

Engaging with your MPs

Toolkit



Engaging with your MPs toolkit

Putting good food on the menu for your MP

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1. Introduction

Election year is a fantastic opportunity to advocate for change and build relationships with those that will be holding the seats of power in the UK over the coming years. With the July election ushering in significant changes in the makeup of parliament, there has never been a better time to talk to politicians about a better food system.

At Sustain, we believe that changing the way we produce food can offer solutions to so many of the serious challenges we face as a society. A more affordable, healthier and sustainable food system will help tackle the cost of living, improve everyone's chances of a long and healthy life, secure better livelihoods for nature-friendly farmers, and help to ensure a liveable climate whilst restoring the clean water and natural systems on which we all depend.

Many of the policies, standards, and the availability and priorities of large amounts of public funding are decided by MPs and their advisors in Parliament. This is the perfect time for our movement to come together and unite behind our shared vision of a better system of food and farming.

At Sustain, we want to see the new Government commit to:

- More support for agroecological farming and better routes to market in the UK.
- Food included in local and national climate and nature emergency plans and a halt to the expansion of factory farming.
- Healthy school food for all and an expansion of the school fruit and veg scheme.
- Expansion of Healthy Start and cash-first solutions to household food insecurity.
- Sustainable and healthy public sector food.
- Mandatory measures to get companies making food and drink healthier and protecting children from unhealthy food and drink advertising and marketing.
- Establishment of a food partnership in every area across the UK.
- Real Bread on the menu of every school and more support for smaller Real Bread bakeries and their communities.

You can see the Sustain food and farming alliance's full manifesto [here](#).



2. Understanding the political context

Election results at a glance

A General Election was held on Thursday 4 July, where the Labour Party achieved a historic majority, meaning that they have formed the next Government. Here is the breakdown of the results:

Labour	412
Conservative	121
Liberal Democrats	72
Green	4
Reform UK	5
SNP	9
Plaid Cymru	4
Others	23

In what was one of the biggest landslides for Labour, the party now has a significant mandate to put their manifesto into practice. Our manifesto tracker spells out the party commitments to food and farming issues and evaluates how these pledges align with the Sustain Manifesto. We welcomed the Labour party proposals to introduce a Land Use framework, a 50% local or high environmental standard public sector food procurement target, a commitment to banning advertising of unhealthy food to children and banning the sale of energy drinks to under 16's. However, we want to see more ambition from the party on other areas.

You can see our blueprint for the first 100 days of a new Government [here](#).

The new Cabinet

The new Prime Minister has largely retained his Shadow Cabinet in their positions, with figures such as Steve Reed appointed as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), Bridget Philipson appointed as Education Secretary, and Wes Streeting keeping the Health brief. These **early appointments** will play a crucial role in shaping the policy landscape in areas of interest to Sustain.

Sustain was pleased to see Daniel Zeichner be confirmed in post as Minister of State at Defra and we are very much looking forward to supporting his work in this role, as an MP who has engaged extensively with **Sustainable Food Places**, the **National Food Strategy** and our **Sustainable Farming Campaign** over recent years. We are also pleased to see Andrew Gwynne appointed as Public Health Minister, having been a supporter of tackling local junk food advertising and healthy school meals in the past.

The new Prime Minister has announced his intention to chair Labour's new 'mission delivery boards' to help meet the manifesto pledges. These will be cross-departmental boards focusing on Labour's missions including driving economic growth, reforming the NHS, establishing Britain as a clean energy superpower, tackling crime and breaking down barriers through a new skills agenda.

Identifying your new MP

With 335 new MPs now entering Parliament, we are entering a new era in British politics. You can find out more about your new MP and their contact details on the Parliament website [here](#). If your MP is returning to Parliament as an incumbent, you can find out about their record via the website [TheyWorkForYou](#), where you can see their voting record and what issues they have spoken about.

For both new MPs and returning MPs, you may follow them on X (formerly twitter) or other social media channels that they regularly use, check out their website, join their mailing lists and follow their maiden speech where they set out their priorities as an MP (you can usually find maiden speeches on YouTube and all speeches are shared on the [Hansard website](#)).

You may want to take a look at some of the [boundary changes](#) for this year, as your seat may have changed name following a review in 2023. Some may coincide with local authority boundaries but more often they don't. As a result, upper tier local authority areas often have more than one MP constituency within them. Place-based organisations may want to consider engaging all their MPs if they have the capacity to do so.

Some key dates

12 September to 6 October – Party Conference recess. Most major parties hold their annual conferences to set the policy direction for the coming year. Parliament is in recess in this period.

7 October – House of Commons returns after conferences.

6 to 11 November recess

19 December to 6 January 2025 Christmas recess

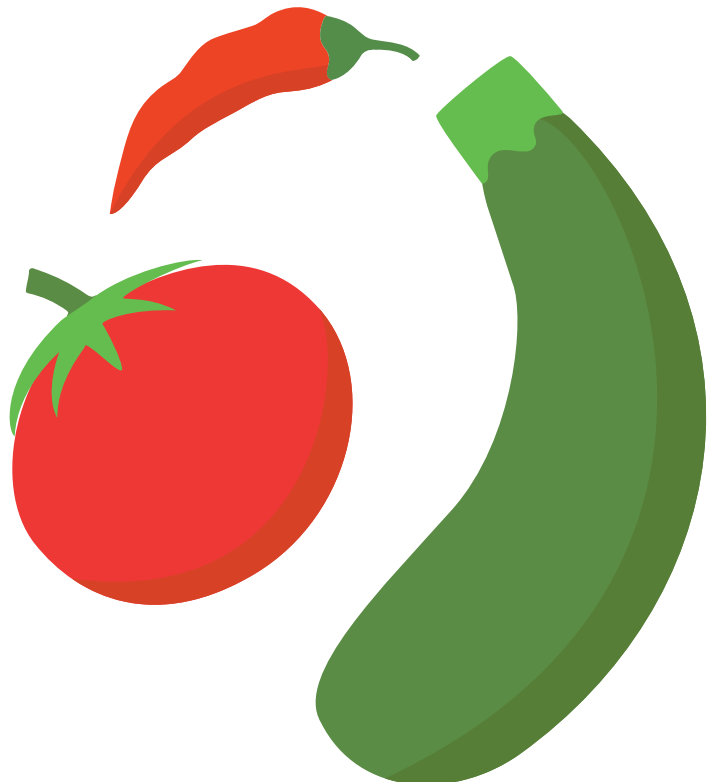
13 to 24 February 2025 recess

8 to 22 April 2025 Easter recess

1 to 6 May 2025 recess

22 May to 2 June 2025 Whitsun recess

22 July 2025 beginning of Summer recess



3. Why should I engage?

What MPs can do for you and your organisation

MPs have a duty to represent their constituents and there is no better time to engage than in a General Election year. Meeting your MP strengthens their mandate to act and allows you to build a relationship.

Whether your MP is in Government, the Shadow front bench or on the backbenches, MPs have a duty to represent their communities. If they hold office in the elected Government, they are still able to help with problems affecting their constituents through all the usual methods and more.

More often, they will be backbenchers, who do not hold office in the Government or opposition's Shadow Cabinet and sit behind the front benches in the House of Commons. MPs can write to a Minister on your behalf, ask a parliamentary question and help put your issues on the political map through debates, clarifying how policy should be implemented or funding allocated, or proposing new legislation. MPs may also be members of select committees, all party parliamentary groups or other interest groups, which gives them more leverage in certain policy areas.

Although MPs don't always live or come from the geographical area in which they are seeking to be elected, there is an expectation that they will be invested in your area and prioritise your needs. Candidates and MPs closely monitor the concerns of their constituents because they have a duty to do so, and also rely on your vote to stay in office.

Don't forget

MPs are often described as the 'GPs of the political world'. They have broad knowledge over a vast range of issues, but due to time constraints, they may not have a deep level of knowledge over the topic you choose to discuss with them.

Your expertise and solutions may be of great interest and fill a gap in their knowledge and programme of work. Offering positive solutions and demonstrating that these have local (and often national) support will help them to take an interest. MPs are extremely well connected and can open many doors for you.



4. Get involved

Identify your calls to action

The first step is to identify your priorities. Is it to establish a food partnership in your area? Is it to win funding for local food infrastructure such as a food hub, local food marketing, healthy food from local farmers in schools and hospitals, or support for farmer focused trading schemes in your area? Or would you like to see more government policy and action on healthy food, household food insecurity or sustainable and climate friendly food systems? Is there one call to action that stands out for you or your organisation?

MPs will be busy meeting constituents in their first months and it's best to define your priorities and not shower them with multiple issues all at once. Your calls will be stronger and more impactful if you can demonstrate you represent many people and organisations.

Research your MPs' interests

Research your MP's interests and use that information to link them to your calls to action. Are they a farmer's son or daughter? Are they a teacher or health professional? Were they on free school meals growing up? Were they employed in the food and farming industry at any point in their lives?

Write to MPs

Now MPs are in place, writing to them directly will be most effective (Appendix 1: template letter for MPs). Ask them questions, invite them to support your key calls to action and invite them to meet with you, visit your community group, community centre, local school or food growing space.

Do share their response or any intel with us if you can so we can build a map of support to key food and farming issues. They will be in the position to represent you in Parliament

and help you and your organisation make progress on your call to action.

Regardless of your political preferences, it's important to congratulate the elected MPs and arrange a follow-up meeting. If your elected MPs made commitments relating to food and farming in their campaigns, build on this, encourage them to deliver on these promises and explore how you can help them to do so.

It's important to note that the new cohort of MPs will be eager to hit the ground running, so we encourage you to use this time to engage with them, whether that's through a meeting or a site visit. It's important to keep the momentum going after the election, as this will be the perfect time to engage with them.

Invite MPs for a site visit

Is there a food growing space, community kitchen, local school or other community food project that embodies your vision and tells a great story of what you would like to see supported in your community? Visiting and experiencing projects first-hand and communicating with local beneficiaries is a powerful way for MPs to understand the aims of your food partnership or organisation and get one step closer to make commitments. Elected MPs will be showered with priorities from individuals and organisations in their constituency. Seeing something first hand is more likely to stand out among their busy schedule and make them understand the importance of food and farming-related issues. If you can turn it into a photo opportunity for local press and social media, all the better!

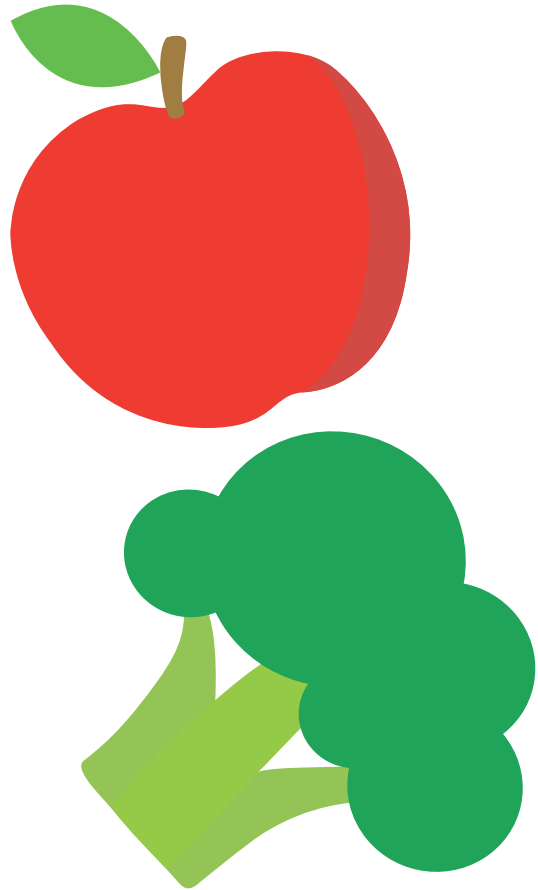
We have recently held a training session on engaging with your MP with our Sustainable Food Places network to prepare you for this stage: **Pitch Perfect: get the most out of connecting with your MPs.**

5. Devolved Administrations in the UK Nations

In addition to having representation in the UK Parliament, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland also have their own elected national assemblies or parliaments, and executive bodies. Also known as the 'devolved administrations', they have 'devolved' powers to legislate and govern on matters that relate to that nation, such as health and social care, education or local government. Other policy areas, such as defence, international trade or immigration, are 'reserved' and remain with the UK Parliament, so decisions made in Westminster directly affect all of the four UK Nations. You can find out more about the [devolution settlements here](#).

Most food and farming-related policy areas are devolved. They include agriculture, health and social care, and education. Therefore, if you and your organisation are based in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland you may decide to concentrate on calls to action that are UK-wide, such as international trade, or on national issues with local relevance and devolved powers such as school food.

It's worth considering that even in those policy areas that are devolved, legislators often need to work with other administrations to make sure the policy or service is designed and delivered successfully. Different administrations can also learn from and be inspired by what has worked elsewhere. For campaigning organisations, it's often useful to compare progress across the four UK Nations and call for solutions across all nations so that we create a common playing field and avoid a 'postcode lottery' of service provision or action on issues of common concern.



Appendix 1: Template letter to MPs

This is a suggested letter for MPs to invite them for a meeting or site visit. Adapt to your priorities and calls to action by choosing what issues you want to include. Mention local organisations, farmers or

families that you or your organisation have supported through a project. Give local examples, facts and statistics – they go down a lot better with MPs.

Subject: Ensuring a healthy, sustainable and resilient food system for... [constituency]

Dear [XXX],

I am writing to you on behalf of [food partnership or organisation]. We are [short description of your aims and who you represent].

Food and farming have become ever more important issues over recent years. One in seven workers in the UK is employed in the food system which contributes over £120 billion to the UK economy. Food and farming are critical for our national security. However, almost half of fruit and veg farmers fear going out of business next year, one quarter of people in the UK are living with obesity that increases the risk of serious health issues, and farming is a leading cause of river pollution and biodiversity loss, whilst farmers committing to nature-friendly methods are struggling to make a living.

Creating a resilient food system must be a top priority in national policy, and we would welcome a meeting with you to explore how you can support a better, healthier and more sustainable food system in [constituency]. Do let us know if there is a convenient day that works for you in the coming weeks.

We commend the leadership you have shown on food and farming issues, including [XXX]. We would like to invite you to visit [the project] and would welcome the start of a conversation with you and your team on how you could build on this leadership to support everyone in [constituency or local area].

Appendix 2: Background and useful resources

Below is some background context and research undertaken by Sustain you can use in your communication or at the meeting/site visit itself.

Farming

A record number of farmers are at risk of going out of business and are at the sharp end of unfair trading practices by supermarkets and food manufacturers. We need incentives for farmers and the big businesses who buy their food to accelerate the transition to nature-friendly farming, grow our local food economy and ensure farmers are treated fairly.

You can see Sustain's Supply Chain Fairness [joint briefing](#) from the Groceries Code Action Network (GCAN), where they call for a stronger Groceries Code Adjudicator to prevent unfair and damaging practices by supermarkets and food manufacturers.

Sustain's food security [joint briefing](#) from the Farming and Land Use Network (FLUN) calls for a more holistic definition of food security that encompasses nutritional quality, food accessibility and stability of supply.

Climate and nature

Thanks to a recent court ruling, the new government will be required to release a new climate change plan in the next 12 months. This needs to contain more comprehensive and ambitious plans to prevent climate breakdown, especially for agriculture and land use.

Our rivers are in dire ecological state and pollution from intensive livestock is a leading cause. You can see our [Stink or Swim](#) report, where we call on the Government to halt new intensive livestock units in river catchments where nutrient loads are exceeded.

A long-awaited reform of public sector food failed to materialise before the General Election. We need to ensure public sector food procurement for schools and hospitals drives healthier diets and support for low-carbon and nature-friendly farming. Public sector food procurement should lead the transition to planetary health diets and support nature-friendly farming. We welcomed the Labour manifesto commitment to 50% local or high environmental standard public sector food procurement, but these standards need to be clear, legally binding and enforced to have an impact.

Children

Healthy school meals introduce children to a lifetime of enjoyable food and sociability. They also boost attainment and attendance, increase a child's lifetime earnings, improve household food security, help families save on food costs, improve diet quality and help combat food-related ill health such as diabetes and heart disease, saving the NHS money in the long term. We need to ensure all children, regardless of their income or background, can have a healthy, nutritious meal every day in school.

Sustain's Children's Food Campaign [Parents' Manifesto](#) for healthy children's food features calls from parents for the new Government, including strong support for making free, healthy and sustainable food available for all children from nursery to sixth-form college.

Health

Everyone deserves to be healthy no matter where they live. We need our next government to make sure healthier food is the easiest, affordable option for everyone. We need action to improve access to healthy and affordable food for everyone, such as

through Healthy Start payments for families, and incentives or rules for companies to switch away from producing and advertising unhealthy food.

Read our [Healthy Start Policy Positions](#) briefing, and find out more about our [Recipe for Change](#) campaign, which calls on the Government to build on the success of the [Soft Drinks Industry Levy](#), which the Sustain alliance was influential in securing. You can also see some of the great work being done locally by York Council who have just introduced a [healthier food advertising policy](#).

Household food security

One in five households with children and almost half of households on Universal Credit reported experiencing food insecurity in 2024. However, our local authorities are cash strapped and Household Support Fund comes to an end in March 2025. We need to ensure that everyone has access to good food and ensure a long-term solution to local welfare support to help your constituents if they experience financial crisis.

Local action and food citizenship

Local authorities have experienced significant cuts to the public health grant and have limited capacity and powers to tackle unhealthy food advertising and prevalence of unhealthy food takeaways. We need to strengthen national planning policies and guidance to support the development of healthy food environments and support a food partnership and plan in every local area.

Appendix 3: Rules for lobbying and campaigning

Party political impartiality is vital for effective campaigning and is part of the rules governing charities. We encourage organisations and individuals to engage with MPs from all parties and ensure good food and farming are central to their priorities in years to come, regardless of which MP now represents your constituency.

Good food and farming, for health, fairness and the environment, should be a priority for everyone, regardless of political hue – and we should all feel confident and able to express this to the people elected as our representatives, whatever party they are from or if they are an independent MP.

Organisations that are charities can find general guidance from NCVO, the National Council of Voluntary Organisations, in their [‘Political campaigning as a charity’](#) resource page. Other useful resources include The Charity Commission’s [guidance on campaigning and political activity](#).