

# Food Science and Technology Asks for the Next Government

## Introduction

Food science and technology, and the food and drink industry are among the greatest assets to the UK. Food and nutrition are integral to health, and as sustainability and resilience of the food supply chain become increasingly critical, food should be considered as a public good, requiring concerted and consistent government attention. These actions need to be underpinned by evidence-based principles and standards.

Food and drink manufacturing contributes 430,000 jobs and over £30bn per year to the UK economy. The Institute of Food Science and Technology (IFST) stands at the forefront of advocating for a healthy food system that provides safe, affordable, sustainable, and nutritious food. Our unique position, built on 60 years as the leading scientific body in the sector, allows us to have an unparalleled view of the issues facing the food system.

As the 2024 UK General Election approaches, and we enter into a new parliament, it is imperative that food takes centre stage in the national agenda. The IFST Food Science and Technology Manifesto outlines a strategic vision to elevate the value of our food system, ensuring that it underpins health, prosperity, and sustainability for all.

## IFST Calls on the Next Government to:

### 1. Establish a Coherent Food Policy.

The food system is complex, with a multiplicity of actors, challenges, and opportunities. Sixteen government departments in England alone currently have some responsibility for food and/or interface with the food system, causing unnecessary inefficiencies, gaps and duplication.

This is compounded by the additional complexity with four nation differences in approach across the UK. We need coordinated aligned, integrated government and a systems-based approach to provide capable and strategic governance relating to food across all UK nations. Nominated Ministerial responsibility for the whole UK food system would provide the leadership needed to enact this.

Creation of a supportive forum, where the whole food system can work with system-based solutions, would benefit all actors in the UK food sector. This would avoid individual actors or issues forcing compromise on the other parts of the system and prevent unintended and unforeseen negative consequences.

### In the first 100 days:

Nominate a dedicated food minister in the cabinet who will oversee and implement a National Food Strategy to recognise the importance of food as a public good.

### 2. Positively Engage on Food Education.

A National Food Strategy must provide education to serve a healthy, sustainable, and resilient food system:

1. Education must serve a well-informed and well-educated population who have equitable access to information about food and nutrition.

Food education, including culinary skills, needs to be strengthened and fully integrated across school curricula to help inform and empower the UK population. A UK-wide food strategy needs to invest in improving citizen understanding of food information, food sources, nutrition, and the importance of eating a balanced, healthy, and sustainable diet. This should be supported by evidence based, scientifically sound, and understandable information about our food to educate the public and aid wise citizen food choices.

2. Education must include food science and technology at all levels of STEM education to ensure a pathway from school through university or equivalent to a career in the food industry.

UK homegrown talent is not choosing careers in the food sector. A third of the national workforce is due to retire by 2024, leaving the food manufacturing industry facing a shortage of about 140,000 recruits to plug this skills gap. The food talent gap affects businesses, local authority control capacity and capability and national regulatory food control functions.

Food should be a priority sector in all four nations of the UK, with a clear pathway from education to a career in the food sector. This should include an A-Level or equivalent qualification in food science and technology and through the inclusion of food science and technology within existing STEM subjects within school and university education.

#### **In the first 100 days:**

Commit to developing and implementing a UK-wide national food strategy which:

- Serves education to support healthy and sustainable food choices.
- Provides a pathway for excellence in education at all levels to support the food system.

### **3. Build a Flourishing Environment for Research Investment.**

IFST advocates for a long-term funding strategy for research in the food system which builds UK innovation and supports research and development (R&D). This is critical to propel the UK to be a world leader in food innovation to provide solutions for a more healthy, sustainable, and resilient food system. In view of the importance of greater food security, business and environmental sustainability, food and agriculture science deserve to have a prominent place in the UK Science & Technology Framework.

The long-term research strategy must be underpinned by a streamlined and progressive regulatory framework which supports the translation of innovation into real-world solutions.

#### **In the first 100 days:**

Provide a commitment to research investment over the coming years, appropriate to the needs of the UK (£20 billion per year on R&D by 2024/25, increasing to £22 billion per year by 2026/27) and which recognises the central importance of the food system.

Support regulatory agencies across the Four Nations to review the current regulatory practices and propose effective measures to enable innovation whilst protecting food safety and standards. These must be supported by sufficient funding for regulatory agencies to have the appropriate expertise and capacity to support innovation and risk assessment.

#### **4. Develop an Evidence-Based and Scientifically Sound Approach to Sustainability for the Food Industry.**

The food system is central to the solutions for the climate crisis and sustainability. Food and agriculture produce the second-most emissions as a sector behind energy (around 19%). IFST has just published the [2024 update to our Food System Framework: A Focus on Food Sustainability](#), which lays out the key challenges facing the food system.

Changes in food production and processing practices are vital to a sustainable food system, however it is critical to ensure that decisions to implement transformational changes are evidence-based and scientifically sound, consider potential trade-offs, and avoid unintended negative consequences around food safety, nutrition, food security, and affordability.

##### **In the first 100 days:**

As part of the UK-wide National Food Strategy, develop and use evidence-based and scientifically sound standards to underpin policy concerning food sustainability including GHG reductions and working towards net zero, while avoiding critical trade-offs.