

Plant-based meat and the ultra-processed food debate

Insights from members of the UK public.



About this report

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Authors and acknowledgements

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About Public First

Public First is a policy, research, opinion and strategy consultancy. Public First works with global companies, governments, start-ups, institutions and foundations around the world to tackle major public policy and strategic challenges.

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About GFI Europe

The Good Food Institute Europe (GFI Europe) is a nonprofit think tank helping to build a more sustainable, secure and just food system by diversifying protein production.

We champion the science, policies and investment needed to make alternative proteins delicious, affordable and accessible across Europe.

By advancing plant-based foods, cultivating meat from cells and producing ingredients through fermentation, we can boost food security, meet our climate targets and support nature-friendly farming. GFI Europe is powered by philanthropy.

Executive summary

Is processing putting UK consumers off plant-based meat? The answer isn't straightforward.

Plant-based meat has the potential to help the UK eat less red and processed meat, with [growing evidence](#)¹ linking this swap to higher fibre intake, reduced saturated fat intake, and a smaller environmental footprint.

But despite more than half of adults saying they want to eat more plant-based foods, less meat and dairy, or both, UK sales of plant-based meat have fallen since 2021. Commentators have linked this to the ongoing debate around ultra-processed foods (UPFs), but there is little direct evidence of how the association between plant-based foods and UPFs in the media is shaping attitudes towards the category. This report begins to address that gap.

The Good Food Institute Europe (GFI Europe) commissioned Public First to conduct six online focus groups in May and June 2026, involving 45 participants identified as open to eating more

plant-based foods and/or less meat. The groups discussed everyday food choices, their reflections on the UPF debate, their attitudes towards plant-based meat, and which framings of it resonated most.

Conclusions

The core conclusion of this research is that “processed food” was a ubiquitous concept among focus group participants and has coloured their perceptions of the plant-based meat category’s healthiness and trustworthiness. However, the UPF lens is not the only way that participants judged plant-based meat, and it often reinforced existing perceptions. For those who already had concerns about issues such as taste and texture, processing entrenched an existing dislike, giving them another reason to avoid plant-based meat. For those with more positive experiences, processing was



Credit: Anna Shvets on Pexels

perceived as a drawback, but this was not sufficient to outweigh plant-based meat's benefits as a familiar, convenient and accessible way to eat less meat. This suggests that the UPF debate increases doubt, but it is not the only factor in people's decision-making.

Other key findings

- **People instinctively view plant-based meat as processed.** Participants raised concerns about long ingredient lists and food that felt artificial. However, these concerns were based on instinct rather than technical understanding, and many people could not explain what the term “ultra-processing” meant. Instead, they used it as a shorthand for broader anxieties around the food industry.
- **Plant-based meat occupies a middle ground.** Many participants judged it as being healthier than processed meat but less healthy than whole foods such as lentils, beans, chickpeas or vegetables.
- **Convenience is not important for everyone.** Convenience was an appealing aspect of plant-based meat for people who otherwise relied on convenient meat options, such as sausages, nuggets and

ready meals. It was not an advantage for others who often cook from scratch or don't mind eating more lentils and beans.

- **Health, not the environment, was the strongest entry point.** Most participants aiming to cut down on meat were doing so due to issues like cholesterol, digestive problems, weight, ageing, or specific medical advice. Environmental and animal welfare reasons were supporting, not primary, motivators.

Future directions

More work is needed to test these findings against a nationally representative sample, but this report lays the groundwork for a deeper understanding of people's perceptions of plant-based meat and the role it can play in their diets. The research suggests that, for consumers who typically rely on processed meat as a convenient base for their meals, plant-based meat could make meat reduction easier.

Businesses and civil society organisations working to support the transition to eating more plant-based foods could further explore the effectiveness of messages that highlight the specific health benefits of plant-based meat.

Introduction

Why this research and why now?

This report builds on [quantitative research](#) ² published by GFI Europe, HarrisX and Plant Futures, which found that 51% of UK adults wanted to eat less meat and dairy, more plant-based foods, or both.

Despite this widespread interest in dietary change, the UK's plant-based market has experienced a turbulent few years. The UK remains Europe's second-largest market for plant-based meat, following rapid [expansion](#) ³ between 2016 and 2020, but sales have fallen since 2021. GFI Europe's latest annual [plant-based retail sales report](#) ⁴, based on data from Circana, shows that the sales value of plant-based meat in UK supermarkets fell by 7.3% in 2025 to £295 million. However, figures from discounters like Aldi and Lidl, where plant-based meat sales appear to have been doing better, were unavailable.

Consumers regularly cite [taste and price](#) ⁵ as their top barriers to eating plant-based meat. Part of the downturn in sales may be attributed to the UK's ongoing cost-of-living crisis, as plant-based meat generally costs more than its animal-based counterparts.

However, commentators often speculate that a widespread public perception that plant-based meat is heavily processed is another important factor in the category's decline. While this trend has been reported in the media and is often discussed anecdotally among those in the plant-based ecosystem, there has so far been limited evidence on how public debate about UPFs has affected perceptions of plant-based meat. Using the three consumer segments identified in GFI Europe's quantitative research with HarrisX and Plant Futures, Public First conducted focus groups to understand how people who are open to meat reduction respond to plant-based meat, what role

they see it playing in their diets, and how the evolving debate over UPF is shaping these views.

By addressing these knowledge gaps, this report provides a resource for those working to diversify the UK's food consumption, including plant-based businesses, retailers and civil society groups. Like all qualitative research, it has its limitations and should not be read as a definitive analysis of wider public opinion. But, together with the previous quantitative research, it provides an important snapshot of how people think and feel about plant-based meat.

Using consumers' own words, this report also builds on previous research demonstrating that making plant-based meat tasty and convenient is critical to realising its potential societal benefits. It confirms that while the UPF debate plays a central role in some people's decisions, it is not the only factor at play, and plant-based meat continues to hold potential as a straightforward swap for red and processed meat.



Credit: Juicy Marbles

Background

This report builds on previous quantitative research, using focus groups to explore how the UPF debate shapes food attitudes.

The aforementioned quantitative research surveyed 2,394 UK adults, using the COM-B model (see Appendix One), to explore attitudes and levers driving consumer uptake and barriers to eating plant-based foods.

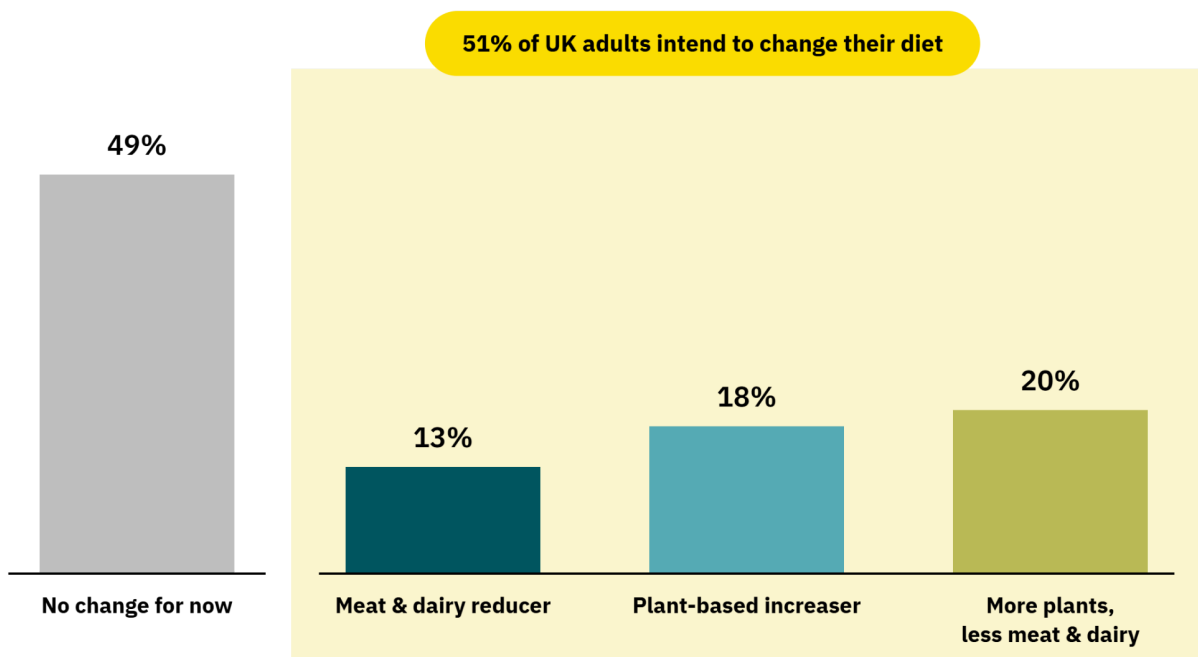
The data identified that 51% of the population intended to change their diets to eat more plant-based foods, less meat and dairy, or both:

- Meat & Dairy Reducers (13%): typically older people wanting to lose weight.
- Plant-Based Increasers (18%): typically younger, higher income people, more commonly men, with a variety of health and fitness goals such as building muscle, seeking protein and fibre.
- More Plants, Less Meat & Dairy (20%): typically people looking for a balanced lifestyle, often including weight loss goals, and often motivated by the environment or animal welfare.

This research also revealed areas where people need support in overcoming barriers to increasing their consumption of plant-based foods, such as unfamiliarity, taste and availability. However, it did not explore the impact of concerns about processing on people's decisions.

This report builds on the earlier quantitative research, using findings from focus groups conducted to explore people's views on the ongoing UPF debate and how these influence their broader food choices and attitudes towards plant-based meat.

Public First conducted six online focus groups during May and June 2026. These comprised 45 participants across two rounds of fieldwork, all of whom were UK adults already interested in reducing meat consumption (see Appendix Two). Participants were split across the three segments identified in the aforementioned quantitative research and were drawn from England, Scotland and Wales.



The groups discussed day-to-day eating habits, their understanding of and responses to the UPF debate, and their views on plant-based meat. Each

focus group also briefly reflected on a selection of messages about plant-based meat.

What is plant-based meat?

Plant-based meat aims to replicate the taste and texture of animal meat using protein-rich ingredients from plants such as soy, pea, fava beans and wheat. Though technically made from fungi rather than plants, mycoprotein is also a very common option in the UK, most commonly recognised under the brand name Quorn.

These products are distinct from traditional vegetarian options such as bean burgers and tofu, as they are designed to more closely match the experience of meat products.

Plant-based meat could satisfy some of the UK's demand for meat, using fewer resources than the industrial systems that supply much of our pork and chickens. Industrial animal agriculture has led to problems like [air pollution](#),⁶ [soil degradation](#)⁷ and [waste buildup in rivers such as the Wye](#).⁸ A 2024 [systematic review](#)¹ concluded that the emissions, land use and freshwater use of plant-based meat are typically at least 70% lower than those of animal meat, underpinning the [Climate Change Committee's](#)⁹ inclusion of plant-based meat in its pathway to ensuring the UK meets its climate targets.

More information [here](#).¹⁰

Is plant-based meat ultra-processed?

Plant-based meat is often considered ultra-processed, but unlike many other foods in this category, it is typically a source of fibre, high in protein and low in saturated fat.

In studies that break down the impact of UPFs by food group, plant-based meat is listed alongside foods such as wholemeal bread as associated with [reduced health risks](#).¹¹ While more research is needed, studies focusing specifically on plant-based meat have found that eating it instead of animal-based meat could [reduce](#)¹² levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol and bowel cancer [risk](#),¹³ [improve](#)¹⁴ gut health and help [maintain](#)¹² a healthy weight.

More information [here](#).¹⁵

What drives food choices?

Everyday decisions are shaped by cost, convenience and health – but instinct guides many choices about what is nutritious.

When asked about their food choices, participants across all groups wanted to eat more healthily, but this was rarely the only consideration. People said they balanced healthy eating against cost, convenience, household preferences, time and food waste.

Some participants said that, for them, healthy eating meant reducing their consumption of red meat and processed foods, while others focused on eating less saturated fat, increasing their fibre intake, managing cholesterol or losing weight. Many of the participants talked more generally about wanting to eat “better” or achieve a balanced diet. But across all of these approaches, people rarely said they were following a strict diet – instead, they were trying to make incremental changes within the realities of everyday life.

Cost and convenience shape real-world decisions

Cost was one of the strongest influences on food decisions across all groups, particularly for families balancing diverse tastes and dietary preferences within a single household. Participants talked about meal planning, batch cooking and avoiding food waste, and many said that rising food prices had made shopping more constrained and deliberate. Some described the budget pressures and practical challenges of cooking a single meal that satisfied everyone.

Convenience was another key factor. Many participants described busy lives with childcare responsibilities and competing priorities and said that meals that were quick and easy to prepare often won out over more aspirational intentions, such as cooking from scratch.

But convenience was about familiarity as well as cooking time. Participants said that meals everyone would eat, using ingredients they already knew how to cook with, seemed more achievable than less familiar options.

Healthy eating is more often guided by intuition than formal nutrition advice

When asked how they looked for information on healthy eating, participants said they drew on social media, recipe sites, newspapers, packaging, family, friends, health professionals, and, increasingly, AI tools – but many felt overwhelmed by the volume of advice.

As a result, while some participants had clear dietary goals, they often said their views on healthy eating were guided by intuition rather than formal nutritional frameworks. Some participants used traffic light systems or protein content when shopping, but most relied on instinct. They talked about whether food looked fresh, whether ingredient lists made sense to them, whether they could make the product themselves from scratch, and how they felt after eating it.

"I literally just go to the supermarket and I just use my general knowledge."

Man, 30s, Llanelli – Plant-based increasers

"I go by how I feel. Some food makes me more energetic. Other food just drains my energy."

Man, 40s, Cardiff – Plant-based increasers

"Convenience is a big factor for me. Half the time I go shopping, I just get ready meals."

Man, 18-19, Burry Port – Plant-based increasers

"I've had to cut down on processed meat a hell of a lot because I found that my chest and asthma was getting really bad."

Man, 30s, Llanelli – Plant-based increasers

"I don't eat a lot of meat but I'm trying to reduce it and eat healthier, only because I'm getting older."

Woman, 70s, Paisley – Meat and dairy reducers

"I'm trying to reduce my meat intake. I had some kidney issues last year, so I've been told to eat less red meat."

Woman, 50s, Reading – More plants, less meat and dairy

"Your body tells you everything you need to know."

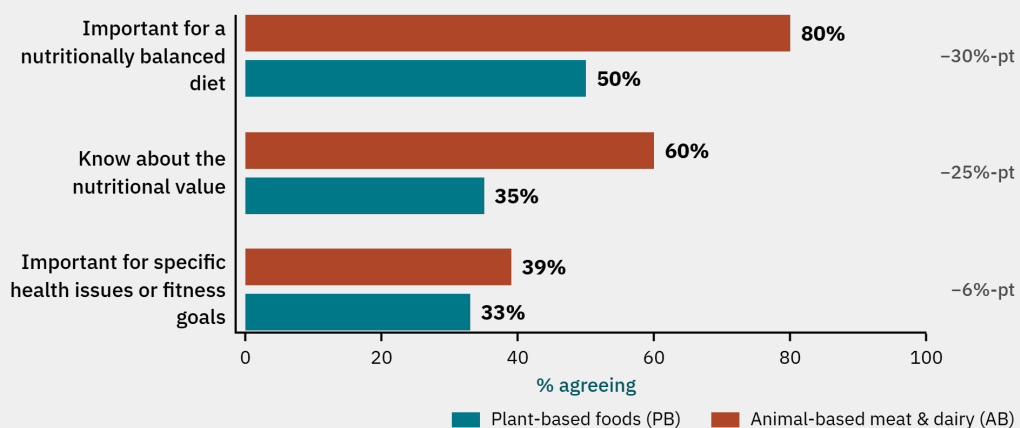
Man, 30s, Wrexham – More plants, less meat and dairy

"The price of things like meat is going up and you just need to be a bit more economical with the ingredients you get, make it last."

Man, 40s, Wrexham – More plants, less meat and dairy

The 2025 quantitative research also revealed that cost and health were central to many people's food choices. Cost came out as the main reason for people to reduce their meat and dairy consumption (25%), closely followed by health (24%), and other health-related reasons such as lifestyle changes (12%), medical conditions (7%) and weight management (5%). The research also found a stark gap in knowledge about the health benefits of plant-based foods, which may present a barrier to greater adoption – only 35% knew about the nutritional value of these foods, compared to 60% for animal-based foods.

Relative attitudes towards plant- and animal-based foods among UK adults (n=2,394)



Data from GFI Europe's quantitative research with HarrisX and Plant Futures.

Attitudes to plant-based meat

Participants viewed plant-based meat as processed – but this did not automatically translate into rejection.

Participants were generally positive about reducing meat consumption, but this did not automatically translate into positive views of plant-based meat.

People in all groups said they were trying to eat less meat, particularly red and processed meat, which many associated with problems such as high cholesterol, heart health and weight management challenges. Although animal welfare and environmental issues sometimes reinforced their decisions, health was the primary motivator.

When asked about reducing meat consumption, most people first talked about eating more vegetables, lentils, chickpeas, beans, eggs, or fish – foods that felt familiar, natural and aligned to their views on healthy eating. Plant-based meat was often mentioned later in the conversation as one option among many, rather than as the default substitute for meat.

Plant-based meat is instinctively associated with processing

Participants frequently described plant-based meat as processed or ultra-processed without prompting, linking it to additives, preservatives, unfamiliar ingredients, and industrial food production. Some people were sceptical about the level of processing required to make plant-based products that tasted like meat.

However, this did not always translate into outright rejection, and many saw a role for plant-based meat in certain situations despite holding reservations about processing.

Mixed views on whether plant-based meat is healthy

Participants rarely described plant-based meat as being either healthy or unhealthy. Some

assumed it must be inherently healthy as it was made from plants, associating it with lower fat and higher fibre content than meat. Others questioned whether heavily processed foods could be healthy, regardless of their nutritional quality. Many participants concluded that it depended on the specific product and what they were comparing it to – an issue explored further in this report under Plant-based Meat and its Relationship with UPF.

Familiar meals and previous experience shape openness

When asked about situations in which they would use plant-based meat, participants were most positive when it naturally fit into meals they already cooked. They described products such as mince, burgers and sausages as working well, as these products allowed them to follow the same meal structure without needing to swap many ingredients.

Some participants described using plant-based mince in spaghetti bolognese, curries or chillies, or buying plant-based burgers as direct swaps for meat versions. GFI Europe's retail sales [report](#)⁴ also found that these were among the highest-volume categories in the UK market.

Participants who'd had previous negative experiences of the taste or texture of plant-based meat, even if this was years ago, demonstrated more negative attitudes towards the category. On the other hand, participants who had found products they enjoyed were more open to plant-based meat. Attitudes towards plant-based meat were often based on whether people could imagine a role for it in the meals they cooked and enjoyed.

"I would rather probably have a veggie curry than swap it for some plant-based meat."

Woman, 30s, Houston – Plant-based increasers

"A lot of vegan meat replacements are highly processed."

Man, 30s, Hove – Plant-based increasers

"It's the processed food element... that makes me think [plant-based meat] is probably not healthy."

Woman, 50s, Dorset – Meat and dairy reducers

"I substitute plant-based stuff sometimes for spaghetti bolognese and curries."

Man, 30s, Glasgow – More plants, less meat and dairy

"It feels like you're having a burger and chips even though it's not meat."

Man, 20s, London – More plants, less meat and dairy

"I'm trying to have a different variety of proteins. So not just always meat-based, going more plant based as well, or lentils and stuff like that, chickpeas."

Woman, 20s, Bolton – More plants, less meat and dairy

"If something's quite true to its original form... that's less processed, versus something trying to be fake meat."

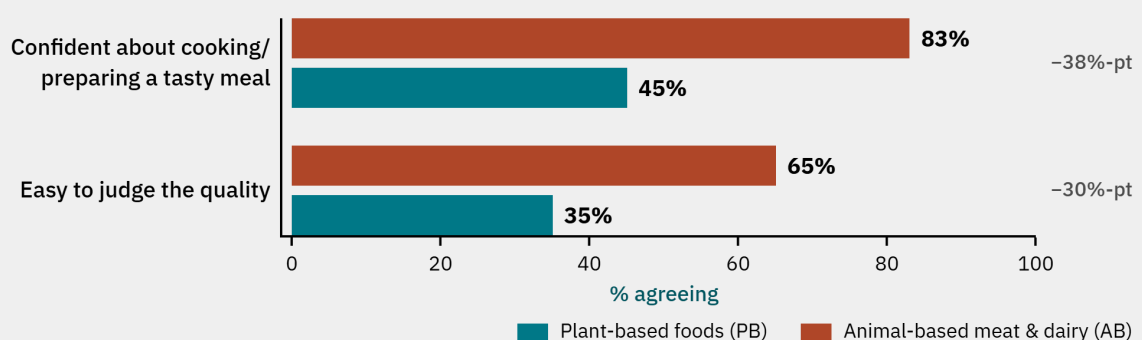
Woman, 30s, Maidenhead – More plants, less meat and dairy

"I think on the whole [plant-based meat is] healthier... because they're based on vegetables."

Man, 40s, Edinburgh – More plants, less meat and dairy

The quantitative research also revealed the importance of familiarity in people's food choices – a capability barrier which limits broader plant-based uptake. Only 45% were confident they could cook a tasty plant-based meal, compared with 83% who felt comfortable preparing a meal with animal-based ingredients. And just 35% thought it was easy to judge the quality of plant-based ingredients, compared with 65% for animal-based ones.

Relative attitudes towards plant- and animal-based foods among UK adults (n=2,394)



Data from GFI Europe's quantitative research with HarrisX and Plant Futures.

Attitudes to ultra-processed foods

Awareness was high, but understanding was low.
Processing served as a catch-all term for anxieties about modern foods.

Awareness of ultra-processed food was high, but people had a limited understanding of what the term meant in practice, often using it as a general warning sign and linking it to broader concerns about the food system.

UPF is widely recognised but poorly understood

Most participants across all groups were aware of the term “ultra-processed”. They reported encountering it in newspapers, documentaries, podcasts, and on social media. Participants overwhelmingly associated the term with poor health, but their understanding of the concept was shallow. When asked, they could identify examples such as fast foods, ready meals and processed snacks, but many struggled to explain what distinguished processed foods from ultra-processed foods.

They had a broad sense that UPF was something people should avoid, without a clear understanding of why or exactly which foods the term covers. Focus group participants said they relied on instinct rather than a detailed understanding when deciding which foods they categorised as processed.

“Processed” as shorthand for broader concerns about modern food

Focus group discussions about UPF frequently expanded into wider concerns about preservatives, additives, pesticides, plastics, supply chains, and

distrust of manufacturers and supermarkets. For many, “processed” functioned as shorthand for food that seemed artificial, commercialised, or hard to trust.

Concerns about processing appeared across all groups, but seemed to be expressed differently depending on age and life stage, with older people more likely to talk about cooking from scratch, avoiding additives and eating “proper food”. Further quantitative research would be needed to establish whether this variation in how different groups approach the issue holds across a nationally representative sample.

Conflicting information has reduced confidence in nutritional advice

In the absence of a clear understanding, participants relied on intuitive signals that they associated with processing, such as long ingredient lists, unfamiliar ingredients, E-numbers, pesticides, and foods that were impossible to make at home. Participants reported receiving nutritional information from a wide variety of sources, such as those outlined in this report under What Drives Food Choices. However, many felt these sources contradicted one another and were uncertain about whom or what to trust. As a result, they talked about using their own judgement and experience when shopping for food, relying on what feels like “real food” to them.

“Nobody’s really 100% sure what the phrase [UPF] actually means.”

Man, 40s, Glasgow – Plant-based increasers

“If there’s loads of words on the back of the product that you can’t really pronounce... then you know it’s been made in a lab.”

Man, 30s, Llanelli – Plant-based increasers

“There’s so much talk about [UPF] that it has got to the point now that it’s not so clear.”

Man, 40s, Glasgow – Plant-based increasers

“I’ve not actually heard of ultra-processed before, and I wouldn’t know where to look for it.”

Man, 50s, London – Meat and dairy reducers

“Even buying stuff from supermarkets these days, I get suspicious of what they’ve been sprayed with.”

Man, 50s, Bangor – Meat and dairy reducers

“If it’s got a lot of ingredients in it and they’re not natural, if you couldn’t make it at home... that’s a sign of whether it is healthy or not.”

Woman, 50s, Watford – More plants, less meat and dairy

“There’s more chemicals added to make them last longer... it comes down to money with it.”

Man, 30s, Wrexham – More plants, less meat and dairy

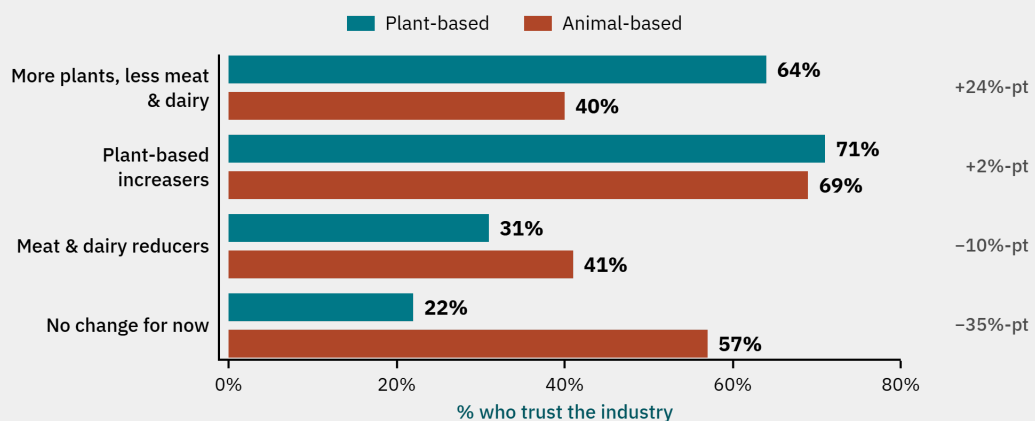
“I do find sometimes it’s a bit contradictory. One person will say you can have this and another says that.”

Man, 40s, Edinburgh – More plants, less meat and dairy

A [2024 study](#)¹⁶ of UK adults also pointed to high levels of awareness but low levels of knowledge about food processing, finding that 73% had heard the term “UPF” but many could not identify which foods it applied to. UK Research and Innovation’s recent [public dialogue](#)¹⁷ found that people felt they did not have enough information about UPFs and wanted research to provide more clarity, including explanations of “good” and “bad” UPFs and whether they should continue to play a role in UK diets.

While it did not specifically examine the UPF issue, GFI Europe’s quantitative research with HarrisX and Plant Futures also found mistrust of both the plant-based and animal-based food industries, although this varied significantly across consumer segments. For those already eating more plant-based foods, trust was far higher in the plant-based sector.

Percentage of people who trust the plant-based/animal-based food industry



Data from GFI Europe’s quantitative research with HarrisX and Plant Futures.

The relationship between ultra-processed foods and plant-based meat

Concerns about processing reinforce existing views rather than shape new ones.

Focus group discussions confirmed that plant-based meat is linked to many of the concerns associated with ultra-processed foods, and to wider scepticism about modern food manufacturing. When asked about how they viewed the category, participants frequently questioned whether products were too processed, too artificial or too far away from their original ingredients.

But some participants who recognised plant-based meat as ultra-processed also said they saw it as a way to eat less meat, particularly processed meat, speaking to the practical reality of how some people eat in everyday life. A tension was evident during some of the discussions – products could be viewed as processed while still being useful, healthier than some alternatives, or aligned to broader dietary goals.

UPF more often reinforces existing attitudes rather than creating new ones

Participants who already disliked the idea of plant-based meat or had prior negative experiences cited processing as another reason for avoiding it. Those who were already open to plant-based meat were not put off by processing if the product served another purpose, such as convenience, reducing meat intake, or enhancing taste.

Participants did not describe processing concerns as the deciding factor in whether they would eat plant-based meat. Instead, processing reinforced views they had already taken.

Plant-based meat sits between processed meat and whole foods

Participants rarely judged plant-based meat against a single benchmark and reached very different conclusions depending on what they compared it with. People consistently viewed whole foods like lentils, beans, chickpeas, and vegetables as the healthiest way to reduce meat intake. While they often accepted that plant-based meat could have nutritional benefits, they tended to view whole foods more positively.

By contrast, participants viewed plant-based meat more positively when they were comparing it with processed meat products such as burgers, sausages, nuggets, bacon and fast food. They often described plant-based meat as the “better option” or the “lesser of two evils” compared with heavily processed or low-quality meat products.

Practicality shapes food choices – not ideology

The discussions showed that most participants took a practical approach to food rather than following strict principles or beliefs. While many expressed concerns about UPFs, they also recognised that processed foods were a normal part of their diets.

Participants’ decisions about what to eat were often shaped by convenience, affordability, taste and the needs of other family members, even when these did not perfectly align with their health goals. Instead of thinking about foods as simply good or bad, participants weighed up different priorities and accepted that everyday food choices involved trade-offs.

Convenience illustrates how these trade-offs play out in practice

When asked which foods they chose instead of meat, some participants said that plant-based meat was more appealing when compared with the convenience meat products they already relied on, such as burgers, sausages, nuggets, and ready meals.

Those who already reported cooking from scratch, for whom opening a tin of chickpeas or adding lentils already felt just as easy and cheaper, found plant-based meat far less appealing. However, it was unclear what proportion of people actually did this regularly.

“It would be better than having a full-on beef burger that's processed... It's the lesser of two evils.”

Man, 40s, Glasgow – Plant-based increasers

“I don't think just because a product is a plant-based meat, it's any different from any other processed food.”

Man, 30s, Kent – Plant-based increasers

“Who's got the time to make your own vegetable burger from scratch?”

Man, 40s, Glasgow – Plant-based increasers

“It's tasteless, I'd rather go for lentils and beans. It's just as easy to do some lentils or beans as it is to use this stuff.”

Man, 60s, Weymouth – Meat and dairy reducers

“I think vegan alternatives are definitely better for you than the really cheap processed meat and spam and things like that.”

Man, 30s, Glasgow – More plants, less meat and dairy

“I quite like buying the meat substitutes, but I don't particularly do that to be health-conscious.”

Man, 30s, Glasgow – More plants, less meat and dairy

The finding that many people consider plant-based meat less healthy than options such as tofu, seitan and falafel was also confirmed in the previous quantitative research.

A separate 2026 [study](#)¹⁸ of UK adults found a similar dynamic around UPFs more broadly. When the cost of cooking from scratch was similar to that of the more convenient option, respondents said convenience, rather than price, tended to decide the outcome.

Percentage of people who view various plant-based foods as having good nutritional value



GFI Europe quantitative research with HarrisX and Plant Futures. Percentage of respondents who had eaten each food group in the last year who rated them as having good nutritional value

Messaging

Each focus group session ended with a discussion about a series of messages about plant-based meat.

These indicated that participants were most responsive to claims that were specific, practical and directly relevant to their existing concerns. Participants were less persuaded by broad claims about plant-based meat as a category. They often wanted to know what the product was being compared with and whether the claim applied to all products. They also assessed whether the claims matched their own experience of price, taste and processing.

As outlined elsewhere, more research would be needed to establish whether these messages resonate with a wider, nationally representative sample of UK consumers.

Specific nutritional claims were the most engaging

Messages about protein, fibre, lower saturated fat and cholesterol generally resonated best. These worked because they spoke to concerns participants already had about reducing red or processed meat, maintaining protein, improving heart health and eating more fibre.

However, these messages needed to be concrete. Participants were sceptical about general claims

that plant-based meat is “healthy”, especially when they still saw the products as being processed. The more specific the benefit, the easier it was for participants to understand and believe.

Convenience resonated when it was tied to familiar meals

Messages about plant-based meat being an easy swap worked best when participants could imagine using it in meals they already cooked, such as spaghetti bolognese, curries, burgers or sausage-based meals.

But convenience was not universally accepted. Some participants, particularly those who preferred cooking from scratch, felt using lentils, beans or vegetables was just as easy.

Price messages landed well, but only when they felt believable

Participants responded positively to messages about plant-based meat becoming cheaper or comparing favourably with meat on price. This mattered because cost was a major constraint across the groups, and trying an unfamiliar product could feel particularly risky if it was expensive. However, participants were sceptical when affordability claims did not match what they saw in shops.

Conclusion

The ultra-processed food debate has become a dominant UK narrative around food and nutrition and has amplified existing concerns and mistrust in our food system. This research suggests that perceptions of plant-based meat have been affected by this debate. But it also reveals that the relationship between processing and food choices is not straightforward and points towards new ways of thinking about plant-based meat's value proposition.

Participants did not reject plant-based meat simply because it is processed. However, processing reduced people's openness to the category by compounding their existing views about it. The perception that plant-based meat is processed served as another reason for sceptical people to avoid it. Conversely, some processing was acceptable to those who saw plant-based meat as a familiar and convenient way to eat less meat.

This research offers one possible explanation for these diverging perspectives – that plant-based meat is viewed very differently depending on what it is being compared against. While focus group participants considered it a positive swap for processed meat and fast food, they viewed it as less desirable than whole foods like lentils, chickpeas and vegetables, which some participants saw as the more obvious path to reducing meat intake.

The challenge is that, in practice, people's perceptions and dietary goals often diverge from their actions. Despite just over half of people in the UK reporting that they wanted to eat less meat, consumption of meat in the UK remains relatively stable¹⁹ and is not falling fast enough to meet health or sustainability goals. And, despite the focus groups' wariness of processing, plant-based meat retail sales⁴ were

90% higher in 2025 than those of more traditional options like tofu²⁰ and bean burgers, which are often viewed as less processed.

While focus group participants instinctively associated plant-based meat with processing, they did not view it solely through that lens. Some also described accepting some degree of processing as a trade-off when a product could deliver on taste, convenience, price, or a clear health benefit. This suggests that, rather than trying to convince people that processing doesn't matter, supporters of plant-based meat may do well to acknowledge the perceived middle ground it occupies between whole foods and processed meat. In that context, people can make informed decisions about how to prioritise factors such as taste, price and convenience.

This report finds that plant-based meat still has an important role to play in building a healthy, sustainable and resilient food system.

Focus group participants described how familiar meals and ingredients were vital to their dietary choices when busy lives and fussy children meant they didn't have the time or energy to experiment with new foods, while the quantitative research made it clear that many people felt more comfortable cooking with animal-based products. Plant-based meat, which replicates the familiar format of animal-based products, is one way of overcoming this lack of familiarity.

For those already integrating plant-based meat into familiar routines, often those managing time pressures or household food preferences, it continues to serve a specific, practical function, regardless of the wider UPF debate. People in this group, who may struggle to balance diet quality with competing demands, are also those

for whom plant-based meat can offer the greatest benefit.

Plant-based meat isn't for everyone. While more research will be needed to verify this, these focus groups found that older participants and those in the "meat and dairy reducers" segment tended to view whole foods more positively and preferred the idea of simply eating less meat or replacing it with foods they already knew and trusted. But those people who regularly scratch-cook with beans and lentils are least likely to eat large amounts of processed meat in the first place, and are therefore less likely to benefit from the straightforward switch that plant-based meat offers.

Media coverage has often noted that concerns about ultra-processing are driving the decline in sales of plant-based meat. This research suggests the picture is more complicated. While the UPF debate certainly creates scepticism and reluctance to try plant-based meat, it is not an insurmountable obstacle for those who value the familiarity, convenience and taste of plant-based meat as a tool to support their dietary goals.

It also suggests value in highlighting the specific nutritional benefits of swapping processed meat for plant-based meat, which is where plant-based meat's broadest benefits lie, and making this information more readily available to those it is most likely to help.

Key takeaways

- **Processing matters, but it isn't a dealbreaker on its own.** People instinctively view plant-based meat as a UPF, but this reinforces existing views rather than creating new ones. Participants who didn't like plant-based meat cited processing as another reason to avoid it, but others were willing to overlook some level of processing.
- **Plant-based meat occupies a middle ground depending on what it's compared against.** People see plant-based meat as unhealthy next to lentils, beans and vegetables, but as healthy when compared with processed meat or ready meals.
- **People make practical trade-offs when choosing what to eat.** Participants discussed balanced, practical considerations, such as affordability and cost, rather than applying ideological principles to what they ate. Convenience worked only for those who already relied on convenience foods, not for those who cooked from scratch.
- **Health is the main motivator for reducing meat.** Many people are reducing meat due to concerns such as cutting cholesterol, eating more fibre or losing weight. This highlighted an awareness gap, as many participants were unaware that research suggests plant-based meat could help to address these health concerns.

Future directions

As with all qualitative research, this study provides a snapshot of how a particular group of people think and talk about these issues, not a measure of how many people hold each view, and it should not be read as representative of UK public opinion as a whole. The sample was deliberately drawn from people already open to reducing meat consumption, rather than the general population, and the size of the focus groups means no concrete patterns can be drawn across the three segments or across different age, life stage, gender or socioeconomic backgrounds.

As such, this report has its limitations, but it points to opportunities for further research to examine its findings in greater detail:

- Because health emerged as the strongest reason for many participants to reduce their meat consumption, health messages about plant-based meat's ability to reduce cholesterol or boost fibre intake when replacing meat could be tested against a large-scale sample of consumers most likely to act on this information.
- Testing a broader set of messages focused on familiarity and convenience with a large-scale sample of people wanting to reduce meat consumption would help establish how effective these messages could be in driving behaviour change. For example, detailed quantitative work could test whether these messages are more effective for people with families or for other age and life-stage demographics.
- A conjoint study asking consumers to choose among plant-based meat, processed meat and whole foods in matched shopping scenarios would quantify exactly how people judge plant-based meat relative to these options. This research would test whether the "middle ground" perception outlined here holds at scale and in real-world scenarios.

Further research would build on the findings of this report, providing the food industry and civil society with a firmer evidence base for making decisions about how to help more people to reduce their meat consumption.

Appendix one

GFI Europe's quantitative research with HarrisX and Plant Futures surveyed 2,394 UK adults, including a nationally representative sample of 1,062 people and an additional group of 1,332 plant-based eaters using a COM-B model.

The survey asked consumers to score both plant-based and animal-based foods across a range of factors drawn from the COM-B model.

The COM-B model is a framework for understanding behaviour change. It identifies three essential components that must be present for any behaviour to occur. These are:

- **Capability (C):** The individual's *physical* and *psychological* ability to perform the behaviour in question.
- **Opportunity (O):** The *social* and *physical* external factors that make the behaviour in question possible.
- **Motivation (M):** The internal processes that direct and encourage the behaviour, including both *reflective* (conscious) and *automatic* (unconscious) motivations.

We were interested in two **behaviours (B)**: the intent to increase the consumption of plant-based foods and the intent to reduce the consumption of animal meat and dairy.

Existing research and knowledge were consolidated to create a long list of attributes that fall under each of the COM-B components.

There were 16 COM-B questions asked about plant-based foods, and 16 about animal meat and dairy foods. The questions about animal meat and dairy mirrored the questions asked about plant-based foods so we could make direct comparisons.

Appendix two

Public First focus group breakdown

Segment	Round one	Round two
Meat and dairy reducers	Eight participants. Majority female, predominantly older (seven aged 50+), mixed income, education levels and ethnic backgrounds.	Eight participants. Gender-balanced, predominantly older consumers (six aged 50+), mixed incomes, education levels and ethnic backgrounds.
Plant-based increasers	Eight participants. Majority male, younger-skewing group (half under 35), broad income range, though slightly more affluent than other segments, mix of educational and ethnic backgrounds.	Eight participants. Majority male, mixed younger and middle-aged consumers (under 30 to late 40s). Broad income range, though slightly more affluent than other segments, all college or university educated, and mixed ethnic backgrounds.
More plants, less meat and dairy	Seven participants (one dropout). Gender-balanced group and younger in age (only one aged 45+). Predominantly middle- to higher-income profile. All college or university educated and mixed ethnic backgrounds.	Six participants (two dropouts). Gender-balanced and mixed-age group, ranging from under 30 to late 50s. Broad income and education spread. Mostly from a white ethnic background.

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