

feeding in to food policy

**a submission to the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming
and Food on the views of low-income consumers**

About the National Consumer Council

The purpose of the National Consumer Council is to make all consumers matter. We do this by putting forward the consumer interest, particularly that of disadvantaged groups in society, by researching, campaigning and working with those who can make a difference to achieve beneficial change.

We are a non-profit-making company limited by guarantee and funded partly by the Department of Trade and Industry.

Our objectives are to work to:

- **Develop markets and public services that work for everyone by finding the right balance between free markets, regulation and self-regulation;**
- **Create smart, streetwise, skilled consumers by promoting access to high quality education, information and advice;**
- **Provide solutions to the problems of exclusion by tackling the barriers that put goods and services out of reach;**
- **Ensure decision-makers everywhere are consumer aware by strengthening consumer representation;**
- **Achieve the right balance between innovation and consumer protection by improving the understanding, communication and management of risk and uncertainty.**

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1. Summary

This paper presents the findings of two ‘Weekend away for a Bigger Voice’ workshops into the views of low income consumers towards the future of food and farming. The workshops – in the north-east and south-west of England – were conducted for the NCC in early autumn 2001. Our partners, and funders, for the workshops were the Food Standards Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The methodology is briefly described in the Appendix.

We are submitting this report to the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, together with a video report prepared with participants of the north-east workshop. This paper complements the NCC’s previous submissions and our recommendations to the Policy Commission (National Consumer Council, *The future of food and farming: summary of questions in response to the Farming and Food Policy Commission’s consultation*, and *The future of food and farming: discussion paper*, October 2001).

An important purpose of these workshops was to ensure that people on low incomes are given a voice in the debate on the future of food and farming. A significant point to come out of this research was the concern expressed by workshop participants that their findings would not be considered by policy-makers. Participants valued the opportunity to be consulted and expressed a wish ‘to be heard’, yet there was a deep scepticism that policy-makers would take notice. This, we believe, is a challenge that the Policy Commission needs to address. The National Consumer Council considers it is vital that the views of consumers help shape the recommendations of the policy commission.

The participants cared deeply about the food they ate and how it was produced. Despite being on low incomes their concerns ranged far beyond merely ensuring affordable food was available to them. An overview of the main findings and recommendations from the workshops are presented below. More details are provided in Section 3.

The views of low-income consumers towards the future of food and farming: an overview

Food chain

A major concern of the workshops was the lack of sufficient dialogue between farmers, the public, supermarkets, and others in the food chain. Urgent measures were thought to be necessary to facilitate mutual understanding and dialogue and to build trust – from plough to plate. Participants wanted better knowledge of, and trust in, all the links in the food chain with greater traceability and a ‘guarantee’ in the form of a logo (see Information and labelling below). Concerns were also voiced about the numerous links in the food chain and the extent to which these (and in particular transport costs) may increase costs to consumers.

Supermarkets

Supermarkets featured prominently in discussions in both workshops with concerns from participants that supermarkets wield considerable power within the food chain. Participants called for action to address a number of issues including concerns that:

- supermarkets are making ‘vast’ profits when farmers can’t earn a ‘living wage’;
- supermarket location and access can disadvantage those lacking personal transport;
- inequitable pricing policies penalise people living in remote areas;
- facilities/services are often limited, for example, home delivery in rural areas;
- supermarkets contribution back to the community is not adequate, particularly with regard to provision of fresh produce to disadvantaged local people.

There was, however, recognition of some positive aspects of supermarkets such as choice and employment.

Where food comes from

Many participants expressed a wish (for a variety of reasons) to buy British produce, but do not understand why it is often more expensive when farmers are getting lower prices. It was strongly felt that there needs to be a level playing field for all produce, whether imported or home produced. There was also much support for more food to be sourced and available locally and a need for action to protect small shops in rural and urban areas.

Countryside and rural issues

Participants felt it was important to invest in maintaining the countryside and to promote a return to community life in rural areas. Recommendations to facilitate this included improving public transport and paying farmers as guardians of the countryside. The countryside was viewed as a 'public good' with participants recommending redirecting subsidies to maintain the landscape for all.

Food safety

Participants expressed general anxieties and specific concerns about food safety. These latter concerns included pesticide use, GM foods, additives used in food processing and problems for people with particular dietary needs, including pregnant women and those with allergies. GM and functional foods were largely felt to be unnecessary and potentially harmful.

Organic food

Many participants expressed a desire to buy organic food but could not afford to do so. There was support for redirecting subsidies, investment and research towards organic and other more 'natural' farming methods.

Information and labelling

There was a general view that there was a lack of accessible and easily understood information on what was in food and how it was produced. Participants said:

- they wanted better labelling of ingredients, additives, nutrition information, allergens, GM as well as country of origin;
- however they didn't want ever increasing amounts of written details on packaging;
- they wanted a simple-to-understand assurance system and logo that would allow shoppers to trust the food they buy. This should provide a 'guarantee' to include the use of chemicals (if any), where and how the food has been produced and its safety;
- they wanted better information, such as warning logos, for people with special dietary needs including pregnant women;
- they wanted to have more confidence in messages about food. While some wanted information from different sources, a role was also identified for one body to provide independent, unbiased, truthful information to the public.

Consumers' role in decision-making

Despite their wish 'to be heard', people largely felt powerless to influence what happens to food. Concerns were expressed that their recommendations would fall on deaf ears.

2. Introduction

The National Consumer Council considers that it is vital that the views of consumers help shape the recommendations of the Policy Commission. Our main submission to the Policy Commission made a number of important recommendations and highlighted the need for UK agriculture to be more responsive to consumer needs. (*The future of food and farming: a discussion paper*, October 2001). We also recognised the potential the Policy Commission has to bring about beneficial change for consumers.

The National Consumer Council works on behalf of all consumers, although we have a particular remit to represent the interests of disadvantaged and vulnerable consumers. Therefore, in conducting this research, we wanted to ensure that the views of low-income consumers are represented in the debate about the future of food and farming.

From the analysis of the rich and varied workshop discussions, it is clear that participants cared deeply about the food they ate and how it was produced. Despite being on low incomes, their concerns ranged far beyond merely ensuring affordable food was available to them. Their recommendations include: calls for greater trust and dialogue within the food chain; for food safety issues to be addressed; for better information and labelling; for more encouragement for 'natural' farming methods; and for better means to maintain the countryside and rural life.

We conclude that low-income consumers broadly share the same concerns and interests about food and the way it is grown, produced and marketed as other consumers. This is borne out by the results of the general consumer research presented in our own submission to the Policy Commission and that conducted by the Food Standards Agency. (See the Appendix; National Consumer Council, *The future of food and farming: summary of questions in response to the Farming and Food Policy Commission's consultation*, October 2001; and Food Standards Agency, *Policy Commission on Farming and Food for England, submission from the Food Standards Agency*, November 2001).

The findings of this research support our analysis that consumers' needs generally include safe, wholesome, accurately labelled foods at fair prices. For many consumers, food produced with high animal welfare and environmental standards is also important. This finding concurs with our view that while price is important to (all) consumers, it is but one of a range of factors consumers take into account when buying food. In reality consumers make trade-offs between all the factors they consider relevant to stay within their budget. This applies as much to low-income consumers as other consumers.

One of the questions we set out to explore with this research is the extent to which diversity of opinion about the future of food and farming divides along an urban/rural

axis. There is a popular image, perhaps encouraged by recent political debate about the future of the countryside, that there are strong divisions in opinion between those living in urban areas compared to those in rural areas. We did not find any evidence to support this view. Firstly, individuals do not always define themselves in strict 'rural' or 'urban' terms. For example they may have been brought up in the countryside but now live in the city, or vice versa. However, wherever they lived, we found that people wished to understand more about the situation of those living in the other area. And the rich discussions in the workshops about the future of the countryside and the strong recommendations for maintaining the countryside and rural life were felt equally strongly by urban as well as rural participants. The countryside was seen as a 'public good' by the majority of participants.

Finally, one of the most important points to come out of this research was the concern expressed by participants that their findings would not be considered by policy-makers. Participants valued the opportunity to be consulted and expressed a wish 'to be heard'. However, people largely felt powerless to influence what happens to food. Concerns were expressed that their recommendations to policy-makers in general, and the Policy Commission more specifically, would fall on deaf ears. This, we believe, is a challenge that the Policy Commission needs to address.

Ultimately the successful future of all players in the food chain depends upon better understanding and meeting the needs and concerns of consumers. Too often the temptation is for policy-makers and providers alike to tell consumers that they have got it wrong, that they don't understand and need better 'education' and information. As the participants themselves identified there is a clear need for greater dialogue and understanding throughout the food chain. However, this must be a two-way process in which consumers are involved and where their views are listened and responded to.

3. The future of food and farming: the views of low-income consumers

This section develops the main themes that emerged from the workshops and allows us to hear the voices of participants.

Food chain

The food chain featured in discussions in both workshops. Participants considered there is not enough dialogue between farmers, the public, supermarkets, and others in the food chain. The Red Tractor logo was cited as one example of this lack of communication – participants had low levels of awareness and little understanding of what the logo represents.

The emphasis in the north-east workshop was on knowing and trusting all the links in the chain. Participants wanted greater traceability and a single logo. This could guarantee that the food is: local; natural; without additives, animal cruelty, GM ingredients or chemical residues; and sold at reasonable prices without any part in the chain exploiting any other part. This guarantee would rely on a greater trust being built up between all the different links in the chain – from plough to plate.

Another issue which featured in discussions in both workshops was that of the numerous links within the food chain, and the extent to which these and transport costs involved throughout the chain, increase costs to the consumer. One vision for the future from the north-east workshop envisaged cutting out the middlemen to make food cheaper, fresher, more local, free of additives and packaging and more wholesome.

Allied to this were concerns about the environmental aspects of transport, including the impact of motorways and new road building, used to facilitate lorries transporting food long distances.

Supermarkets

Many issues arose from both workshops that related to supermarkets, with strong feelings from participants that supermarkets have far too much power.

Location of supermarkets

Urban people felt that hypermarkets were too far out of town, while the rural residents said they were not easily accessible to them either.

This is what gets me about the hypermarkets, they are all out of town and if you don't have a car, you have no choice but to shop locally.

Bridget, participant in north-east workshop.

Pricing policy

Concerns were expressed in the north-east workshop about supermarkets in rural areas charging up to 20 per cent more than supermarkets of the same chain in urban areas. This is unfair – prices should be the same from one shop to the next within the same chain. There was a strong feeling that people should not be penalised for living in more remote areas, particularly as welfare benefits are the same from one part of the country to another.

Tim: The supermarket nearest to me is more than 20 per cent more expensive than the same supermarket in Newcastle.

Izzy: The government should do something to stop it.

Participants in north-east workshop.

Facilities/services

There was strong support for improving the facilities and service offered by supermarkets. The north-east workshop recommended that more shops should offer facilities such as deliveries, easy access for the disabled/pushchairs, toilets and seating. People in rural areas have problems getting supermarket deliveries, since many shops will only deliver within a four-mile radius.

Contribution to the Community:

The north-east workshop recommended that supermarkets donate 5 per cent of annual profit to their local community to provide fresh produce either free or heavily subsidised to disadvantaged local people (for example, pensioners, unemployed, homeless people and others).

Relationship between farmers and supermarkets

Concerns were raised that farmers needed some protection from supermarkets. Participants particularly in the south-west workshop expressed their feelings that supermarkets are making vast profits when farmers can't earn a living wage.

The groups also acknowledged that supermarkets have many positive aspects, including offering employment, convenience, they are generally cheaper than local/corner shops, and they offer a huge variety and choice.

We shouldn't forget that supermarkets employ a tremendous number of people. It's very simple to sit here and say it's all the supermarkets' fault, but it's not as

simple as that.

Laura, participant in north-east workshop.

Small shops

The north-east workshop called for action to protect small shops in rural and urban areas.

We value local shops in both our rural areas, where they are often the only shop for miles, and in urban areas, where they are often far more convenient than supermarkets. They also provide an important social function, especially for the old.

Recommendation from north-east workshop.

UK-produced food

The origin of food arose as a concern for participants when they are shopping. The south-west workshop in particular expressed a preference to be able to buy British products. This was for a variety of reasons, including worries about the standards and quality of ‘cheap’ imports. Many participants did not trust that these always meet the same safety, hygiene and animal welfare standards as UK produce.

While some participants felt that people worry too much, there was common agreement that there needed to be a level playing field for all produce, whether imported or home produced. More than half the participants felt that this was something they would support even if it meant price increases to the shopper.

At the same time participants could not understand why British food continued to be more expensive when farmers were getting lower prices. Transportation costs – including, for example, the perceived madness of moving food long distances for packaging before bringing it back to be sold – were thought to be a factor. The lack of transparency within the food chain hindered consumers’ understanding.

Tricia: But they can’t just be targeting British farmers, they must make the same demands on farmers in other countries. So why are there price differences?

Colin C: They don’t meet with the same stringent quality checks that the British farmers have to meet. They don’t have the overheads. There are cases of German meat coming in with spinal cord in them.

Participants in south-west workshop.

Local produce

There was much support in both workshops for more food to be sourced and available locally. From the south-west workshop came the view that too much of the price consumers pay in the shops is money taken by intermediaries between farmers selling

the produce and it arriving at the shop. They therefore recommended that it should be made easier for farmers to sell direct – both to local shops/vans and to customers, including local deliveries. Enterprises that keep wealth within local agricultural communities should also be encouraged to stop small farms dying off, and to help local people have cheap access to fresh produce at a fair price via not-for-profit enterprises.

We want to encourage more small shops and farmers selling direct to Joe Bloggs.

Simon, south-west workshop.

One of my concerns is how far has it travelled, and how much energy has been consumed in getting it from where it's produced to where I'm buying it? And is it fresh? Fresh is healthier.

Alistair, south-west workshop.

Gardening

The south-west group expressed a high level of interest in gardening and growing their own food, partly for cost reasons but also because of food safety worries such as pesticide residues. In the south-west workshop, half of the group said they regularly get food from their own gardens. For some, the need for help in getting started, and the expense of tools, were seen as barriers.

Countryside and rural issues

The strong view that emerged from both workshops is that it is important to invest in maintaining the countryside and in promoting a return to community life in rural areas. This involves improving public transport, paying farmers for their role as guardians of the countryside, for example, their work in maintaining drystone walls (from north-east workshop) and hedgerows. There should be ways of encouraging people to live on the land and to remain in rural villages.

Participants in the south-west workshop felt that keeping a beautiful countryside should be a priority, and that big farms, with prairie-style fields were not what made the countryside beautiful. Yet farmers with small fields, which form the image of the English countryside were effectively penalised by the subsidy system and branded unsustainable. Many participants felt that this landscape was a 'public good', and that farmers should be paid out of the public purse for maintaining this landscape and looking after hedgerows. The south-west group recommended redirecting subsidies towards smaller farmers which would lay the ground for a better future, with more local produce available to shoppers, grown in a more sustainable way, and maintaining the landscape for the good of all.

We need a compromise between a place of enjoyment and a food producing environment. We need to agree access, the farmers want people to enjoy the countryside, but there are some areas the public can't access.

Izzy, north-east workshop.

If subsidies were done away with, couldn't that money be used – instead of paying farmers to have set-aside, where they pay you not to produce anything – could they not just pay farmers for looking after the countryside? I think consumers would appreciate that more – it's such a waste to be paid for not doing anything, it's wrong.

Laura, north-east workshop.

Environmental education for children was seen as an important issue in the north-east workshop.

*How many children who go to school round here have ever been to the country?
How many have ever seen a cow? We should be doing something in schools with kids to educate them about the countryside.*

Izzy, north-east workshop.

Cost of food

For participants, all of whom were living on low incomes, money was a constraining factor. It was felt that the less you have, the more difficult it is to get good value for money or exercise choice.

Ann: What I pay for food as a proportion of my income is much higher than what Tony Blair pays.

Paul: But it's up to you what you earn, isn't it?

Ann: No, not if you are a pensioner...

Participants in south-west workshop.

I don't have enough money to pick and choose, if I die, I die.

Participant in north-east workshop.

My sister was reasonably well-off – her husband had a good job, so she had a big fridge-freezer and could go out and buy things in bulk so it was cheaper. I couldn't do that. I didn't have the money for the initial outlay, so I had to spend more buying my food than she did. Often the poorer you are, the more you have to pay.
Ann, south-west workshop.

I was homeless, but I got a place to live recently, and now I can actually buy a week's shopping and have somewhere to keep it.
Alastair, south-west workshop.

When they were short of money, food was something they cut back on, particularly the more nutritious dietary options.

When I got divorced, I went on to supplementary benefit. My four children always ate, but I often didn't. If we had meat, it was mince, and we didn't have fruit. I scrounged vegetables from my friends and neighbours ... With the change to the working families tax credit I started eating again.
Tricia, south-west workshop.

Participants felt that while cost was always an important consideration in buying food, it was not the only consideration. People were generally far more concerned with getting value for money, and making choices within their budget to ensure that they were getting the best possible quality and nutrition. The price has to be weighed against safety, ethical issues and production issues.

New Zealand beef is good. I would still buy a piece of British beef, and it would come down to: price; which has the least fat; and the most meat – quality and value for money.
Claire, north-east workshop.

Participants in the south-west workshop felt that healthy food should not be a luxury – it should be accessible to all. One suggestion was for providing support for food for people on low incomes as for housing (for which housing benefit is available). Generally it was felt that people should be able to decide for themselves how to spend the extra support (whether in cash allowances or in tokens) to best feed their family. Others felt that tokens would be a way of encouraging good healthy eating.

If you give people on low income tokens, they should be able to decide what to spend them on – I know what my family needs.
Heather, south-west workshop.

Food safety

Issues of food safety arose in both workshops. Many participants worried about damage their food might be doing to them, while others thought it wasn't worth thinking about.

Ann: I think most people live with an anxiety just below the surface.

Lynn: Yes, a fear of food.

Ann: There is no security now, not just with food but with everything. But it would help if we knew our food was safe, and the apple that we ate last week isn't going to damage us permanently.

Participants in south-west workshop.

All my family got salmonella poisoning in 1981, and we stopped eating dairy for six weeks and eggs for a few years.

Moira, north-east workshop.

Heather: There are very mixed messages. Liver used to be brilliant – so rich in iron, you should eat it when you are pregnant. Then all of a sudden it was stop, it's dangerous. So you worry about the consequences of what you eat.

Lynn: Yes you just worry about what you eat, don't you. When you are pregnant, you eat something, and think, Oh my, god!

Graham: That just goes to show you shouldn't believe all that's said. I just don't let it bother me ... If you spend time worrying about every little thing you eat, if you listen to all the stuff that's said, you would turn into a nervous wreck.

Participants in south-west workshop.

Concerns were also expressed that the public doesn't know the full story, and that much of the information on food safety is not in the public domain.

Organic food

Many participants expressed their concerns about chemical sprays and pesticides used on crops and did not understand why organic produce is so expensive.

Margaret: Our concern was the spraying of foods – we don't know what exactly they put into the food that we are eating, with all the chemicals ... We discussed organic foods, but we don't know enough about farming. It seems a lot dearer, but they don't have to use pesticides and stuff to grow it, so why is that? Why does it cost more? And we think it's better for you and for your kids, but why is it dearer?

Claire: They have to be well tended because they are not being pumped with all this artificial stuff to make them grow.

Margaret: Everything was organic before, but now organic is the expensive stuff.

Participants in north-east workshop.

Many of the participants said they did want to buy organic food, but it was out of their price range. They wanted organic at a price they could afford.

I fervently believe in organic, but I can't afford it.

Alistair, south-west workshop.

We want organic to be available, but at a price we can afford.

Shirley, south-west workshop.

There was a strong feeling among participants in the south-west workshop that the reason organic food is more expensive is that there is much less research into developing natural farming methods than into high-tech methods. Investment should be diverted into more research into natural farming methods, including organic, and support for farmers during the transition process.

Genetically modified food

GM foods arose in a number of the discussions in both workshops. A strong view was that GM was seen as being 'against nature' and could exacerbate environmental problems caused by industrialised farming methods. The view was expressed that we should be going back to nature rather than trying to recreate it with GM foods. Investment should be diverted from developing GM to developing more natural farming methods, including organic, and to support farmers in this transition. A less prevalent view, expressed in the south-west workshop, was that GM was part of progress and therefore a good thing. The question of whether GM offered the possibility of providing cheaper food was also raised.

But it all comes down to price. We are all on lowish incomes asking for cheaper food – and GM is a way of providing that.

Colin C, south-west workshop.

The north-east workshop recommended that the government should ensure that labels clearly indicate whether food is genetically modified or not.

A lot of us don't want to eat GM foods, and don't want functional foods. We would like to know whether the food we eat has GM ingredients or not, especially since some of us are concerned about the potential effects this will have on allergies, pregnant women, or people taking medications.

Participants in north-east workshop.

Animal welfare

Animal welfare issues arose as part of discussions in both workshops.

I stopped eating meat in 1982 because of battery farming.

Neil, north-east workshop.

Concerns about transporting animals long distances led to support for more locally-based slaughter houses.

Neil: *We also think that slaughterhouses should be local to where cattle are.*

Claire: *Why not keep it all local and together, instead of having cows going from Kent to Aberdeen to be slaughtered – we'd prefer it to be local.*

Participants in north-east workshop.

Labelling

Food labelling featured strongly in both workshops and was a major issue in the discussions in the north-east. There was a general view that there was a lack of accessible and easily understood information on what was in food and how it was produced. Participants said they wanted better labelling of additives, sugar, nutrition information, allergens, GM, as well as country of origin.

There's a lack of information on every side. I'm a farmer's wife, but I also work in the community as a play group leader, and I'm also a housewife. I get confused, and I know more about production than most other people. But when you go to the supermarket and you look at the labels, you don't know where things have come from, how far it's come. It isn't on the label, and if you ask 'Is this British?' ... I was buying carrots the other day, and it said British carrots. The sign was big, but they were Spanish carrots, with some British carrots right at the bottom underneath them. A lot of it's misinformation.

Jenny, south-west workshop.

There was felt to be particular problems for people such as pregnant women, diabetics, people with allergies and others with a range of medical problems, including knowing whether it is advisable to eat certain foods. Several participants had allergies, or had children with allergies; one participant had kidney problems; some had family members with diabetes; and many of the women had concerns around foods that should be avoided during pregnancy (and conflicting advice being given to pregnant women).

There is not enough information for people on special diets – ‘no sugar’ doesn’t really mean that, because you might have natural sugars, or added sugars, and you can’t tell from the package. There should be more labelling for special diets.

Joan, north-east workshop.

I’ve got an allergy to mushrooms, and you’ve got to go through the list of ingredients. It’s amazing what’s got mushrooms in it.

John, north-east workshop.

What people did not want was ever increasing amounts of written details on packages. As one participant said: *By the time you’ve got your glasses on and read all that, the day has gone.* Instead people preferred to have a food production, distribution and retail system they could trust, and enough information on packaging to be able to make a decision. One recommendation was for a symbol to identify the source and assurance of food. While there was very little awareness of the Red Tractor logo (or its standards) for farm-assured produce, the logo was seen as a good start – but no more. Logos were generally viewed positively.

Everyone wants to know everything about everything but there isn’t room to put it all on the package. But if you can trust something, and everything is open for inspection, you don’t need that. Like a logo. If you know that’s it’s come from somewhere you can trust, if you can have confidence in the logo, confidence in the name, you can trust it and you don’t need loads of information on the label.

Tim, north-east workshop.

Packaging

The south-west workshop recommended a re-evaluation of the necessity for so much packaging. They called for packaging to be biodegradable and recyclable, and for plastic bags to be replaced with paper bags from sustainable forests. In addition, they considered that the cost of often unnecessary packaging frequently makes items too expensive. Packaging legislation also posed obstacles for producers to sell their produce direct. The group felt that supermarkets should be made responsible for the disposal and recycling of excess packaging, as is the case in Germany.

Small businesses

The participants of the north-east workshop requested a streamlining of legislation to help smaller direct food producers cut down on paperwork, while keeping with health and safety laws.

Our food co-op had to spend £1,400 buying new scales when they brought in European weights.

Moira, north-east workshop.

Information

A key discussion in the north-east workshop was on ‘information’ – who provides it, who funds the research, how much of it is passed onto the public. Some participants wanted to have information from several different sources, while others felt this would be confusing and too much like the current situation where the ‘experts’ appear to disagree. A role was identified for one body which could provide independent, unbiased, truthful information to the public – there was little or no awareness of the Food Standards Agency among either workshop. There was no consensus on this point, other than that people feel powerless and don’t know who or what to believe.

We need independent information, not working for one particular body, but for the consumers.

John, north-east workshops.

Consumers’ role in decision-making about food

There were discussions in both workshops about people feeling powerless to influence what happens to food – particularly since people felt they weren’t given enough information about what is being done to food before they buy it. One participant in the north-east workshop made the comparison with fluoride in water, and the fact that nobody had asked her if she had wanted it. Participants in the north-east strongly felt that they wanted ‘to be heard’.

The south-west group were concerned that their recommendations would fall on deaf ears.

We do not believe any of the government bodies that sponsored this process – or that will be given the results – will take its conclusions on board. We fear this weekend will not make any difference, because other forces such as supermarkets, will be more influential than us.

Conclusion from south-west workshop.

However the feeling was not totally pessimistic. People felt they had learned a lot from being able to share their views and analyse the issues with people with very different experiences to themselves, and were hopeful that there would be ways their recommendations would be taken up at decision-making levels.

Appendix: Methodology

In early autumn 2001, the National Consumer Council held two 'Weekend Away for A Bigger Voice' workshops – in the north-east and south-west of England. Each workshop took place over one-and-a-half days. The purpose of the workshops was to explore the views of low-income consumers towards the future of food and farming and to ensure that their views are represented in the debate on the future of food and farming. Our partners, and funders, for the workshops were the Food Standards Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The workshops formed part of a larger National Consumer Council project, with a remit from the Department of Trade and Industry to examine models of consumer representation in different policy settings.

The workshops were recruited and facilitated by the Who Says? Consultancy on behalf of the National Consumer Council. Each workshop comprised around 18 participants who discussed all aspects of the future of our food system, including how it is grown, processed, distributed and sold. Participants were selected to reflect a diversity of low-income backgrounds and included both rural and urban participants. (Our working definition of 'low income' is household income of less than half the average earnings.) Workshops included both men and women and reflected a diversity of age.

This paper does not include a detailed discussion on the 'process' of the workshops, although this was an important aspect of our project. The workshop facilitation used a variety of participatory techniques including Reflect, citizens juries, participatory appraisal, scenario workshops, forum theatre and participatory video. These were combined in an innovative way to fulfil the dual aims of qualitative research and empowerment. A key aspect of the workshops was the emphasis on drawing out participants' own experiences and aspirations for the future of food and farming, rather than framing and constraining discussions. A considerable amount of educative dialogue took place between participants during the workshops, however the methodologies used did not feed in 'information'.

The workshops followed a pre-arranged structure and sequence to bring out participants experiences in ways that were non-threatening and made participants feel valued. Initial activities focussed on building the group before moving on to getting people to voice more personal opinions and concerns to a group picture for further discussion. Exercises included:

- Voicing opinions: 'What do you think about when buying food? What are your main concerns?'
- Analysing past experiences: The 'Dual Carriageway' exercise allowed people to think about changes in diet and food habits in their own lifetimes and to analyse the causes of these changes.
- Constructing scenarios and creative thinking: Discussion dramas presented elements of possible scenarios for the future of food and farming. These were prepared with reference to DEFRA scenarios work. Participants were then asked to think about how they think the future might look, and act this out in their own 'discussion drama' set in 2011.
- Exploring other perspectives: 'Exits from the roundabout' asked participants to join groups of 'farmers', 'supermarkets', 'shoppers' or 'nature and animals' to think about what their ideal future world would look like. This encouraged participants to think beyond their personal situation and think about things from different perspectives and tackle the issue of trade-offs and priorities, as well as power dynamics between different sectors.
- Having a say: By this stage towards the end of the second day people worked in two and threes to think about issues they felt were important enough to make a recommendation about. Participants then prioritised these and in small groups worked on turning them into recommendations, which the whole group then voted on.

The whole process is independently evaluated by the Institute of Food Research for the National Consumer Council and its partners (The Food Standards Agency and DEFRA).

For the purpose of this submission we have placed greater emphasis on the policy outcomes and recommendations of the workshops. However the participatory process involved in the two workshops was just as important for the participants, and the project as a whole, as the policy recommendations. Many people arrived at the workshops not knowing whether they had anything useful to say and went away having acknowledged that they had important contributions to make, either through the workshop, via their local community groups, or as individuals.

The process achieved its aims of not only being participatory but also empowering to the citizens it involved. It did not merely gather people's views, but allowed people to recognise their democratic right and innate capacity to participate in the decision-making process. The sophisticated analysis of complex issues undertaken by most participants demonstrates that they are capable of far more than mere responses to questions from market researchers. In many ways, the depth of engagement and insight they achieved went beyond that possible using opinion polls, questionnaires, public meetings, internet consultation and most focus groups.