

[Home](#) / [Latest](#) / [News](#) /

# Where do the political parties stand on food systems?

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With global events understandably taking over the news, you would be forgiven for not being completely up to date with where each of the UK's political parties stand on food systems. We took a look at the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative recent party conferences to assess the priorities.

The Climate Change Committee are unequivocal in their advice: the UK needs to reduce meat consumption in order to meet climate targets. Henry Dimbleby's National Food Strategy gave us a step by step pathway to get there. And yet, the current government has failed to act. The 2023 political party conferences offered the opportunity for the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties to showcase their commitments for the next government. During events on food and farming, all three parties made it abundantly clear that achieving food security was a priority. However, once again, healthy and sustainable diets were missing from the agenda, with no party setting specific targets for any kind of meat reduction. The Eating Better [Better by Half roadmap](#) outlines key actions that the UK government must take in order to facilitate the provision of healthy and sustainable diets. In this blog we'll dive deeper into the commitments, or lack there-of, made on key roadmap actions at the party conferences. It will highlight where the next government should focus efforts to increase food security through the provision of policy on healthy and sustainable food.

## Disappointing progress on school food

The [Better by Half Roadmap](#) calls for a nationwide school food plan to be put in place to ensure that food in schools reflects healthy and sustainable dietary guidelines. There is an opportunity for the next government to mainstream healthy and sustainable diets through the provision of free school meals, better school food standards and integration



However, conversations around school food at the party conferences barely reflected commitments on food security, let alone sustainability.

Universal free school meals was missing from the agenda of both the Labour and Conservative party conferences. In Labour's [drafted policy programme](#), there is a commitment to provide fully-funded free breakfast clubs in every primary school. However despite mounting pressure from both [inside](#) and [outside](#) the party, Labour leader Keir Starmer has refused to commit to supporting free school meals for all primary school children. Multiple stakeholders, including Eating Better alliance members [Sustain](#) and [The Food Foundation](#), have condemned this omission.

The Liberal Democrats took a different approach. A policy motion, '[Investing in our Children's future](#)' was approved, forming the party's official policy offer for schools in the next election. Contained within this was a commitment to extend free school meals to all children in primary education, and all secondary school children whose families receive Universal Credit.

The Liberal Democrats also proposed a [policy paper on Food and Farming](#). Contained within this are several commitments to ensure higher school food standards and to better embed healthy and sustainable diets into the curriculum, namely through the introduction of a 'Food' A-Level. On the whole however, improving school food standards was not a topic covered in a significant way by any party at the conferences. Eating Better alliance member [School Food Matters](#) highlights the importance of maximising the benefits that school food can bring through improved access to healthy and sustainable food.

## Public procurement is a hot topic

Due to the size of public sector procurement, normalising healthy and sustainable diets within food procurement policy will have wide benefits within the food system. The next government needs to capitalise on this opportunity.

During the Conservative conference, Defra Secretary of State Thérèse Coffey alluded to the fact that a freshly elected conservative government would continue to explore options for improving public food procurement. At an [event](#) hosted by the National Farmers Union (NFU), the Secretary of State said she was "having a few battles" with the World Trade Organisation in a bid to increase the quantity of food procured from British sources.



[Labour's Farming Policy Paper](#) commits to the relocalisation of procurement. The following measures have been put forward by Labour:

- “Ensure more home-grown sustainable food is bought, made and sold, through public procurement targets
- Ensure that 50% of all food purchased by the public sector is locally produced or certified to higher environmental production standards
- Use government procurement to support local businesses, cutting red tape and streamlining the bidding process to level the playing field for small businesses”

While relocalisation of public procurement supports British producers, shortening the supply chain alone is not enough. The nutritional value and environmental impact of the food sourced needs to be better defined, measured, and integrated into procurement contracts. In order for this to be feasible, the government needs to address the barriers which stand in the way. For example, food standards in public sector catering, e.g. in hospitals and schools, need to be in line with health and sustainability goals. Thus far, few details or commitments on these specifications have been made by the Conservative or Labour Party, while mention of ‘better diets’ in the Liberal Democrat Food and Farming Policy Paper is undefined.

## Promises made on trade standards

The UK currently imports [46%](#) of the food it consumes. Equally, food exports amounted to a whopping [£12 billion](#) during the first half of 2023. As such, all future trade deals should be audited for their impacts on human and planetary health, and avoid erosion of existing standards. Conversations on trade revolved around ensuring trade standards, however, no specific commitments on what this may look like were made.

At the Labour conference, Defra Shadow Environment Secretary Steve Reed and Shadow Farm Minister Daniel Zeichner offered reassurance that the Labour party would maintain high environmental and animal welfare standards in trade deals, while ensuring a level playing field for farmers. Shadow cabinet minister Nick Thomas Symonds, expanded on this, stating that if elected a new Labour government would secure better terms in the Trade Co-operation Agreement with the EU. Included in the [Labour policy programme](#) are the following commitments on trade:

- Begin to develop long-term structures to ensure cooperation between the UK and EU in key areas such as the green just transition, while protecting supply chains by



due diligence rules.

The Liberal Democrat [Food and Farming Policy Paper](#) makes similar commitments to the policy programme of Labour. However it also pays mention to the auditing process of trade deals, promising to introduce democratic scrutiny of all trade deals. The [Better By Half Roadmap](#) highlights this as an essential component of a just trade strategy.

The [Better By Half Roadmap](#) highlights that trade deals must be in line with health and sustainability goals. They should maintain or improve current high standards of environmental protection, animal welfare, climate resilience and workers' rights in the UK. While conversations on ensuring trade standards are welcome, the topic needs to be expanded to normalise health and sustainability within these standards. As yet, no party has focussed on the role of sustainability within trade.

## The Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats both pledge to improve the Environmental Land Management Schemes

At an [event](#) hosted by Eating Better alliance members [Sustain](#) and [Nature Friendly Farming Network](#), the Shadow Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister Daniel Zeichner confirmed that Labour would back improved [Environmental Land Management schemes](#). The commitments made by labour are reflected in Labour's [Policy Programme](#):

“Deliver a land-use framework in England that supports sustainable farming, enables the country to reach our climate goals and improves our national biodiversity.”

How Labour plans to honour these commitments is yet to be revealed. The Liberal Democrats made more specific suggested commitments in the [Food and Farming Policy Paper](#), including a promise to provide an additional £1bn to the ELMS budget to ensure a smooth uptake and transition.

Rebalancing agricultural policy towards supporting better farming practices is a key ask of the [Better By Half Roadmap](#); if facilitated correctly, ELMS have the potential to enable this. At a [fringe event](#) hosted by Eating Better alliance member [Nature Friendly Farming](#)



# Promises made on climate goals, but silence on less meat and dairy

While ELMs has the potential to facilitate nature friendly farming practices, it needs to be supported by further policy on agriculture and climate. This policy needs to incorporate shifts to healthy and sustainable diets through the promotion of plant production, and the reduction of meat consumption. At the conferences, details on diversifying from livestock agriculture were absent from commitments to improve ELMs. In fact, meaningful commitments, or mentions of, reducing meat and dairy were completely absent from both Labour and Conservative conferences.

As part of its 'Green Prosperity Plan', the Labour Party has committed to investing £28 billion a year towards the UK's green transition. During [several speeches](#), Shadow Defra Secretary Steve Reed MP promised that Labour will restore the great British countryside, turning the tide on environmental destruction and restoring nature across the country. While [Labour's proposed policy programme](#) aims to facilitate a just transition to net-zero, there has been no mention of the role of the livestock industry within this transition and specific details on climate goals for agriculture are absent.

As set out in the policy paper, [Tackling the Climate Emergency](#), Liberal Democrats aim to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions in the UK by 2045. In the [Food and Farming Policy Paper](#), several specific commitments are made to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions associated with the agricultural sector, including new funding for new innovative approaches to animal management, improved husbandry practices, new kinds of feeding, changes in how animals are housed and new methods of waste management. While presenting alternatives to meat production, such as "funding sustainable protein start ups", the policy paper manages to directly avoid any mention of reducing livestock numbers.

## So where does that leave us?

Fringe events on farming, hosted by the NFU at the [Conservative](#), [Labour](#) and [Liberal Democrat](#) conferences set the scene for the food systems focus of the upcoming election: food security. At the [labour event](#), Shadow Defra Secretary Steve Reed MP was clear in his message, that for Labour, food security means national security. Defra Secretary of State



Within work on food systems, the term ‘siloe thinking’ is often used. Whereby elements of the food system work independently to one another, failing to recognise the interdependence and connections which run through our agri-food system. Taking a systems based approach, the newly released [State of Food and Agriculture 2023](#) states that in 2020 the global hidden costs of agrifood systems amounted to \$10 trillion or more, resulting from a siloe food system. The lack of recognition given to reducing agricultural emissions and the vague, unbinding mentions of improving the health of the public plate, demonstrate a siloe approach to food policy, and by extension food security. Ahead of the upcoming general election, we need to see joined-up thinking and consistent food and farming policy in order to make progress on healthy and sustainable diets. In the coming months Eating Better will seize the opportunities to make this progress, working with alliance members to move sustainable food systems up the political agenda.

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