

PLATE OF THE NATION








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Introducing Plate of the Nation

Britain has a problem with food. We're eating more than ever, but vital nutrients are being lost along the way.

We're not short of food. Supermarkets are full, choice is abundant, and eating opportunities are constant. Yet many people feel tired, under-fuelled and unwell, and long-term health outcomes continue to worsen.

This is why Plate of the Nation was created. Not to tell people how to eat, or over-simplify complex choices, but to ask a more honest question:

How are people really eating, and what's getting in the way of eating well?

Incorporating a review of current nutrient intake from the British Nutrition Foundation and complemented by a large-scale YouGov consumer insight survey, the research looks beyond nutrients alone. It examines real life: cost pressures, time, confidence, taste and culture, and how these forces collide on the plate.

The conclusion is clear: the issue isn't just how much we eat. It's what's missing from the plate.

Behind the headlines of obesity and sugar sits a more systemic problem – a growing nutrition gap. Vital nutrients are being missed out of our diets - a ticking time bomb that we need to tackle. Convenience culture, cost pressures, time, food literacy and food confidence are driving us to lose sight of what we're really putting on our plate.

The gap isn't simply about individual behaviour or intention - it's shaped by the food system itself. In other words, healthy food environments are not created equally for everyone, and that inequality is embedded across the entire system.

But systems can change. Many of the most effective solutions are also the most familiar: affordable, everyday foods that already fit into people's lives, especially when nutrition feels confusing or overwhelming.

Changing the cause, not the symptom

Closing the nutrition gap means changing the world around food - how we talk about it, how we access it, and how we support people in their food choices. Real progress needs three things to shift at once:

- **Food Literacy**
- **Food Culture**
- **Food Access**



79%
of adults say
healthy eating
matters. ^[1]

People are trying, but getting stuck between cost and convenience, conflicting advice, and a food culture where the easiest option is often the least nourishing.

Where the gap opens widest: teenage girls

The nutrition gap is widest at adolescence - the moment nutritional needs are most significant, yet often diets become more fragile. Eating grows more irregular, breakfast disappears, snacking increases, and peers and social norms displace healthy habits.

Teenage girls are one of the most at-risk groups. As external pressures intensify, nutrient-dense foods fall away - and with them, the calcium, iodine and vitamins critical for bone health, energy and long-term wellbeing.

Closing this gap means making healthier choices easier, clearer and more realistic - through three connected areas of action: working with government to make food labelling easier to understand; building food confidence around food nutrition; and making nutritious food more accessible.

Plate of the Nation aims to move the conversation beyond what we should be cutting out of our diets - towards nourishment, understanding and the changes that help people eat well more often.



What's Really Missing From Britain's Plate?

"When we talk about the future of health in the UK, we are really talking about the kind of society we want to build and the food environment we want to create for future generations.

Good food and healthy diets should not be a privilege. They should be something everyone can access, regardless of age, income or postcode.

Yet for too many people, making healthy food choices still feels confusing, expensive or out of reach. We are living with an abundance of calories, deep divisions around access to nutritious food in different areas of the country, and a food system driving some of the highest levels of diet-related illness we have ever seen. The scale of these challenges highlights the importance of continued collaboration, understanding and action.

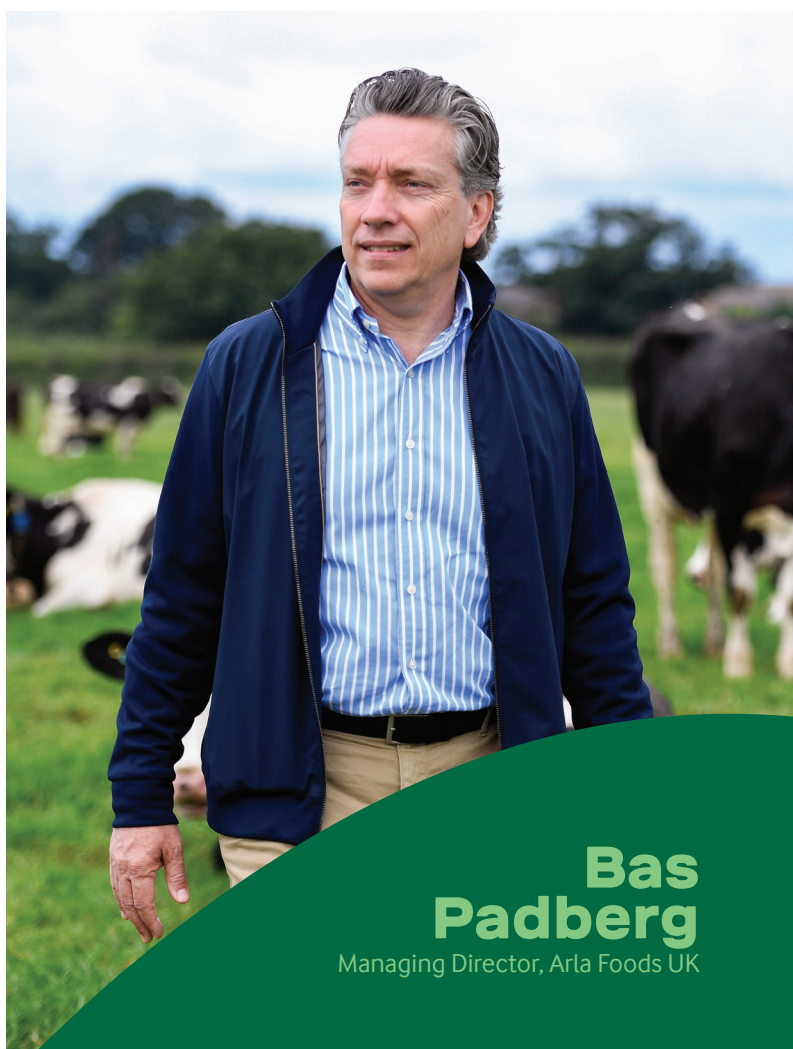


As one of the UK's biggest food companies, a farmer-owned cooperative rooted in communities across the country, we have a responsibility that goes beyond the products we sell.

Because food, done well, can be one of the most powerful levers for helping people live healthy lives.

We know that dairy plays a central role in that opportunity. Milk and dairy are rich in calcium, iodine, protein and vitamin B12 ^[2,12], making them one of the most practical and affordable ways to get these essential nutrients into the diet. At a time when millions of people, particularly teenagers, are falling short on some of these nutrients, dairy can play a role in helping to close the gap.

To better understand how people in Britain are eating, and what's shaping how they think and feel about food, we partnered with the British Nutrition Foundation and conducted large-scale consumer research with YouGov. Plate of the Nation examines what's really happening when people choose the food they eat every day and how things like cost pressures, time, confidence, taste and culture are having an impact on our diets.



Bas Padberg

Managing Director, Arla Foods UK



What we found is stark: the issue isn't as simple as how much we eat. It's about what's missing. Behind the noise of diet trends and obesity debates sits a less obvious but more systemic problem: a growing nutrition gap between what our bodies need and what they actually get. This is not a failure of individuals.

It's a problem in our food system.

But systems can change.

We believe the role of food companies must now evolve. It is no longer enough to offer healthier options and hope people find them. We must make good choices easier, clearer and more accessible, and challenge the misinformation that erodes confidence in everyday foods like dairy.

Progress will require collaboration between businesses, government, educators, health professionals, retailers, hospitality, foodservice and communities. This is a long-term commitment."

We are determined to play our part in building a healthier, fairer food system – one that serves people, strengthens communities and delivers lasting change.

"The UK stands at a critical juncture in the relationship between diet and health. Healthy life expectancy has stalled, inequalities are widening, and millions of people are living with diet-related conditions that impact not only quality of life but also economic productivity and the sustainability of our health system.

Diet quality is central to this challenge. Poor dietary patterns are now one of the leading contributors to preventable ill health, driven by a combination of excess and insufficiency: too many foods high in fat, salt and sugar, and too few rich in fibre, fruit, vegetables and essential micronutrients. As this insight highlights, the issue is not simply how much we eat, but what our diets lack.

The findings presented here underscore a persistent and growing 'nutrition gap'. Many individuals are consuming sufficient, or even excessive, calories, while falling short on vital nutrients such as fibre, calcium, iodine and iron. This imbalance is particularly pronounced among adolescents, especially girls, where inadequate intakes of key nutrients coincide with a life stage critical to growth and development.

At the same time, the context in which people make food choices has become more challenging. Cost pressures remain a significant barrier, with the majority of adults perceiving healthy eating as expensive. Conflicting information, often amplified by social media, is eroding confidence, meaning that access to evidence-based information on diet and health is vital.



Crucially, these challenges are not experienced equally. Large and widening disparities in healthy life expectancy reflect deep-rooted inequalities in access to nutritious diets. Where people live, their income, and the environments in which they grow up all shape dietary behaviours and outcomes. Addressing diet-related health therefore requires more than individual behaviour change; it demands systemic action.

Plate of the Nation provides valuable insight into the drivers of current dietary patterns in the UK and highlights the gap between intention and reality. Encouragingly, it also points to a strong desire among the public to eat well and to engage with credible, evidence-based guidance.

Closing the nutrition gap will require coordinated effort across sectors, from government and healthcare to education, academia and the food industry. Science must remain at the heart of this effort, guiding practical solutions that are both achievable and equitable in real-world settings.



“Large and widening disparities in healthy life expectancy reflect deep-rooted inequalities in access to nutritious diets.”

– Elaine Hindal, Chief Executive



The Current State

Healthy life expectancy has stalled and inequalities are widening. Diets contain too many foods high in fat, salt and sugar, and too few rich in fibre, fruit, vegetables and essential micronutrients.

The majority

of adults perceive healthy eating as expensive — a significant barrier to better dietary choices.



**THE
NUTRITION
GAP**



Desired State

Coordinated effort across government, healthcare, education, academia and the food industry creates food environments where healthier choices are the easier choice for everyone.

For all

Moving beyond awareness to meaningful action, with equitable access to evidence-based guidance on diet and health.

By bringing together robust evidence with lived experience, this makes an important contribution to the national conversation. It reinforces the need to move beyond awareness towards meaningful action, creating food environments that make healthier, more nutritious choices the easier choice for everyone."



**Elaine
Hindal**

Chief Executive, British Nutrition Foundation

Why What We Eat Matters More Than Ever



Britain is one of the largest economies in the world. Our supermarkets are full. Eating opportunities are everywhere. We are rightly focused on tackling obesity and diet-related disease. But there is a risk: in addressing one public health crisis, we may be overlooking another.

The burden we can see

Diet-related illness affects millions of people across the UK. Over 8 million live with heart and circulatory conditions^[6]. Almost 4.6 million have been diagnosed with diabetes, with a further 1.3 million potentially undiagnosed.^[7]

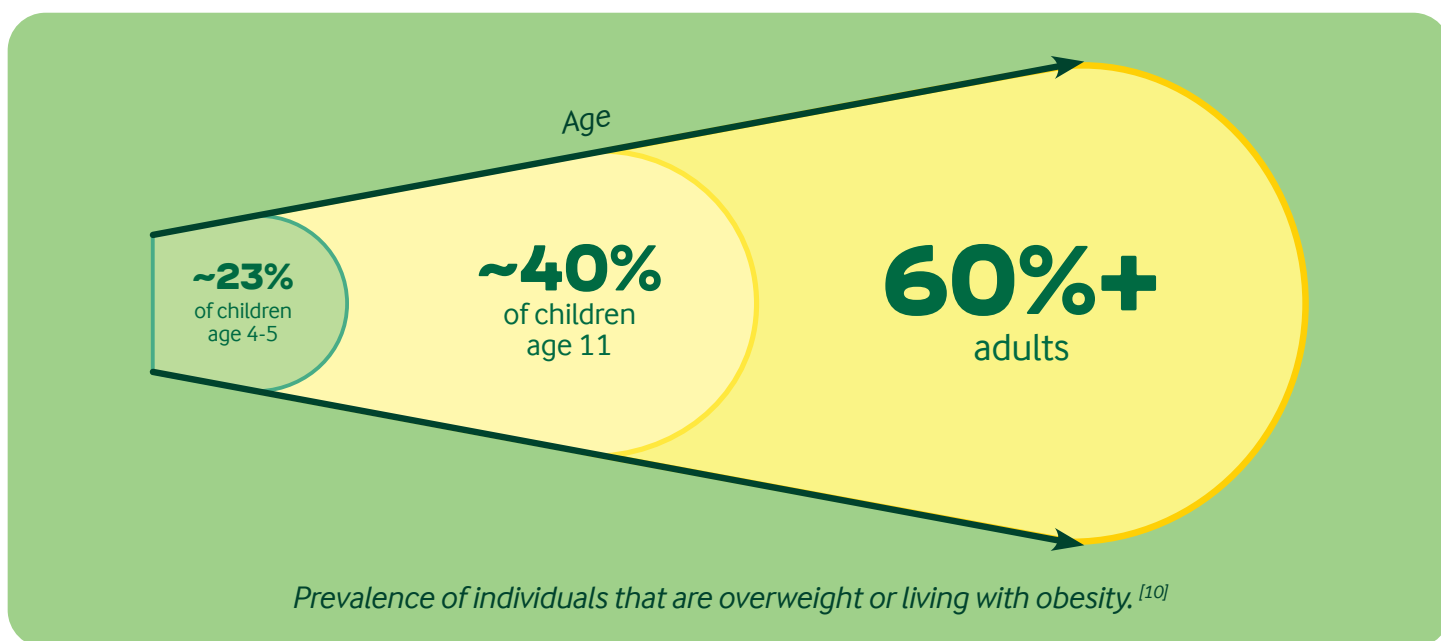
Long-term conditions driven by poor diet are placing an ever-greater burden on the NHS and on individuals. Diet-related illness costs the UK economy tens of billions of pounds every year^[8].

And if nothing changes, it's only going to get worse. At the same time, more than 60% of adults and nearly a quarter (approximately 23%) of children aged 4–5, measured at Reception year, are already overweight or living with obesity. By the time they leave primary school, that figure rises to four in ten.^[10]

More than 14 million people experience food insecurity.

The communities hit hardest by poor health are overwhelmingly those with the least power to change it: the most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend almost half their disposable income to afford the government-recommended healthy diet.^[13,14]

This is not a crisis of individual choices. It is a systemic issue - a food environment that makes it too easy to eat poorly and too hard to eat well.



The Nutrition Gap

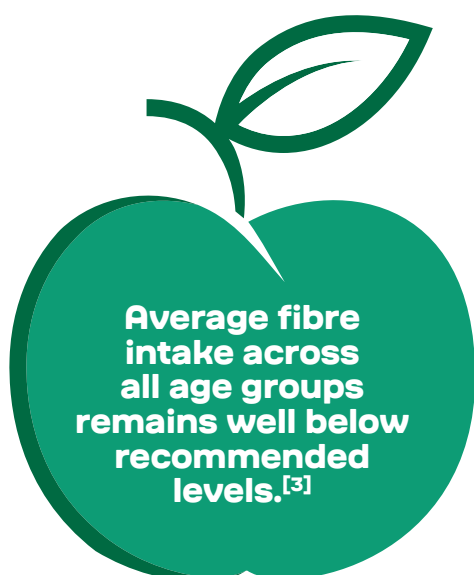
But there is something else happening, something less visible but equally concerning.

Here is what makes this particularly striking: we are not lacking food. We are lacking nourishment.

Britain's diet delivers plenty of calories - but it routinely falls short on the nutrients that our bodies need to function, develop and thrive.

Only around one in three adults manages five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. Among 11–18-year-olds, it's just one in eight. [3]

But it is low intake of micronutrients, the less visible shortfalls, that are often forgotten:



1 in 5 teenage girls has an inadequate calcium intake - during the very years her bones are developing most. [3]

1 in 3 girls aged 11–18 consumes less iodine than recommended - a nutrient critical for normal growth in children and cognitive function. [3]

<0.1% of the UK population follow all evidence-based dietary recommendations. [3]

Low intakes of iron, magnesium, selenium and vitamin B12 also rise during adolescence, going largely unnoticed in the short term, but with consequences that may accumulate over years and decades. [3]

The gap between knowing and doing

Most people understand, at least in principle, what eating well looks like.

- 79% of adults say healthy eating is important to them.
- 75% believe they know what a healthy diet means.
- And yet only 53% say they actually eat healthily most or all of the time.
- Just 37% find it easy to do so. [1]



23%

consistently choose the healthier option when faced with a choice^[1].

Addressing that gap - between intention and action - is the real challenge. More than half of adults say they struggle to resist unhealthy snacks. Only 23% consistently choose the healthier option when faced with a choice^[1]. For children, the pattern is similar: most say healthy eating matters, but fewer than half find it easy - and taste, not nutrition, drives what ends up on their plate.^[4]

People are trying, but they're getting stuck between cost and convenience, conflicting advice, and getting trapped in a food culture where the easiest option is often the least nourishing.

Identifying where those sticking points are, and what can realistically shift them, is exactly what we have set out to explore.



Who's Most Affected and Why



Healthy life expectancy differs by up to nineteen years between the most and least affluent parts of the UK.

Britain's nutrition problem is not evenly distributed. Where you're born, how much your family earns, where you go to school - all of these shape what ends up on your plate and what it does to your health.

Healthy life expectancy - the years lived in good health - differs by up to nineteen years between the most and least affluent parts of the UK. That is a staggering gap and for many people is the difference between a long, active later life and years defined by illness.^[11]

While regional patterns exist, the single most consistent driver of poor nutrition in Britain is not geography - it is socioeconomic inequality.

14 million+ people across the UK experience food insecurity.^[13]

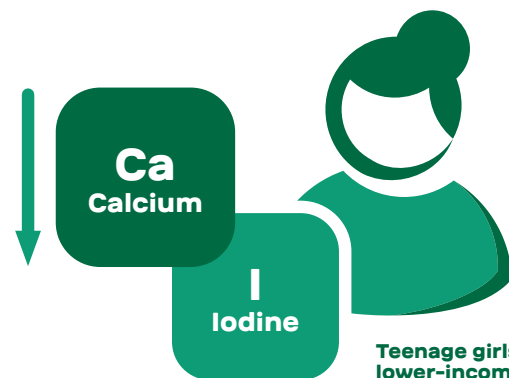
The most deprived households would need to spend around 50% of their disposable income on food to meet government dietary guidelines.^[11]

That rises to 70% for families with children in the most deprived households - the majority of their income, just to eat well.^[11]

Children bear the heaviest burden. Those growing up in the most deprived areas are twice as likely to be obese as those in the least deprived. Their parents are more likely to cite cost, convenience and picky

eating as barriers to healthy food - not a lack of care, but a lack of options.^[11]

A family's income and circumstances affect the nutritional quality of children's diets, not just how much food they eat. Among teenage girls from lower-income households, low intakes of calcium and iodine are most acute, coinciding with a life stage where peer influence grows, they gain more autonomy over their food choices, and dietary habits are shifting fast. Our survey found that those classed as the least well off were significantly less likely than those who are wealthier to report eating healthily most of the time, and significantly more likely to cite cost as their biggest barrier.^[1]



Teenage girls from lower-income households are more likely to have inadequate nutrient intakes.

Why do these inequalities persist?



Social and cultural influences shape behaviour, especially during adolescence



Access varies between communities, particularly where fresh and nutritious options are less available



Conflicting information reduces confidence in making healthy choices

Eating well is genuinely easier for some people than others - and that's not down to willpower or effort. The system itself needs to change. It requires changes to the environment in which people make choices, and that means action at every level, from government policy to what's on the shelf at the local shop.



Children and Teenagers

76%
say healthy eating is important

Our survey found that the younger generations' relationship with food shifts dramatically as they grow.

Among younger children, intent is strong but capability is limited.

- 76% say healthy eating is important.
- Yet less than half find it easy to eat well.

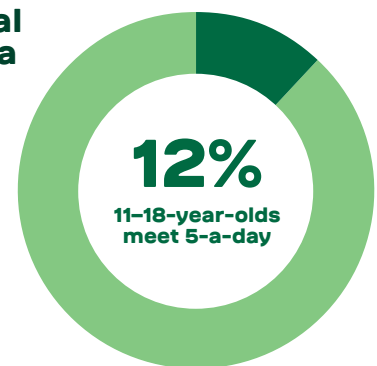
At this stage, parents, routine and availability shape behaviour.

By contrast, adolescence marks a turning point.

- Independence increases.
- Peer influence, identity and social norms begin to dominate.
- Taste, convenience and "fitting in" often outweigh health considerations.

This shift has real nutritional consequences. National data shows that:

- Only 12% of 11–18 y/o meet 5-a-day.
- Teenage girls are among the most at risk of low intakes of key nutrients.



"to help me grow big and strong"

(52% of children's motivation to stay healthy)

Crucially, motivations change too. 52% of children eat healthily "to help me grow big and strong" - a message that resonates powerfully with younger children (boys aged 8-11 particularly over-index at 42% who drink milk specifically because "it helps me to grow").

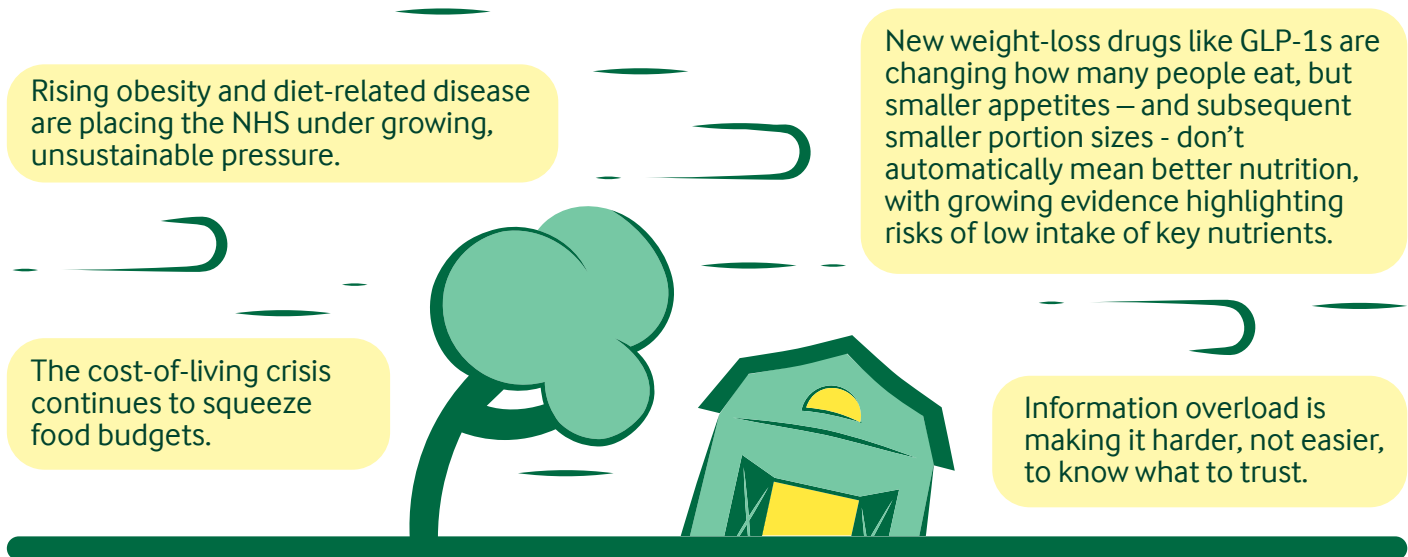
However, this messaging loses relevance for teenagers, especially girls aged 12-15, who are instead motivated by wanting to "stay well" and "feel good."

Any meaningful intervention must reflect this shift - supporting parents in the early years, while using evidence-based approaches to help teenagers see healthier choices as relevant, achievable and socially normal.

A Perfect Storm, and A Clear Opportunity

Britain's nutrition challenges don't exist in isolation. Several major forces are colliding at once - and together they're creating both real urgency and, if we respond wisely, genuine opportunity.

The pressures are stacking up



38% of adults say healthy eating feels confusing because of conflicting information.

One in five now turn to social media for nutrition advice.

Among Gen Z, that rises to 40%.

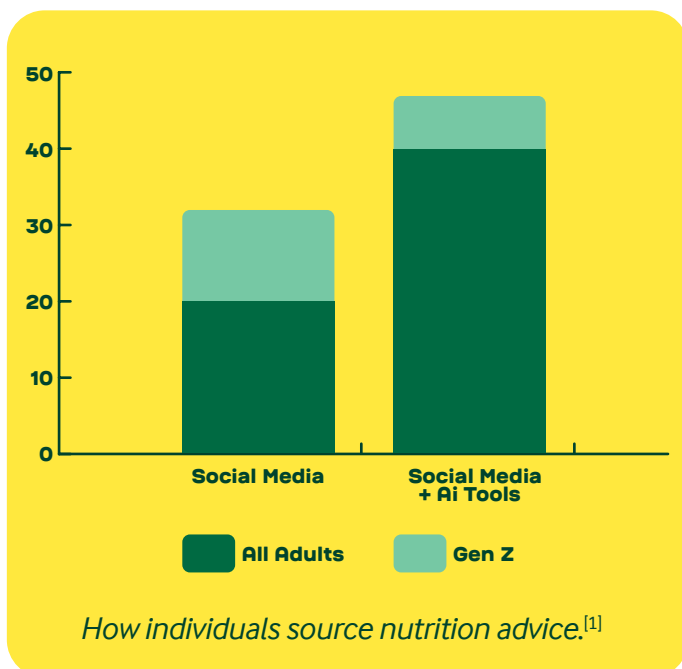
AI tools are being consulted too, by 7% of adults overall and 12% of Gen Z.^[1]

But people want to do better

The data shows that most people want to eat well and are looking for help to make it easier. That desire can be the foundation for real change.

The most effective solutions are often the most familiar - affordable, everyday foods that already fit into people's lives. Part of what's needed is reconnecting people with food itself - understanding where it comes from, how it's produced, and the people behind it. When food becomes purely transactional, nutrition loses its story. As a cooperative rooted in farming communities across the UK, we are well placed to help rebuild that connection.

We believe that good nutrition shouldn't depend on your postcode or your pay packet. But making this a reality requires more than good intentions, it requires sustained collaboration between national government, local authorities, industry, communities and civil society.



*Arla farmer-owner Andrew Metcalfe,
pictured with his family.*



A Positive Vision for Nutrition

Most people want to make healthier choices. But the system around them often makes that harder than it should be.

For too long, the conversation about healthy eating has focused on restriction: what to avoid, what to cut out, what not to eat. That approach hasn't worked. It creates anxiety, confusion and guilt - but rarely lasting change.

We need a different conversation.

One that focuses on nourishment, not just calories. One that celebrates what people should choose to eat, not just what they should eat less of. One that helps people understand why certain foods matter - especially for those whose needs are greatest.

But changing the conversation isn't enough on its own. Real progress requires changing the food system itself - making nutritious choices more visible, more affordable, more convenient and more culturally desirable than they are today.

This is not about perfection. It's about making the healthier choice an easier choice - through better information, stronger food culture, and accessible food environments for everyone regardless of income or postcode.

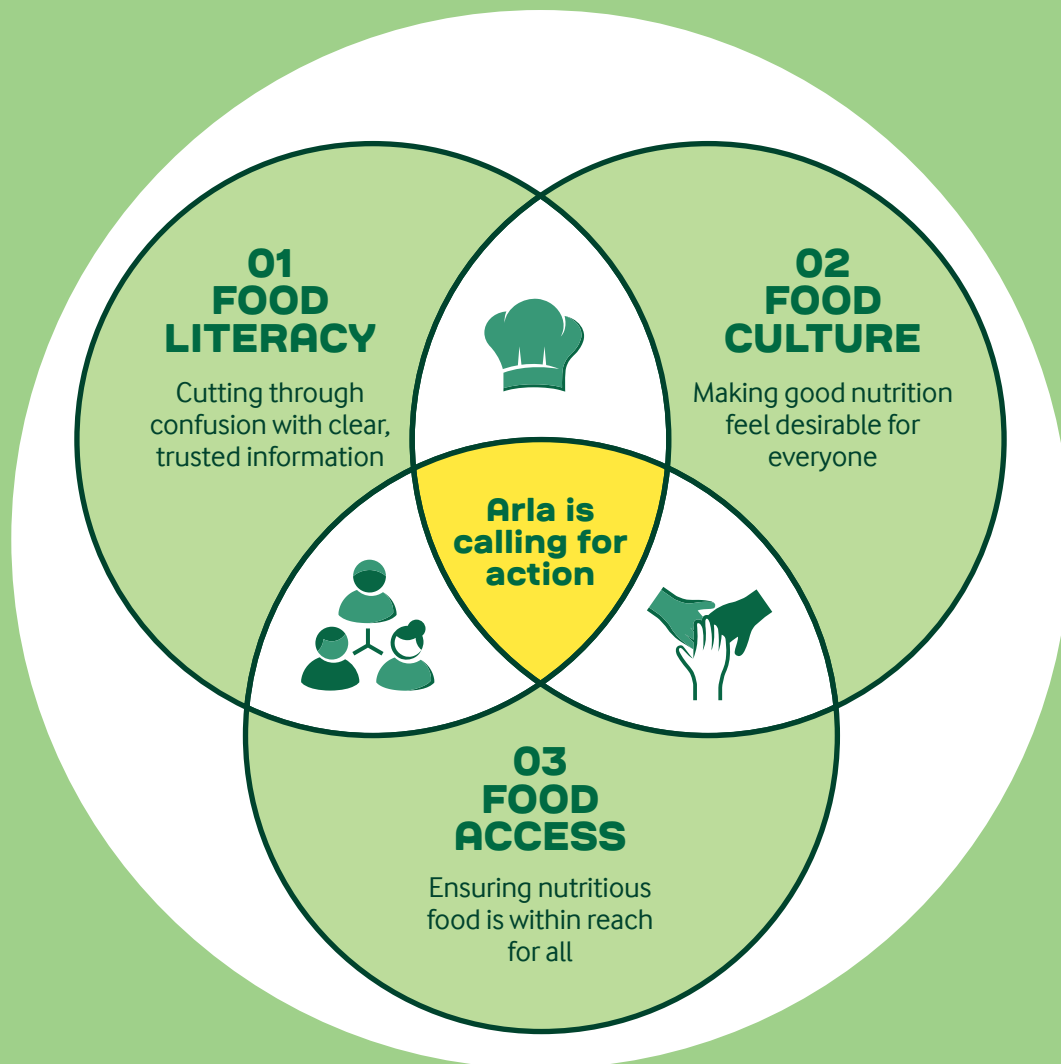
We believe that when these three opportunities work together - when clearer knowledge, positive food culture and improved access reinforce each other - change becomes possible.



Arla is Calling for Action Across Three Areas

Our research shows that people want healthier eating to feel simpler, more appealing and easier to achieve in everyday life. Cultural influences, habits and social norms play a major role in shaping food choices - particularly for children and teenagers. At the same time, affordability and access remain significant

barriers for many families. Together, these findings highlight the need for a more joined-up approach that improves understanding, makes nutritious choices feel relevant and desirable, and ensures healthier food is accessible to everyone.



Key Stats



Most children say they want to eat healthily - but fewer than half find it easy.



Almost all children prioritise taste when choosing food.



Clearer food labels are one of the top forms of support people want to help them eat more healthily.



Nearly half of children are confused about which foods are healthy.

Closing the Nutrition Gap

Closing the nutrition gap requires a whole-system response.

This section sets out where action is needed, what Arla is committing to do, and how we are calling on government, industry and others to make a difference.

Food businesses have a responsibility to make nourishing food choices easier, not just available.

Arla's Commitments:

As a farmer-owned dairy cooperative, Arla has a particular and practical role to play in addressing the nutrient gaps identified in our research.

We're not claiming to have all the answers. We're calling for genuine collaboration across government, the food industry, schools and communities. To help address the challenges this report has uncovered, we are committing to three areas.

- On food literacy, we will review our labelling to help shoppers better understand the nutrients in their food.
- On food education, we will launch a dedicated school outreach programme, targeting 250,000 young people by 2027, to help cut confusion.
- And when it comes to improving access in food environments, we will expand our impact partnerships to provide 4 million meals to those who need it most.

But we also know this has to be a collective effort. No single organisation can close this gap alone, which is why we want more organisations across government, retail, education and communities to join us.

"Food businesses have a responsibility to make nourishing food choices easier, not just available."







The Path to a Healthier Britain

The picture is clear. Britain has a nutrition gap - between what our bodies need and what they actually get, between good intentions and everyday reality, and between those who find healthy eating easy and those for whom it remains out of reach.

Arla is committed to that change for the long term – to help make meaningful change in the food system and truly change the conversation around food.

Tracking, evaluation and follow-up

Anyone can say they're committed to change. We want to show it. That's why we're tracking what we do - and being honest about whether it's working. We will monitor and report on progress through the Plate of the Nation tracking study, returning each year to ask the same honest questions.

What we will track:

- Perceptions, barriers and consumption patterns among adults and children, tracked through regular surveys, allowing us to spot shifts and respond.
- Nutrient intake trends: drawing on national nutrition survey data as it is updated, with a particular focus on adolescent girls and older adults.
- Behavioural shifts: including trends in dairy consumption and changes to milk availability in secondary schools.
- Cultural indicators: including changing attitudes towards taste, nutrition confidence and food knowledge among young people.

All interventions will be subject to independent evaluation to ensure they remain evidence-based and genuinely effective.

Dietary change takes time and we know that without honest, regular assessment of what is and isn't working, even well-intentioned efforts can drift. That is why we will be holding ourselves to account and continuing to challenge ourselves – and others – to do more to create a healthier Britain.



“We will monitor and report on progress through the Plate of the Nation tracking report, returning each year to ask the same honest questions.”

Survey Methods and Evidence Base

About the research

This report draws on three overarching sources:

A nationally representative survey of 5,127 UK adults aged 16+, conducted by YouGov in February 2026

A survey of 863 children aged 8–15 and their parents, also conducted by YouGov in February 2026, with quotas applied across gender, age and socioeconomic group

A review of UK nutrient intake data and dietary research conducted by the British Nutrition Foundation, including analysis of National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) findings

Nutrition claims

Calcium and protein are needed for normal growth and development of bone in children.

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