

Behind the scenes of the National Food Strategy

Lessons from the UK's
experience



Behind the scenes of the National Food Strategy: lessons from the UK's experience

Authors

Rosie Allen, James Elliott and
Dustin Benton

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Summary

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We have analysed the most important factors in the National Food Strategy’s successes, as well as areas where it could have gone better.”

In 2019, the UK environment secretary commissioned an independent review of the food system, designed to provide an overarching strategy for the government to create a resilient, healthy and environmentally sustainable food system.

The review combined data driven evidence with wide stakeholder engagement to diagnose serious problems caused by the food system, develop policy recommendations to tackle them and build a social and political mandate to act.

What came out of the process was the National Food Strategy (NFS), consisting of three parts: *Part one*, introducing the issues in July 2020, followed in July 2021 by the *Evidence pack* and *The plan*, proposing the way forward.

To outline lessons from the strategy’s formulation process, we interviewed the central team that worked on it. We have analysed the most important factors in the NFS’s successes, as well as areas where it could have gone better. Our goal was to offer transferable advice for other governments and groups seeking to develop a food strategy and create a healthy food system built on climate friendly, nature positive land use.

We identified seven important lessons:

1. Recruiting the team

The strategy team was brought together in a way that was unusual for the civil service, to encourage a culture of radical change.

2. How the time was used

The right balance should be struck between diagnosing problems and testing policy solutions.

3. Driven by data, delivered by story

Robust and extensive data is needed to support a compelling story and motivate change.

4. Accessing expertise

Backing from government helps to gain access to experts to test solutions.

5. Working with industry

Productive collaboration with the food industry is important, as is maintaining the integrity of an independent review.

6. Public engagement in tension with elected representation

It is helpful to pursue a public mandate, as well as a government influencing strategy.

7. Appetite for change

A political strategy that depended on a relationship with the secretary of state left action on recommendations vulnerable to a ministerial reshuffle.

How the National Food Strategy was born

“

The current food system causes several persistent and interrelated problems.”

To understand how the National Food Strategy was created, we conducted seven interviews with those most central to its production, as well as those involved in the management of government and industry stakeholders.

The current food system causes several persistent and interrelated problems, including biodiversity loss, climate change, diet-related disease and health inequalities. In the UK, responsibility for these different areas is fragmented between government departments, national and devolved administrations, as well as between different levels of government. Fragmented decision making means that successive UK governments have made few attempts to tackle the interlinked issues of the food system as a whole, preferring to address one or two issues at a time. However, efforts were made in the past to address particular aspects of the system.

In 2001, the Curry Commission reported on the state of farming and food safety in the light of the foot and mouth disease outbreak. In 2008, the Cabinet Office released a review of food consumption trends called Food Matters, aiming to identify their implications for the economy, society and the environment. The next phase of this project was in 2010, when the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) published Food 2030, widening the scope to health and food security, but the project was abandoned soon after due to a change of government.

“

It was the first review of its kind for 75 years.”

In 2019, the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP (then environment secretary) commissioned Henry Dimbleby, co-founder of LEON restaurants, non-executive director at Defra and co-author of the School Food Plan, to head an independent, comprehensive, government sponsored review of UK food policy. It was the first review of its kind for 75 years. The terms of reference were broad, allowing flexibility to take a systems level approach to mapping and improving food policy. It is the experiences and lessons of formulating this strategy that we discuss here.

The strategy's remit

“

It was rooted in robust, evidence based analysis to help the public and politicians understand the UK's food system.”

The strategy's focus was how to create a nature positive, climate friendly food system that radically improved public access to a healthy diet.

A participative approach relied heavily on democratic engagement with UK citizens. It was rooted in robust, evidence based analysis to help the public and politicians understand the UK food system's problems. To test its messages, the team engaged with industry stakeholders and experts.

The strategy's team members interviewed for this report saw their mission as: to diagnose serious problems caused by the food system; to communicate policy recommendations to tackle them; and to build a social and political mandate to solve problems identified.

The NFS faced three significant hurdles which made it difficult to address systemic problems. The first was the gulf between the current operation of the UK's food system and the extent of change required for more positive health, nature and climate outcomes. The second was the profit motive reinforcing the business case for unhealthy, more environmentally damaging food. The third was the government's aversion to intervening in the food system.

These challenges meant the team had to innovate to ensure a strategy proposing solutions at the scale required would be taken seriously by the government. One solution was to communicate high level data analysis in an accessible way.

“

Citizen dialogues were also vital in understanding the change needed.”

The team also needed to access senior level expertise and convened the food industry around solving problems that the industry directly profited from. Public voices through citizen dialogues were also vital in understanding the change needed.

In this report, we reflect on how the team as a whole operated, including the approach taken to recruitment and setting the right scope and tone for the review, and how it managed important stakeholders.

1. Recruiting the team

Problem

A wholly consultant or civil service team would not be able to propose radical change.

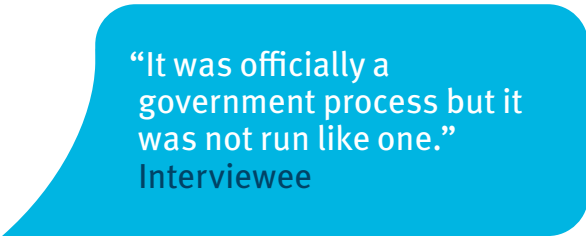
Lesson

Recruiting a diverse, skilled team meant it had the ability to operate like a think tank but also network like government.

Unique leadership shaped the strategy

Henry Dimbleby, an entrepreneur, publicly led the NFS in a media proficient way. His business experience fostered a fast paced internal culture (to the point of impatience with government procedures at times) and he was willing to change approach swiftly when something was not working.

His experience and reputation opened up access to industry stakeholders, as well as important media and political connections. Within the civil service, the internal leadership working on the strategy emulated Henry Dimbleby's style, avoiding friction in ways of working. This led to an inspired, loyal team.



“It was officially a government process but it was not run like one.”

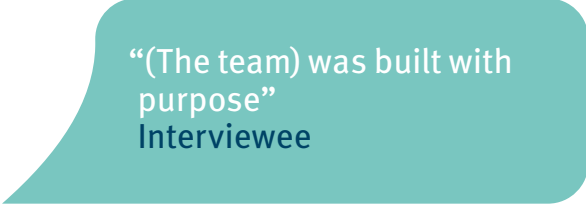
Interviewee

Consultants were not the right fit

At the start of the strategy's development, a small team of consultants were employed to begin data analysis (see the timeline in the annex on page 29). While their analysis was useful, it became clear that they lacked necessary expertise in food policy, and their approach did not match Henry Dimbleby's vision for the strategy. He decided to release the consultants and recruit a new core team better suited to the style needed to influence government thinking.

A hybrid team beyond civil servants

The core team was a hybrid, consisting of both civil servants and some who were external to government, including seconded staff from higher education institutions and charities. The purpose of this was to harness the experience of externally recruited staff in creating policy for radical change, alongside civil servants who understood the internal logic of central government, including how to work persuasively with ministers and other civil servants.



“(The team) was built with purpose”
Interviewee

The newly assembled core team recruited further civil service staff in a way that was different to the usual government approach, building a team culture unlike standard civil service culture.

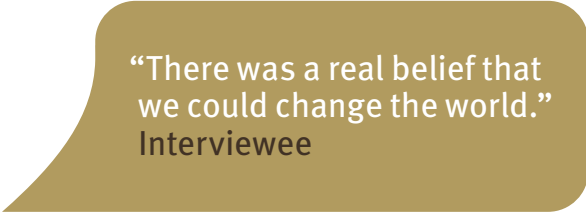
Interviewees observed that the UK civil service, by the nature of its internal working, favours generalists, rather than those with subject expertise. This is, in part, down to recruitment procedure which generally does not seek out skills for particular projects.

Civil service culture also tends to reward moderation in policy making, rather than fostering an appetite for radical change. Aspects of the food system had been reviewed before the NFS, but the new review was an opportunity to

inspire major change to the system as a whole. It was apparent that, to achieve this level of change, a different work culture was important. Subject expertise in the food system and the environment was considered necessary to build an evidence base of the required depth.

At the time of the review, civil servants in central government were becoming overwhelmed by day to day management of issues relating to both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Working on the NFS was a rare opportunity for those involved to engage in big picture thinking on policy solutions to societal problems. This opportunity was welcomed by the civil servants on the team. In hindsight, they noted that the unique team culture encouraged them to develop interest and expertise in food policy at pace, and many continue to be passionate about the topic.

A quote in a speech bubble. The bubble is olive green with a white border and a tail pointing to the left. The text inside is white.

“There was a real belief that we could change the world.”
Interviewee

This blended team approached the work of drafting the NFS in a way that did not separate policy and analysis (the standard government approach). Furthermore, the core team worked together closely on all the processes that led to the final output.

In common with a think tank, those drafting the policies were also involved in the storytelling, communications style and even the design of the final outputs.

Later, we explore how the perception of the team as government insiders gave them access to pools of expertise and industry convening power.

‘People first’ recruitment

Interviewees praised the core NFS team, suggesting that the ‘people first’ approach to recruitment resulted in a highly engaged group of staff. While the unintended consequence of this personal commitment may have been a tendency towards long working hours and ‘sprints’ of intense work, recruiting a diverse team with a passion for the subject was seen as crucial to successful delivery.

“ It’s worth reflecting on the personal sacrifice, which should not happen. But people cared to work late because they were inspired.”
Interviewee

2. How the time was used

Problem

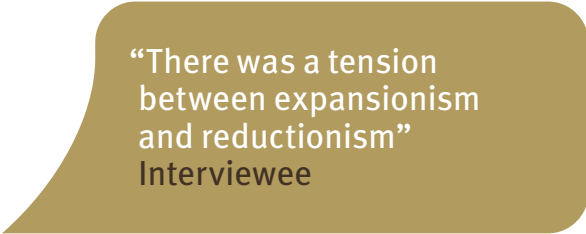
Needing to reach a correct diagnosis of the problems made it hard to finalise policy positions.

Lesson

The timeline of work should allow for attention to the data, but more time to test recommendations could have increased the success of the strategy.

Thorough analysis needs time

Interviewees thought too much time was spent on diagnosis, as opposed to drafting recommendations. On the other hand, they appreciated that the NFS was reviewing a complex system in need of radical change and that it needed to build momentum towards the changes required. The burden of proof on the evidence was high and a thorough diagnosis was needed to understand the problems. (See the annex on page 29 for the full timeline of activity involved in creating the strategy).



“There was a tension between expansionism and reductionism”
Interviewee

Ensuring the right scope

The NFS benefitted from generous terms of reference, which granted flexibility to analyse and recommend ways to address issues across the entire food system. It spanned agriculture and food production, industry and food sales, economic instruments and dietary health. This breadth came with its own challenges: setting the remit within which the strategy would operate.

Systems thinking was used to help communicate an effective story and simplify the breadth of information and data.

As identified by The Food Foundation, Henry Dimbleby was inspired by the work of Donella Meadows, who provided a framework of thinking about the food system as a whole and its interrelated parts, when diagnosing causes of problems.¹



“Running a strategy at that level of complexity [...] it was hard to finish things.”
Interviewee

The result was an ability to make connections between different parts of the food system, otherwise fragmented across government departments, to conceptualise the ‘junk food cycle’, which was one of the most impactful ideas from the strategy, according to interviewees.

Inevitably, sorting through an expanse of data across so many policy areas, with the high burden of proof required, meant diagnosis took a long time.

Balancing time between diagnosis and policy solutions

Some on the team thought more time should have been spent testing policy recommendations, after the analysis and diagnosis were completed.

“Spending lots of time describing the problem doesn’t get your solutions over the line”

Interviewee

Several interviewees concurred, although weighed this against the difficulty of creating momentum to intervene in the political climate at the time. It was thought that this could only be achieved through rigour in diagnosing and describing the problems, which made it hard to progress to final policies and close down dialogue to determine a final position.

The commitment to critical and empathetic argument testing extended the process of analysis, but ultimately strengthened the strategy’s messages.

“I was sceptical on the value of the evidence (but) ultimately, (it) was fundamental.”

Interviewee

3. Driven by data, delivered by story

Problem

Finding the right tone to communicate detailed evidence was difficult: there was a risk that either few would read it, or that it might be too colloquial to be taken seriously.

Lesson

The right balance in tone is important, using journalistic but accessible language.

A high bar for evidence

To mandate the scale of change required, the burden of proof for NFS data was high and depth of evidence was needed for the strategy to be credible.

Evidence had to be strong, engaging and endorsed by experts to capture the attention of the government and the public. In response, the team aimed for rigorously tested data, communicated in an engaging tone of voice.

“(We knew) we had to be unbelievably good on data.”
Interviewee

It was important that the content was accessible to both the government and the public. This motivated the colourful design and conversational style of *Part one*. Drawing on Henry Dimbleby’s journalism and marketing experience, he made use of personal anecdotes.

Respected by the government

However, the legitimacy of the NFS as a government document could be thrown into question if its tone was seen to undercut the data driven content. Straying too far from a more neutral, formal government tone risked it being seen by some as undermining the authority that the independent review status awarded the NFS. One interviewee mentioned that a civil servant had said the writing style of *Part one* “was a bit fruity.”

“My eight year old daughter woke me up the other morning with a question. “Daddy, [...] were you this chubby even when you were young? It was a bruising start to the day.”
From *Part one* of the National Food Strategy

Following this reception to *Part one* from some internal sources, the NFS team sought to adjust the balance between communicating the data and the evidence, while still conveying the story with political salience in accessible language.

For the subsequent two documents that made up the full strategy, *The plan* and the *Evidence pack*, the ‘fruitiness’ was dialled back, to avoid the risk that the case for food system change would not be taken seriously.

“(The minister) saw the bell curve and said f***.”
Interviewee

Interviewees thought that, for the NFS to inspire government action, a high burden of proof was required. This would avoid any doubts that could slow progress or

prevent maximum impact on the strategy's release. Behind closed doors, the data pack was seen by civil servants as 'unimpeachable' and was used to change the minds of those in influential government positions, according to interviewees.

Striking the right tone

While keeping the writing style formal enough to be taken seriously, the NFS also aimed to engage readers. The style of delivery gave the NFS a uniquely non-governmental feel. The approachable tone, while maintaining authority, was considered important to alter perceptions about the acceptability of change to food system policy in the UK.

“The (evidence pack) slides have become a sort of bible (in government).”
Interviewee

Interviewees noted that the *Evidence pack* is still revered by government insiders. The overarching impression of those we interviewed was that the combination of data and narrative voice used by the NFS was successful.

4. Accessing expertise

Problem

The strategy needed expert input to legitimise its findings.

Lesson

Being a government supported exercise enabled good access to experts to debate and assess the evidence.

Being both in and out of government

The strategy team benefitted from being based within government and from the profile of Henry Dimbleby, facilitating access to politicians and industry experts.



“Being inside government gave excellent access.”
Interviewee

To drive momentum towards change, the team sought expert endorsement of the data. Not only did this add rigour, but engaging with a range of expertise meant policy recommendations could be tested.

The positioning of the NFS as independent, but with government backing, enabled access to world leading experts and those involved in shaping the UK food industry.

The NFS team set up a platform, using an NFS advisory panel, to test competing and novel concepts and confidently map out expert debates. The trade-offs between

different policy options were tested and better understood. The policy recommendations were also tested across a spectrum of views.

“(Henry Dimbleby) was uniquely well placed. He had a lot of people with trust (in him) within the food movement. Great connections with (politicians) and connections with the media. That stuff all made for a lot of political capital.”
Interviewee

Fostering healthy debate

Engaging with such a wide range of expert stakeholders – including economists, scientists, farming representatives and campaigners – in a way that enabled dialogue, helped to reach a satisfactory outcome. All our interviewees agreed that this expertise contributed to the NFS process and helped to increase the credibility of the strategy.

“(The team got) leaders in their fields testing their views against each other.”
Interviewee

5. Working with industry

Problem

The government's position on the food system is strongly determined, in part, by industry's views.

Lesson

The status of the strategy team made it possible to access, convene and build trust with industry representatives, but it was important to keep in mind that they profit from the system as it is.

Working with, but not for, industry

The NFS team convened senior food and drink industry representatives in workshops to seek solutions, but were aware of the profit incentives in maintaining the status quo.



“We avoided echo chambers.”
Interviewee

It was vital to engage senior industry stakeholders, to understand the food system and the impact of different policy interventions. But this had to be balanced against acknowledgement of the profit motive. The ‘junk food cycle’, a major concept which emerged from the NFS, is driven by the high profit margins from selling ultra-processed food.

Trusting industry

Industry stakeholders were brought together and trusted with information gathered by the NFS team. This convening was vital, according to interviewees. Care was taken to strike a balance between workshopping policy with

industry, so workable recommendations could be put forward, but not to such an extent that the NFS could be accused of bowing to industry lobbying or reducing the ambition of its solutions.

Interviewees noted that working directly with industry representatives may have moved the conversation forward more constructively than working with trade associations could have done. Trade associations were seen as being more resistant to system-wide change.

“Sufficient jeopardy from this process kept (industry players) in the room.”
Interviewee

Interviewees recalled that industry stakeholders were, sometimes surprisingly, amenable to policy interventions. Many were aware that the food system is leading to environmental and health problems, but noted that early adopters of change would see their profits fall. In that sense, many industry representatives were supportive of government regulation that meant change could apply equally across the board.

“It would have been pointless to recommend a salt and sugar tax without being certain it was doable.”
Interviewee

Overall, the team saw engagement with industry as an important aspect of the NFS. It enabled them to explore interventions with those who had direct experience of the workings of the food and drink sector, and policy recommendations were targeted more appropriately as a result.

6. Public engagement in tension with elected representation

Problem

Some politicians think direct engagement with the public could undermine their political mandate.

Lesson

It is helpful to the outcome to pursue a public mandate, as well as a government influencing strategy.

The importance of citizen engagement

Although public dialogue, hosted by the NFS team, experienced some issues with objection from politicians, it was invaluable as it brought lived experience to the strategy. It was necessary to do this at the diagnosis stage.

The NFS team knew that, to address structural problems identified in the UK food system, large scale change would be needed. It is hard to build this momentum in any circumstance, but particularly hard when a government (with a large majority) is opposed to radical change.

Henry Dimbleby and the team determined to engage directly with non-policy professionals, to ensure the strategy was grounded in reality in terms of people's relationship with food and to build public support for change. Meaningful public engagement was considered essential to reinforce the strategy's legitimacy.

However, it was apparent throughout the public engagement process that politicians considered it a threat, particularly in the light of the Brexit referendum.

Public vs political mandate

Setting up public engagement was not without difficulty. Behind the scenes, politicians expressed concern about democratic process, particularly in the light of the 2016 Brexit referendum, characterised by some as a failed experiment in direct democracy, unsuited to the UK's political system.² This led to an assertion by some MPs that only their contributions were democratically legitimate, through their elected mandate. They believed their role was to make decisions on behalf of their constituents. Whereas some view direct democracy as valuable way to engage the public directly on a specific issue, to create a mandate for change.



“The cabinet was very hostile to citizen engagement.”
Interviewee

Dialogue vs citizens' assembly

The main barrier encountered around the NFS's use of public dialogue was that, while it gathered the thoughts of those involved, some interviewees thought the format of the dialogue did not allow thorough enough interrogation of emerging views.

In other words, the dialogue identified opinions but was cautious about engaging in further debate to test them. As such, it stopped short of drawing strong conclusions from the opinions given.

It was suggested by one interviewee that a true citizens' assembly model would have enabled more extensive testing of ideas but they admitted it would have taken far longer and been more expensive.

Dissatisfaction with the standard of initial engagement (run by an external provider) led to core NFS team members conducting their own focus groups to ensure that citizen engagement went beyond a loose indication of opinion about the strategy's policy recommendations and whether or not they should be enacted. While this model was not ideal, it was thought that more effort should be made to properly test ideas with the public as a priority.

The team wanted to establish a true public mandate, through interrogation of the benefits and drawbacks of the ideas, more aligned with a citizens' assembly.

“The question is, do you want meaningful public buy in or do you want to justify (the recommendations) to ministers by saying: voters want this?”
Interviewee

Some interviewees suggested that, if they were to run the NFS process again, they would adjust the timeline so there was more time to test the policy recommendations with the public.

Public involvement was essential

In the end, the NFS public dialogues were useful and enhanced the strategy's impact on its release. Research areas and scope were adjusted following these consultations, and recommendations were shaped in the light of the feedback received.

“If you had unlimited time, it would have been great to spend six months testing (the policy recommendations) rigorously with citizens.”
Interviewee

The process involved underrepresented people in policy making, including their views to build momentum for a true public mandate to improve the food system.

Issues discussed in public sessions did not conflict with expert views, but they directed the team’s attention to the main areas of public concern.

“(The dialogue) harnessed lived experience, which otherwise might have gone unrepresented.”
Interviewee

7. Appetite for change

Problem

An influencing approach targeting senior government ministers, while potentially rewarding, can also be high risk.

Lesson

Investment in good relationships with senior ministers (as opposed to broadly targeting parliamentarians) can be highly successful but care should be taken. If the minister involved leaves their post at an important moment, momentum can be lost.

The government response fell short

Overall, the UK government's response to the NFS was disappointing. Ministers accepted the analysis of the problems but only took forward a small subset of the solutions proposed. However, the NFS did succeed in changing the way the government, business and civil society think about the food system in the UK.



“(The NFS) did not have the political impact it should have.”
Interviewee

Our interviewees were unanimously proud of the quality of the strategy. However, they did not believe the lead government department, Defra, was fully engaged in fostering a cross departmental response to the recommendations made.

Stakeholders expected more

There were successes as policies were taken forward. The government embraced the need for a land use framework; and to reform agricultural subsidies with new funding through the new Environmental Land Management schemes. Funding for children through Holiday Action Fund food clubs was extended (after public backing from the footballer Marcus Rashford).

But there were major disappointments too: the government had little appetite for restricting advertising for unhealthy foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS); a white paper on food related health inequalities was trailed but never published; dietary guidelines were not updated; no food bill was announced; and the HFSS tax was considered, but not enacted.

“It did not get the momentum it should have (despite) buy in from charities, academics and industry.”

Interviewee

How momentum could have been built

Interviewees reflected on how the relationship with political stakeholders could have been managed differently to encourage more action on the strategy’s recommendations.

One suggested that less reliance on senior ministers, who were then shuffled out of post, and instead a focus on creating cross party momentum with non-governmental parliamentarians, might have been more successful.

Another suggestion was that the team could have given more attention to inside track advocacy and used more thorough citizen engagement to test policy recommendations.

Focusing on senior ministers proved to be a high risk tactic. Immediately following the publication of the strategy, the UK faced a period of political instability, with three prime ministers appointed over fifteen months. This left the NFS without its network of proponents in government.

Some interviewees commented that, despite not being usual government practice, there would have been a benefit in continuing the project beyond the strategy's publication. The team could have continued to advise ministers and the food industry on implementing its recommendations.

“(There was always the) risk of a supporting minister moving on.”
Interviewee

The NFS still opened up solutions

The NFS opened up thinking and possibilities about how to address the junk food cycle and the relationship between agriculture, nature and land use in the UK. Interviewees said that the strategy continues to be seen as a reliable source of evidence for future government policy.

It was noted that Henry Dimbleby's continued advocacy of the issues is maintaining public focus on improving the national food system. There has also been recognition from the opposition, such as from the shadow Defra minister Daniel Zeichner MP, who has suggested that a Labour government could support the arguments made in the NFS.³ He has suggested that future governments could continue to refer to it for an accurate diagnosis of UK food system problems and potential solutions.

“(The NFS) has set up a different solution space.”
Interviewee

Annex

Three years to create the National Food Strategy

	2019			2020				2021			2022		
	Summer	Autumn	Winter	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Winter	Spring	Summer
Milestone	Terms of reference published	Call for evidence launched	Core NFS team recruited	Pandemic leads to NFS pause	Part one published				The Plan and Evidence pack published				Government response published
Strand of work													
Consultancy work													
Discussions with advisory groups													
Site visits													
Data gathering and analysis													
Multi-phase citizen dialogues													
Chapter drafting													
Call for evidence and response analysis													
Polling and focus groups													

Endnotes

- 1 The Food Foundation, 2022, *Lessons learned from England's National Food Strategy*
- 2 Politico, 6 July 2016, 'The trouble with referendums'
- 3 Hansard, 27 October 2022, debate, 'National Food Strategy and food security', <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-10-27/debates/2C4AD752-A804-4F41-9B09-CF0327B41562/NationalFoodStrategyAndFoodSecurity>

Green Alliance
18th Floor
Millbank Tower
21-24 Millbank
London SW1P 4QP

020 7233 7433
ga@green-alliance.org.uk

www.green-alliance.org.uk
@GreenAllianceUK
blog: www.greenallianceblog.org.uk