REDUCING DEPENDENCE, INCREASING FOOD SECURITY: THE ROLE OF PLANT-RICH DIETS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Food security means meeting the nutritional requirements of the nation while protecting the environment, not simply meeting demand.
- A transition towards more plant-rich diets is essential to meet health and sustainability goals.
- Animal-based agriculture demands more land and resources to produce food than growing food directly for human consumption. The UK cannot feed its farmed animal population and feed its human population at the same time.
- The UK is dependent on imports of finished foods and critical inputs such as feed and fertiliser in order to meet current demand for animal-based foods.
- The climate crisis will drive further instability in global markets and threaten UK food production.
- A transition away from feed and grazing combined with policy support for the development of protein crops for human consumption can meet our nutritional needs.
- Policies to support this transition are practical and achievable and can benefit farmers, food businesses and consumers alike.

INTRODUCTION

"Food security is national security"
- Steve Reed, former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The confidence governments felt very recently in the ability of the international trade system to supply their nations' nutritional needs has been profoundly eroded by COVID-19, the Russia-Ukraine war, extreme weather events and the US administration's use of trade as a tool for securing political ends. The fragility of the system has been exposed most recently by the war in Iran - oil prices drive fertiliser prices, while critical fertiliser ingredients, including almost half the global supply of urea, pass through the Strait of Hormuz (NSDU, 2026). The UK currently imports 35-40% of its food (Defra, 2024a) and relies on imported commodities for domestic production. The government has rightly identified food security as a priority goal for the Good Food Cycle.

The goal for food security must not be to simply answer consumer demand for food but to ensure that the nutritional needs of the UK population are met in a sustainable way. There is an almost universal expert consensus that the UK must eat more plant-based foods to achieve its health and environmental goals (NHS 2026; EAT-Lancet Commission 2025). This dietary transition also supports national food security.

Production and consumption of animal-based foods increases our dependence on imports, which are already subject to price and supply risks and face greater challenges in the future. Critically, it also prevents us from using domestic land and resources to produce nutritious and sustainable food more efficiently. To meet its goals, including food security, the Good Food Cycle must support a just transition to plant-rich diets.

MAXIMISING FOOD PRODUCTION - MINIMISING ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

"Livestock which consumes animal feed offers a much less efficient calorie conversion than crops for direct human consumption. The dominant use of land for animal feed in the UK is therefore an important consideration for questions around the sustainability and productive capacity of UK food production."
- UK Food Security Report 2024

Feeding animals for human consumption wastes land. According to Defra, all the croppable land in the UK has the potential to be used for growing food for human use but at present, 56% is used to grow animal feed, which consumed an estimated 47% of our domestic wheat, 68% of barley, 37% of oats and 60% of field peas in 2024 (Defra. 2024a). Plant species which can be used for human consumption (though not necessarily currently of a high enough grade for human use) take up approximately half of that land.

Reclaiming land devoted to feed for food for humans would dramatically increase productivity, and hence enhance food security. Feed is a grossly inefficient way of providing nutrition for humans:

- Just 11% of the calories and 15% of the protein that a pig is fed over its life is available in the meat it produces; for cows, this is just 5% of the calories and 10% of the protein (CIWF. 2025).
- 85% of the UK's total agricultural land footprint (including abroad) is associated with meat and dairy production, but only 48% of total protein and 32% of total calories we consume comes from products from farmed animals (de Ruiter et al. 2017).
- Conversion of UK land from feed production to food production has been estimated to have the potential to feed an extra 16.5 million people in the UK (CIWF 2025).

Growing food for direct human consumption also liberates land for other, more valuable, uses. Agricultural land unsuited to crops is used for grazing, but at a significant environmental cost. Grazing animals – cows and sheep – drive climate change through, primarily, methane emissions and utilising land that could be used for carbon sequestration. That is why the Climate Change Committee (2025) recommends a 27% reduction in cattle and sheep numbers by 2040. In the words of a 2018 study, the "environmental impacts of [converting grass to human-edible proteins] are immense under any production method practiced today" (Poore & Nemecek 2018). In contrast, reforestation of UK land currently devoted to pasture could, according to a 2019 study, remove 3,236 million tonnes of CO2, equal to offsetting nine years of UK CO2 emissions at the time of the study (Harwatt & Hayek 2019).

ANIMAL-BASED FOODS – VERY FAR FROM SELF-SUFFICIENT

"The UK does not have enough land to feed its population and rear livestock: a wholesale change in consumer diets would be required."
- Global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security report. HM Government 2026

Only in two cases, meat derived from sheep and milk, does UK production of animal-based foods meet or exceed domestic demand (Defra 2024a). These are both foodstuffs that the Climate Change Committee has recommended we consume less of (CCC 2025). We meet only two-thirds of demand for meat from pigs and just 20% of current demand for seafood from domestic production (Defra 2024a). However, no animal-based foods are required for a healthy diet (British Dietetic Association) and given the expert consensus on the value of more plant-rich diets, this dependence is unnecessary – reducing demand rather than increasing supply strengthens our food security.

Critically, meeting demand for animal-based products with domestic supply is also not indicative of food security. Domestic production of animal-based foods is itself heavily reliant on imported products, principally feed and fertiliser.

The real cost of feed

In the words of the government's 2024 UK Food Security report, "The UK does not grow sufficient protein crops to sustain its livestock sector" (Defra 2024a). Instead, the UK relies on imports of commodities and feeds, including feed additives such as minerals and enzymes. Feed is the largest single item of expenditure in farming and has shown the most consistent rise in costs of the major inputs tracked by Defra over the last 20 years (Defra 2024a). Feed prices have also been subject to considerable volatility over the current decade – we spent £2.7bn in 2022 on imported feed and £3.3bn in 2023 (current prices; Defra 2025). Indeed, the inflation in grain prices in 2022 following the Russian invasion of Ukraine drove cost increases in compound feed that forced farmers in the UK to reduce animal numbers (Defra 2024a).

Soya is a critical component of animal feed. The UK imports more than 3 million tonnes every year with around 90% used for feed. More than 75% has historically come from just three countries: Brazil, Argentina and the United States (University of Oxford 2021). The imposition of EU and potentially UK import restrictions on products – including soya beans - linked with deforestation poses a risk to both supply and prices (WWF, 2025). Pig and poultry farming are both heavily reliant on it, especially poultry as it cannot easily be substituted in chickens' diets, which is a threat to the UK Government's stated intention to support growth in the poultry sector.

Mitigating the fertiliser risk

Fertiliser costs are a significant driver of price instability in animal products. The UK is entirely reliant on foreign sources for phosphate fertiliser and heavily reliant on them for nitrogen (Defra 2024a), a key dependence and source of insecurity. Because growing food for human consumption

requires less land and less volume of crops than producing feed, less fertiliser is required for plant-rich diets, reducing our reliance on imports.

Fertiliser is also used, extensively, on grazing land. Despite the natural image of grass-fed cows, 82% of crops and grass on dairy farms receive a dressing of artificial nitrogen fertiliser (NFU 2022). Farmgate milk prices track fertiliser prices and approximately doubled for a period in the crisis of 2022, demonstrating, as the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board has put it, "the extreme volatility and challenge for dairy farmers" (AHDB 2024). Indeed, so close is the relationship between animal agriculture and fertiliser that reduced numbers of grazing animals is the main reason for declining fertiliser use in the UK over recent decades (Defra 2024a). Continued, and planned, decline in the number of animals will further reduce our dependence.

THE CLIMATE CHANGE THREAT

The climate crisis threatens security of supply of imports of animal-based foods and feed, and impacts domestic production, potentially increasing reliance on imported feed and food.

- Poor grass growth due to drought affected UK butter and beef production in 2025, forcing farmers to rely on winter reserves and feed in the summer, driving up farmgate beef prices by 25% in a year and reducing production (Bank of England 2025; The Grocer 2025; Sky News 2025). These pressures led to higher imports from countries whose own production was afflicted by climate factors, including Brazil (drought) and Australia (wildfires) (ECIU 2025).
- Farmed animals are also affected directly by effects such as rising temperatures, additional rainfall and extreme weather events, including through reduced weight gain and potentially higher mortality, threatening production and supply (The Grocer 2025; Bunning & Wall 2022). New disease and parasite threats, such as increased bluetongue in cattle, are also associated with our changing climate (World Organisation for Animal Health 2024).

Drought and high rainfall also affect arable crops, with extreme unpredictability of harvests a significant commercial threat. At 25.5mt, UK cereal production was the highest this century in 2019, only to slump to 19mt in 2020, the second lowest (Defra 2024a). With yields under threat, use of arable land to grow feed for farmed animals exposes farmers and consumers to unnecessary risk. Feed is a luxury: food is a necessity.

GREATER EFFICIENCY, LOWER INPUTS AND LOWER RISK

For a given amount of protein or carbohydrate, plant-based foods require less land and fewer inputs than animal-sourced foods. Transition towards plant-rich diets allows us to do more with less, making UK businesses and consumers less dependent on the imported commodities which support UK animal farming, and reducing our exposure to supply and price risks associated with imported animal-based foods.

"The UK does not grow sufficient protein crops to sustain its livestock sector."
Defra, 2024

PLANT-RICH DIETS: HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE

"Growing awareness of 'plant-based' diets and a fall in total meat consumption is also a longer-term trend which is a positive trajectory for sustainability and health, when accompanied by improvements elsewhere in the diet."
- UK Food Security Report 2024

People in the UK must eat more healthy plant-based foods. The most recent National Diet and Nutrition Survey found that only 9% of children and 17% of adults meet the 'five-a-day' recommendation for fruit and vegetable consumption. Fewer than 5% of adults and children aged 11-18 meet the recommended intake of fibre, which can be obtained only from plants (NDNS 2025). Meanwhile, eating red and processed meat is associated with a range of health harms, including significantly increased risks of Type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease (Guo et al 2022), kidney disease, various cancers, particularly colorectal cancers, and all-cause mortality (Charlebois & Pantopoulos 2023, Jin et al. 2024).

In regard to sustainability, multiple studies show that plant-based sources of protein have, in almost all circumstances, significantly lower environmental impacts in terms of land use, greenhouse gas emissions, eutrophication, biodiversity loss, and pollution than animal-based foods (Scarborough, 2023; Springmann et al. 2024). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that "Where appropriate, a shift to diets with a higher share of plant protein, moderate intake of animal-source foods and reduced intake of added sugars, salt and saturated fats could lead to substantial decreases in GHG emissions" (IPCC 2022).

PLANT FOODS CAN FEED THE NATION

"The grain production in 2023 of just under 22 million tonnes would nearly sustain the population from a purely calorific perspective if it was consumed directly by humans."
- UK Food Security Report 2024

One hundred per cent self-sufficiency may be possible, but is not at present desirable. Multiple staples, such as rice, chocolate and bananas, can only be obtained from abroad, while a range of sources provides insulation against supply or price shocks from individual providers. Nevertheless, the UK's existing farmland is already capable of meeting our need for calories through plant-based foods – in addition to grains, it grows and harvests many other nutritious and calorific plants consumable by humans.

Many of these feed crops are also sources of protein. Beyond grains, protein crops already grown in the UK for both food and feed which have been identified as having potential for human consumption at scale include beans - especially faba beans - peas, soya, hemp and lupins (UK Agri-tech, 2024). Even the 'superfood' quinoa can be grown in the UK (Nature-Friendly Farming Network). All these plants provide further nutritional value, including the fibre so deficient in British diets.

Pea protein and faba beans are already produced at scale, primarily for animal feed. The UK harvests 685,000 tonnes of faba beans per year (2023 figures), and is one of the world's biggest exporters (Transforming UK Food Systems 2025). Hemp offers significant opportunities, and in addition to having strong carbon sequestration potential, provides all 20 of the essential amino acids in the human diet. Defra is currently financing further research into developing its commercial potential (Defra, 2026). Lupins have higher protein content than peas, beans and some soya varieties, are nitrogen-fixing – supporting soil health and biodiversity - and have a lower carbon footprint than soya (British Lupins; UK Agritech 2025).

Currently, some of these crops are difficult to scale up because they are not ideally suited to weather or soil patterns across the UK. However, research on existing and new varieties, including through precision breeding, offers the potential to introduce commercially viable crops. Other species currently not grown at all – such as chickpeas – are also being researched and have commercial potential if UK-adapted varieties can be introduced. With half the UK's legume supply currently imported (UK Health Security Agency 2023), the commercial opportunity and food security necessity of a strategic expansion in protein plant production is clear.

Problems with suitability of UK farmland can also be addressed through innovative techniques such as vertical farming, which also provides protection from extreme weather events. In addition to traditional plant proteins, UK-produced novel proteins such as those derived from precision fermentation have significant potential to meet domestic nutritional needs, with the appropriate investment and support from government. A 2023 Green Alliance report estimated that the alternative proteins sector could be worth £6.8bn annually and generate 25,000 jobs by 2035 (2023).

MEETING THE FOOD SECURITY CHALLENGES

"The UK relies on imports for a proportion of both food and fertiliser and cannot currently produce enough food to feed its population based on current diets."
- Global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security report. HM Government 2026

Reliant on animal-based farming to meet unsustainable demand for animal-based foods, the UK's food and farming sector is not currently fit for purpose to provide the plant-rich diets experts agree we need to eat (NHS; EAT-Lancet Commission 2025).

Horticultural production in the UK is in an ongoing decline, with vegetable production at its lowest since 2015 and fruit production at its lowest since 2015 (apart from 2021). Only 53% of vegetables and 16% of fruit are home grown (Defra 2024a). Our arable farming is dominated by the production of animal feed, while promising protein crops are produced in tiny quantities. Farm payments of various kinds continue to support inefficient and unprofitable animal farming. The effects of the climate crisis will make all domestic food production more unpredictable, necessitating a more diverse, innovative and productive system, supplying the foods that serve us best.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

The transition towards more plant-rich diets is essential for health and sustainability reasons – and if properly managed, can enhance our food security. The Vegan Society endorses the policy proposals to support the production and consumption of more plant-based foods that are described in the joint position paper *Reaping the Benefits of a Plant-Rich Diet: the Ten Point Plan* (Foodrise et al, 2026). In regard to enhancing food security in the context of the dietary transition, we highlight the following measures:

- Strategically manage the transition to plant-rich diets with policies which drive demand for healthy, plant-based foods, including those which can be produced domestically.
- Provide strategic financial, regulatory and training support for farmers to diversify protein production, transition arable away from feed production and convert grazing land to other purposes.
- Develop a strategy to expand domestic horticulture.
- Expand and sustain research into alternative proteins, including existing crops, novel varieties and innovative sources such as precision fermentation. Provide regulatory and financial support for their commercial development.
- Ensure food and catering professionals receive training in preparing nutritious and attractive dishes involving new or currently under-utilised UK-sourced, plant-based ingredients.

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