

2024



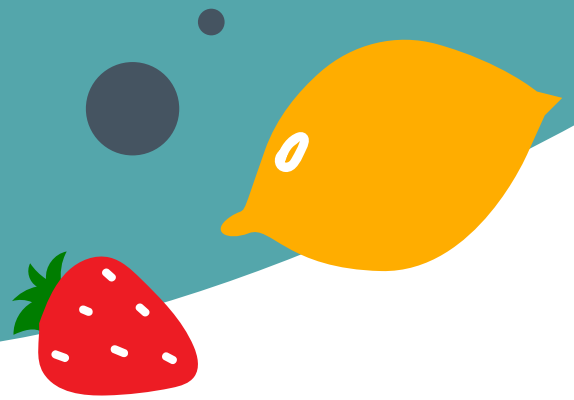
airfield
estate

FOOD SYSTEMS

Through the Eyes of Young People



A Report by
Airfield Estate's Youth Board



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When established in 2023, **Airfield's Youth Board** was set the task of bringing the voice of young people to Airfield Estate. In order to do this, they determined that first, they needed to know how young people in Ireland saw the food system and their place in it.

This prompted the creation of the **Food Systems Through the Eyes of Young People** survey and following this, the production of this report. The findings have shown us that food is an important part of the lives of young people and that they are conscious of the **need to improve our food system**, in terms of fairness, cost and climate impact. However, where the disconnect lies, is how they themselves fit into this change. Much greater education is needed on the opportunities the agri-food sector holds for young people but also on the ways that we can produce, purchase and eat food in a way that benefits ourselves and our planet.

This report **sets out a series of recommendations** for a range of stakeholders, some of which will be taken on by Airfield Estate and our Youth Board in the coming years, to **help foster the connections young people have with the food system in Ireland**.



"Empowering Ireland's youth to shape our food and agriculture systems, is more than just investing in their future - it's sowing the seeds of resilience, sustainability and community in Ireland's future leaders."

- Chris, Airfield Youth Board

⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B9780323910019000414>

⁸ <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/15/14/11148>

INTRODUCTION



This report, led by the Youth Board of Airfield Estate, delves into the critical role Ireland's young people play in the nation's food system. It explores how young people perceive their role within the agri-food landscape and the challenges they face or anticipate in the future. As a nation globally recognized for producing high-quality food, Ireland's reputation remains strong; yet this same country is witnessing a growing disconnection between its younger population and the origins of its food.

In 1969, nearly half of Ireland's population lived in rural areas. By 2050, however, this figure is predicted to drop to just 25%, illustrating the significant impact of urbanization and global trends. According to the 2023 Teagasc National Farm Survey, farmers aged 65 and over now account for one-fifth of Ireland's farming population, with the average age of a farmer rising to 58. This generational shift—coupled with the ongoing movement of young people into urban centres—presents a serious risk to the long-term sustainability of Ireland's food systems, unless urgent action is taken to address this trend.

This report presents the key findings from the survey, offering an insight into how young people in Ireland perceive the agri-food system, their place within it, and their vision for its future. We conclude with actionable steps that policymakers must take to ensure the long-term sustainability and success of Ireland's world-class food system.

This survey, coupled with the experience garnered by the Youth Board and Youth Activism Officer and that of Airfield's educational team, means we are well placed to provide commentary and input into how Ireland can better engage young people in the food system.



¹ <https://www.pwc.ie/services/deals-advisory/insights/sustainable-cities.html>

² <https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2024/National-Farm-Survey-2023.pdf>

WHO WE ARE

Airfield Estate is a 38-acre urban working farm and gardens located in Dundrum, Co. Dublin, reconnecting people with where their food comes from. Our ambition is to be Dublin's Sustainable Food Hub and help transform Dublin into a world-leading sustainable food city (under SDG 11). Through our commitment to showcasing sustainable food production, Airfield encourages individuals to make informed food choices—choices that are not only better for themselves but also for the planet.

The work of Airfield Estate today is informed by the legacy of the Overend sisters, Letitia and Naomi, who left the estate in trust to the Irish people for the purposes of education and recreation. Today, Airfield Estate is a charitable trust welcoming thousands of students each year on curriculum-informed school tours and offering visitors of all ages the opportunity to explore its working farm, gardens, woodlands and heritage. Airfield is also home to a community garden and a cookery school, providing visitors with an immersive farm-to-fork experience that fosters a deeper understanding of sustainable food systems. Alongside this work, Airfield is an accredited research institute, hosting PhD students, undergraduate research interns and working closely with a number of universities. Airfield is also a partner in several EU research projects working in the areas of sustainable agriculture, soil health and agri-data.

Airfield Estate's Youth Board

Airfield Estate established a Youth Board to bring the voices of the next generation into its decision making. This initiative also aims to upskill young people and empower them to become future leaders in food, agriculture and climate action. Airfield's Youth Board brings together a diverse group of 15-18 year olds from across Ireland, from both urban and rural backgrounds. The Youth Board meets up to six times a year, both in person and online. Actions throughout the year range from planning and brainstorming, coming together to provide feedback to the Senior Board on plans, representing Airfield and undertaking training sessions on different topics of interest to the members. The Youth Board is enabled by Airfield's Youth Activism Officer. This involves coordinating meetings and activities and liaising between the Senior Board and the Youth Board throughout the year. In addition to working with our Youth Board, the Youth Activism Officer also works on youth engagement in food and agriculture in Airfield and more widely, collaborating with other youth groups and initiatives working on similar projects nationally and internationally.

Recognising the growing challenges within the food ecosystem, the Youth Board embarked on a mission to



identify what Ireland's young people want from their food system and the issues they believe are most pressing. This effort culminated in the 'Food Systems Through the Eyes of Young People' campaign—a survey of young individuals aged 16 to 30, conducted alongside an ongoing analysis of the social landscape surrounding food, agriculture and youth engagement in Ireland.

Research Approach

Audience: To better understand the perceptions young people hold about the food system, we surveyed over 300 young people aged 16 to 30 from diverse backgrounds across the Republic of Ireland. While the majority of respondents reported as being from urban areas, there was representation from 22 counties in Ireland amongst the responses.

Themes: The survey assessed young people's knowledge of food origins, awareness of opportunities in the sector, and their perceptions of farming and the food system. We explored this through the lens of three key themes:

- Relationships with Food
- Perceptions of the Irish Agri-Food Sector
- The Future of Irish Food Systems

Objective: The aim was to uncover clear insights into the views young people hold on the food system, helping to identify where policymakers can act to foster a greater interest in the agri-food sector, identify educational gaps on the opportunities within the sector and explore ways to encourage a greater sense of appreciation for where our food comes from.

- **318 survey respondents aged 16 - 30**
- **Representing 22 counties, however the majority of the responses were from Dublin**

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOOD



41% of young people we surveyed are either indifferent or concerned about the current Irish food system

As the generational divide between Ireland's youth and agriculture grows, it becomes increasingly important to rebuild these ties in order to foster sustainable food consumption behaviours. The number of farmers in Ireland is decreasing, with the number of farmers reducing from 73,000 to 61,000 between 2011 and 2022. Farmers are the foundation of our food system so it has never been more urgent that we foster a renewed connection to food and agriculture amongst Ireland's young people. Research consistently shows that individuals who have direct experience growing food are more likely to adopt sustainable practices. The lack of interaction between today's young people and farming, combined with an absence of widespread education in schools on sustainable farming, is a significant concern that threatens the future resilience of Ireland's food system. Studies have shown that greater exposure to sustainable farming and hands-on experience can lead to more environmentally conscious food behaviours³. Anecdotally, this is seen at Airfield, when students come on school tours, agricultural science or ecology classes, they and their teachers routinely report that the topics learned in class are grasped more quickly and easily, when you can see them in action on the farm.

Alongside the widening gap between young people and food production, food culture in Ireland is also changing. Dietary preferences of younger generations differ from those of older generations, but also differ depending on gender, religious/spiritual beliefs and a range of other factors⁴. In the last 20 years, Ireland's food culture has rapidly transformed, with the influx of takeaway options and food corporations such as 'Deliveroo' and 'Starbucks' and a rise in international cuisine and high-quality Irish gastronomy across the island. Although some popular media such as the 2014 documentary 'Cowspiracy' or the popular 'Clarkson's Farm' have shed a light on the food system, 30% of young people we surveyed still expressed that their feelings about the current Irish food system were 'confusion' or 'indifference'.

Young people in particular are vulnerable to the harmful marketing of unhealthy ultra-processed food products by powerful multinational food corporations. **BiteBack 2030** is a youth activist movement in the United Kingdom challenging this harmful marketing which is directed specifically at children and young people. Global food corporations are reshaping food culture for the worse by flooding our markets with highly addictive, low-cost products packed with sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats, eroding our health and traditional food practices. Their influence on our food system is pervasive, pushing unsustainable diets that harm our bodies, communities, and the planet. Respondents to our survey highlighted 'cost of living' as their top challenge facing the Irish food system and repeatedly highlighted that they felt Irish food was very expensive. This just further emphasises how vulnerable young people are to the rampant marketing of cheap, ultra-processed and addictive foods. This issue is so severe that under new government rules in the UK junk food advertising is set to be banned prior to the 9pm watershed.

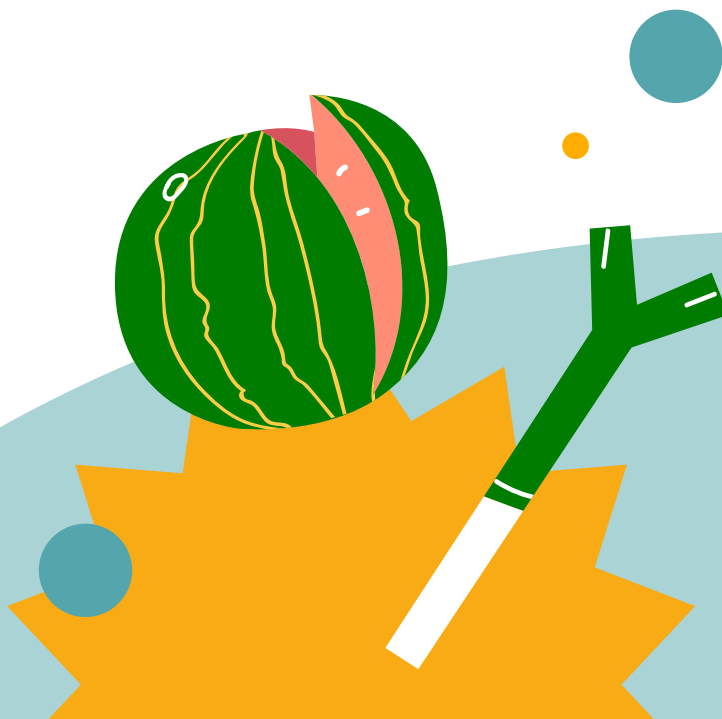
Ultimately we at Airfield aim to grow a stronger appreciation for our food, where it comes from and its impact. We want to educate people on the work that goes into producing their favourite food products and as a result, help place a greater value on our food and food system. To address the disconnection between people and food production and help foster a strong food culture, Airfield Estate believes that those in positions of influence must work to engage young people early, allowing them to witness sustainable farming firsthand to understand and appreciate where their food comes from.

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921800922002579>

⁴ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/jhn.13216>

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666323024431>

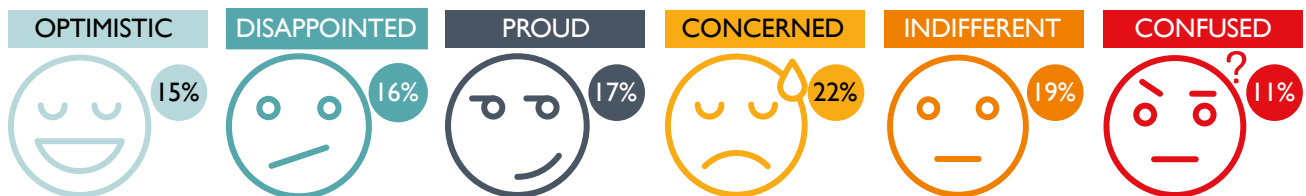
⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/15528014.2024.2306030?needAccess=true>



RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOOD

Key Insight: Young people are becoming disconnected to food production and food culture in Ireland has changed.

Recommendation: Reconnect young people to production



Airfield Estate's FarmerTime programme connects classrooms directly to farmers with a monthly video call. The programme provides resources on how agriculture links to the curriculum and allows students to see the day-to-day workings of a farm throughout the seasons.

Recommendations

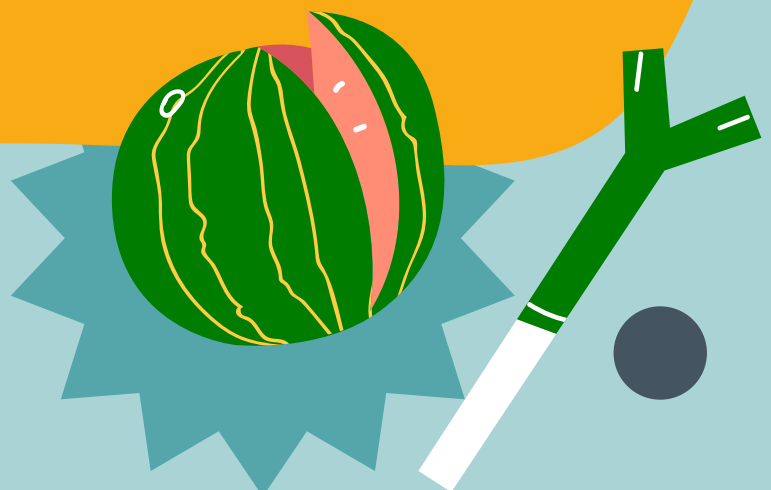
Reconnect young people to food production:

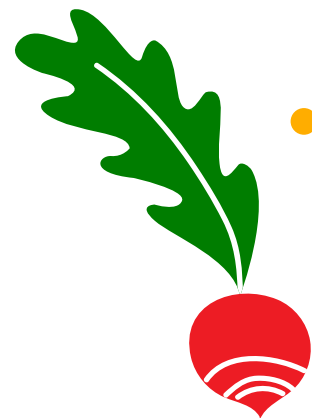
- **Farm-to-Fork Educational Programmes:** Every class in the country should visit a farm once a year. Establish government supported visits to farms for primary and secondary school students, particularly focusing on disadvantaged schools (DEIS). This initiative will build early familiarity with farming practices and provide hands-on learning experiences that connect students to the food system. To extend this learning beyond just a single day of the year, we propose that
- **Provide a Direct Connection to Food Production:** Every school should either have a school garden, be connected to a local community garden or where possible, have a connection with a local farm. This should be done alongside providing

funding for the ingredients needed for home economics classes. Funding is already provided for in other hands-on modules such as art and woodwork⁸. This helps increase access to education on both ends of the farm-to-fork journey - production and consumption.

- **Enhanced Food Literacy Curriculum:** Integrate comprehensive food literacy education across multiple subjects, including agriculture, biology, and home economics. This curriculum will be supplemented by practical learning at places like Airfield Estate, ensuring students gain a well-rounded understanding of sustainable food production and consumption.

⁸ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-03-07/3771>





PERCEPTIONS OF THE IRISH AGRI-FOOD SECTOR

44% of young people would not consider a career in the agri-food sector

There has been growing concern about the decline in young people pursuing higher education in agriculture-related fields. Recent media coverage has highlighted this trend, which poses a significant challenge to the sustainability of the agri-food sector⁹. A submission made by Airfield Estate to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, as part of the Committee's examination of the Future of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) in Irish Education highlighted that food education should be incorporated into primary and secondary school curriculums. In an additional submission regarding the new Leaving Certificate Climate Action & Sustainable Development subject, Airfield noted that there is "an absence of the central importance of sustainable food systems in relation to climate action and sustainable development". It is no surprise that students' pursuit of food and agriculture related careers or courses at third level are decreasing if food education and the topic of sustainable food systems are so absent from their wider education. It has been shown that pursuit of agricultural education and careers decreases at times of economic growth¹⁰, which may be an indicator to why courses in agricultural science are receiving lower applicants at present, nonetheless it is alarming that education on food systems is so absent in our curricula. When asked where the best place to learn about food systems would be, the majority of students (63%) identified school or college. This shows that the appetite is there amongst young people to learn about food. In our survey when asked how they felt about the Irish food system, 49% of young people said either 'concerned', 'confused' or 'disappointed' with only 17% stating that it made them feel proud. There is a clear need here to help young people understand the many elements that comprise Ireland's resilient and internationally-recognised food system.

This highlights a crucial misconception that needs to be addressed—while young people are interested in this sector they are often unaware of the diverse and dynamic careers within the agri-food sector, which span media, marketing, finance, diplomacy, sustainability, technology and business. It is imperative to showcase the wide variety of roles available in order to inspire future generations to enter the sector. Without this, the agri-food sector won't be competitive and will be seen as a less interesting option for the young people leaving education and heading into the working world in Ireland.

One initiative working to combat this issue is the **National Youth Food Forum**, a platform that connects young people from across the agri-food sector and amplifies their voices to policymakers.

"Not something I've ever considered... was never discussed in school as a career option so never thought about it"

- Female, 25, Cork

⁹ <https://www.farmersjournal.ie/careers/news/ag-science-decline-continues-as-concerns-heighten-833892>

¹⁰ <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/15/14/11148>



PERCEPTIONS OF THE IRISH AGRI-FOOD SECTOR

The National Youth Food Forum is a platform established to bring together young agri-food professionals to connect and to share their vision for the future of the Irish food system with policymakers. The group is working to showcase Irish agri-food careers more widely. Since its inception in March 2024, the forum has welcomed nearly 100 young professionals and students, offering them valuable opportunities to engage and collaborate. The National Youth Food Forum is also Ireland's National Chapter to the World Food Forum, which provides unique opportunities for these young people to connect to the global food system.

To further bridge the gap between young people and the agri-food sector, universities and educational institutions must ensure that the full spectrum of careers within the industry is represented at career events. A coordinated effort to establish national or provincial agri-food careers fairs would provide a socially equitable and accessible platform for young people to explore career opportunities and apprenticeships in the sector. In order to be competitive with other sectors such as technology, media and finance, these events must highlight to young people that the agri-food sector extends throughout media, STEM, hospitality, tourism, business, health and creative industries. This initiative should be complemented by the creation of a dedicated online platform offering career resources and guidance to help young people navigate their potential paths into agri-food.

Ireland's education system also offers a unique opportunity through Transition Year, which could be used to introduce students to careers in the agri-food sector. By incorporating a curriculum focused on food systems and sustainability—paired with hands-on projects at sites like Airfield Estate—students can gain practical experience and a deeper understanding of what a career in the agri-food industry could look like. Such programmes would benefit both students who are considering alternatives to university and those who are still exploring their future career options.

⁸ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-03-07/377/>



PERCEPTIONS OF THE IRISH AGRI-FOOD SECTOR

Key Insight: Young people are not informed about what the agri-food sector can offer them

Recommendation: Expose young people to the wide variety of possible food-related careers

Certified Irish Angus run a schools' competition challenging Transition Year students to rear Irish Angus calves over 18 months while completing a research project. The initiative aims to educate the students about producing beef. It also supports students' self development and presentation skills as well as assisting in subjects such as business studies, biology and home economics.

Recommendations

Expose young people to the wide variety of careers on offer by:

- **Run the National Youth Food Summit annually:** The first National Youth Food Summit in 2024 was a successful event in bringing together young people of all ages to learn about food and agriculture in an interactive way. This event should be continued annually, to expose more young people to this sector and encourage them to think differently about food and food production.
- **Agri-Food Careers Awareness Campaign:** Develop a national awareness campaign to correct misconceptions and showcase the diversity of roles within the agri-food sector. Highlight the breadth of career paths such as sustainability consulting, agri-tech, policy, and marketing to broaden the sector's appeal. This campaign should include events such as careers fairs and a website, bringing together information from a range of sources including job postings, internships etc.
- **Transition Year Integration:** Introduce an agri-food curriculum within Transition Year that combines academic learning on food systems and sustainability with practical, hands-on experiences. Partner with local farms and educational institutions, such as Airfield Estate, to offer experiential learning that highlights the sector's wide-ranging opportunities.

THE FUTURE OF IRISH FOOD SYSTEMS

Only 22% of young people felt that the current Irish food system is fair for farmers

The future of Ireland's food system hinges on urgent steps that must be taken now to address long-standing challenges. Climate change, rural depopulation, the rising cost of living, and shifting consumer preferences are all issues that have grown over the decades and will likely continue to intensify. While this report has outlined numerous steps that can be taken on a national level to equip the next generation with the education and tools necessary to make more sustainable food choices and to see the opportunities the agri-food sector holds, it's equally clear from the survey responses that government action is critical for supporting young people as they enter careers in the agri-food sector. Without this, Ireland's food system remains vulnerable. Farmers, as the backbone of the Irish food system, were ranked by survey respondents as the most important contributors to the food system. The sentiment expressed by young people in their survey responses displayed significant respect for farmers and their place in the food system.

Only 22% of young people felt that the current Irish food system is fair for farmers and fair financing for farmers and a just transition was raised by almost a quarter of respondents. Although many respondents acknowledged the high cost of food, they still believed that farmers should receive fair compensation for their work. This sentiment

underscores a pressing and much called for need for better financial and structural support for farmers, ensuring that agriculture remains a viable and attractive career path for the next generation.

In Ireland, agriculture is the single largest contributor (37.8%) to our overall greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. More than a quarter of respondents felt that Ireland must lower the carbon emissions of our food system, to create a more sustainable food future. Additionally, the changing climate and biodiversity loss were seen by young people as the second and third greatest challenges to the Irish food system. However, at the same time 45% of young people rated their age group (16-30 year olds) as having little to no knowledge on the environmental impacts of the food system. These results highlight a clear uncertainty amongst young people about the true impact of the food system on our global climate. In our submission in the Public Consultation on the new Leaving Certificate Climate Action & Sustainable Development subject, we emphasise that 'We cannot solve the climate crisis without understanding the relationship between the food we consume and its impacts (both positive and negative) on the climate and biodiversity crises. This includes students developing an understanding of what the entire food system is; what ramifications it has on our climate; and how changes to it across the entire system can impact on our health, economy, and climate.'

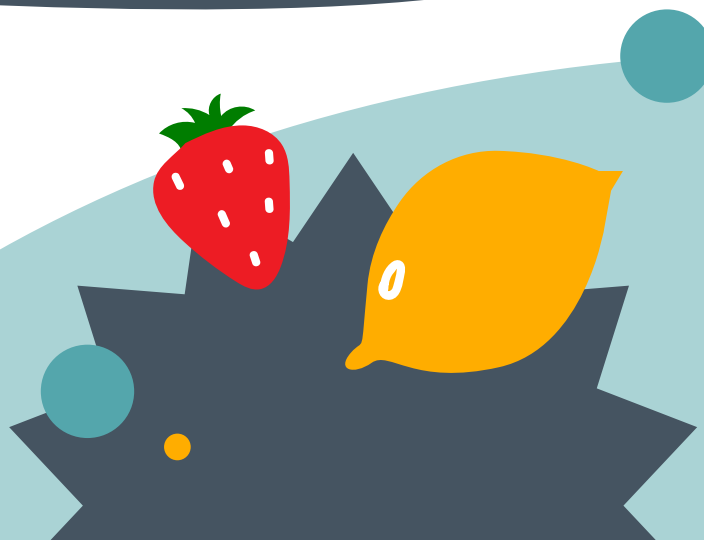
Leaving Certificate Updates. 'Food' and 'Agriculture' are both mentioned only once in the draft of the new Leaving Certificate subject on Climate Action and Sustainable Development. The absence of these topics leaves a major gap in the understanding of climate change and sustainability of the young and interested young people who will choose to study this subject.

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921800922002579>

⁴ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/jhn.13216>

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666323024431>

⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/15528014.2024.2306030?needAccess=true>



THE FUTURE OF IRISH FOOD SYSTEMS

Key Insight: Young people want to see support for farms and climate action

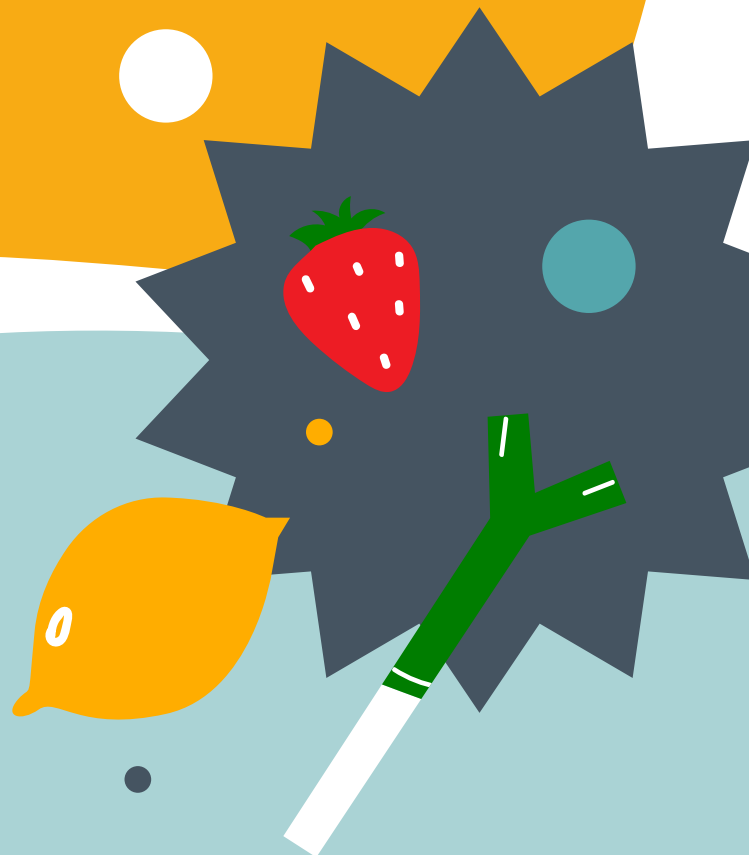
Recommendation: Leverage school meals programme as a tool to support farmers, decrease carbon footprint and educate students on Irish food

Recommendations

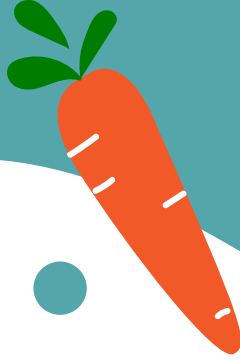
Take action in connecting young people to food through culture, activism and mealtimes:

- **Leverage School Meals Programme:** We all eat multiple times a day every day, meaning there are a huge number of opportunities to sit and reflect on our food and the steps involved in getting it to our plates. We see the School Meals programme as an area with huge potential to grow food system understanding and appreciation, while also having tangible benefits in lowering our GHG emissions and in supporting Irish farmers. This programme can be utilised to tackle multiple issues raised in this survey. By calling for 30% of all school meal ingredients to come from Irish producers we can:
 - Reduce the environmental impact of these meals by using locally produced food
 - Support Irish farmers by ensuring a reliable market
 - Use lunchtime as an educational opportunity for young people by increasing awareness of Irish food, where your food comes from, but also of the need to import certain food items and therefore incorporating education on the global elements of the food system.
- **Create a guide to food activism:** Every young person has a different set of skills and interests and there is a space for them all in climate action through food sustainability. Airfield Estate's Youth Board will create a guide for young people on the ways they can make an impact whether that be through local youth action, plant-based diets or education through social media.
- **Create a food culture map:** Similarly, Airfield Estate's Youth Board will look to devise a map recommending books, films, organisations they can follow to help people embrace food culture.



⁸ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-03-07/3771>



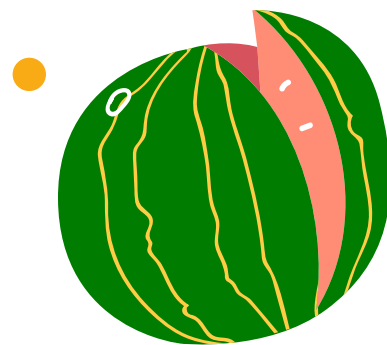
GLOBAL COMPARISONS AND BEST PRACTICES



Ireland is not alone in facing these challenges. Similar issues around youth engagement in agriculture, rural depopulation, and the sustainability of food systems are seen globally. For example, in the UK, the [LEAF Education study](#) has shown that young people across the UK share a deep respect for farmers, but there is often a gap between that respect and actual career interest in the sector. This is reflected in our survey also. By comparing these trends and looking to countries that have implemented successful strategies, Ireland can learn from global best practices. **Policymakers should explore international partnerships, adopt proven educational models, and encourage cross-border collaborations in the agri-food sector.**



One example of a strong initiative which is connecting young people across global food systems is the aforementioned World Food Forum (WFF). This flagship event brings together young people and policy makers in the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation in Rome, Italy and allows for connection and collaboration between young people working on food systems projects in their own national contexts. Ireland is a significant supporter of the WFF, having funded 150 young people from the global south to attend the event in 2024. Internationally, Ireland's government support of the WFF National Chapter – the National Youth Food Forum is seen as an example of 'best practice'. The NYFF held Ireland's first ever National Youth Food Summit in 2024 in collaboration with Airfield Estate, which brought together close to 500 young people for a full day of activities educating young people from senior infants up to young professionals on the food system and their roles in it. This is a very positive example of the support for generational renewal within Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and we hope that the findings of this report can further reinforce the value of this support.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The future of Ireland’s food system will require support for both older and younger generations. What is key from this report is that although young people in Ireland think highly of our food system and of farmers it is clear that significant gaps exist in education around these topics. There is a clear lack of education for young people on either the impact of food production on the climate or the wide diversity of career opportunities the agri-food

sector can offer them. It is not all bad news however. Through awareness, education and action we feel we can greatly increase the value placed on food and food production in our society and show young people the wealth of opportunities the food system in Ireland has to offer them, fostering a new generation of leaders who are equipped to address the challenges of we face in the coming years of **climate change** and **food security**.

Recommendations

Although we have set out these recommendations for policymakers, educators, and sustainability organisations, we recognise that meaningful change in food sustainability involves everyone—young people and adults alike. These actions are just the beginning of what’s possible when we work together to build a stronger, more sustainable food system. We are all stakeholders in the food system,

whether we farm, cook, eat or shop and therefore we can all make a difference and all pay attention to the true value of our food. Airfield’s mission is to connect people to where their food comes from and help educate everyone on the food choices which will nourish both people and planet. We will continue to do this, and particularly work with young people to start this learning and appreciation early in life.

	Policy makers	Educators	Sustainability Orgs (e.g. Airfield Estate)
Leverage School Meals Programme	✓	✓	✓
Create a food culture map	✗	✗	✓
Create a guide to food activism	✗	✗	✓
Transition Year Integration	✓	✓	✗
Agri-Food Careers Awareness Campaign	✓	✗	✓
Run the National Youth Food Summit annually	✓	✗	✓
Farm-to-Fork Educational Programmes	✓	✓	✗
Provide a Direct Connection to Food Production	✗	✓	✓
Enhanced Food Literacy Curriculum	✓	✓	✗



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