

MEAT YOUR PERSONA

A public engagement initiative to understand attitudes towards meat production, consumption, health and environment – Livestock, Environment and People (LEAP) at The University of Oxford and The Liminal Space

Top Findings

- People's awareness of meat damaging the environment is increasing but detail is lacking and people are curious to know more
- The majority of people are open to changing their diets but the cost of lower-meat diets remains the biggest barrier
- People find it hard to change but there is a clear public appetite for structural change originating from policy-makers and stakeholders in the food system

The Problem

A series of recent reports have highlighted that to meet net zero targets there needs to be a change in the way people eat. The food system contributes between 25% - 30% to global GHG emissions and livestock accounts for around 80% of this. LEAP¹ research has shown foods which cause the largest negative environmental impacts - unprocessed and processed red meat - are also associated with increased risks of some cancers and cardiovascular disease. However, public understanding of impact of what we eat on the climate and our health, and active mobilisation to change diets is limited.

We wanted to bring LEAP research to the public in order to enhance understanding of the impact of UK diets on the environment with a particular focus on meat eating, and to provide insights into the health and environmental benefits of alternative eating habits. Our scientists also wanted to learn more about the public's views on meat-eating in order to inform their research.



Metro Centre, Newcastle, photo by Rachel Ashwanden



Festival of Thrift 2021, photo by Tracy Kid

What We Did

In summer 2021 we took an eye-catching pop-up to six locations in England, Wales and Scotland with the aim of starting evidence-based discussions on meat, climate and health. Designed by Liminal Space and based on research from the LEAP programme, Meat Your Persona engaged with over 150,000 members of the general public. The yellow horse box was accompanied by five stands with audiovisual information, inviting take-away material and a step-by-step quiz about visitors' eating habits. Our goal was to reach those with low science capital who are disconnected from the current conversation. In particular we targeted Brexit-voting men outside London who are the most likely to eat the most meat and to not connect meat consumption with health and environmental impacts.

What We Learnt

We heard from people about their openness to change, but also the barriers they encountered to adapting eating habits. What we learned could help tailor public health policies and behavioural interventions to support healthier and more sustainable diets.

¹The LEAP programme aims to understand the health, environmental, social and economic effects of meat and dairy production and consumption to provide evidence and tools for decision makers to promote healthy and sustainable diets.

Top Findings in Detail

1. People's awareness of meat production and consumption damaging the environment is increasing but detail is lacking and people are still curious to know more

81% of frequent meat-eaters (defined as those who eat meat every day or most days) said they learnt something new about the environmental and health impacts of eating meat by engaging with us. 75% said they planned to talk about what they'd learnt at Meat Your Persona with friends and family.

'So, I can make an impact just by swapping beef for chicken?'
- 65 year old man, Leeds

'I'm really trying to reduce - doing meat 4 days a week and veggie 3, but it's hard - I'm 30 and I've always eaten meat so not sure what to cook - but we [my partner and I] want to.'
- 30 year old man, Newcastle

2. There is a clear public appetite for structural change from policy-makers and stakeholders in the food system

After completing the quiz and finding out their meat persona, people could make pledges about changes to their diets or sign next to one of the six requests for changes to the food system. In total 2,089 request slots were signed. The most popular was for 'supermarkets selling cheaper meat-free alternatives'. This was followed by 'more food labelled to show its impact on the environment' and 'farmers given support to produce alternatives to meat'.



'I think it should be on the manufacturers.'
- 42 year old man, Cardiff

'Companies doing the damage are subsidised regardless. It's not on the consumer, it's up to the government to stop them getting away with it.'
- Man in his 50s, Cardiff

'I know about it and I care about it but I just can't do much about it.'
- 40 year old man, Newcastle

3. Cost still remains the biggest barrier, cited by people considering changing their diets

There is a perception amongst many that meat is easier and inexpensive compared to alternatives. However people are keen to make changes to their diet when given support and tools. After discussions with the team about strategies and tactics, 66% of frequent meat eaters we spoke to said they plan to reduce the amount of meat consumed in the future.

'I eat meat every day, but I'd like to stop.'
- 14 year old boy, Blackpool

'Cost is the biggest barrier [in the way of a more sustainable diet] - I can feed a family of four [on meat] for a tenner at Iceland.'
- 30 year old woman, Blackpool

'These meat substitutes are more expensive than actual meat!'
- 65 year old man, Cardiff

Implications for policy-makers

- There is a growing interest in the impact of food on health and on climate. There is an opportunity to capitalise on the eagerness of the public to know more about healthy and sustainable diets.
- Making plant-based alternatives cheaper and more widely available would be welcomed by the public and support policies to achieve net zero and improve population health.
- There is broad public support across socio-economic status for structural change relating to the food system in order to enable a more plant-based diet. This could include public sector meal provision to promote a more sustainable, plant-based approach to eating.
- Education and outreach programmes to support people with the skills to cook low-cost and healthy plant-based food would be welcomed.

You can find out more about our work at:

www.meatyourpersona.com

www.leap.ox.ac.uk

Sources

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