

Changing the

NARRATIVE

PRODUCERS



Project overview

This resource is for members of the Eating Better alliance and the wider food movement. It is intended to provide organisations with information and guidance on how to tailor their projects, messages and outputs so they are able to work in a more constructive way with producers and the farming community. This resource was made through direct in-person engagement and feedback from producers through our Changing the Narrative project, alongside desk-based research. It is intended to be used to inform Eating Better alliance members' reports and research, external engagement and campaigns, comms products and strategic thinking on 'less and better meat and dairy' in the context of farming and food producers.

"The ambitious changes we need to see in our food system demand that we work collaboratively. Changing the Narrative allows us to be bolder in demonstrating how we can make change happen and the positive story to be told with dietary change."

Andrew Stark

Senior Research and Policy Manager
Eating Better



Other resources in the series:



What this resource is and how to use it

Eating Better is acutely aware of the need for more constructive dialogue across all aspects of society, particularly so the food and farming movement. This document is aiming to aid with this, but we also recognise that as our evidence, practices and policies around food and farming evolve, so must our language and our arguments for change. We may update this document in future years and we welcome constructive feedback.

Producers are defined as people who farm and produce food, plus individuals and organisations that are responsible for growing, rearing or catching raw food ingredients. It is worth noting that there is a lot of variation within food production, and producers can differ greatly in size, practices, geography and economic value. They can also differ in terms of values, social and economic context, priorities, training, farm advice available to them and background. Some producers also go on to use their raw products to create additional products (i.e. turning their surplus milk into cheese or yogurt) to diversify their income streams - in this definition we include these as 'producers' based on their primary role; we have created a separate [messaging guide for commercial manufacturers](#). The difference across the sector means that there is no 'one-size fits all' approach to farming and farmers are not a homogenous group.

Despite this variation across producers, in an increasingly polarised world there is a clear need to support food stakeholders with more effective and conciliatory communications around the future of farming and our food system. If we are to build a better food system, we need to strengthen our alliances and align where possible. A more connected food and farming movement, with farmers supported by the passionate advocates for change in the Eating Better alliance and beyond, will help unlock more momentum for the changes we need to see in our food system.

This guide can be used in a number of ways; to inform alliance member reports and research, provide guidance for external engagements and campaigns, communication assets and contribute to more effective strategic planning on more plants, and less and better meat and dairy.



What needs to change



For farmers

On the whole, farmers and producers currently hold little power in the UK food system. There are different types of landownership amongst farmers (tenants and owners), and therefore different levels of power and control over their own farm. They are also not paid fairly for their work and the price they receive for their products tends to not reflect the cost or environmental impact of production. Successive decades of UK and devolved government policy have failed to deliver a healthy, sustainable and equitable system in which they can flourish. Much needs to change, and producers should be empowered to lead that change. With devolution in food and farming policy across the UK, each Government of the UK is at different stages in their post-Brexit agricultural transition and there have been differences in policy efforts to move away from the Basic Payment Scheme which traditionally benefited landholders rather than producers. Progressive food and farming policy in each nation of the UK is fundamental to making our food system fairer for farmers, alongside market reforms so farmers are able to stay economically viable with their products.



For animals, people and our planet

There is an increasingly strong appetite amongst producers for policies that better support them in transitioning away from industrial agriculture, and a growing appreciation of the desired outcomes needed for a just and equitable food system. Primarily this means an increase in nature-friendly and agroecological farming and empowering farmers to adapt their business and drive change. This will be key to increasing the farming sector's climate resilience whilst boosting biodiversity across the UK, with the majority of land in the UK dedicated to farming.

At a broader scale, there is widespread recognition that the climate crisis poses a threat to UK food security ([UK Food Security Report](#)) and that at a global scale, livestock agriculture is a significant contributor to global emissions. [In the UK](#), agriculture accounts for around 12% of emissions (excluding emissions imported from overseas agriculture), with [livestock contributing 63%](#) of this, resulting in a 7.4% contribution to UK emissions. Rebalancing [how livestock are managed](#) and how many there are, inline with diets that are good for human and planetary health, will be key to the success of agroecological farming systems.

Changing farming so it is better aligned with healthy and sustainable diets will also require us to take a more ethical approach to animals in our food system, which can subsequently improve human health whilst [reducing the risk of zoonotic diseases](#). These improvements and the shift away from a system of [industrial livestock production](#) will also provide benefits to farmers, increasing the long-term sustainability of farming and strengthening their supply chains whilst putting them at the forefront of food system change.

What needs to change



For the NGO community

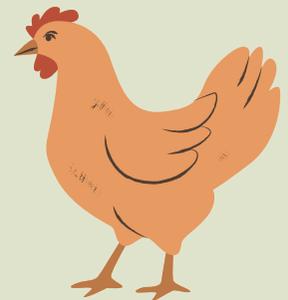
The way that we talk about and to farmers matters. So much of our current food system is done to farmers rather than with them, which is why farmers themselves say they need to be listened to more than anything. There is a significant mismatch between whose voices are heard by those in government and industry, and the reality of farming day-to-day. [Research](#) by the Food Foundation has shown that trade associations were overwhelmingly the most active food-related organisations in terms of ministerial meetings. Whilst mainstream farming representative bodies lobby on behalf of the farming community, there are reasonable questions about how much they represent the interests of the whole of the farming community, and the multitude of challenges they face. This means that some farmers and types of farming get more of a hearing than others, emphasising the need for NGOs to listen to the voices of all farmers.

Advocacy and communications from Eating Better, our members and the wider food community need to demonstrate that it truly understands farmers' concerns – not just lip service, but an authentic appreciation of the challenges they face, the values they hold, and the realities they are experiencing. Working with farming lobby organisations which are growing and showing an alternative approach to agriculture such as the [Nature Friendly Farming Network \(NFFN\)](#), [Pasture for Life](#), [Peoples Alliance for Food and Farming](#), [European Alliance for Regen Ag](#) and the [Landworkers' Alliance](#) will be key to this.

Better by Half Roadmap

For more info on the practical actions on what needs to happen, explore Eating Better's [Better by Half roadmap](#).

The Better by Half roadmap shows actions to move us towards producing and eating less and better meat and dairy, creating a food system that is fairer, healthier and more sustainable for people, animals and the planet.



Effective framings

Tailoring messaging when talking about farming or in direct conversation with farmers is key for positive engagement and breaking down barriers. There are also large variations in who farmers are and their different roles, from a small-scale micro-dairy farmer to a farmer overseeing multiple pig or poultry sheds. **Below are a few tips on what works well and what to avoid when engaging with, communicating about or researching farming and its role in healthy and sustainable diets:**

3 framings that work well



Any farmer-facing comms needs to strongly acknowledge the chronic/multiple challenges that confront them: unfair supermarket contracts, disruptive weather events, the effects of climate change on their land, disregard from politicians, and challenging economic circumstances. As an alliance, we are working to address these, bringing about a 'just transition' - which is clearly defined - to a food system in which farmers can flourish, and 'less and better' meat and dairy is the norm and the outcome of an agroecological food system.



Any farmer-related comms around dietary changes should be framed within an overarching narrative that highlights the need for a cohesive government plan for food and farming. This should be one that involves and engages all farmers in a national mission for a more secure, resilient sector and a sustainable, fairer future. Isolating calls for meat reduction from broader concerns is unlikely to be well received by producers.

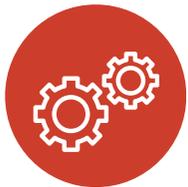


There are some value framings which resonate with farmers better than others. For instance, they may value their role as custodians of the countryside, as both innovators and traditionalists, as trusted by the public, their national identity and the quality of the food they produce. As an example of innovation, mixed farming and horticulture alongside livestock production can showcase the economic opportunities to be found in diversification. Improving visibility of Method of Production can also help resonate with farmers carrying out 'better' farming practices and uplifting those farmers leading the way. These are very important aspects which comms around 'better' meat and dairy needs to highlight.

3 framings to avoid



Farmers can be resistant to loosely defined talk of 'industrial livestock', 'less meat and dairy', 'better meat and dairy' without a clear definition or shared understanding of what these terms mean, even if well evidenced (such as by Eating Better, [We need to talk about industrial livestock production 2025](#)). Furthermore, they typically dislike to be perceived as criticising one another. Eating Better members must be careful in our use of language, and place an emphasis on the potential for healthy, productive, resilient farm businesses. Attention should instead focus on the power imbalances in the food system. The 'just transition' angle is key, as well as highlighting the systems that underpin farming practices and how they do not, on the whole, serve farming communities.



Blaming individual farmers for systemic issues. Producers are one part of an enormous food system, and the decisions they take on-farm which may be harmful for animal welfare, environmental or social outcomes are often driven by multiple systemic pressures; from historical policy incentives, supermarket pressure, poor working conditions and financial pressures (including debt). That said, we must still recognise that bad practices on-farm, such as agricultural pollution or animal welfare abuses, need to be adequately monitored and dealt with through enforcement measures.



Producers primarily listen to one another, peer-to-peer. There is a relatability amongst fellow farmers that is recognised and respected within the farming community. This is evidenced in the impact that knowledge exchange practices have in changing farming practices. As an alliance and wider food movement, we need farmer advocates to lead the conversation. This may mean taking a step back and avoiding dominating the narrative on behalf of farmers.



Examples of counter-arguments we hear

These illustrative examples of counter-arguments are by no means definitive, and there will be different answers for different farmers across different types of farming methods. That said, they can help illustrate some of the examples that Eating Better and its members hear and some guiding responses to help answer challenges.

It is always worth identifying what type of farming you are focussing on and ensuring your communications are adaptive to this.

Example

“There’s no need for the UK to produce less meat and dairy - as long as it’s British, it’s fine.”

Response

Short response: British meat and dairy might be better than some countries overseas, but it should still be the best it can be - and unfortunately British isn’t the only guarantee.

Longer response: We are working to create a food system with resilient farm businesses, equipped to face the challenges of this century. That will require changes across the food system and UK land-use, and livestock will continue to play an important role in food production and managing landscapes. We do want to see people ‘buy British’ and local where possible, and avoid substandard imports. Fair trade deals for both imports and exports, with animal welfare standards no lower than our own, alongside government policy, is needed to make this happen.

But the evidence suggests we will need to farm fewer animals overall, with this reduction stemming from a phase out of the most intensive and industrial systems. This is especially the case for poultry production which is the largest form of meat we produce in the UK, and is integrated with the pig industry globally. For example, Pilgrim’s is owned by JBS, one of the largest food companies in the world and is listed on the Brazilian stock exchange. Companies of this scale are often financing the creation of new poultry sheds, creating farmer dependency on these companies. Whilst meat and dairy produced in the UK can be better, imported livestock feed links some UK meat and dairy to overseas deforestation. Minimising food/feed competition, and reducing overreliance on grain for livestock, is a key part of a regenerative system and can help reduce our “ghost acres”, the land used to grow animal feed abroad.

Example

Response

“Advocating for less meat and dairy could harm the farmers trying to do good.”

Short response: Farmers leading the way are the farmers we want more of, with less meat and dairy focussing on the system of Industrial livestock production.

Longer response: The UK food system will be transformed in the years ahead, one way or another. In 2050 and beyond, due to climate change and biodiversity loss, we won't be able to eat certain foods as we do now if we do not change course. As an alliance, we're working to champion nature-friendly, pasture-fed and organic livestock systems, with higher and improved animal welfare, whilst calling for a fair price for producers. Decreasing the corporate control of the food system and monopolisation of supply chains is key to this. We also recognise the opportunities there are to produce more plant protein and the potential for diversification in farm businesses. We do believe as part of the changes to our food system, this will require that people eat less meat and dairy overall, but it's the systems of industrial livestock production that we want to be transformed. This is the 'less' of less and better. We need more nature, climate and agroecological friendly farming across all areas of the UK.

“Meat and dairy demand is growing around the world, and the global population is also growing – the UK can produce meat and dairy more sustainably than many other places and therefore we have a responsibility to produce it for export.”

Short response: The UK's food system is not feeding everyone in the UK, and we should focus on eating more of what we produce and producing more of what we eat.

Longer response: The idea that UK farmers need to 'feed the world' is an argument that has been made by agro-chemical companies wanting to push more products and yield increases at all costs. Farmers are disadvantaged by power imbalances in the system, including the corporate consolidation that is characteristic of intensive and industrial livestock farming. It is an enormous pressure on individual farmers if you take the view that they are responsible for feeding everyone. In addition, the UK is never going to be a volume-trader, we are too small. We should instead aim to nourish people within the UK and aim to disseminate best practice globally, with an overall ambition for a fairer food economy.

Further, we are not feeding the world as we still have global and UK poverty. 1.1 billion people live in acute poverty worldwide and in the UK, more than 1 in 5 people in the UK (21%) were in poverty in 2022/23 – 14.3 million people. Where we are feeding them, we may be feeding calories but we are not nourishing them as evidenced by the amount of diet related diseases. Additionally, a significant proportion of UK crops are going into animal feed, ultra-processed foods and alcohol which are undermining the UK's health and nutrition goals.

As an alliance we are working for a fairer future, one in which farmers receive a fair price, and in which everyone can access and enjoy a nutritious, healthy and sustainable diet as part of an agroecological food system. You can read more about our work on food justice through our Nourishing Justice workstream.

Example

“What about people on lower incomes? They can't afford better meat and dairy.”

Response

It is true that better meat and dairy can cost more than cheaper products, due to it reflecting the true environmental and social cost of producing food. Research by the FFCC has calculated the hidden cost of food at a staggering £268 billion. This means that people on lower incomes are priced out of healthier and more sustainable alternatives to the current cheap food on offer.

Despite the higher cost, Eating Better believes that everybody in the UK - regardless of income, gender, race, location - should be able to afford healthy and sustainable food. This is a key part of achieving food justice. Progressive government policy - at a UK, national and local level - is fundamental to achieving this and creating better food environments. This includes Improvements to social welfare, fair pay, universal free school meals and public procurement making better meat and dairy the norm. Brazil is one nation leading the way, lifting 40 million people out of poverty and removing themselves from the UN's Hunger Map. Meanwhile in Scotland, cash-first approaches to poverty are a clear way of getting people eating more sustainably and healthy. Further, research into organic shopper trends from the Soil Association shows that lower-income shoppers display higher rates of purchasing organic products than those on higher incomes.

You can read more in Eating Better's Better by Half Roadmap which sets out the range of policy options available to make better meat and dairy the norm, alongside wider reforms to other areas of the food system such as retailers and manufacturers.



Existing resources

This is a list of useful resources from members of the Eating Better alliance with expertise in the world of producers:

Organisation	Case study
Eating Better	<u>Pentrefelin, North Wales</u>
Pasture for Life	<u>Essebeare Farm, Devon</u>
Soil Association	<u>Robert England, Boxford Fruit Farms</u>
WWF	<u>Land of our future (contains 6 case studies from Wales)</u>
Community Supported Agriculture	<u>Norwich Farm Share</u>
Nature Friendly Farming Network	<u>Improving soil health through bokashi, microbes and red clover, Northern Ireland</u>
Nourish Scotland	<u>Case studies and agroecology resources (Scotland)</u>

For more info or questions, contact Andrew - andrew@eating-better.org

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