

The UK Public's Interests, Needs and Concerns Around Food

Stories about UK Public Interests, Needs and Concerns around Food

Conducted for the Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland by Bright Harbour, in partnership with Esposito Research & Strategy and AndGood



Preface

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) and Food Standards Scotland (FSS) commissioned Bright Harbour to explore the public wider interests around food - the interests that the public want represented and protected on their behalf.

Research explored the views of both the 'general public' as well as groups that are traditionally less heard by policy-makers - drawing on qualitative research with 95 participants and a nationally representative quantitative survey of 6175 respondents. Research took place across the UK. The full findings from this research have been reported separately.

The 'stories' in this booklet represent the views and experiences of real UK people who took part in the wider interests research. They are not 'personas' - but rather a selection of quotes and other materials from real individuals. They offer a chance for policy-makers to hear from the UK public directly, and see how some of the issues explored in the main reporting are felt and experienced by everyday people.

The stories included here were selected to provide a cross-section of attitudes and priorities around food, and are broadly representative of the needs and interests reported in the research. The voices of people who are often less heard by policymakers have been boosted (e.g., people with health conditions; people on lower incomes; younger people; ethnic minorities; older people). They should not be used to assess scale of interest around a given interest/concern - overall public priorities - or be viewed as the 'only' public interests emerging from research.

Note: All names have been changed and people's choice of favourite food has been used as their last name

Brianna Beans

- Age: 72
- Gender, ethnicity: Female, Mixed race, Jamaican heritage
- Household: Living alone
- Income and Education: Retired, DE
- Health: Has amyloidosis, an incurable condition requiring monthly treatments to slow progression
- Location: Bristol & Avon

Personal food priorities:

- Food justice
- Food of adequate quality is not affordable for people on low incomes, especially when managing a chronic illness.

Food System Feelings

"As I've gotten older, I really have noticed how horrible cheaper food is. I wish that they would sell food that is accessible to everybody so that poor people could eat things like salmon for example, because they happen to like it or because it's good for you or whatever. There's no doubt about it in the long run, you eat cheap stuff, you get ill. The NHS is suffering blah, blah, blah. Because you're ill because you can't eat properly!"

It's unfair that poor people have to make do with poor quality food.

"If you've got to pay for a nice tin of Heinz baked beans, it's gonna maybe cost you one-pound-something. But if you're like my son and his partner, you can only afford the nasty 20p-a-tin one, which is not good for you, not good for the kids. It's full of sugar, it's horrible."

I dream about being able to afford the good quality, fresh food that I need to feel well.

"If I had more money, I could afford to go to a proper greengrocer, Eastern European or something. Which I did once. And it was absolutely amazing. Lots of

lovely fruits, I didn't even know what they were. But I came out of there and I've spent 20 quid! I eat a lot of grapes because I can taste them and they cleanse my mouth and they help with the ulcers. If only I could afford the best grapes! ... You buy a cheap bag of potatoes and half of them have got nasty potato things on them. They've got to be cut out, which makes the potato smaller, which makes me use more potatoes ad infinitum."

I worry about my grandkids and I help my children financially, but that sets me back too.

"Your kids go to school and are dozy [from being hungry] ... I mean, we don't have that in our family, because I make sure that doesn't happen, but that has an impact on me, because then I have got cheap food, which I really hate. Without being disrespectful to my kids, if I didn't have the grandchildren or them to worry about, I'd be rich. I could afford to have the best apples instead of the cheap ones that dry up and go mouldy in two days, but it's not a big deal. It's not a sacrifice. It's my family, you know. If I didn't have my kids, then I would be able to put £30, £40 worth of fuel in my car. Whereas at the moment I'd put in, you know, £10 at a time and that's got to last me a week."

I take risks with unsafe food because it is more affordable. My concerns are dismissed because of my skin colour.

"I've been in the supermarkets before, when I went up and said, 'You got some beef in there and it's bleeding, you need to take it out.' They must think 'bloody black people' ... you know, straightaway, they see the colour of your skin, and it's like, 'oh my God, here we go.' I can't imagine going to some of these upmarket supermarkets and seeing that - you simply wouldn't see it. I'm quite prepared to open up the freezer, take out that other piece of beef, not knowing if any of the blood from other meats leaked into that. I'm quite happy with that, because it's only X amount of pounds to buy."

I don't trust the FSA to protect our interests, because they don't understand how food inequality affects us.

"I have lactose-free milk and it's expensive but I have to have it because otherwise I get problems. The lactose-free milk is like £1.45 a pint And I think well, I've got one that'll last me till Monday. It would be brilliant if the food standards people would employ people to go into ordinary houses and actually see how I'm living and ask me to open up my cupboards and see that most of the stuff is tinned."

Sarah Steak

- Age: 40-59
- Gender, ethnicity: Female, White British
- Household: Parent to neurodivergent children
- Income and Education: C1/C2, Working full time, GCSE/ O Levels
- Health: Autistic with some sensory issues
- Location: Wales-Cardiff (Rural)

Food priorities:

- Looking for convenience and routine while also trying to provide healthy options for her children

Food system feelings:

- "I find it so hard with food sometimes. I feel that I don't have much control. I sometimes find it difficult to make a choice so I order takeaway. I eat from the same restaurant and order the same items. I know it is not healthy or value for money but it is easier than stressing about prep, choices or having to go to the supermarket."

Being autistic makes food shopping more difficult for me.

"Supermarkets are a very stressful situation. To enable me to choose optimal healthy food, I need to see/feel/smell foods. This is difficult for me due to being on the spectrum and time spent in the supermarket is limited and unhealthy convenience foods are easily accessible. Noise, lights, crowds, choices all have an effect on me - sensory overload."

I feel like I'm having to make sacrifices to provide healthy options.

"I have a very rigid routine with as little change as possible. I do however try to make healthier choices as an example to my child. I would choose to give my children the healthier option above myself, as it can cost more. With myself and children being picky eaters I try and offer as many healthy options as possible. I worry that healthier food costs more and fresh foods are often imported so not as fresh as they state. Healthy options should not cost more."

Jamie Pasta

- Age: 18
- Gender, ethnicity: Male, Asian/Asian British
- Household: Living with a friend
- Income: C1/C2, Working part time
- Location: Scotland (Urban)

Personal food priorities:

- Looking to make food routines as easy as possible for himself while sticking to a budget.

I worry about the hygiene of the food I buy.

"I say one thing that worries me about food is the hygiene of food. I'm like a really, really big germaphobe if I don't know where some things come from. New things for instance, I always kind of stick to what I know. If I was to go into a shop and buy a packet of chicken, I'd always stick to what I know but if somebody was to buy something that I've never used before, I probably wouldn't use it. Just because I don't know where it came from or anything like that."

I have made a routine for myself to make sure I'm buying what I need.

"I do all my own shopping and we go out together. My pal will go buy all her stuff, and we'll just kind of meet up at the end.

So there's no like overspending on crap that we're just never going to use because the way I do it, I just kinda write down a list and then take that with me. It

was a lot of trial and error when I did first start to do my own shopping, I didn't know what the hell I was doing. But I just write a list down and take that list with me, so I'm not like going in and just buying whatever I see. Price wise, I shop in quite a few different places. I don't do all my shopping in the one place because there's certain things that are cheaper in Asda than they would be in other places. I mainly stay between Aldi, Lidl, and Asda, sometimes Iceland. I don't really shop anywhere else because they're all kinda relatively cheap places."

Aisha Fries

- Age: 25-39
- Gender, ethnicity: Female, Asian/Asian British
- Household: Lives with husband and eighteen month old
- Income and Education: AB, Working full time, Undergraduate
- Location: Scotland (Urban)

Food system feelings:

- "Now things are very, very different and stressful. I have a toddler who is very picky. He's very clingy so I can only cook once he's asleep. A husband who has intolerances and although he does like to help with cooking, he creates more work for me. I know what I want to do but I can't put it into practice. I stand at the kitchen sink and eat my food. I haven't exercised in 2 years. I'm working, looking after a baby, cleaning the house and cooking, I barely get any sleep."

I want to feel more trust in the future.

"I remember when growing up I'd ask my mum why don't you check ingredients or question certain labels. She would say 'We are in the best country in the world. This government is honest and they look after us. We don't have to worry because they worry for us and look after us more than we do ourselves. If there is something wrong they will take it away and let us know.' She had blind faith and trust. I wish we could have that carefree approach."

I don't feel like I can think about the future of food.

"I don't have a lot of knowledge in [the environment]. I've never read up on it and I feel horrible saying this and my husband was freaking out as well. I was like, oh, it's not our problem. Let the next generation deal with it, we've got enough to do for now. And he says 'How dare you say that you've got a child, you know, you're not thinking about him. His generation, you know, you're being selfish.'"

Lewis Sushi

- Age: 43
- Gender, ethnicity: Male, White British
- Household: Partner and kids 8-15
- Income and Education: C1, Full time work, Undergraduate degree
- Location: Wales-Cardiff

Food system feelings:

- "Especially with all the problems with the truck drivers, and the shortage of things coming into the country, you realise how much food travels to get on the shelf. You know, when you could get it a couple of miles down the road maybe rather than from Spain?"

Personal food priorities:

- Trying to prioritise shopping local and buying good quality, healthy food.

I want big businesses to make sustainable changes.

"Lots of the big chains like Tesco's and Asda can make a lot more of a difference if they weren't so profit oriented rather than doing more to help with the environment. ... [It] could be working with the companies to help them towards using the biodegradable plastic, because they obviously haven't been forced to use better things...I want the companies who sort of use the products we're all talking about to have a bit more thought for the world."

I can't always afford to shop as locally as I would like.

"[Farmer's markets] are sort of seen as, you know, the organic stuff, and the more expensive stuff. I know lots of people won't even be able to afford to buy at the farmers market. I tend to go and look at lots of things, but I don't really buy much there, as much as I'd like to. There's a split with healthy food, and it always seems to be a lot more expensive than you know the potato waffles. So there is a fine line between splitting what people would like to do for the environment and then what they can actually afford to do."

Orwell Honey

- Age: 60+
- Gender, ethnicity: Male, White British
- Household: Lives with his wife
- Income and Education: C1/C2, Working full time, GCSE/O Levels
- Location: Northern Ireland (Urban)

Food system feelings:

- Concern about the long term effects of the current system on the environment and the public.

Personal food priorities:

- "My dear wife finds it boring to worry about food and what it may or may not contain... she would be happy to consume highly processed foods because they are particularly flavoursome (as they're intended to be) and so I try my best to steer her on what I perceive to be a better path."

I worry about people being put to the side in favour of profit.

"In every industry worldwide there will always be someone who can make something cheaper. This is not necessarily a bad thing in itself but invariably there is always something that has to be sacrificed...The food industry is a monster of diverse procedures and standards that can often be interpreted in many different ways.. and if left to their own devices...somebody is gonna find a

way to cut corners, to make more profit and somewhere risk is going to be introduced.

In the next five years, I would like to have access to healthy and sustainable food.

“Given that we are currently battling with a very obstinate Covid pandemic, and the fact that I reside in the North of Ireland, where we are suffering from serious food/produce supply issues, I would first of all like to see a return to something approaching the norm. That said, in a perfect world subject to climate changes and free trade agreements with other nations, I would like to see produce of good quality finding its way to our larders at a sensible cost.”

John Chicken

- Age: 25-39
- Gender, ethnicity: Male, Black/Black British
- Household: Lives with his partner and children
- Income and Education: C1/C2, Working full time, A Levels
- Location: Bristol & Avon (Urban)

Food system feelings:

- Looking to see changes that help the consumer, so he can feel more trust in what he's buying.

Personal food priorities:

- Balancing the health priorities of him and his partner with the food needs of their children.
- Looking to get quality food for a reasonable price.

When buying food I am thinking of what is healthy for my family.

“I think having kids, one of your main things in life is not to be giving them too much bad food...It's an issue for everyone. Me and my partner are both quite health conscious and want to stay healthy. We both exercise. We want to make

sure we're eating decent food to maintain our bodies. For our kids as well to make sure they're healthy and they're growing well and not eating anything that's gonna cause health issues in any way."

I wish there were clear quality standards I could follow when I was shopping.

"I guess I would just love to be able to eat with confidence ... We don't know any quality standards. There's so many different qualities of veg and fruit and meat depending on where it's sourced, how long it's been kept for, how it was made. Unless you are knowledgeable in these areas there's no easy way to know the quality of what you're eating. It's not something they have to declare, ...Somebody can sell top tier meat for five pounds and someone else can sell the worst meat possible for five pounds and I have no way of telling what happened to that meat before it got to me."

Sage Soup

- Age: 38
- Gender, ethnicity: Female, White Scottish
- Household: Living alone with her 2 dogs
- Income: Self employed, C1/C2
- Health: Managing 2 chronic conditions: endometriosis and a rare condition called diffuse esophageal spasm disorder
- Location: Semi-rural area

Food system feelings

- "I found it quite frustrating because the generalised advice that's out there is all about a balanced diet. A lot of people have that stuck in their head that they need to be having this amount of dairy, etc, but I've had to learn where to top up on calcium from other sources and I realised it was a lot easier than what it seemed. It would be good if there was guidance that says we are all unique and discuss all the ways you can approach your food - anti-inflammatory, organic only, etc."

Personal food priorities

- Eating for health
- Balancing a restricted, anti-inflammatory diet while on a low income, and managing days with low energy for food preparation.

Maintaining a diet that's good for me takes energy that I don't always have.

"I used to be the sort of person for whom food was all about enjoyment and I wouldn't question really what I was putting in my body but then I started feeling unwell. It's more about nutrition now and about what feels comfortable and doesn't flare up my condition. Because of my esophageal condition, I need softer foods, like mash or soup. I try to batch-cook on days I am well, but that takes a toll on me."

I have to rely on convenience foods on bad days but these make me unwell.

"I try to tend to my endometriosis and I have a plan of what to eat. I'm going to sound like a diva, but all the convenience mashes in supermarkets use butter. I've noticed how bad I feel afterwards. It would help to have a better range of convenience foods, because for some of us these are not actually for convenience, they are necessary."

If I earned less, I'd be priced out of taking care of myself.

"I try to keep it within £60 a week. A lot of people say that's a lot for one person. If I had to lower that, I'd have to go to several stores and that's just too exhausting, so I have to put my health first. I don't want to add to my brain fog. It's so simple for someone who is feeling well and energised to jump in the car and go to another place, but it's really draining for me to do that, so I always end up going to Tesco even if it's more expensive."

Shopping in stores isn't always accessible or inclusive.... but neither is shopping online.

"I prefer Tesco because the atmosphere in the stores is less overwhelming than in other supermarkets. I can get sensory overload. Even when you say to the cashier I'm going to be quite slow today, they are really fast-paced and the

whole queue is staring at you. Tesco is more laid back and there's more space in the store. The thing with online delivery is that you don't see the products. So I feel I have less choice. Sometimes the products are not available online, or they just give you something that's too close to the use by date. That's a bit frustrating. I've been in situations before where I couldn't afford the £40 minimum spend for a delivery and had to struggle to the local shop, where healthy products are limited."

Shorter supply chains and better hygiene through the supply chain would make me feel safer when I shop.

"I still wipe all my shopping when it is delivered. I try to avoid supermarkets because they feel overcrowded and people are not social-distancing anymore. For me, even just a small cold can set me back so much. Most of us rely on others to prepare food for us. How many hands have touched your food, how many people have breathed over it? It's something we need to take seriously!"

Rosie Pancakes

- Age: Under 24
- Gender, ethnicity: Female, White British
- Household: Lives in a five adult household with parents and siblings
- Income and Education: C1/C2, Part time work, Undergraduate
- Allergies/ Dietary Restrictions: Vegan
- Location: Outer London (Suburban)

Food system feelings:

- I'm concerned and scared about the environment and future.

Personal food priorities:

- Shopping for herself and her (adult) family on a budget.
- Balancing health, convenience and environmental values in the food she is buying.

I wish it was easier for people to find out how to eat healthily.

"I worry about how easy it is for the general population to eat foods that are so unhealthy. It surprises me that they are not worried about the health implications it could have if they don't eat healthy foods. Of course everything in moderation, but fast, processed food is far too easily accessible and there is such a lack of obvious education on how to eat well for good health. There's information but you have to do your own research."

Investing more time helps me eat good food on a budget.

"Often I will only buy expensive high quality foods if they are on special. I tried to buy whole food products, loose fruit and veg as this is a good way of buying cheaper items and making dinners from scratch. I also buy canned legumes etc, which are cheap but highly nutritious."

I am really frightened about the climate crisis.

"Unless we can make fast, drastic changes to how the world currently works, I'm not sure our climate is going to be able to recover, so for now I'm clinging on for dear life, trying to find things that I can do to help and hope I don't fall, because I'm afraid of what I might fall into. Also a feeling of - I don't like it here but I don't have enough power to make much change. So for now I have to sit and see what happens." [See image]

I feel responsibility to make ethical, sustainable choices.

"As consumers our choices have a massive impact on the environment. For example, if we buy into the fast food chains a lot, that reinforces them and gives them more power. I definitely think the public should try and take some sort of responsibility for adapting their diet to be more sustainable... Everyone's sort of working towards the same goal, and working together to make looking after the environment a priority... But at the end of the day, we all live here. And I think we have a massive responsibility and duty to look after it."

I feel like food businesses care about profit, not the planet.

"I want companies to start to take responsibility for their carbon footprint, look at more sustainable methods of farming, and how they can make the transition to plant-based, [Acting in a sustainable way] is not something that's really enforced at the moment. And I know that sounds really dramatic, that we should have to enforce it... But a lot of the time, it does just seem purely driven by money..."

Theme: Cutting Back

Many participants in this research talked about feeling under financial pressure - even those who were 'better off' overall.

Researchers noted that higher income groups were often having the same kinds of conversations we would usually associate with lower-SEG groups around food - for example, switching to 'bargain' brands or cheaper supermarkets, or finding ways to 'stretch' meals out with cheaper ingredients. This 'story' presents a conversation between participants in one of our workshop sessions that gives a sense of some of these 'cutting down' behaviours amongst better-off people - with Heinz baked beans increasingly being considered a more 'luxury' item.

- Gender: All women
- Household: Family, children 16+
- Income and Education: Higher SEG Group

Gisele Grapes, Manchester

"To me, I like certain brands, because they just taste better. But during COVID, and watching my budget, I have compromised a bit. For example, Heinz baked beans, I love those, but we now buy another brand, and we will jazz them up ourselves... just to make it taste better. Increasingly it's getting more and more expensive to stick to what we like. So we have to compromise for certain things."

Rachel Chocolate, London

"I've got one tin of Heinz baked beans and I'm saving it for a special occasion."

I've eaten a lot of baked beans because I'm working from home just trying to get some protein. I'm becoming even more conscious of prices. I'm actually restricting my diet in terms of what I'm buying. Instead of buying tins of Heinz - they're now over a pound a can and I don't really like the comparables - so I've been going even more healthy, making my own vegetable soups which are quite cheap."

Casey Salad, Northern Ireland

"If it's something that's a wee bit more expensive, I would indulge, to have the quality of it. Then I'm willing to pay the price for the quality, but I think I'm getting to the stage in the current climate where the quality's not coming with the price. You know, the lower items are coming with high quality price tags, but high quality's not being delivered."

Marina Noodles, London

"We've got a local Asda, and when the children were little, and it was convenient, and I was really, really strapped for cash on maternity leave, I went shopping there. I got less and less satisfied with the quality of food...[so] for better quality food, I would be happy to pay more. I guess it's a judgement call."

Rachel Chocolate, London

"I am concerned about value for money and I really think the supermarkets really have a monopoly on our lives and wield so much power. It is outrageous how prices are going up."

Casey Salad, Northern Ireland

"I don't specifically shop for a brand, and I wouldn't shop in the 'Finest' range for quality, but I would shop around. I find myself now, instead of being tied to a premade for convenience, starting to make more of my own stuff because it's cheaper. I suppose that's the bottom line for me, it's taking up more of my time, but I don't think I have a choice."