether these actors need to be more actively involved because of their capacity to enable change. More broadly, changemakers felt that food system actors were becoming better aligned around some shared goals and values, but that translating this broad alignment into coordinated action remained difficult. The challenge was not simply reaching agreement on the overall direction of change, but determining how organisations with different priorities, skills and resources could play complementary roles while retaining space for disagreement and pluralism.

Figure 1. European and UK approaches to change: preliminary typology



Source: Authors

2.3 Comparing UK approaches to change in practice

POLICY REMAINS THE MAIN ROUTE TO SYSTEM-LEVEL CHANGE

The policy route was the **most common approach** described by UK changemakers and remained the default route for many seeking change at scale. Changemakers frequently saw changes to regulation, public spending, procurement and government programmes as necessary for reshaping the conditions in which businesses and individuals make decisions.

This was reflected in the changemakers' activities. The **Food, Farming and Countryside Commission**'s *The Food Conversation*, for example, uses deliberative engagement with citizens to challenge assumptions about what the public wants from food policy and to create a stronger basis for political action. **Sustain** combines evidence, advocacy and coalition-building to influence policymakers on issues such as sustainable farming, children's food and local authority action. At the time of the interviews, organisations were also contributing directly to national food strategy development through the Food Strategy Advisory Board, including the **Food Foundation** and the **Institute of Grocery Distribution**, in its role as co-secretariat.

Changemakers were seeking better outcomes across a similarly wide range of policy areas. Common examples included improving public procurement and School Food Standards, expanding schemes such as Healthy Start, strengthening or extending fiscal interventions such as the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, and using restrictions on the advertising and promotion of less healthy foods. Several of these areas have since moved forward in policy (see Part 1). This makes implementation increasingly important: the question for changemakers is not only ***how to secure new commitments, but how to influence their design, ensure they are delivered effectively and sustain political support for them over time.***

Aerial of roads through farmland. Photo by Bernd Dittrich (Unsplash).

Despite prioritising policy, changemakers repeatedly described it as **a difficult and often frustrating route**. They viewed policy processes as slow and vulnerable to changing political priorities, with proposed measures sometimes delayed, weakened or abandoned. Political instability in recent years reinforced the perception that progress is difficult to sustain and that organisations could invest considerable time in influencing a policy process without seeing corresponding action.

These experiences help explain why many changemakers combine policy work with other routes. The more active policy landscape described in Part 1 creates genuine openings for change, but does not remove the concerns changemakers raised

about coordination, continuity or implementation. Instead, policy remains central because of its potential to create change at scale, while its limitations encourage changemakers to work through businesses, markets, local action and citizen engagement as well.

MARKET APPROACHES CAN OFFER A FASTER ROUTE TO CHANGE

Changemakers across sectors saw the market route as **increasingly promising**, particularly because businesses and investors can often act faster than the government. For some, this offered a way to make tangible progress while policy processes remained slow or uncertain. As one third-sector actor explained: "We work with businesses and investors in recognition of the fact that the policy process is often painfully slow and you can deliver smaller sets of results in the shorter term by getting businesses and investors to behave voluntarily in support of better outcomes."

Changemakers described a range of activities within this route. These included collaboration and data-sharing between industry actors and across sectors; greater use of data and technology to help retailers promote and position healthier and more sustainable products; and investment in artificial intelligence and other tools intended to improve marketing and product placement. Several also believed that there should be greater engagement with the less visible 'middle' of the food supply chain, particularly manufacturers and processors. They felt that these actors were often missing from food system conversations despite having substantial influence over which products reach consumers and how supply chains operate.

Market approaches were not only used by private sector changemakers. Some civil-society organisations increasingly engaged businesses and investors either alongside policy advocacy or as a more immediate route to change. Changemakers also pointed to signals from major businesses and investors calling for stronger policy frameworks, including support for sustainable farming and mandatory reporting on healthy-food sales. This suggests that market and policy routes can reinforce one another rather than operate separately.

At the same time, changemakers did not agree that greater industry involvement was inherently beneficial. As discussed earlier, workshop participants questioned whether working more closely with powerful businesses could reinforce existing imbalances in the food system, while others argued that meaningful change would be difficult without their participation. The market route therefore presents both an opportunity and a tension: private actors have substantial capacity to change products, practices and supply chains, but changemakers disagreed over whether or not voluntary action could deliver system-level change and what role regulation should play in shaping or requiring business action.

LOCAL APPROACHES BUILD CAPACITY AND CONNECT ACTION TO PLACE

UK changemakers also described local and citizen-led actions as an important route for change, **usually pursued alongside policy or market approaches**. These approaches emphasise local relationships, citizen participation, capacity-building and responses shaped around the needs and assets of a particular place.

The Sustainable Food Places programme provides a prominent example. Led by **Sustain**, **Food Matters** and the **Soil Association**, working with **Nourish Scotland** and **Food Sense Wales**, the programme has run for over 15 years and supports more than 120 local food partnerships — often involving local authorities, civil-society organisations, businesses and community actors — with tools, knowledge and systems-based approaches to help them develop coordinated action. Alongside supporting grassroots and community activity, these partnerships can also engage with local or national policy. By building relationships, developing capacity and coordinating organisations with different skills and roles, Sustainable Food Places demonstrates how local action can create networks of actors with both the knowledge and agency to pursue food system change. **Sustain** also has a complementary Good Food Local programme which provides a benchmarking and self-assessment

tool through which local authorities can evaluate their food policies and actions, identify areas for improvement and learn from others nationwide.

The **Food, Farming and Countryside Commission's** *The Food Conversation* also applies a citizen-led approach, even while aiming for policy change. It works directly with members of the public to explain how the food system works and explore their priorities and assumptions about the food system. Then, these discussions are used to expose changemakers to evidence, different perspectives and practical examples, challenging common narratives about what the public wants from food policy. Changemakers can then take this knowledge back into their own communities, while the wider programme uses citizen perspectives as a strategic communications intervention intended to create a stronger basis for political action. A group of participants from the project now also work together through the Citizen Advisory Council (CAC) to directly engage with policy, supported by the **Food, Farming and Countryside Commission** and **the Food Foundation**. They accomplish this by advising DEFRA on the Good Food Cycle strategy process and also helping develop a new £10 million *Good Food Neighbourhood* fund. Through work like this, the programme combines individual and community capacity-building with an ambition to influence wider systems through policy change.

More broadly, changemakers associated local and citizen-led approaches with values that can be harder to capture through conventional policy or market measures, including inclusivity, pluralism, agency, relationship-building and responsiveness to local needs. They also emphasised the importance of creating space for actors who are not usually represented in national food system debates, with some changemakers specifically highlighting racial justice and anti-racism as a particular focus. For example, one participant said "food partnerships and food community enterprise have been at the forefront of peaceful resistance to anti-refugee protests and violence." Third-sector organisations and some policy actors aligned most strongly with these approaches, although usually as part of a wider strategy that also sought policy change.

As noted previously, local and grassroots activity is also likely to under-represent this route relative to its actual importance within the wider UK landscape (see section 2.1).

INCREASINGLY COMBINED APPROACHES TO CHANGE

Overall, the three routes are better understood as complementary strategies than as competing models of change. **Policy remains the main route for achieving change at scale**, but changemakers' frustration with slow or unstable political processes has encouraged greater engagement with businesses, investors, local actors and citizens. At the same time, market and local activity often feed back into policy: business action can demonstrate what is commercially possible, while local initiatives can test approaches, build support and generate practical experience that informs wider change.

Narrative and cultural change also cut across all three routes. Changemakers repeatedly described the **importance of changing how food system problems and solutions are understood**, whether by challenging assumptions about public support for policy intervention, building shared values within communities, or changing expectations among businesses and investors. This helps explain why workshop participants saw cultural change as a possible fourth route, even though we treat it here as a mechanism that can operate across the three.

The current UK context reinforces the value of these combined approaches. Policy activity is increasing across health, food security, farming, land use and resilience, but delivery remains spread across government, businesses, local authorities and civil society. As a result, no single actor or route has the capacity to deliver food system change alone. The challenge is **how actors can use their different strengths in complementary ways while navigating genuine differences** in priorities and interests.

Part 3: Barriers, needs and opportunities

Despite the range of approaches described in Part 2, changemakers identified persistent barriers that limit their ability to turn broad ambition into sustained action. Some relate to the wider political, economic and cultural environment in which they operate, while others concern the resources, evidence and relationships available to them. Many cannot be overcome by individual organisations acting alone.

Five barrier themes emerged particularly strongly from the UK interviews and workshop: **1) complexity, confusion and contested evidence; 2) the status quo and fear of change; 3) lack of 'funded leadership'; 4) power dynamics, vested interests and political risk and 5) 'top-down' and impractical research agendas**. These barriers frequently overlap. For example, political resistance can be reinforced by competing narratives and uncertainty over evidence, while limited organisational capacity can make it harder for changemakers to coordinate responses or engage consistently with policy processes. The sections below examine these barriers through the experiences of the changemakers involved in this study, before turning to the evidence, funding and wider support they said would help.

3.1 Barriers to food system change

COMPLEXITY, CONFUSION AND CONTESTED EVIDENCE

Food systems were frequently described as difficult to understand and communicate because health, environmental, economic, social and political issues interact, often with competing objectives and trade-offs. Changemakers felt that this complexity makes it difficult to develop clear messages about what needs to change and to build support for particular interventions, especially among people who do not work directly on food systems.

Changemakers across sectors also pointed to polarisation, misinformation and uncertainty about the evidence base as factors that compound this problem. Evidence can appear conflicting, incomplete, biased or difficult to interpret, making it harder for non-specialists to distinguish areas of strong agreement from genuine scientific or political disagreement. This challenge was raised even by changemakers with academic backgrounds, suggesting that the problem is not simply a lack of evidence but also how evidence is produced, synthesised, communicated and contested.

The policy landscape described in Part 1 illustrates some of this complexity in practice: food system objectives do not always align neatly, and solutions that perform well against one goal may create tensions elsewhere. For changemakers, the resulting **challenge is not only to communicate why change is needed but to do so in ways that acknowledge complexity without allowing it to become a reason for inaction**.

STATUS QUO AND FEAR OF CHANGE

Changemakers also described entrenched cultural norms, values and narratives as important barriers. Existing ways of producing, selling and consuming food can become normalised and difficult to challenge, while proposed changes may be framed as threatening individual choice, livelihoods or established identities. This barrier was raised particularly often by changemakers working in agriculture or through the policy route.

One recurring example was the political narrative that government intervention in food represents

an overreaching 'nanny state'. Changemakers felt that this framing can make policymakers cautious about intervention and reinforce approaches that place responsibility for healthier or more sustainable diets primarily on individuals or voluntary action by businesses. One civil-society participant described the problem in terms of deeply embedded assumptions about the appropriate role of government:

> **"What we think really, really needs attention are some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about how things work at the moment and the potential for change in those things. Even food as a category for [policy] attention is quite contested – that classic quote: 'government food policy has always been leave it to Tesco's'."**

The current context complicates this picture. As Part 1 shows, government interventions are now advancing in areas such as advertising, promotions and school food. The barrier is therefore not simply an unwillingness to intervene, but the continued political sensitivity around how ambitious interventions can be, how they are framed and whether commitments survive changing political circumstances. One changemaker did note that despite this, norms can shift over time and sustained evidence-building, advocacy, coalition-building and reframing narratives can gradually change what is considered politically and socially possible.

LACK OF 'FUNDED LEADERSHIP'

For civil-society organisations in particular, a major barrier was the lack of stable funding for the core organisational work needed to provide sustained leadership. Changemakers described a funding environment dominated by short-term, project-specific grants, requiring organisations to devote significant time and capacity to fundraising, administration and delivering individual projects rather than longer-term strategy, collaboration and movement-building.

Three organisations explicitly described this problem as a lack of '**funded leadership**'. One civil-society participant explained:

> **"My interest as [a civil society decision maker] is that I have to ensure that first and foremost I can pay everyone's salaries and we can do the projects that we've committed to do and that we want to do. I would love to have the bandwidth and the space and capacity to go, 'Right, how do we show leadership as an organisation?'"**

The concern was therefore not simply that individual projects lacked funding, but that organisations lacked the flexible capacity to look beyond immediate deliverables, invest in relationships, coordinate with others and respond strategically when opportunities emerged. Changemakers felt that this made it harder to build the sustained, coordinated action described in Part 2.

This issue may become even more significant as the policy landscape becomes busier. New strategies, consultations and implementation processes create potential openings for changemakers, but engaging effectively with them requires staff time, expertise, sector knowledge and continuity. More opportunities for participation do not necessarily mean greater influence if organisations lack the capacity to engage with them consistently.

POWER DYNAMICS, VESTED INTERESTS AND POLITICAL RISK

A fourth barrier concerned unequal power within the food system and the influence of actors with strong interests in maintaining existing arrangements. Several civil-society changemakers described concerns about powerful commercial interests shaping public and political debate, lobbying against particular forms of regulation or making it difficult to understand how influence is exercised. One participant described what they saw as an important but often less visible obstacle:

> **"I think the big sort of unseen barrier is the behaviour of those with vested interests in the current system... [who] are very powerful, but also quite insidious, difficult to spot, and are acting through multiple channels quite often in subtle ways which are not easy to expose really."**

Changemakers linked these concerns to a perceived lack of transparency around lobbying and decision-making, as well as to misinformation and polarisation. In their accounts, unequal access to political influence could reinforce existing power imbalances and make politically contentious policies even harder to pursue, especially where the costs of change would fall heavily on particular sectors or groups.

At the same time, food supply-chain changemakers also described the consequences of being approached primarily through a "vested interests" framing. Some felt that industry actors were routinely treated as the "bad guys" by academic and civil-society organisations, creating a hostile environment that made constructive engagement more difficult. This reflects a tension also identified in Part 2: powerful businesses can both resist change and possess substantial capacity to enable it, and changemakers disagree over how engagement with these actors should be managed.

Current debates around farm profitability and supply-chain fairness reinforce the wider importance of questions about how economic and political power are distributed across the food system. They do not establish the specific claims made by interviewees, but show that bargaining power, influence and accountability remain live policy concerns.

'TOP-DOWN' AND IMPRACTICAL RESEARCH AGENDAS

Changemakers from both the third sector and food supply chain also described a mismatch between some research and the practical needs of organisations trying to create change. They felt that research questions and project designs were often determined before changemakers were meaningfully involved, leaving limited opportunities for them to shape the problems being investigated or ensure that resulting evidence could be applied in practice.

Timing was another concern. Academic research can move slowly relative to rapidly changing commercial and policy environments, meaning findings may arrive after the relevant opportunity for action has passed. Changemakers also described being asked to contribute to projects late in their development, sometimes through advisory boards or consultation processes that offered little influence over fundamental decisions.

A representative from a private-sector trade organisation described the need for earlier and more meaningful collaboration:

> **"We're not involved in the conversations of what should the [research and science] ecosystem be trying to achieve. So to start, let's work out what we want to achieve with industry and government collectively rather than, 'Oh yes, they've decided something and now they're telling us'... Otherwise it'll have no practical implication. It'd be a nice piece of knowledge versus this is the thing that could help us."**

The barrier identified here is therefore not opposition to research. Changemakers repeatedly valued evidence and many actively contributed to research projects. Their concern was that research can be disconnected from what practitioners need to know, how findings will be used and when evidence is needed. This distinction is important for understanding the needs discussed in the following section: changemakers were often asking not simply for more evidence, but for different ways of producing, synthesising and applying it.

These barriers cut across the policy, market and local routes described in Part 2. The next section turns to what changemakers said would help them navigate these constraints, from different forms of evidence to funding, relationships and organisational capacity.

3.2 What changemakers need to enable greater impact

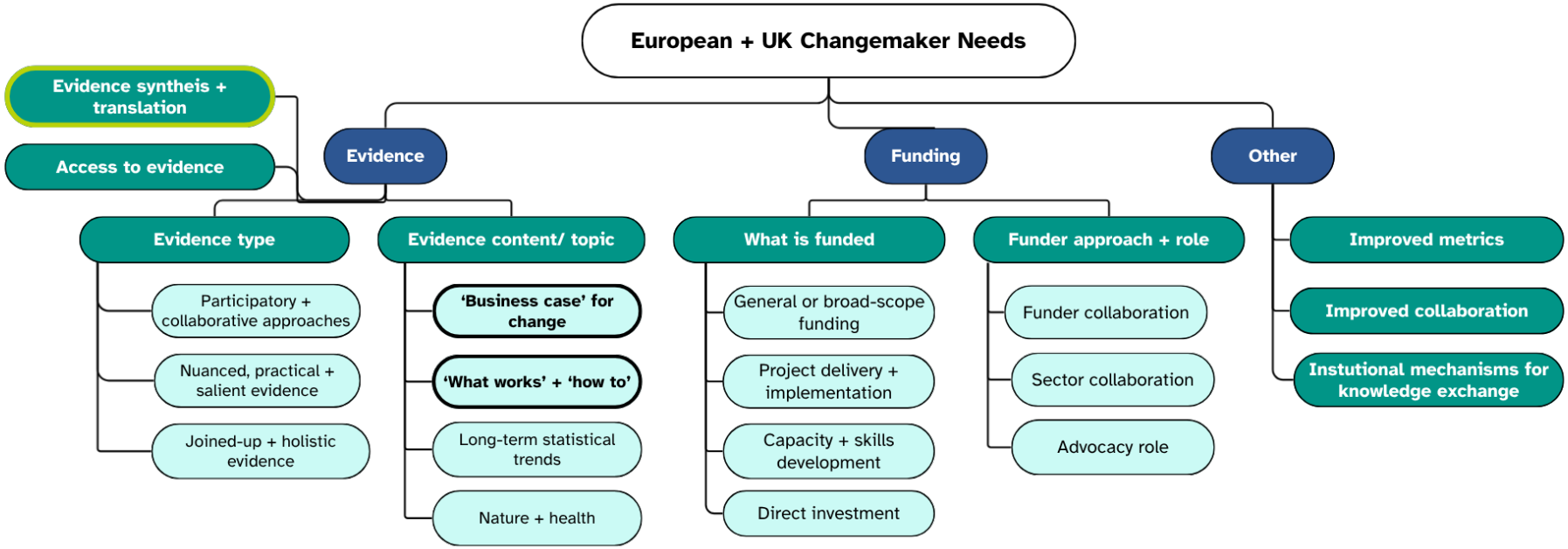
Across the entire project, we identified nine key themes around changemaker needs, organised across three categories: evidence, funding and 'other' (see Figure 2). National workshop participants broadly agreed with these categories, although some needs were much more prominent than others. **Evidence synthesis and translation** was the strongest overall ask across sectors, while the most frequently raised evidence-content needs concerned creating a "business case for change" and **practical evidence** about "what works" and "how to" create change. Changemakers also emphasised the need for research that is more closely shaped around their needs, stronger coordination between organisations and sectors and funding that provides the capacity to sustain this work.

BETTER SYNTHESIS AND TRANSLATION OF EXISTING EVIDENCE

For many changemakers, the priority was **not simply generating more evidence, but making better use of evidence that already exists**. Changemakers described a large and difficult-to-navigate evidence base spread across disciplines and topics, often published in lengthy reports or academic journals that they lacked the time, capacity or resources to access. Third-sector changemakers in particular emphasised the need for evidence that is both credible and easy to understand: reliable and trustworthy, but also written in clear language and presented in formats that can be used quickly by the different policy, business, advocacy or practitioner audiences they are trying to reach.

Changemakers therefore wanted greater investment in synthesising existing evidence around practical questions such as sustainable diets, dietary change, sustainable farming and policy solutions, and translating the findings for different audiences. This includes identifying who needs particular evidence, understanding how those groups access and use information and translating academic or technical evidence into formats and language that are useful to them. Several changemakers argued that useful evidence may already exist but remain effectively unavailable because it has not been brought together, translated or communicated to the relevant audience.

Figure 2. European and UK changemaker needs preliminary typology



Source: Authors

*Note: 'Evidence synthesis + translation' is highlighted because it was the most common ask from changemakers across sectors. Within 'evidence content/ type', 'business case for change' and 'what works' + 'how to' are boldfaced because they were the most common evidence topics asked for by changemakers.

This need was closely connected to the barriers described in section 3.1, especially complexity and confusion and 'top-down' and impractical research agendas. Better synthesis could help clarify where there is strong evidence or agreement, where uncertainty genuinely remains, and what existing research implies for practical action. Changemakers also wanted stronger follow-through from research projects: some described contributing their time and knowledge to studies but never hearing about final findings, outputs or impacts. For them, translation is not simply the final communication of research findings. It also meant understanding who needed the evidence, maintaining engagement with those audiences and ensuring that knowledge reached them in forms they could actually use.

DIFFERENT TYPES AND FORMS OF EVIDENCE

Alongside better use of existing evidence, changemakers wanted research that more directly helps them decide what to do and how to do it. This included different forms of practical, political and economic knowledge and evidence.

Unhelpful sign in a corn field. Photo by Benigno Hoyuela (Unsplash).

Practical evidence for what works and how to create change

Changemakers repeatedly asked for more "what works" and "how to" evidence: **practical knowledge** about which interventions have been tried, why they succeeded or failed, how they can be implemented effectively and how change can be generated in real-world settings. They also suggested that useful lessons may come from fields outside food systems, including communications and psychology, and could be synthesised and applied to food system challenges.

A particularly prominent need was stronger evidence for the **"business case for change"**. Changemakers described this as economic evidence that demonstrates the financial implications of acting or failing to act, including effects on business performance and the wider or 'true' costs associated with current food system outcomes. They saw this type of evidence as particularly important for engaging businesses and policymakers, building support for change and responding to concerns about the economic consequences of proposed interventions. At the same time, changemakers acknowledged that much of this evidence may already exist but may not have been synthesised or translated into forms that businesses and policymakers can readily use.

More broadly, changemakers called for evidence that is **practical, timely, nuanced and joined-up**. Rather than examining health, environmental, social or economic dimensions in isolation, they wanted research that considers several dimensions together and helps decision-makers understand the likely trade-offs and consequences of different actions. Access to this kind of evidence was described as giving changemakers the 'right tools' to intervene more effectively rather than simply adding to the volume of knowledge available.

The growing implementation agenda described in Part 1 makes this need increasingly relevant. As policies and initiatives move from broad ambition towards delivery, changemakers need evidence

about how they work in practice, what effects they produce and what conditions enable or constrain success.

Evidence for understanding political feasibility, governance and power

Changemakers' evidence needs also extended beyond the technical effectiveness of particular interventions. Their descriptions of political risk, lobbying, competing interests and resistance to change point to a related need to better understand **whether and how proposed interventions can become politically feasible**.

This includes evidence that helps changemakers understand who is likely to support or resist particular forms of change, how different actors exercise influence, and how economic or social concerns shape political responses. The demand for stronger business-case and more **holistic evidence** reflects this wider concern: changemakers were not only interested in whether an intervention could improve health or environmental outcomes, but also in what economic, social and political trade-offs might shape support for it among policymakers, businesses and other affected groups.

The power dynamics described in section 3.1 also suggest the value of greater transparency around how food system decisions are made and whose interests are represented. For changemakers pursuing the policy route in particular, evidence about political feasibility, governance and power can help move beyond demonstrating *why change is desirable* towards understanding **how change might actually be secured and sustained**.

MORE NEEDS-BASED AND CO-PRODUCED RESEARCH

Changemakers also wanted the process of producing evidence to be more closely aligned with their actual evidence needs. Third-sector and food supply-chain actors described frustration with research agendas that were largely determined before they became involved, leaving limited opportunities to shape research questions, project design or intended outputs. Some felt they were approached "last minute" or involved in relatively surface-level ways through advisory boards or consultation exercises that gave them little influence over fundamental decisions.

Changemakers instead called for **earlier, more meaningful and longer-term involvement** in research. During the national workshop, participants proposed a **funded 'pre-scoping phase'** as one practical model. This could provide a two- to three-month period before a funding application is submitted during which researchers and changemakers jointly co-develop the project question, approach and intended outputs. Changemakers suggested that this would make research more responsive to real-world needs while also giving collaborators time to build stronger working relationships.

This proposal should be understood as an example raised by workshop participants rather than a single prescribed model. The **wider need was for research relationships that are more participatory, longer-term and mutually beneficial**, with changemakers involved not only as sources of information but as partners whose practical knowledge helps shape the work, and who gain useful evidence, relationships or capacity from taking part.

FUNDING, COORDINATION AND ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

Finally, changemakers emphasised that evidence alone cannot create change without sufficient organisational capacity and opportunities to work with others. They called for **stronger alignment and coordination** between funders, researchers and changemakers, as well as among changemaker organisations themselves. They wanted clearer and more durable mechanisms for knowledge exchange: regular pathways through which organisations can develop relationships, share priorities and identify areas where their different strengths, expertise and influence could complement one

another rather than duplicate effort or work at cross-purposes.

Changemakers suggested that these mechanisms need to be built into how funders, governments and research institutions operate, rather than offered only through short-term projects or occasional consultations. This connects directly to the earlier barrier of 'funded leadership': meaningful coordination requires staff time, relationship-building and organisational capacity, but these activities can be difficult to support through tightly specified project funding.

Changemakers also called for **more funding for food system work overall**, extending beyond the generation of new research to support synthesis and translation, coordination and activities delivering change on the ground. Some changemakers perceived food and food systems as receiving less dedicated attention than related areas such as climate, health or the economy, despite sitting at the intersection of all three. They therefore saw food systems as an important area for more sustained investment, including flexible funding that allows organisations to develop capacity, respond to emerging opportunities and maintain the relationships needed for longer-term change.

Taken together, these findings reinforce a recurring message across the UK study: **the challenge is not simply a shortage of evidence**. Changemakers need existing evidence to be easier to find, translate and use with different audiences; different types and forms of evidence that speak more directly to implementation and economic and political realities; research that is more closely shaped around changemaker needs and creates value through co-production; and the funding, coordination and organisational capacity to act on that knowledge over time. These needs overlap and reinforce one another, but address different parts of the gap between knowledge and action. Meeting them would not in itself remove the wider political and structural barriers described in section 3.1, but changemakers saw them as important conditions for using existing knowledge more effectively and increasing their ability to act.

3.3 Opportunities for enabling change

Changemakers described two related kinds of opportunity: opportunities for change and opportunities to enable change. Opportunities for change were broader areas where changing conditions, technologies or policy priorities could help move the food system towards healthier, more sustainable and more equitable outcomes. For example, Scope 3 emission reductions and land use change were both identified as opportunities to strengthen connections between food production, nature and consumption in ways that could support greater sustainability. Changemakers were particularly interested in approaches that could support more sustainable farming while increasing the production and availability of healthy food. Since the interviews were conducted, several of these themes have moved further into mainstream policy through the food strategy process and *Towards a Good Food Cycle*, Land Use Framework, Farming Roadmap and growing emphasis on food system resilience described in Part 1.

Opportunities to *enable* change were more difficult for changemakers to identify, but are particularly relevant to understanding where additional support could help existing activity have greater impact. These included more concrete intervention points and needs that, if addressed, could increase changemakers' impact – for example, by creating more favourable policy conditions, strengthening coordination or changing how evidence and funding are organised. The remainder of this section focuses primarily on these enabling opportunities.

The food strategy process is a current policy window

At the time of the interviews and national workshop, the government's food strategy process for England was still at an early stage and was one of the clearest opportunities identified by changemakers across sectors. Changemakers were interested in the process because of its ambition to take a more joined-up approach to food and its potential to bring health, environmental

sustainability, food security and economic concerns into a common policy framework.

That opportunity has since moved on, but it has not closed. *Towards a Good Food Cycle* was published in July 2025 and now provides an explicit set of outcomes around healthier and more sustainable food sales, affordable access to healthy food, fairer supply chains, sustainable production and greater food system resilience. The opportunity now is to shape the policies, targets and actions intended to deliver those outcomes and how those ambitions translate into implementation[13].

This shift is particularly relevant to changemakers pursuing the policy route. Several of the areas they prioritised — including healthier food environments, public food provision, sustainable farming and stronger engagement with businesses — now sit within an active policy agenda. *Towards a Good Food Cycle* also recognises that delivery depends on actors across government, business, civil society and local communities rather than government acting alone. This creates potential entry points for changemakers to contribute evidence, practical experience and partnerships, while also increasing the importance of several needs identified in section 3.2: usable evidence for implementation, research that responds to changemaker needs and sufficient coordination and capacity to sustain involvement.

Food security and resilience are becoming more prominent frames for change

Since the interviews and national workshop, food security and resilience have become more prominent in UK policy. These debates increasingly connect national production and supply chains, climate and geopolitical shocks and households' ability to afford and access nutritious food. The UK Food Security Digest explicitly treats these dimensions as interconnected rather than reducing food security to a single measure[57].

This may create additional ways of connecting objectives that have often been discussed separately. Healthier diets, sustainable domestic production, climate adaptation, farm viability and affordable access to food can increasingly be discussed through a shared resilience lens rather than as separate specialist agendas. This does not remove the political tensions described by changemakers, but it potentially broadens the range of arguments and actors through which food system change can be discussed.

This is especially relevant to the barrier changemakers identified around narratives and fear of change. Where health or sustainability interventions can be framed politically as restriction or individual sacrifice, resilience and food security offer a different starting point centred on preparedness, stability and the ability of the food system to continue meeting people's needs under changing conditions. Whether this framing ultimately enables greater action remains to be seen, but its growing prominence represents an important change in the policy environment since the interviews and national workshop.

Borough Market in London. Photo by Hulki Okan Tabak (Unsplash).

Market and supply-chain change provides additional entry points

Changemakers also saw opportunities in working more directly with businesses and other economic actors. As described in Part 2, some saw the market route as relatively agile, while others highlighted the influence of manufacturers, processors, retailers and investors over what food is produced, marketed and sold.

Current policy developments reinforce the relevance of this route. Government plans for mandatory healthier-food sales reporting and targets for large food businesses would, if implemented, create

clearer expectations around the healthiness of what companies sell while allowing businesses flexibility in how they respond[54]. At the same time, the growing policy focus on farm profitability, supply-chain fairness and resilience places greater attention on relationships between producers, processors and retailers.

These developments create opportunities for policy and market approaches to reinforce one another. Business commitments, data and practical examples can help demonstrate what is commercially possible, while regulation and reporting can create stronger incentives and accountability for action. However, the tensions identified by changemakers remain important: market engagement can widen the range of actors involved in change, but changemakers differed over the extent to which voluntary action is sufficient and how engagement with powerful commercial actors should be managed.

Stronger coordination can connect fragmented activity

A recurring opportunity across the findings was to improve coordination between organisations and sectors that are already trying to achieve overlapping goals. Changemakers saw considerable potential in bringing together researchers, policymakers, civil-society organisations, businesses, funders and local actors more deliberately, particularly where different organisations hold complementary forms of expertise, influence or capacity.

This does not necessarily require complete agreement about what food system transformation should look like. Workshop participants explicitly valued pluralism and recognised that organisations will continue to approach food system problems from different perspectives. The opportunity lies instead in identifying areas of sufficient shared interest to support complementary action, while making disagreements and trade-offs more visible rather than allowing fragmented activity to work at cross-purposes.

Funder practices and priorities can create enabling conditions

A further enabling opportunity identified directly by changemakers concerned **how funders work and what they choose to support**. Changemakers saw funders not only as sources of money, but as actors with the ability to shape research agendas, influence relationships between organisations and create spaces in which different parts of the food system can work together.

Specific opportunities raised by changemakers included greater coordination between funders; longer-term and more flexible funding for core organisational activity; funding for synthesis, translation and implementation as well as new research; and stronger requirements or incentives for genuinely participatory research. The proposed funded 'pre-scoping phase' described in section 3.2 was one example of how funding processes could provide changemakers and researchers with time to develop questions and approaches together before a project begins.

Changemakers also saw a role for funders in supporting knowledge exchange and convening. This could include creating longer-term spaces for researchers, practitioners, policymakers and businesses to build relationships, identify shared needs and better coordinate existing activity. Some changemakers additionally felt that influential funders could use their own institutional standing to raise the prominence of food systems within wider research and policy agendas and help bring actors into conversations who might otherwise remain outside them.

Narrative and framing work cut across everything

Narrative and framing work complicates this picture, cutting across these opportunities rather than representing a separate need or route to change. UK changemakers in particular stressed the importance of how food system issues are framed, including the need to move beyond polarised or overly technical messages and communicate practical, credible reasons for change. Some even suggested that cultural and narrative change should be recognised as a distinct fourth route, feeling

that these elements were underrepresented in the three-route typology. The demand for stronger 'business case' evidence identified in section 3.2 is one example of how evidence content can support this work, while synthesis and translation, co-production and stronger coordination can all help changemakers develop narratives that are more relevant to different audiences and better connected to shared goals. The increasingly interconnected policy agenda around health, affordability, resilience, farming and the environment may provide new opportunities to build narratives that speak to a wider range of actors rather than relying on a single health or climate rationale.

Taken together, these opportunities suggest that the UK does not lack possible routes or openings for food systems change. The challenge is to make better use of these openings by: ensuring evidence reaches and is usable by the right audiences, developing knowledge suited to practical and political decisions, making research more responsive to changemakers' needs and giving organisations the space and resources necessary to coordinate actions and sustain their work over time. Narrative and framing work cuts across each of these, shaping how problems, evidence and possible solutions are understood and where support for change can be built. The changing policy context — particularly around the food strategy process, resilience and food security — may create new openings, but does not remove the wider barriers around power, political risk and capacity explored throughout Part 3.

Conclusion

The UK findings reinforce a recurring challenge in food system transformation: **the problem is not simply a lack of evidence, activity or broad agreement about the need for change**. Changemakers across sectors are already working through policy, market and local routes; substantial research exists across health, climate and food systems; and many organisations broadly share ambitions around healthier, more sustainable and equitable outcomes. Yet changemakers involved in the project continue to describe familiar barriers around political risk, unequal power, fragmented action, limited organisational capacity and the difficulty of turning evidence into practical change.

These results suggest that **the UK already possesses many of the ingredients needed for greater change**: an extensive evidence base, active organisations across sectors, emerging policy opportunities and a willingness among changemakers to collaborate. The continuing challenge is how these elements are brought together and used effectively. Changemakers repeatedly emphasised the need for better synthesis and translation of existing evidence; different types of knowledge which are more practical and improve understanding around feasibility and political and economic realities; more co-produced research shaped around their evidence needs; and the funding, space for coordination and organisational capacity to sustain their work over time. Together, these needs reflect a wider **shift from asking primarily what needs to change towards understanding how change can be achieved, implemented and maintained in practice**.

The changing UK context may create new openings for doing this. Health, affordability, food security, climate resilience, farming, land use and supply-chain relationships are increasingly being considered together, with food security and resilience serving as potential frames to connect them. At the same time, the increasingly visible impacts of climate and economic pressures underline the urgency of ensuring that food systems remain able to provide healthy and affordable food while adapting to environmental change. Narrative and framing work is one tool which could help changemakers make evidence and proposed solutions more resonant to different audiences, without removing genuine tensions between interests, priorities or visions for the food system.

Overall, the UK landscape is characterised less by an absence of potential routes to transformation than by the difficulty of connecting and sustaining them. Policy, market and local approaches each offer different forms of leverage, but no single route or actor can deliver food system change alone. The central challenge is therefore how to connect existing knowledge, actors and opportunities while navigating the political, economic and social realities that shape what change is possible.

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