

# Stuck in Motion:

Why UK food system transformation is more than a knowledge problem

Rachel Headings



This piece is a summary of [Stuck in Motion: Why UK food system transformation is more than a knowledge problem](#), authored by Rachel Headings, Tara Garnett, Christian Reynolds, Monika Zurek and Roger Sykes and in partnership with Pierre-Marie Aubert, Valérie Noel, Amanda Harding, Johanna M Gelejinse and Sander Biesbroek. The full report, including citations and references, is available [here](#).

## We have the ingredients, so what's the recipe for change?

On the surface, the UK seems well-equipped for food system transformation. It already has many of the 'ingredients' deemed necessary for change: an extensive evidence base, active organisations across sectors, growing policy attention and broad recognition that the food system needs to become healthier, more sustainable and more equitable. Yet progress remains slow, fragmented and often difficult to see at anything like the scale or pace the challenges demand. **So what is actually stalling progress and how can we better enable change?**

This summary draws together UK-specific findings from a wider [Wellcome](#)-funded project which explored food system change across Europe and the UK (see [main project report](#) for more details) to better understand how evidence could be put into action.

### Included in this summary

Ingredients for change

No single way to mix: Three routes to change

Five barriers

More research is not the answer

Creating conditions for change





## No single way to mix: three routes to change

Across the project, three broad routes to food system transformation emerged:

- **Policy:** influencing how policies are developed and implemented.
- **Market:** changing commercial practices, investment, innovation and the ways food is produced, sold or consumed.
- **Local or citizen-led:** working through places, communities, local food systems and public participation.

These routes are not competing; they're complementary. UK changemakers commonly combine them, moving between routes as opportunities change. Policy remains especially important for broad-scale change, but businesses and economic actors can often act faster than government and demonstrate what is commercially possible. Local initiatives can test ideas, build relationships and create practical experience that feeds back into wider policy. Narrative and cultural change cut across all three, shaping how problems and possible solutions are understood.

## Where the recipe breaks down: five barriers

Despite substantial activity, changemakers described five recurring barriers:

1. **Complexity, confusion and contested evidence** – Food system problems cut across health, environment, economics and politics. Evidence often appears fragmented, contradictory or inaccessible, making it harder to communicate where there is strong agreement and where genuine uncertainty remains. Which protein sources and protein production systems do they finance?
2. **Status quo and fear of change** – Existing ways of producing, selling and consuming food are deeply normalised, and therefore difficult to change. Proposed interventions may be portrayed as threats to individual choice, livelihoods or established identities, making ambitious action politically sensitive.
3. **Lack of 'funded leadership'** – Changemaker organisations, especially in the third sector, struggle to secure the flexible, long-term capacity needed for strategy, coalition-building and sustained engagement rather than only short-term project delivery. This includes funding, but also staff time, expertise, sector knowledge and continuity.
4. **Power dynamics, vested interests and political risk** – Changemakers pointed to unequal influence within the food system and the difficulty of pursuing changes that threaten established commercial or political interests. Changemakers also described a lack of transparency around lobbying and decision-making, making it harder to see who holds influence and how it is exercised.
5. **'Top-down' and impractical research agendas** – Research questions are often set before practitioners are meaningfully involved, resulting in impractical or disconnected agendas which do not align with changemaker needs. Academic timescales tend to be slow and can struggle to match rapidly changing policy and commercial needs. The problem is not that changemakers do not value evidence, but that research can be disconnected from what they need to know, when they need to know it.



## More research is not the missing ingredient

Across sectors, changemakers repeatedly asked for **better synthesis** and **translation** of what we already know. Evidence may already exist but remain difficult to find, interpret or use with different audiences.

They also wanted **more practical evidence** about “what works” and “how to” create change, including stronger understanding of **political feasibility, economic implications** and **how** change can be implemented and sustained over the long term.

Research relationships themselves also matter. Changemakers called for earlier and more meaningful involvement in shaping research, with **co-production** treated as a way of producing more useful knowledge rather than simply consulting stakeholders once projects are already designed.

Finally, evidence cannot create change without capacity. Changemakers emphasised the need for **stronger coordination and alignment** between organisations and sectors, more durable spaces for **knowledge exchange**, and **longer-term, more flexible funding** that supports relationships, leadership and implementation as well as new research.

## Bringing it all together: creating conditions for change

The UK food policy landscape continues to shift and evolve, especially in the context of wider geopolitical, social and climate pressures and major events since 2020 such as Brexit, COVID-19, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the energy and cost-of-living crisis, extreme weather and successive changes in government. Food security, resilience, health, affordability,

farming, land use and supply-chain fairness are increasingly being discussed together. The ongoing food strategy process is a clear entry point for action.

Changemakers also saw scope for stronger coordination between researchers, policymakers, civil society, businesses, funders and local actors. The challenge is not simply to undertake more broad visioning work or find complete consensus. Instead, it requires a more practical step of identifying where interests overlap, making disagreements visible and enabling different forms of expertise and influence to work in complementary ways.

Funders can play an important role here, not only by providing money but by shaping research agendas, supporting synthesis and translation, creating space for collaboration and enabling longer-term relationships between actors. Narrative and framing work cuts across all of these opportunities, helping evidence and proposed solutions resonate with different audiences without pretending that real conflicts or trade-offs do not exist.

## The central challenge

The UK does not appear to be stuck because nothing is happening, because evidence is absent or because actors lack ideas about what should change.

It is stuck in the harder territory between **knowing and doing**.

The challenge is to connect existing knowledge, organisations and policy opportunities; produce evidence that is usable in real political and economic contexts; and give changemakers the capacity and relationships needed to sustain action over time.

No single route or actor can deliver food system transformation alone. Progress depends on how effectively the pieces already in motion can be connected.