



Targeted Messaging for Plant-Based Diet Change

An evidence-based guide for UK communicators



Animal
Think Tank

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Animal Think Tank

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With thanks to Food System Research Fund
for funding this study.

This research explores UK audiences to support UK communicators. Judgement should be used in applying the ideas outside the UK.

If you are interested in helping fund and extend this research so the UK movement can better target and message about dietary change and buying new-meat please contact:

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Contents

At a glance	4
Introduction	9
Tailoring messages to your audience	13
The diet change spectrum	27
Conclusion	31

AT A GLANCE

AT A GLANCE

We created this guide based on the extensive public opinion research we've been conducting to understand how people relate to food, and their openness to plant-based diet change.

This guide is for communicators and marketers

... in the space of food transition and diet change who are working on reducing society's reliance on animal products.

Use this guide to:



Identify your audience

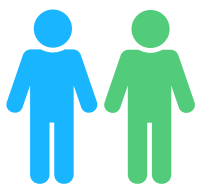


Understand your audience



Focus your messages on their mindsets and goals

We recommend two key segments to target



Hesitant ethical eaters (19% of the UK population) and **active ethical eaters (10% of the UK population)**

This group is closest to change and is already motivated by ethics and environment. But they are also the most sensitive to how messages are framed. Alongside the 'why', they need clear, practical support with the 'how' of eating more plant protein.



Conflicted conformists (29% of the UK population)

Social norms are both the barrier and the lever for this group. They haven't yet thought seriously about changing, but showing that plant-based eating is becoming more accepted and mainstream can move them, because fitting in matters most to them.

AT A GLANCE

Use the guide to segment your audience (page 15) into one of five:

Ardent meat eaters
(12% of pop.)

Strongly attached to eating animal products, very low openness to change.

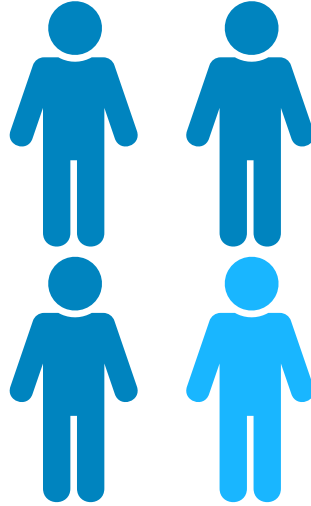


Meat-lovers
(29% of pop.)

Comfortable with current diet, not actively considering change, but aren't resistant to the idea of change either.

Conflicted conformists
(29% of pop.)

Enjoy eating animal products, but feel conflicted about it. Haven't yet thought about making changes, but are not resistant to the idea. They may struggle to overcome social norms.

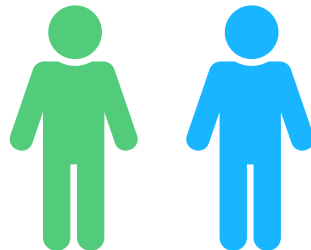


Hesitant ethical eaters
(19% of pop.)

Actively thinking about change, motivated by animals and health. Potentially resistant to strong messaging.

Active ethical eaters
(10% of pop.)

Already reducing or avoiding animal products. Highly motivated.



AT A GLANCE

Greater meat reduction may be achieved by moving away from meat language and culture to describe plant-based food products.

The groups most open to change do not necessarily enjoy meat or associate strongly with it. **Products which target heavy meat eaters and emulate meat are actually targeting the two groups that are most resistant to buying them.**

Instead, the two groups most open to change are not trying to recreate the experience of eating meat; they have already moved away from that. What they want is something that does the nutritional job of meat – a protein source that fits their values. That means messaging built around meat-mimicry is likely missing its audience entirely, while the language of ethics and environment when describing plant-based and alternative foods speaks directly to people already primed to buy.



For brands and organisations, the practical upside is significant: by focusing on audiences that already have reasons to be open to plant-based foods, and framing products around protein and values, they can be more efficient with resources, sharpen priorities, and get more out of every campaign.



AT A GLANCE

The most promising messaging

1 **Hesitant ethical eaters** and **active ethical eaters** are highly receptive.

They're open to eating more of any type of plant protein – from whole foods like pulses and lentils, to 'processed' options like tofu, seitan, and new meat*. Messaging grounded in animal welfare and environmental values will resonate most strongly here.

2 **Conflicted conformists** also represent real potential.

With the right encouragement, they show openness to a wide range of plant proteins, including new meat as well as pulses, lentils, and tofu. They may need a softer entry point, such as through social proof rather than ethical arguments, but they are reachable.

Ardent meat eaters and **meat-lovers** are the most resistant to change and **are unlikely to respond to plant-based protein messaging**. For most players this group is not the best use of limited resources. They're as likely, even much more likely, to swap meat for carbs rather than plant protein.



* new meat is a term used to encompass all forms of plant-based meat alternatives, including cultivated meat

INTRODUCTION

UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES

We all relate to food in many different ways. Food is tied to culture, family, memory, identity, and belonging. It is wrapped up in routines, comfort, celebration, and ideas about what a “proper meal” looks like.

Because of this, diet choices are rarely driven by practical factors, like time, cost and convenience alone. They are also shaped by identity, habits, emotions, and social norms.

That is why this guide focuses on **mindsets**. To better connect with people across different life experiences, we need to understand the different ways people think about eating animals and plant-based foods.



WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is designed to support people working in the UK food transition space across animal protection, plant-based diets, alternative proteins, and food system change, to make more effective messaging choices and accelerate progress towards shared goals.

A common assumption in communications is that people are similar enough that the right facts or frames will move most audiences. But research behind this guide and across causes, brands, and communications more broadly, consistently shows otherwise.

People relate to food, animals, and diet change in very different ways, and messaging that doesn't account for those differences can meet frustrating resistance, or simply fail to land.

This guide is grounded in public research that Animal Think Tank conducted to map differences in how people relate to food, and what shapes their openness to plant-based diet change. It is intended as a practical tool to support clearer thinking, prioritisation, and more strategic communication. The full research report is available on our website.



USING THE GUIDE

The guide should be considered a practical tool to help you quickly and effectively classify your audience into one of five segments. The tool balances accuracy with usability, giving you confidence in using it to generalise, even though every individual is unique. While it cannot categorise people with complete precision, it does so with a high degree of reliability and is designed to support clearer audience understanding and more effective message tailoring.

What might you use the guide for?

- **Campaign planning**, to identify which segments you are primarily trying to reach and select messages that are more likely to resonate with them.
- **Message testing**, to sense check if a draft message is suited to your chosen audience segment before a wider rollout.
- **Training**, to give staff and volunteers a shared language for talking about audiences and avoiding one-size-fits-all assumptions.
- **Outreach and conversations**, to quickly orient yourself in one-to-one or small-group interactions and adjust tone, framing, and emphasis accordingly.

How we recommend you use the guide

Use the flowchart on **page 15** to identify your audience. Then use the guidance on **pages 16–26** to understand that audience and tailor your messaging to their particular mindsets and motivations. To explore the segments in more depth, and see how they differ from one another, refer to the diet change spectrum on **pages 27–30**.

TAILORING MESSAGES TO YOUR AUDIENCE

IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE

People who responded the same way to the questions overleaf tended to be similar in many useful ways for messaging.

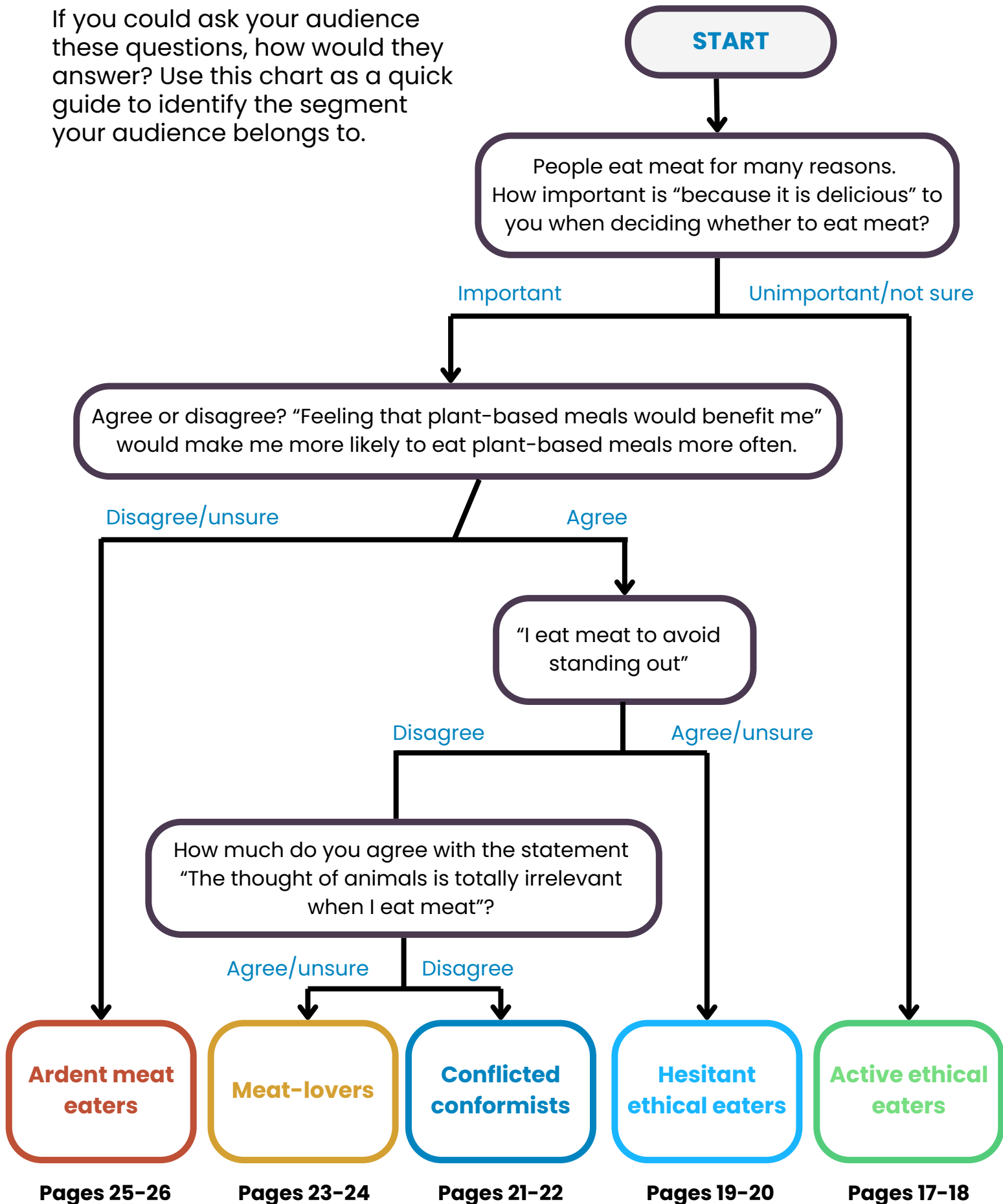
Before using the following flowchart, we'd encourage you to gather at least some direct insight into your audience - even informally. If the budget allows, a short survey or interviews with existing customers or supporters can tell you a great deal. If not, conversations with friends or family members who reflect your target audience are a worthwhile starting point.

The flowchart works best when it's helping you interpret what you've heard, rather than asking you to guess.



IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE

If you could ask your audience these questions, how would they answer? Use this chart as a quick guide to identify the segment your audience belongs to.



IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE

Now that you've identified your audience, use the following pages to find out more about them. These pages provide deeper insights into the psychological profiles of each segment.

The analysis used to identify these segments is based on a method that groups together people who are most similar to one another. Of course, no two people are exactly the same, even if they are highly similar. This is why you might find some ardent meat eaters, who are typically unwilling to give up meat, reporting that they are reducetarian, or some hesitant ethical eaters, who are typically meat eaters who are almost vegan, already identifying as vegan or plant-based. These categories aim to strike a balance between capturing differences between people and remaining accessible and easy to interpret.



Active ethical eaters

Pages 17-18



Hesitant ethical eaters

Pages 19-20



Conflicted conformists

Pages 21-22



Meat-lovers

Pages 23-24



Ardent meat eaters

Pages 25-26

ACTIVE ETHICAL EATERS

10% of the UK population

This group is already reducing or avoiding animal products, or if not, are strongly inclined to do so.

They do not feel threatened by change, and feel little guilt about their current diet. Further persuasion has limited value here. The strategic opportunity lies in support, reinforcement, and mobilisation, helping this group sustain change.



Diet self-identity: Pescetarian / plant-based / vegetarian / vegan

Most receptive to: Tofu, seitan, new meat, legumes, nuts & seeds.
Somewhat receptive to wheat (bread, pasta etc)

Values: Animal rights and welfare, health, environment, social justice

Openness to diet change: They have made significant changes to their diet to avoid animal products, and feel little conflict over their current diet.

ACTIVE ETHICAL EATERS

This is the group most receptive to new meat of all the groups.

With this group, the focus should be on support rather than persuasion. They are already reducing or avoiding animal products, or are strongly inclined to do so, so giving them more reasons to care is unlikely to add much.

What they need most is help to keep going. Communications should reinforce their progress, strengthen their confidence, and help them turn intention into habit.

It helps to offer a wide range of practical food options. This group is open to foods such as tofu, seitan, new meat, legumes, nuts, and seeds, so messages can focus on variety, ease, and ways to make these foods part of everyday life.

Give clear next steps that help sustain change. Useful messages for this group are ones that make plant-based eating feel simple, doable, and easy to maintain over time.

HESITANT ETHICAL EATERS

19% of the UK population

This group eats meat, but feels conflicted about it. They are already thinking seriously about reducing or avoiding animal products. They may already be on a low- or no-meat diet.

They are not easily swayed by dominant narratives, such as manly meat.

This group has the highest potential for meaningful diet change.



Diet self-identity: Reducetarian / flexitarian / pescetarian / plant-based / vegan

Most receptive to: Tofu, seitan, new meat, legumes, nuts & seeds

Values: Animal rights and welfare, human health, human justice issues, trying new foods, environment

Openness to diet change: They are seriously contemplating changing their diet. They feel conflicted about eating animals.

HESITANT ETHICAL EATERS

This group is the most open to change. They are receptive to replacing animal products with a wider range of plant proteins, including foods they may not have tried much before, such as tofu, seitan, new meat, legumes, nuts, and seeds.

The key is to show them both **how** as well as the why to make the change.

- They may already be open to messages about animals and the environment, but that is not enough on its own. **They also need support with the practical side**, such as confidence, access, and simple ways to use these foods in everyday meals.
- It is important not to assume that this group will respond well to any strong message just because they seem receptive. In the research, they did not respond positively to any of the tested messages, and several triggered clear pushback. This suggests that **they are quite sensitive to how messages are framed**. Heavy-handed or overly forceful communication may create pushback, even among people who seem open to change.
- A better approach is to **use supportive, practical messaging**; help them see why change matters, but place equal weight on making it feel easy, realistic, and achievable.

CONFLICTED CONFORMISTS

29% of the UK population

This group enjoys eating animal products, but feels conflicted about it. However, they are not actively thinking about changing their diet.

They strongly endorse social narratives around meat, such as normality and manliness, and are motivated by fitting in. These social motivations might be a barrier to change, but may change if they see social norms around eating also changing.



Diet self-identity: Omnivore / reductarian / flexitarian

Most receptive to: Most kinds of plant-based protein

Values: Traditional social norms, socialising, human justice issues, animal welfare and rights

Openness to diet change: They are not strongly inclined to change, but are open to being convinced. They do feel conflicted about eating animals.

CONFLICTED CONFORMISTS

The main aim with this group is to help them change their diet in ways that feel socially normal and easy to follow. They are strongly influenced by what other people are doing, so it helps to show that eating more plant protein is becoming more common, more accepted, and more mainstream.

Unlike the less receptive groups, they are open to a wide range of plant-based proteins. That means **communications can present change as flexible and varied**, rather than narrow or restrictive.

It is important to speak to the conflict they already feel, but without blame. They may already feel uneasy about eating animal products, so it helps to show that other people feel this too. Concern is normal, and acting on that concern is normal too.

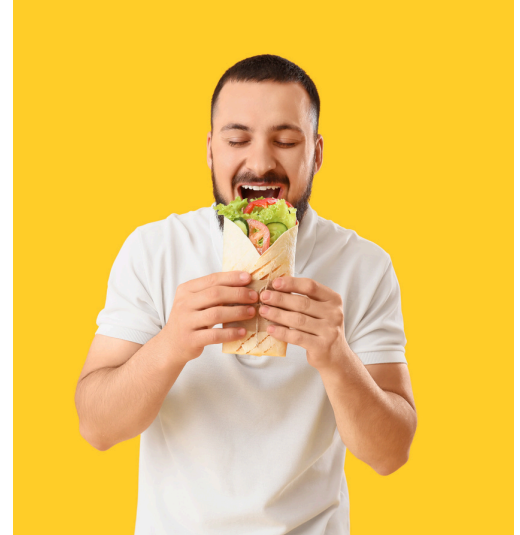
- **Use social proof and changing norms wherever possible.** Show that more people are eating differently, and that plant-based eating is becoming socially acceptable and increasingly popular. It can help to present plant protein as current, appealing, and part of where food culture is going.
- **Messages should focus especially on the human and animal costs of meat**, rather than leading with environmental arguments. This group may also respond to messages about **public health, fairness, and the treatment of workers in exploitative industries.**
- **It is also important to show them how to eat more plant protein in practice.** Give clear, everyday examples of meals, foods, and swaps that make change feel simple and doable.
- Overall, **emphasise that plant foods are healthy, normal, natural, and nice.** The message should make change feel socially supported, personally relevant, and easy to act on.

MEAT-LOVERS

29% of the UK population

This group is not actively thinking about changing their diet, but they are not overtly hostile to the idea either. They enjoy eating animal products and feel comfortable with their current choices.

Low-friction considerations, such as taste or personal health, or a stronger connection between meat and the animal it came from, may make them more open to change.



Diet self-identity: Omnivore / Reducetarian / Flexitarian

Most receptive to: Eating more wheat-based protein (bread, pasta etc)

Values: Taste, health, naturalness, animal welfare

Openness to diet change: They are unlikely to change, but are open to being convinced. They don't feel conflicted about eating animals

MEAT-LOVERS

The main aim with this group is to encourage simple swaps from animal products to plant foods they already know and eat. Keep the food familiar. Like the more resistant group, they are most open to wheat-based foods, such as bread or pasta, and are less interested in options such as new meat, pulses, and lentils.

Offer easy, tasty, healthy meals built around wheat and plant proteins. Do not put too much weight on moral or environmental arguments. This group is more likely to choose a plant-based meal because it looks appealing and feels easy, not because it is plant-based.

A small amount of awareness-raising about animal welfare may help. It can open the door, but it should not be the main focus of the message.

Emphasise that plant foods are healthy, natural, and enjoyable. Focus on taste, ease, and personal benefit. These are the strongest reasons for this group.

Frame change as one simple step, not a major shift in identity or lifestyle. They may be open to change, but they are less likely to respond if the message feels demanding or too abstract.

Enjoyment should be central to the message. This group responds well when plant-based food is presented as something tasty and satisfying.

ARDENT MEAT EATERS

12% of the UK population

This group is firmly attached to eating animal products and sees little or no reason to change.

Food is closely tied to identity, tradition, and enjoyment. To them, dominant cultural narratives about meat, such as that meat is necessary, natural, or manly go unquestioned. Messaging has little effect on this group, and rarely produces movement.



Diet self-identity: Meat-lover/ omnivore/ reducetarian

Most receptive to: Eating more wheat-based protein (bread, pasta, etc.) than pulses or new-meat

Values: Masculinity, traditional social norms, taste, naturalness

Openness to diet change: They are closed off to diet change. They don't feel conflicted about eating animals.

ARDENT MEAT EATERS

This group should not be a priority for direct persuasion as they are resistant to change. Your messaging resources will go further to capture new audiences and build momentum for plant-based foods with the other segments. If you do want to message to them, it is better to focus on small, low-friction shifts.

The main aim with this group is to encourage simple swaps from animal products to plant foods they already know and eat not to new products like plant-based new meat nor to wholemeal ingredients like tofu or pulses. The realistic goal is not a big conversion. It is to help them eat a bit less meat through familiar, low-pressure substitutes, such as pasta.

The best approach is to encourage small changes without asking them to rethink who they are or what they believe. Messages should feel easy, normal, and non-threatening.

It helps to present wheat and other plant proteins as natural, enjoyable, and part of everyday eating. Keep the focus on foods that feel familiar and appealing, rather than unusual or highly processed options.

Avoid moral pressure, urgent appeals, or messages that directly challenge identity, especially ideas linked to meat. That kind of messaging is more likely to create resistance than openness.

Use a mainstream, non-activist tone because with this audience, the goal is to avoid backlash and keep the door open, rather than push them towards an ethical conclusion.

THE DIET CHANGE SPECTRUM

THE DIET CHANGE SPECTRUM

In this section, we take a step back and consider all five segments in aggregate.

People are at different points along a spectrum in how they relate to food and diet change. Some are not considering change at all, some are beginning to feel uncertain or conflicted, and others are actively making or sustaining changes.

We should think of these segments as belonging to different stages of that spectrum, rather than fundamentally different groups. People can move from one to another and back again, depending on their life experiences.

Messaging plays a direct role in that movement. The right message at the right stage can help someone take the next step forward, while a message that jars with where they are can reinforce resistance or push people backwards. **That means where someone sits on the spectrum shapes not just how open they are to change, but which kinds of messages are likely to land, and which may do more harm than good.**

Depending on where people are, they will differ in:

- Their readiness to change
- The degree of conflict they feel about eating animals
- Their motivations for eating less meat

Importantly, people at different stages are receptive to different kinds of messages. Messaging that supports someone at one stage can be ineffective, or even counterproductive, for someone at another.

THE DIET CHANGE SPECTRUM



Opposed to the idea of diet change. They may feel little or no conflict about eating animals.

They are unlikely to make any dietary changes in the near future.



They see change as possible, but are not particularly motivated to do so. They rarely consider the fact that meat comes from animals.

They are somewhat unlikely to make any dietary changes in the near future.



They feel conflicted about eating animals, and avoid thinking about it. They have not yet started thinking about how to resolve this conflict.

They are unsure if they would make any dietary changes in the near future.



They are facing the conflict they feel about eating animals. They are starting to think about how to change. They see change as possible, but may feel unsure, lack confidence, or perceive practical barriers.

They are unsure if they would make any dietary changes in the near future.



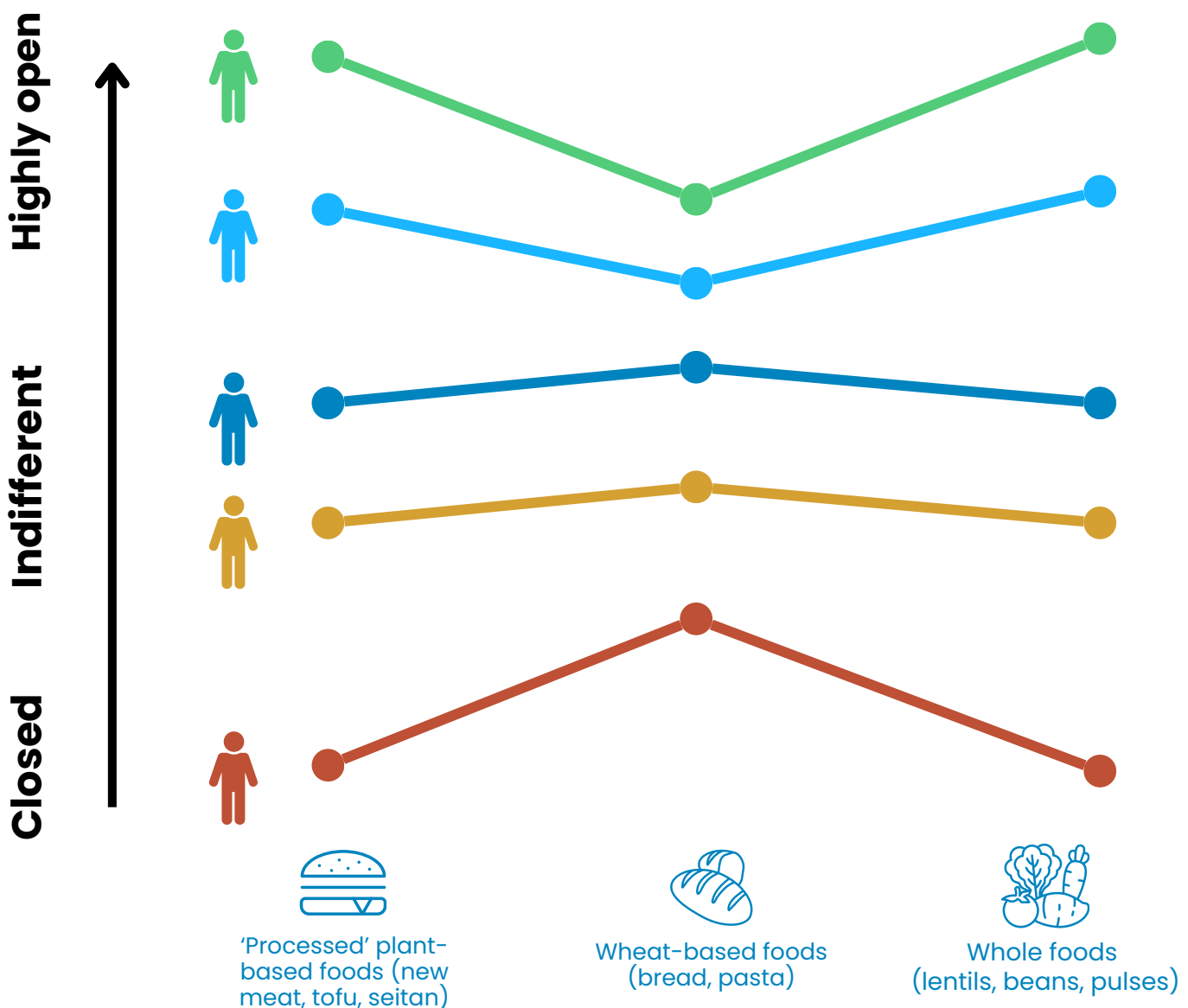
People are actively changing their behaviour, for example reducing or avoiding animal products.

They are somewhat likely to make further dietary changes in the near future.

THE DIET CHANGE SPECTRUM

Openness to eating this instead of animal-based foods

As people move through their diet change spectrum, the types of food they are open to trying changes. For several different types of plant-based foods, we asked participants how strongly they agreed with the statement “I could see myself replacing animal-based foods with (more of) this food”. For example, **active ethical eaters** are the most receptive of all groups, but are particularly receptive of ‘processed’ plant-based foods and whole foods. **Meat-lovers** and **ardent meat eaters** are not only an uphill battle for new meats, but are highly resistant to change overall.



CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

Reducing the consumption of animal products is not simply a matter of providing more information or repeating the same moral arguments. People approach food through habits, identities, social expectations, and practical constraints. This guide has shown that these factors vary substantially across the population. As a result, communication strategies that treat “the public” as a single audience have an opportunity to build momentum with the most aligned groups, by using focused approaches that speak to what makes each segment distinct.

Segmentation offers a practical way forward.

By recognising that different groups relate to food, animals, and change in different ways, communicators can align their messages with the motivations, concerns, and barriers that already exist within each audience, **building momentum with the groups most open to change**, rather than spreading effort across audiences unlikely to move.

Some groups are strongly attached to meat and are unlikely to respond positively to messages about dietary change. Others are comfortable with their current diet and rarely think about it, yet are not actively resistant. A further set of groups already feel some tension between their values and their behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Two groups stand out as particularly important for those working on food transition: **hesitant ethical eaters and **conflicted conformists**.**

Together they represent a about 50% of the population and show meaningful openness to change. However, the reasons for their openness differ:

- **Conflicted conformists** are influenced strongly by social norms and the behaviour of others. **Messages that signal growing social acceptance of plant-based eating**, and that position dietary change as normal and increasingly common, are therefore likely to resonate.
- **Hesitant ethical eaters**, by contrast, are already reflecting on the ethical or environmental implications of their diet. For this group, **messages that clearly explain how change can happen**, may be more effective.

The findings also highlight the limits of some current communication approaches. Much plant-based marketing has leaned heavily on the culture and language of meat, and direct comparisons with meat products. These appeals often fail with **ardent meat eaters** and **meat-lovers** as they are least likely to swap meat for new meat - they're more likely to swap meat for a familiar pasta dish.

At the same time, audiences that are already motivated by concerns about animals, the environment, or fairness in the food system are not motivated by food imitating meat.

Plant-based products can gain more momentum with those already on their journey (especially **hesitant ethical eaters** and **active ethical eaters**). Targeting messaging based on a segment's motivations and the foods they are most likely to switch to can unlock greater impact.

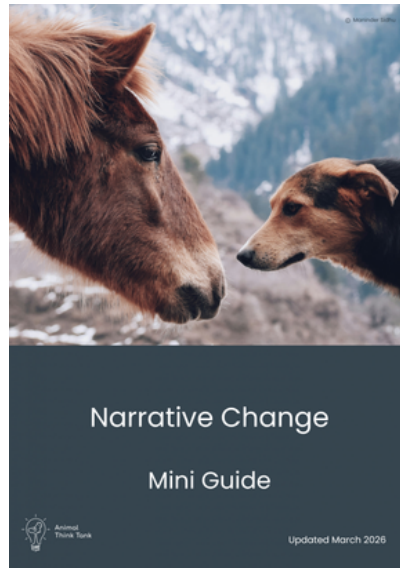
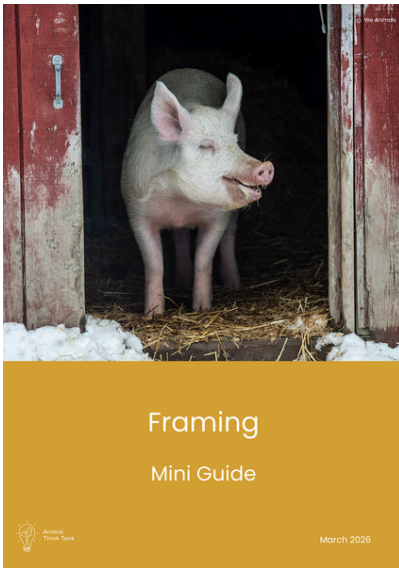
CONCLUSION

Ultimately, communication alone cannot transform the food system. Dietary change is shaped by availability, affordability, social norms, and wider cultural expectations. However, communication plays an important role in shifting how people think about food and what they see as possible.

By focusing effort where openness to change already exists with the appropriate message, communicators can help move people along the diet change spectrum from comfort with the status quo to curiosity, reflection, and eventually action.

The purpose of this guide is not to prescribe a single message or campaign approach. Rather, it offers a framework for understanding audiences and aligning communication with the realities of how people think and make decisions about food.

When messages are grounded in that understanding, they are more likely to support the gradual but meaningful shifts that make large-scale dietary change possible.



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