



FABIAN POLICY REPORT

# REVALUING FOOD

*New research from the Fabian Society into food waste  
featuring responses and discussion from Tim Lang  
& Geof Rayner; Carrie Longton; David Fell; Rosie Boycott  
and Jeanette Longfield*





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## CONTENTS

- 2 A clear plate means a clear conscience  
*Natan Doron*
- 7 Waste Lands?  
*Geof Rayner and Tim Lang*
- 9 Chuckers and keepers  
*Carrie Longton*
- 10 Offer shoppers in-store advice  
*David Fell*
- 11 Does muesli grow on trees?  
*Rosie Boycott*
- 12 Making sure food matters to government  
*Jeanette Longfield MBE*

## EDITORIAL

When it comes to food waste and food policy, there is a need for some innovative policy thinking. In addition, we must also confront questions about the purpose of our food system. Is it to provide an excess of food at the cheapest possible prices? Or is it to ensure that all are well fed and can enjoy access to good quality food? The articles that follow offer a range of answers to and opinions on some of these questions and more. Some focus specifically on the problem of food waste, others look at the food system more broadly. The articles come from a variety of perspectives, some from academia and others in the game of advocacy. At times, the views of the various authors may conflict, but in true Fabian tradition, they all provide ground for further thought and discussion. Ultimately what they all illustrate in primary colours is that food is indeed a deeply political issue and we have a collective duty to reason together about what we want our food system to deliver.

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# A clear plate means a clear conscience

We are not a nation of callous food wasters, yet high levels of waste persist. *Natan Doron* writes that new Fabian Society research shows this is a problem that can't be left to individuals to shoulder alone, but must be solved collectively through politics



*Natan Doron is  
Senior Researcher at the  
Fabian Society*

FOOD IS A profoundly political issue. In the not too distant past, the lack of food was a pressing concern for social justice campaigners. Indeed the rationing of food was a central issue during the 1951 election in which the Conservative party promised to usher in a new era of abundance. Nowadays it is an excess of, as well as the low quality of food which provide political challenges.

A peculiar feature of the food policy debate in the UK today is the problem of food waste. Household food waste in particular continues to mystify. Despite a squeeze on living standards that has accompanied the economic slump of the last few years, household food waste remains a source of alarming statistics. £480 worth of perfectly good edible food is thrown out by the average household each year. The figure rises to £700 for households with children. The collective climate change impact of household food waste is the equivalent of one in five cars on the road in the country.

We can choose to ignore food waste as a political issue. We can take the view that people should be free to do what they wish with their food. But this view is misplaced for a number of reasons. Firstly, to waste food is to undermine the purpose and value of food. It is there to be eaten, to provide sustenance as well as to bring pleasure

through its quality and/or as an outlet for cultural expression. Secondly, food is the product of hard labour and depends on the use of resources such as land and water. These are resources that are precious and in greater demand than ever both domestically and abroad. Most importantly, our food system has outcomes that impact everybody. Whether it is the carbon emissions associated with food waste or the increased cost to the NHS due to unhealthy food, the features and structures of our food system are anything but an individual concern.

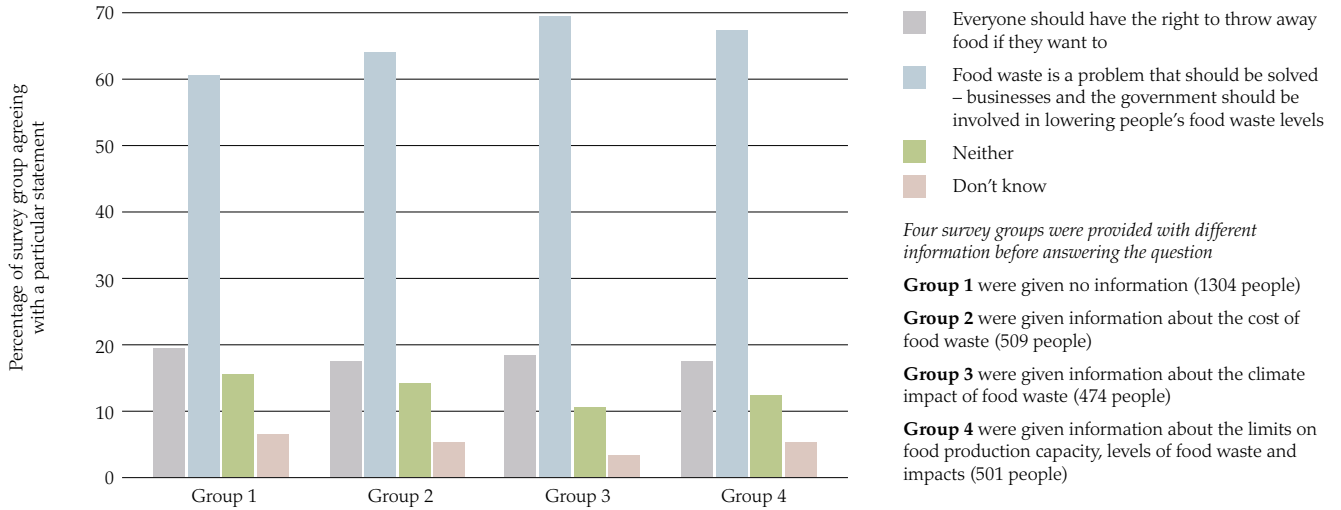
An understanding of food policy as a collective concern demands that food waste is a problem that should be solved. Our research, presented here for the first time explores in detail the issue of public attitudes to food waste. The new work, which is based on a nationally representative survey carried out in August 2012,<sup>1</sup> helps to shed light on how we can meet the challenge of food waste by exploring the political space available for designing public policy interventions.

This article sets out to answer some questions pertinent to the debate around food waste. Are we a nation of callous food wasters? Does using different information to communicate the problem trigger more support for initiatives to address food

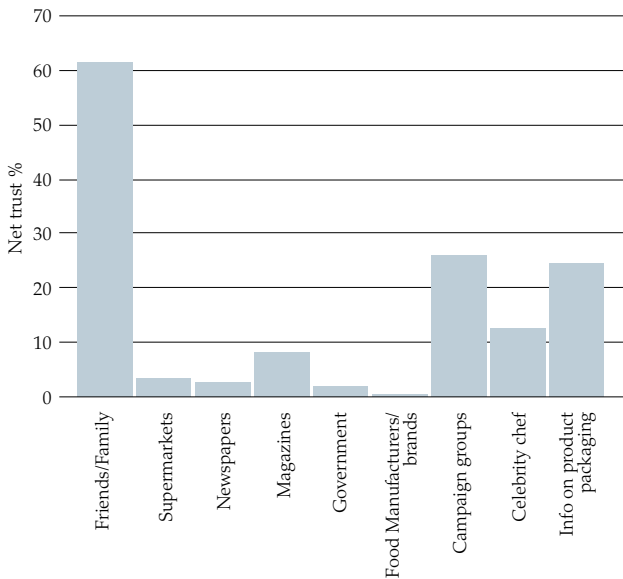
waste? Who do we trust to deliver information about reducing food waste? What kind of barriers to reducing their food waste levels do people list? What policy solutions are popular and what motivates people to reduce their food waste? Finally, is food waste a problem we solve on our own as individual consumers or we do tackle it collectively?

Our research shows that we are not a nation of callous wasters. The results of the survey show that 60 per cent of people think that food waste is a problem that should be solved. Furthermore, it is a problem that legitimises intervention by both government and businesses. As shown in Figure 1, when people were presented with information about the climate change impact of food waste, this figure rose to around 70 per cent. This was 5 per cent higher than the survey in which another group were given only information about the monetary value of food waste. This affirms a finding in our previous qualitative work that the environment can be a bigger motivator of attitudes towards food waste.<sup>2</sup> In this collection, the article by Geof Rayner and Tim Lang (page 7) asks if we “can’t all be criticised for being bunch of wasters”. This research provides evidence that if we can, we are certainly concerned about it.

**FIGURE 1**  
Business and government should be involved in lowering people's food waste

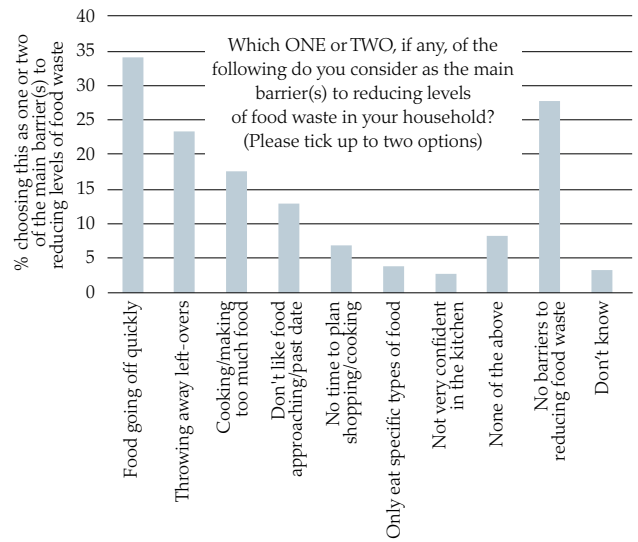


**FIGURE 2**  
Net trust scores of different sources of information about lowering food waste



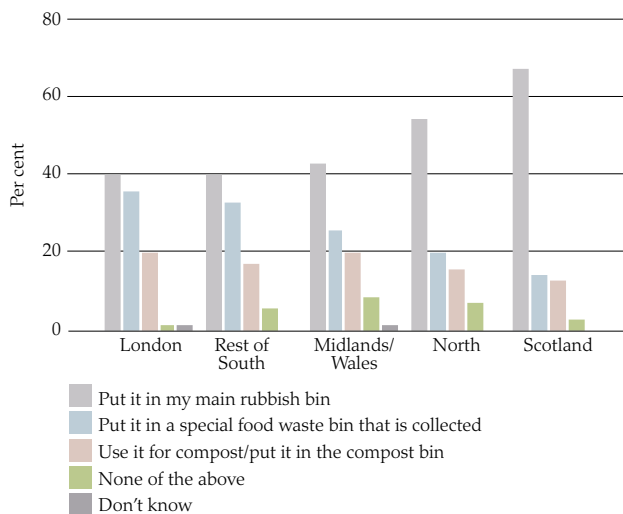
This figure shows the net trust score of different sources of information. This score is the percentage of people who trusted this source minus those who did not trust this source. None of the sources of information had a minus net trust score. The figure clearly shows that friends and family are the most trusted sources of information about food waste.

**FIGURE 3**  
Main barrier(s) to reducing food waste

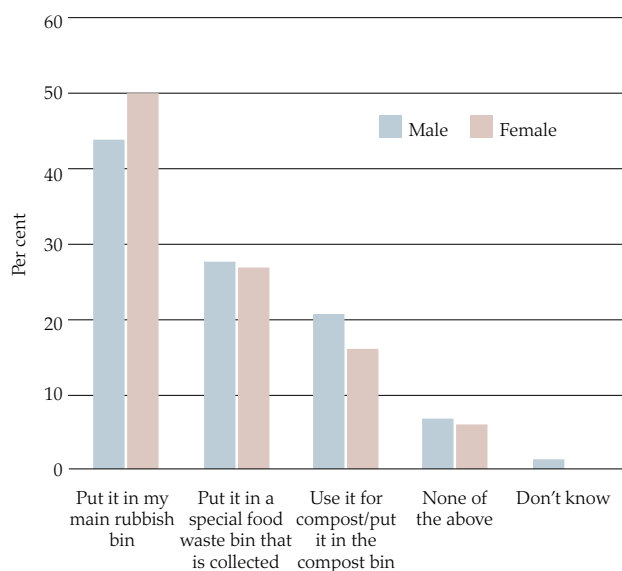


This figure shows what people in our survey listed as the main barriers to them reducing their levels of food waste. It is worth noting the large number who state that there are no barriers to them reducing their food waste. This may be because they do not think that they waste food in the first place.

**FIGURE 4**  
Regional differences in answers to the question of where people currently put their food waste



**FIGURE 5**  
Gender differences in answers to the question of where people currently put their food waste



So we think that government and business action is justified to solve the problem of food waste, but do we trust them? Our research shows that people do not particularly trust government or business to provide information about reducing levels of food waste. So what sources of information do we trust? Overwhelmingly, and perhaps obviously, the most trusted sources of information are our friends and family. Interestingly, the other sources that enjoy a high net level of trust (more people trusting than distrusting) are campaigning groups and information on product packaging. This data, seen in Figure 2 above, gives a strong indication of what sources of information a successful communications campaigns about food waste would utilise: peer-to-peer information giving facilitated by campaigning groups as well as information on product packaging. It also bears out the spirit of an assertion made by Carrie Longton in this collection (page 9): the best ideas that mums can get will often come from other mums.

So if the vast majority of people think that food waste is a problem that should be solved, why does the problem persist? Much accepted wisdom informs us that the barriers people face in attempts to reduce their

food waste include: busy lifestyles, a lack of skills or ability to plan in the kitchen. Our research, however, shows that the barriers people actually describe include: food going off too quickly, throwing away leftovers and cooking too much food in the first place. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

### The results of this survey illustrate the amount of work needed to be done in increasing use of food waste collections

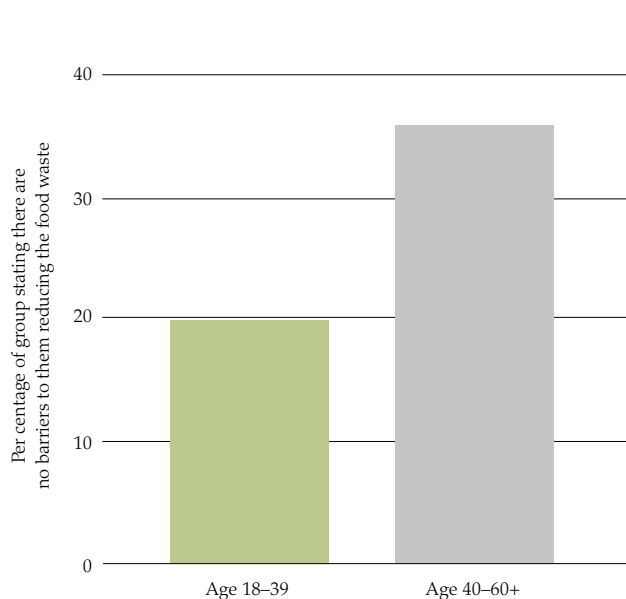
Beneath the top line findings of the research, there are some interesting differences in responses that shed some light on the complex variation of food waste attitudes as well as behaviours around the UK. One of our questions looked at what people currently did with their food waste. On average, around half of people still put food waste in their main rubbish collection. When breaking down the responses by region, big differences emerge. As displayed in Figure 4, almost 70

per cent of people in Scotland put food in their main rubbish collection. This was around 30 per cent higher than people in London or the rest of Southern England. With food waste collections only available in half of the UK, the variation in visibility and take up is clearly very high. The results of this survey illustrate the amount of work needed to be done in increasing use of food waste collections.

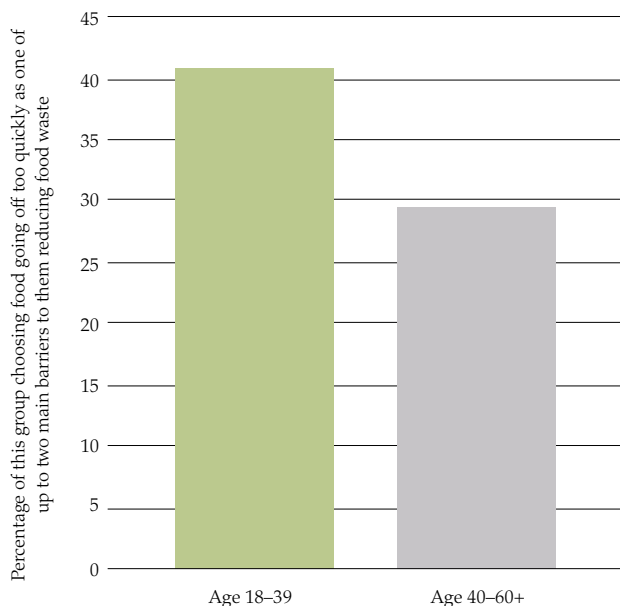
The survey data also shows differences between how men and women throw away their food. Though not as dramatic as the regional differences, men come out slightly better in terms of avoiding food waste going in their main rubbish collection. Men also show marginally higher rates of composting. This is shown in Figure 5. Why is it that men are slightly ahead in terms of food waste disposal? It may be that women are often left with too high a share of the childcare and household responsibilities, squeezing the time and energy that can be devoted to disposing of food waste in special collections or composting. This is perhaps borne out in the practical barriers listed by users of the website Mumsnet in the article by Carrie Longton in this collection.

Age also emerges as an important factor. When asked to list the main barriers to

**FIGURE 6**  
Age differences in the amount saying that there are no barriers to them reducing food waste



**FIGURE 7**  
Differences according to age group in listing food going off too quickly as a main barrier to reducing food waste



reducing food waste, those above 40 were far more insistent that there are no such barriers. This may reflect a belief on the part of the older people in our survey that they themselves do not waste significant amounts of food.

Younger people in our survey were also more likely to state that food going off too quickly was one of the main barriers to reducing their food waste (Figure 7). There may be a number of explanations for this. People above 40 years of age will be more experienced at managing households, planning meals and making use of the food they have bought. Those above 40 may also have a higher tolerance for food that is not quite as fresh, perhaps preferring to use their common sense as opposed to the date on the label.

Regional differences also emerge in the factors listed as main barriers to reducing food waste. Whilst people in all regions listed the same four main barriers, as Figure 8 demonstrates, there are some interesting variations in the strength of the results. Londoners and people in Scotland identify throwing away leftovers as a greater barrier than people in the rest of the country. More people in Scotland also list cooking too

much food as a main barrier compared to people in the rest of the country.

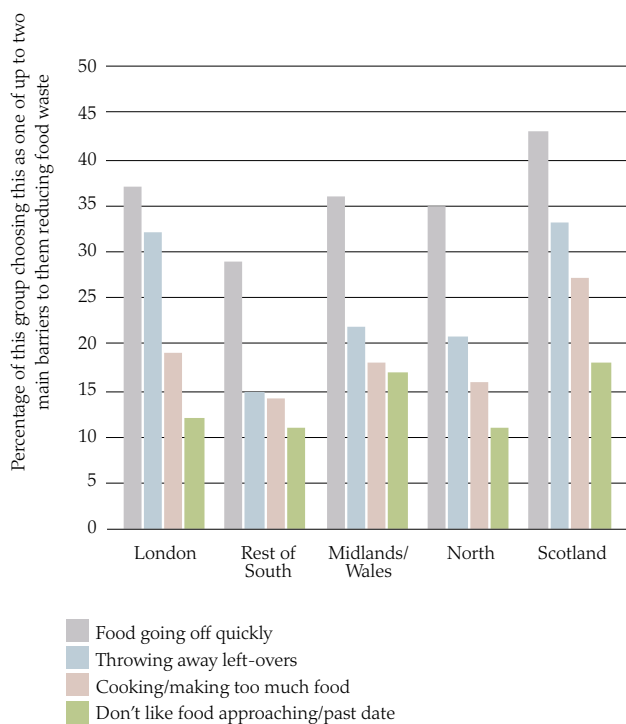
The fine grained detail shown by our survey results reveals a rich tapestry of attitudes and experiences that vary according to age, gender and region. This bears out some of the recent research done by the sociologist David Evans at Manchester University. Evans demonstrates through a long period of close observation of families that the logistics of shopping, routines of families eating together, the desire to eat healthier (more perishable) food and the force of spontaneity all contribute to people wasting more food than they would like to.<sup>3</sup> There are important practical considerations too for many people that make issues of skill and lifestyle somewhat redundant: not having much storage space for food, not possessing a big enough freezer (or not having one in the first place) as well as living far from anywhere to buy food conveniently making people reliant on occasional large shopping trips. The different attitudes and barriers identified by the people in our survey mean that if we are concerned with reducing food waste, we may have to be particularly creative with our policy prescriptions.

What policy solutions were popular with

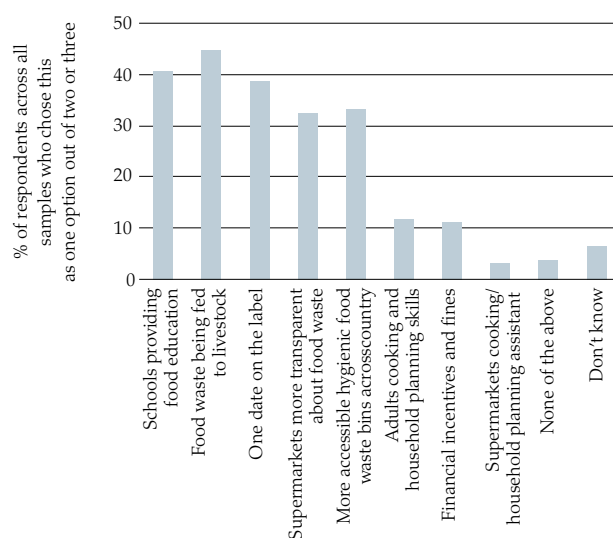
people? Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the solutions that were most popular in our survey involved little action from people. The things that were popular were actions that government or business can take largely independent of any change in people's behaviour. Furthermore, the solutions that were popular were the ones that were more focused on lowering the impact of food waste rather than the occurrence of food waste in the first place. The research shows that whilst we think that government and business are justified in attempts to solve the problem of food waste, we want them to focus on reducing the impact and we don't want to have too much to do with it. When we asked people what they thought would motivate them to waste less food in the first place it was clear: saving them money or making it easier to reduce their food waste.

There was, however, an interesting finding which showed that how we communicate about food waste affects how much trouble people are willing to go to in order to address the problem. The group of people who were given information about the environmental impact of food waste saw a 7 per cent rise in those willing to support the idea of universal food waste collections

**FIGURE 8**  
Regional differences in main barriers to reducing food waste



**FIGURE 9**  
Most popular ideas for reducing food waste



This figure shows what people in our survey listed as what they thought the best policy ideas for reducing levels of food waste were. There is a clear cluster of five policy options which are the most popular. These often focus on treating the impact of food waste (e.g. feeding to livestock) or involve little effort from individuals (e.g. putting one date on food packaging labels).

in the UK. This illustrates the importance of building support for policy initiatives by constructing a coherent narrative, drawing upon the reasons for acting in the first place.

Our research is good news for supporters of the food waste bill. Many of the measures contained in this unsuccessful bill proved popular. Of particular popularity was the idea that food waste be fed to livestock where appropriate. Whilst this and many such measures address food waste after the event, there is a strong argument that by doing more to lower the impact collectively (i.e. through the political process), this will raise awareness of the need to stop food waste arising in the first place. If not, we have to tackle the question of how concerned we are with reducing food waste as opposed to lowering its impact. This can be done by asking ourselves: if we somehow eliminate all the impacts of food waste, are we still concerned about it being thrown away in the first place? It would be very likely that the majority of people would still think so.

There is something about food waste that intuitively troubles us. It may be because of the resources and labour that go into food production. It may be because it undermines the purpose and potential of food for pleasure and for exchanging cultural commemoration. It could also be because it presents an intriguing paradox of human behaviour. Food prices have been rising steadily throughout the globe. In some parts of the world there are extreme episodes of hunger affecting large groups of people. Despite this, waste persists both at the level of the household and throughout our complex food system.

This paradoxical policy area illustrates that there is some deep thinking to be done about our food system both in this country and around the world. It should be remembered that the features and functioning of our system are but a consequence of political choices. Whilst so much of the food waste and food policy debate tends to fixate on the role of the individual, it is ultimately a problem which we must strive to solve collectively.

Wartime posters in the UK proclaimed that a clear plate meant a clear conscience. We must revisit some of the wisdom of our past. **F**

#### Endnotes

1. The survey was carried out by YouGov online between 15th–17th August 2012. The total sample size was 2800 UK adults. The sample was split into 4 groups. Group one was given no prior information before answering the questions. This group consisted of 1304 people. The three further groups were given different information about food waste before answering the questions. This information is detailed in figure one which represents a comparison between people in these different survey groups. Figures two, three and nine represent top line findings and are based on an average of answers of all four groups. Figures four through to eight represent comparisons according to age, gender and region within group one meaning a total sample size of 1304 people for those particular figures.
2. Our previous qualitative research was analysed and published in May 2012 in the report *waste not, want not* which is available online at the Fabian Society website
3. David Evans, *Beyond the throwaway society: ordinary domestic practice and a sociology of household food waste*, 2012



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# Waste Lands?

Wasteful behaviours cannot be explained by psychology alone. We have to look at the institutions which shape behaviour and forge a new economic approach based on the principles of sustainability argue *Geof Rayner* and *Tim Lang*



*Geof Rayner is a freelance researcher and Tim Lang is based at City University London. They are the authors of Ecological Public Health*

**T**S ELIOT'S 1922 poem *The Waste Land* builds upon the Arthurian legend of a wounded king and the barrenness and despoliation of his lands. "I will show you fear", says Eliot, "in a handful of dust." Eliot was commenting on culture, not the environment, but the poem provides echoes of such concerns, waste being central to the emerging consumer culture which he so disdained. Today's 'waste land' is a world where we unthinkingly throw out, abandon, or ignore. To waste is to "use or expend carelessly, extravagantly, or to no purpose", says the Oxford dictionary; waste is composed of "unwanted or unusable material, substances, or by-products." What is defined in language is confirmed in law. The EU Waste Framework Directive says that waste is that "which the holder discards, intends to discard or is required to discard".

In Europe about 2.2bn tons of waste of all kinds was generated annually between 1998 and 2001. Prior to industrial society in Europe, food waste (only one dimension of waste, of course,) was impossible to estimate. But we know from the situation in developing countries that waste probably occurred near the point of production and once food got to customers they wasted little.

According to the UN's Environment Programme, Indian losses for cereals and oil seeds are 10–12 per cent. In some African countries, 25 per cent of cereals are lost post-harvest, and for more perishable crops such as fruits, vegetables and roots, post harvest losses can be 50 per cent. In Uganda milk losses are an estimated 27 per cent of

all milk produced. In contrast, in the UK and other Western countries reducing waste has been a goal of food policy since the 1930s. Even so, in the USA, first estimates indicated that 30 per cent of all food, worth US\$48.3bn is thrown away each year. A 2012 study put the figure up to 40 per cent. US food waste represents 4 per cent of all US energy use and approximately a quarter of all water use.<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, according to WRAP (the UK government's official waste body), UK consumers threw away 6.7m tonnes of food, a third of the food they purchased, worth £10.2bn. The pattern that emerges here is that in the transition from poor agricultural societies to rich industrial or post-industrial societies, product loss shifts from spoilage (in or near production) to wastage (in consumer use).

A more radical view of waste emerges from within ecological thought. Ecologically, one doesn't see 'waste' but a long chain of conversions of energy and matter from one state to another. What may appear the waste of one species (carcass remains to a polar bear) becomes the meal of another species (say, an arctic fox.) It goes further down the chain of course, including down to the basic microbiological processes of decay. Charles Darwin, it should be remembered, wrote an entire book on worms. In nature nothing gets wasted; it only changes form, location and utility.

Conversely, in the human-created social world, waste is simply what we define it to be, with its meaning historically locked in step with the economy and social struc-

ture. Thorstein Veblen, the great Victorian Darwin-influenced economist, pointed out a century ago that in the new Gilded Age of American capitalism, waste held a powerful social function. He observed that the new 'leisure class', the super-rich of his day, achieved little social merit from consuming 'the bare necessities of life'. What they really needed to give them symbolic heft and, as they thought, to be admired by the masses, was overt wastefulness.<sup>2</sup>

Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, set in 1922, provides a bookend to this era, which was soon to be followed by the Great Depression (and higher taxes on the rich.) How things have changed today. Conspicuous consumption and deep deprivation – witness food riots in poor countries as commodity prices skyrocket – exist together. The current US Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney boasts at having paid 13 per cent tax when people receiving comparatively minute incomes pay double that rate. In fact, rates of inequality in the USA are back to those found in 1917, according to economist Emmanuel Saez.

Such stark contrasts fascinate, but, compared to the past can't we all, in the rich world, be criticised for being wasters? We leave lights on when we leave a room; we use electric dryers in place of washing lines; we overfill our plates and throw away the remains. What were once considered small social crimes by our forebears are today's new normal. Such apparent acts of carelessness, to return to Veblen's critique, may hide a social function. Perhaps they confirm to us our own sense of personal progress, helping

distance ourselves from privations visited on our parents. It is a form of problematic progress however. Previous generations had to spend energy at work. Post Olympics, the UK basks in gold medals, but many of us develop chronic diseases due to poor diet and inactivity. What is waste, indeed?

Wasteful behaviours cannot be explained by psychology alone. We have to look at the institutions which shape behaviour. Mass production, supply chain logistics, and aggressive retail marketing provide cheap consumer products at rock-bottom prices. For example when a (Chinese) electric toaster can be had for little more than a deluxe sandwich (a snip at £4.97 in Argos), our in-built mental calculators tell us not to mend but to buy new. Unsurprisingly, the profession of toaster mender no longer exists.

Isn't modern life a witness to such efficiency? And where more than in the much-admired food supermarket chains. They've changed our lives. They espouse 'zero waste' and avoidance of waste is much discussed, so where and why does the food waste documented by WRAP occur? As noted, today where waste happens is mainly at the end of the supply chain: lodged in consumer behaviour. The 'why', in contrast, is more complicated. Food sales devices such as the BOGOF (buy one get one free) incentivise over-purchasing. Another aspect is the need creation process itself. Take soft drinks. Bottled non-alcoholic drink consumption in Britain is almost three times the level of the 1970s. Not only is this bad for health (all that sugar and chemicals, with links to obesity and poor dental health) and bad for the environment (even if 100 per cent of bottles or cans were recycled), the energy costs (another form of waste) and carbon production would still be considerable. A central, undisputable fact that guides both impressionable minds and wallets is that the expenditures of soft drink marketing has grown to be vast. We did a health audit of the world's top 25 food companies in 2006 and found that Coca Cola alone spent more on marketing annually than the entire biennial budget of the World Health Organisation.<sup>3</sup>

Such facts raise the possibility that it is not just waste we need to consider but the concept of an intrinsically wasteful product and the deliberate creation of waste that civil society, healthcare, or insurance pays for. Waste can no longer be seen as just an external cost or a regrettable aberration but

is intrinsic to marketing-driven production systems. Consumer behaviour is part of the problem, of course, but consumer behaviour also needs to be explained, and changed. It too is plastic and easily marketing driven. As the UK economy totters, surely we don't want to get back to this form of business-as-usual.

Some have argued that the problem of waste and its conceptualisation is rooted not only in marketing and supply chains but in the economic concepts which guide production and consumption. What has been called the theory of joint production, drawn from ecological economics, says that hedonistic, desire-based economics offers an incomplete and faulty analysis of value creation and production consequences.<sup>4</sup> It does so by randomly ascribing value to some outcomes (i.e., those that produce private economic value) while ignoring the rest, often borne by the environment. Pollution, waste or deleterious health effects, therefore, are shuffled into a conceptual bin called 'external costs'. Segmenting out useful production and collateral effects ignores the fundamental energetic and biological parameters of life which make no such discrimination; rather it is the total outcome that matters.

This may seem a very radical approach to economic thinking, but actually such thoughts only return us to the ideas of 19th century economists like TR Malthus and JS Mill. The former who attracted the criticism that, in stating the case that population growth needed to balance with agriculture, portrayed economics as a 'dismal science', while the latter favoured a steady-state (i.e., no growth) economy. These ideas were revived in the early 1950s by the Liverpool-born economist Kenneth Boulding, President of the American Economic Association, who created new metaphors to express these ideas. Contemporary economics, he said, saw the world as a 'cowboy economy'. The image here was of a lonely rider on the range occupying a vast geographical and ecological space. In fact, Boulding said, we should be talking about the earth as a 'space ship economy', a sealed system where nothing can be wasted and where free ecological space is being eroded to our increasing population and its changing consumption patterns.

These are difficult ideas to sell today, in the midst of an economic downturn, but discussed they must be. Given the apparent priority of growth (and thus of waste) and the critical importance of securing new

jobs, such ideas are deeply challenging. They imply a complete redesign of the basic principles guiding the economy. Nevertheless in an age of climate change, reducing biodiversity, water and topsoil loss, and agricultural production failures, can we afford not to consider them?

While the precepts of ecological economics are unlikely to displace orthodox economics just yet (but as the slump continues, who knows?) at least progress is being made in thinking more systemically about waste. The result is that at the European level and national level there are a mix of efforts – regulatory, market-driven, local authority and group-based – which combine to minimise the worst effects of a throw-away society. Initiatives like WRAP, EC-based land-fill measures, manufacturers' voluntary efforts to reduce water use, etc., are all paying off. They, rather than vapid appeals to 'nudge' behaviour change, do at least change corporate behaviour. They may not be the whole answer but are certainly part of it.

One implication is that a new economic approach can be forged from the effort to reduce inputs in production and consumption cycles, in effect a model of company economics based on the benefits of de-growth rather than wasteful production, and of ecological efficiency rather than profit and loss alone. This requires a different mind-set. The 18th century political economist Adam Smith spoke of our innate tendency to look for optimistic outcomes and ignore failure when we make decisions. Certainly part of the challenge, as TS Eliot might agree, is cultural. Not a morbid look backwards, however, but a visualisation of the future based upon principles of sustainability. **F**

1. Jones T. *Using Contemporary Archaeology and Applied Anthropology to Understand Food Loss in the American Food System*. Tucson AZ: Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, University of Arizona; 2005
2. Veblen T. *The theory of the leisure class*. London: George Allen and Unwin; 1899/1925.
3. Lang T, Rayner G, Kaelin E. *The Food Industry, Diet, Physical Activity and Health: a review of reported commitments and practice of 25 of the world's largest food companies*. Report to the World Health Organisation. London: City University Centre for Food Policy; 2006.
4. Baumgärtner S, Faber MM, Schiller J. *Joint production and responsibility in ecological economics: on the foundations of environmental policy*. London: Edward Elgar Publishing; 2006.



## Chuckers and keepers

Looking for practical solutions to food waste? Then ask mums suggests *Carrie Longton*

**N**O MUM LIKES wasting food. This is borne out by the number of discussions on Mumsnet on using up leftovers, meal planning and sell by dates not to mention food composting and packaging.

According to extensive anecdotal research, in every household there's a chucker and a keeper of food: one who won't eat anything even approaching a sell-by date and another who just gives it all a sniff and goes with their nose. There is a challenge to educate folks to be sensible about when to keep and when to throw out food – to reduce food waste without reducing the workforce through food poisoning. And here brands can do their bit.

Sainsbury's for example were the first supermarket to change the ubiquitous "freeze on day of purchase" on packaging,

to "freeze anytime up to sell-by date" – a no-brainer really – but an action that saved not only food and therefore waste and money, but a whole load of arguments. Add to brand action the sort of peer-to-peer advice you get on Mumsnet: "Can I safely re-cook a frozen lasagne?", "Are sprouting potatoes still OK for chips?", "AIBU (am I being unreasonable) to use old milk for pancakes?" and you can start making progress.

## Living in central London I'd have to undo six deadbolt locks in order to put my solitary tea bag in the compost bin at 11pm – it's not going to happen

As well as food savers, mums are also, in general, keen to do their bit to save the planet – so there's something left for the generation they've laboured so hard to bring into the world. But mums are time-poor and often cash-strapped so brands and policy makers need to arm them with relevant and accurate information – something that so far has been in relative short supply – and then make it both easy and financially worthwhile for them to act on this information. The best way to do this? Get them involved in solving the problem – ask their opinion, engage them, enfran-

chise them and they'll find the solution, act on it and tell all their friends about it too.

Take composting food waste. We know it makes sense (although actually I'm not sure everyone does know the surprising facts on tea bags and landfill?), but honestly how many folks are organised enough to make it work properly even if the facility is offered?

It's not enough to just give everyone different coloured bins and hope for the best. Some of my friends (mostly not London based) have large kitchens and gardens, with well-fed compost bins just outside their ever-open back door. Living in central London I'd have to undo six deadbolt locks in order to put my solitary tea bag in the compost bin at 11pm – it's not going to happen. But equally – and you can call me squeamish and selfish – I can't stand the smell of the little plastic indoor bin, nor the sight of it clogging up my already overflowing kitchen surfaces, as obviously my tiny kitchen wasn't designed with council composting in mind. That said, when my council offered it, I did my bit and used that little brown mini-bin to compost my household waste – but then my mini-bin got stolen (by whom? – you have to wonder if their need to compost was greater than mine.)

Practical solutions offered by brands – normal kitchen bins with different compartments, biodegradable bin bags, more attractive air tight compost bins (that have an anti-stealing device!) might help. We want to feel like good world citizens and good parents – so a brand or policy maker that can help me feel that way – rewarding me for composting/recycling, encouraging me to get my kids involved and above all making it easy would get my vote.

Going back to the issue of tea bags for a moment – how can we stop our daily cuppas (it is estimated that we consume around 165m cups of tea in the UK every day) affecting the environment? I know Unilever, who are doing a heap of work on reducing food waste, are now looking specifically at how they can help solve the problem of tea bag waste. Perhaps it's composting or safer disposal advice on their tea bag packaging? Or maybe there's another solution. Honestly, I don't have all the answers, but I can probably find some folks who do – other mums. **F**

*Carrie Longton is co-founder of Mumsnet*



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## Offer shoppers in-store advice

Supermarkets need a neutral, friendly and trustworthy source of information says *David Fell*, to offer advice and guidance to shoppers on recipe ideas, weekly meal planning and portion sizes

OVER THE COURSE of the past six or seven years, Brook Lyndhurst has been researching the whys and wherefores of British food behaviours. For organisations such as WRAP, Oxfam, the Greater London Authority, WWF and DEFRA we've looked at people buying food, storing food, cooking food, eating food – and throwing food away.

A common theme through this work has been the issue of skills. At each stage, it seems that few of us are fully confident with food. Many of us are not sure where our food comes from, or what the labels on the packet mean. Many of us don't store our food properly, and get confused between 'best before' and 'use by'. Many of us overcook our vegetables, undercook our meat and simply throw away our leftovers.

This 'de-skilling' has been underway for a long time, and has many inter-locking causes. Lifestyles have changed over recent decades and busy people want both their cooking and their shopping done as fast as possible, so ready meals and 'fast food' that require no skills have become more popular. The teaching of food skills in schools has declined and, at home, we're now into a second, possibly even a third generation of young people who have not learned to cook by watching their parents.

This lack of skills has a direct impact on the amount of food we waste – and, given the scale of food wastage in this country, an urgent solution is required.

Since the majority of food purchased in the UK comes from supermarkets – the

'big four' (Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's and Morrisons) account for 75 per cent<sup>1</sup> of the grocery market (as well as £5bn in profits) in the UK between them – an innovative approach that attempts to tackle the problem of de-skilling, and which builds on existing initiatives such as the Courtauld Commitment,<sup>2</sup> could sensibly be based in those supermarkets.

The teaching of food skills in schools has declined and, at home, we're now into a second, possibly even a third generation of young people who have not learned to cook by watching their parents

I propose that each large supermarket in the UK should have a Food Skills Advisor (FSA). Most large supermarkets already have butchers and bakers in store: this individual would have a similar status. They would offer advice and guidance to shoppers on recipe ideas, weekly meal planning and portion sizes. They would explain how to cook unfamiliar vegetables, how to store the additional items purchased when shoppers are lured by 'three for two' offers and how to make creative use of items in the discounted section that appear in the late afternoon.

To ensure a broad and fair provision, these FSAs would need their own identity, distinct from the individual store or retailer. I therefore propose that they should be



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provided by retailers in partnership with one another; and that they should be funded by a levy on turnover. The levy would operate a little like the Tobin Tax. Each store above 25,000 square feet would pay a charge that was related to its annual turnover. The monies collected would be hypothecated and used to fund the FSAs.

According to the Institute of Grocery Distribution, (IGD) the major retailers have, between them, close to 5,500 stores of this size. Assuming that the FSAs work part-time and are on salaries commensurate with in-store butchers and the like, the total annual cost of the programme could be in the region of ~£130mn. On the basis of IGD data, this would be the equivalent of just 0.1 per cent of large-store turnover.

As well as being affordable, the proposed FSA programme addresses two key factors that underpin our food waste behaviours.

The first is that, whilst not everyone in Britain wastes food, most of us do – and we're embarrassed to admit it. Deep down we know that it's a shameful thing to throw away good food, but we look the other way. The second factor is that it's almost as embarrassing to admit that we don't know what to do, particularly with something as 'obvious' as food: so it can be hard to ask for help.

The FSAs, available in every large food superstore in the land, would overcome both these barriers. On the one hand they would be a neutral, friendly and trustworthy source of information available to everyone, thereby making it easy for people to ask for advice. On the other hand, they would be advising on positive issues – how to shop smart, how to cook smart – rather than castigating us on negative issues. We all prefer to be helped rather than told off.

The figures on food waste in this country are, indeed, shaming; but the FSA programme outlined could provide an effective and affordable solution. **F**

1. Kantar World Panel grocery market figures, published 21 March 2011. Profit figures from company accounts for closest trading year to 2011.
2. The Courtauld Commitment is a responsibility deal brokered by the Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP) aimed at improving resource efficiency and reducing the carbon and wider environmental impact of the grocery retail sector.

*David Fell is director of Brook Lyndhurst and editor of online debate at London Remade*



## Does muesli grow on trees?

*Rosie Boycott*, champion of community vegetable gardens in London, explains how being involved in the process of growing can help kids, and beyond, truly understand that what we eat is important

DOES MUESLI GROW on trees? Do cows produce semi-skimmed milk? And how on earth does spaghetti grow – from branches or from the ground? These are just some answers that recent surveys of children have thrown up, pointing to an alarming and worrying lack of knowledge about food. A few years ago, many might have found this lack of knowledge a source of amusement, but nowadays it is anything but.

1 in 4 youngsters in primary schools are overweight, verging towards obese and these rates are rising. Too many young children are getting to school without having had breakfast and teachers are now seeing how impossible it is for such children to concentrate on their lessons, let alone start learning poetry by heart as prescribed by Michael Gove. Food is causing problems, so how can a school garden help?

There's no doubt they are fashionable. Everyone from Jamie Oliver to model and business-woman Jo Wood, have been championing school gardens and in newspaper gardening pages there are frequent articles waxing lyrical about children who have – overnight – developed a passion for lettuce because they have grown it themselves.

But is it more than fashion? Yes, I believe it is. At the end of last year, I joined a DEFRA taskforce to study school gardens in more detail. The taskforce consisted of representatives from food, farming, the

church, the WI, the schools themselves as well as gardeners and campaigners like myself. It was chaired by Myles Bremner, the CEO of Garden Organic, who has long championed vegetable growing for youngsters. We collected evidence from across the world to try and establish once and for all that when young children grow their own, more than just a few lettuces result.

The results were definitive and cheering. Children who grow their own are more likely to eat vegetables than those that don't. Schools where gardens are incorporated into 'outdoor learning' have a higher community spirit, higher level of parental involvement and better levels of concentration. Children's eating habits change and so do the schools', especially when school-grown vegetables are incorporated into school meals.

## 40 per cent of children who leave primary school have no idea where even the most basic fruit and vegetables come from

I've long known, through talking to teachers in schools who have gardens in London, that gardening can help kids with such basic stuff as maths (if you need to plant 24 beans in six equal rows, how many is that per row) and language and tenses ("I am planting this bean today, it will be ready in two months."), but I was thrilled to learn that children who grow vegetables when they are in primary school do better in science. Given that David Cameron recently announced that he wants Britain to be a country where the pharmacological industry can thrive, making vegetable growing a 'must' in every school seems like a logical and sensible step. After all, what else can you possibly introduce into a school that can be set up for as little as £500, involve parents and children, provide community engagement and fun, and help improve the health and academic progress of the pupils?

And yet, to date, the Department of Education is showing little interest in incorporating gardens into the curriculum. Some of the reasons are easy to understand, for example – they can be time consuming



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and they do require at least one teacher or one parent to actively throw their personal weight behind the project to ensure that it gets of the ground and – most importantly – keeps going. But to my mind, the benefits easily outweigh any negatives.

40 per cent of children who leave primary school have no idea where even the most basic fruit and vegetables come from. They don't know whether something has been grown in the UK or abroad, so what hope do they have of understanding seasonality and what is healthy and what is not? Gardening can change all that, and also connect a child to the wider question of resources – water, soil, sunlight. Growing vegetables also makes children understand the value of green spaces and of the natural world. They learn about insects, pollination, ripening, harvesting; about the devastating effects of drought and about the importance (and the wonder) of food.

Understanding that what we eat is important is a lesson which no one can afford to ignore: after all, who would buy a new car and then put in petrol when the engine demands diesel? That's pretty much what a growing proportion of our population is doing and the costs to the NHS are rising as obesity levels soar.

Finally, one last thought. In a time of rising unemployment, it amazes me that young people don't look a little bit harder at horticulture. It is really staggering that while youth unemployment is at an all time high, the horticultural industry has more skilled vacancies than it can fill in the UK. The current education policy is not helping raise awareness of horticultural careers to young children. What a waste. What an opportunity. Let's get growing. **F**

*Rosie Boycott is The Mayor of London's Food Advisor*



## Making sure food matters to government

Should we develop an integrated, ambitious and sustainable food and farming strategy or just get on with delivering it? *Jeanette Longfield* looks at the arguments.

IT IS HARD to escape the conclusion that food does not, in fact, matter to government. Arguably the high water mark of recent government policy on food (so excluding rationing and digging for victory during the second world war) was the publication, in 2008, of *Food Matters* by the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit. The analysis is rigorous, the arguments are cogent and the coverage of the whole food chain is clear.

However, anyone with any lingering belief that government policies are in any way based on evidence should read, for example, chapter 6. It sets out, powerfully and clearly, the very many reasons why the government should show leadership in setting standards for public sector food, not least because, "...it shows that the public sector is taking its own advice and following the policies, principles and priorities that it calls on others to adopt."

Those principles include:

- A duty of care to those in its care – such as patients and pupils – and those it employs.
- The urgency of reducing the environmental damage being caused by the food and farming system – including, of course, climate change but also damage to water supplies, soil, biodiversity and animal welfare.
- The importance of tackling diet-related diseases, particularly the obesity epidemic.
- The moral imperative to narrow the still

yawning gap between the poorest people with the worst health and the richest groups with the best health – both in the UK and globally.

- Creating economically viable livelihoods in the farming and food industries, for now and for the long term.

Indeed the report notes that, "Action across the whole of the public sector, rather than in a piecemeal way, could create a powerful demand-side lever...", particularly given the £2bn or so that is spent each year on food in the public sector. So did we get that action?

Shamefully, neither the Labour government that commissioned *Food Matters*, nor the coalition government that followed it (claiming to be "the greenest ever") established legally binding sustainability standards for food in our schools, hospitals and care homes, or implemented anything else significant from the report, which has been quietly shelved.

True, there continue to be some outstanding examples of good practice in sustainable food and farming around the country. Many of these may even be linked to local food policies, developed by local authorities in the absence of a national framework. London and Bristol are among the growing number of areas stepping into the food strategy gap left by government. Some are arguing that, given the current political and economic situation, local food strategies are the best, or even only option.

Wonderful as local initiatives are (and they are genuinely inspiring), this analysis is deeply flawed. There are essential elements in tackling our unsustainable food and farming system that can only be taken by national government. These include not only rules about public sector food, but also competition law (such as the long-awaited Grocery Code Adjudicator to tame the power of the major supermarkets) and marketing regulations (to protect children being targeted by junk food promotions). Increasingly, attention is also now turning to fiscal measures – such as Denmark's "fat tax" and France's "soda tax" – so that the so-called external costs of bad food are internalised in the price.

It is assumed by some that all businesses will automatically find such regulatory behaviour unpalatable, but showing clear leadership and direction is in some cases expected by, and actually beneficial

to industry. The Institute for Manufacturing quotes the Food and Drink Federation as stating that "...there appears to be a strong desire from industry for government leadership through coherent and appropriate regulation and legislation".

Would it be helpful, then, to try to resurrect *Food Matters*, or something like it as an integrated, ambitious sustainable food and farming strategy? Some argue that this is what is needed to speed up the introduction of progressive ideas into mainstream policy. But bitter experience of helping to develop such policies both in the UK and elsewhere suggests otherwise.

Where attempts at comprehensive food strategies have had a positive impact this has been largely due to high level political leadership, significant amounts of cash to be able to put policy into practice, and considerable campaigning effort from a range of groups and citizens. Where the leadership and/or the cash is lacking (and they certainly are at the moment at national level) then the process of trying to produce a food strategy provides the perfect excuse to thwack difficult issues into the proverbial long grass.

Nervous policy makers can give a plausible reason to delay progress even with existing initiatives, on the grounds that they should wait for the food strategy to be agreed. Worse, the process of developing the food strategy can often be not only painfully slow, but also allow rich lobbying interests that can afford to dig in for the long haul and attempt to block and dilute elements of the strategy that might damage their interests.

And yet, and yet. Surely the strategy would provide valuable evidence? Evidence is necessary, but not sufficient, perhaps the best example being the largest peer-reviewed global study of the scientific evidence on sustainable farming produced to date. The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development involved some 400 scientists from 110 countries but has sat, unloved, on government policy shelves since it was published in 2008.

Let's stop waiting for the strategy. As Dr Martin Luther King said: "You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step." **F**

*Jeanette Longfield MBE is the co-ordinator of Sustain*



