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Engaging citizens on policy scenarios for dietary change

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Executive summary

Reducing emissions from the food sector is vital to meeting the UK's climate targets. This briefing reports on the findings of the Energy Demand Research Centre (EDRC) Citizens' Panel[1], which considered the question "What could a healthier and more sustainable national diet look like, what may prevent or support us reaching that, and how we can ensure that changes work for everyone?" Findings from the panel are being used to generate updates to the Positive Low Energy Futures model[2].

The majority of panel members supported a substantial shift in the aggregate national diet, including **reduced meat and dairy consumption.**

Members wanted this change to be primarily driven through **education, information, and public engagement**, and were highly positive about the extent that this could deliver dietary change. This includes crucial elements of **skills and competence** as well as knowledge and awareness-raising – helping people of all ages to understand both what constitutes a healthy, sustainable diet, and how to plan for and prepare it.

Active **collaboration with large food companies** was seen as essential, ideally on a voluntary basis. However, 90% of members also supported **stronger regulation** if necessary, e.g. to require promotion of healthier, more sustainable foods and restrict advertising of high-emissions foods, including meat and dairy products.

The panel supported strong action to reduce **food waste** and packaging, and to increase the amount of **locally and nationally sourced food**, including **support for farmers** to transition to more sustainable production practices.

Key findings:

Panel members demonstrated:

1. Strong support for substantial changes to the UK national diet to reduce emissions and improve health, including reduced meat and dairy consumption
2. Desire for strong government leadership, but lack of confidence in the ability of any government to provide this consistently over time
3. Strong preference for change to be driven through education, engagement and information, targeting skills, abilities and practices alongside knowledge and awareness
4. Support for regulation of food companies to improve availability, affordability, and attractiveness of healthy, low-emissions foods
5. Recognition that health is a stronger driver for most people than reducing emissions, and that the connection between diets that are healthy for both people and the planet is a powerful message that is currently not well understood
6. Aversion to measures that would overtly restrict individual freedom of choice, (e.g. bans or 'punitive' taxes on certain foods)

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Introduction

The UK urgently needs a healthier, lower-emissions diet, with reduced levels of meat and dairy consumption, to address two crises: public health and climate change. Diet-related diseases, such as obesity, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes, affect millions and cost the NHS around £6.5 billion annually, with a total social cost of £58 billion annually[3]. The Climate Change Committee estimates that 11% of UK GHG emissions are attributable to agriculture and land use, a level that has remained unchanged over the past decade[4]. Eating less meat can lower the risk of chronic diseases[5] while reducing food-related emissions by up to 73%[6].

Deliberating food futures with the public

The EDRC convened a citizen's panel to test the social mandate for significantly reducing energy demand and emissions from key sectors[1]. Our innovative approach combines deliberative processes with technical modelling, enabling us to construct 'citizen-led scenarios' which represent possible futures both qualitatively and quantitatively. More information on the panel is available at the end of this briefing.

Here we present the findings for the food sector. The panel's discussions were framed by the overarching question, "What could a healthier and more sustainable national diet look like, what may prevent or support us reaching that, and how we can ensure that changes work for everyone?"

Citizen's choices: the panel-led scenario

There was strong support across the panel for a national diet that included **less meat and dairy**, both on health and sustainability grounds. However, there was equally strong support for the need to **retain freedom of choice**, and recognition that a wide **variety of individual diets** would persist, for reasons ranging from personal taste to medical and religious requirements.

The panel favoured an approach centred on **encouragement rather than enforcement** (e.g. by increasing the relative attractiveness of lower-meat diets by increasing the availability and affordability of alternatives, and people's knowledge of how to prepare them well, rather than by banning or significantly increasing the price of meat products).

There were concerns that mechanisms that raised the price of foods (e.g. taxes) would disproportionately impact less affluent people, and a commitment that changes should not disadvantage people who are less well-off or otherwise vulnerable (e.g. those with specific medical dietary requirements).

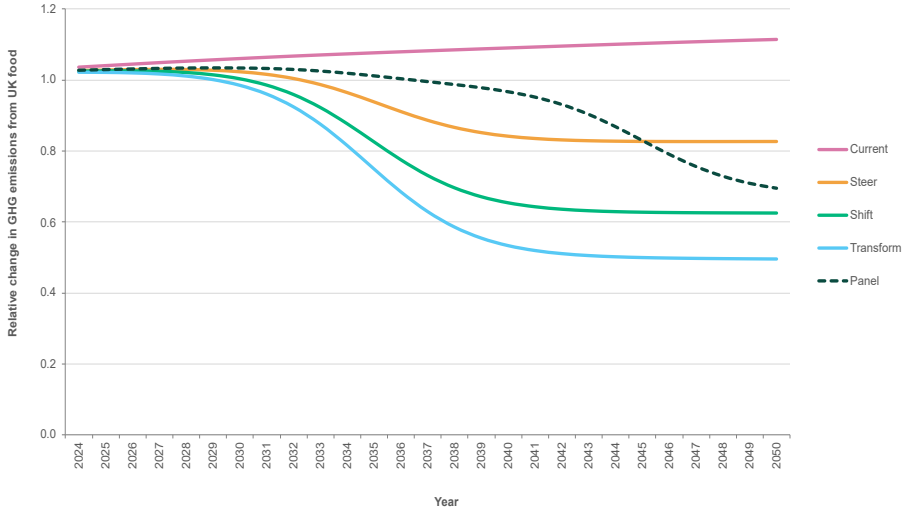
The panel-led scenario required strong, consistent and sustained **government leadership**, but members expressed a lack of confidence in any government's ability to achieve this, partly driven by concern about short-term electoral cycles and food becoming a 'political football'. A statutory independent body for food strategy was popular with some panel members to avoid politicisation of the issue; many elements of the panel-led scenario align with the existing National Food Strategy Independent Review recommendations[7].

The central element of the scenario was **education, information and public engagement**, connecting the links between food and emissions and between healthy diets and sustainable diets, with the skills, know-how and capabilities required to plan, budget, buy, cook and eat more sustainable, healthy diets that are affordable and tasty. Extensive, sustained engagement, through a wide range of national and local channels and platforms (including workplaces, supermarkets, community initiatives, conventional and social media, and with a particular focus on schools), was considered necessary to **shift food-related norms, attitudes, competences and routines**. Most people would still eat meat and dairy, but generally in smaller amounts and less often.

The scenario also required:

- All **school meals** to be healthy and sustainable, with a majority of plant-based ingredients, but still including smaller amounts of meat, fish and dairy, and for this to be replicated across the **public sector**
- A traffic-light **food labelling** system, underpinned by consistent definitions for healthy and low-emissions foods
- More of the food we eat to be produced in the UK, driven partly by requiring **imports** to meet UK standards for sustainability and animal welfare

Figure 1: Change to national emissions from UK food consumption under each scenario



- A collaborative and consultative approach to **farm subsidy reform** that would better enable farmers to prioritise net zero, nature recovery, and food security, support farm livelihoods, and enable rapid response to unintended consequences
- Firm policy intervention to eliminate unnecessary **food waste** and **food packaging**

This scenario was estimated to reduce GHG emissions from the food sector by around 36% by 2050. This would make a very substantial contribution compared to our current trajectory but is considerably less than the most ambitious scenarios suggested by the Positive Low Energy Futures model, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The measures proposed by the panel would reinforce and accelerate existing UK dietary trends, with self-reported meat consumption falling by around 17% between 2008 and 2019[8]. However, as reflected in Figure 1, there is a risk that the proposed actions would be relatively slow-acting, relying on gradual shifts in norms and practices, which was modelled to only equate to a 13% reduction in cumulative emissions (compared to a total cumulative reduction of 33% under the 'Transform' scenario in the Positive Low Energy Futures model). Panel members, drawing on their own lived experience, argued that these measures would lead to a faster pace of change, which would lead to significantly greater cumulative reductions. 90% of panel members supported this scenario as a minimum level of action required; half of those wanted to see faster and deeper changes. The Climate Change Committee recommends a 35% reduction in meat consumption by 2050.

We also tested the panel's receptiveness to additional measures that could drive dietary change further and faster. 90% of panel members would support increased regulation (e.g. restrictions on advertising unhealthy and high-emissions foods) to achieve these goals, and 65% would support a price cap on a basket of sustainable, healthy foods. Support for these measures was conditional on mitigating the risk of unintended consequences and tackling practical difficulties in implementation, based on meaningful consultation and collaboration with customers and industry. The panel's feedback on these additional measures will be incorporated into future modelling of panel-led scenarios.

Recommendations

1. People are **open to the message** that dietary change is needed meet climate targets and improve health.
2. Rapid change will require consistent and sustained **government leadership** to engage citizens and build consensus.
3. **Health is a stronger motivator** than emissions for most people. The link between healthy and low-emissions diets is a powerful message that is not currently well understood.
4. **Education, information, and engagement** are crucial elements of any policy package to shape healthier, more sustainable diets, and can create create space for further measures to be taken.
5. Working with food companies to improve the relative **availability, affordability, and attractiveness** of healthier, lower-emissions foods is essential. **Regulation** would be strongly supported if voluntary efforts fall short, if carefully designed with stakeholder input to avoid unintended and undesirable consequences.
6. Diet is deeply personal, and individual **freedom of choice** is highly prized, making measures that would overtly restrict choice, or price people out of buying familiar foods, unpopular.
7. Most people associate food sector emissions with transport, packaging, and waste. It is vital to communicate the **climate impacts of agriculture**, especially meat and dairy farming, and the potential solutions.
8. Enhancing **UK self-sufficiency** and **local and seasonal foods** are popular aims. Although their direct impact on emissions is limited, they could be leveraged in promoting lower-emissions diets.
9. Eliminating unnecessary **food waste and packaging** are very popular aims, and stronger policies would be supported to achieve them.
10. There is a **key role for citizen deliberation** in developing socially acceptable policy in this controversial area.

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The Energy Demand Research Centre (EDRC) addresses the unique opportunity to realise benefits from energy demand reductions in industry, businesses, transport and homes.

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More information about the EDRC Citizens' Panel

The EDRC has partnered with Involve to convene a two-year citizens' panel to test the social mandate for significantly reducing emissions through social as well as technological change, and to explore the conditions required to support and enable these changes[1]. The panel consists of 40 people, selected to be broadly reflective of the UK population. Following expert input, they are guided through a series of conversations by professional facilitators, enabling them to draw conclusions informed by high quality evidence and their diverse values, views, and lived experience.

Bringing representative groups of people together to deliberate on complex issues can demonstrate what citizens want and are willing to accept, when properly informed and with space to discuss the issues with people with different backgrounds and perspectives. They have the potential to overcome the increasing polarisation of public and political debate, steering away from simplistic headlines towards thoughtful consideration of difficult trade-offs, enabling more robust policy to be made[9,10].

This research is an innovative combination of qualitative deliberation and quantitative modelling. The starting point for the panel's deliberations is the Positive Low Energy Futures model[2], which provides the most comprehensive assessment to date of the potential for energy demand reduction to contribute to the UK's climate targets[11]. In turn, the panel's insights enable new, socially-informed scenarios to be modelled.

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