The real cost of food - Why the cheapest option is costing us everything

1st May 2026

Taylor Smythe

Project Lead – Farm Jersey Local Food and Farming Programme



There is a particular kind of satisfaction in buying fresh produce directly from the person who grew it. This morning, passing a farm stall on the edge of a field still dark, I bought a bag of carrots, cold from the ground, sand still on them. The grower knew what had gone into them. I knew who had grown them. The exchange felt honest. What struck me later was not just the quality of the carrots, although they're distinctly sweet. It was the money. That transaction stayed on the island. The farmer was paid fairly. No margin disappeared into a supply chain headquartered somewhere else. The value circulated here, among us, as it once routinely did.

Those carrots cost me £1.40. What they actually cost (the land, the labour, the soil, the water, the knowledge) standing behind them, is a figure he has never printed on the label. And what it costs us collectively to keep buying the alternative is a figure our economy has quietly agreed not to calculate. We

have convinced ourselves, over several generations, that cheap food is a sign of progress. We are wrong. Price and cost are not the same thing, and we have been confusing them for fifty years...and the problem with cheap prices can be long term costs which directly undermine economic, social and environmental sustainability.

Why food really costs what it costs

British sheep farmer and author James Rebanks puts it simply. A cheap chicken isn't cheap. It's just cheap for you, at that moment, in that shop. Somebody else is paying the rest of it. He's talking about the £3.50 chicken produced at a scale and a speed unrecognisable to any farmer a generation ago. When pushed on whether cheap food has been a civilisational gain –more protein, more accessible, more affordable for people on low incomes—he doesn't dismiss it. Of course, there has been a benefit. Nobody wants to go back to tinned spam. But then he walks you through what actually happened.

The hidden costs behind the price tag

The price of a chicken dropped because the costs moved. Onto the animal, kept in conditions that drove river pollution across entire catchments. Onto the farmer, squeezed so hard on margins that the only rational response was to get bigger, consolidate, strip out anything that couldn't be measured on a spreadsheet, or get out altogether. Onto the land, drained of the mixed rotations, the hedgerows, the varied livestock that had sustained it. Onto the health system, now managing the obesity, the poor nutrition, the diet-related illness that is the downstream consequence of a food system optimised entirely for shelf price. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation records that 18% of the poorest people in Britain are malnourished from cheap food. The system designed to feed them well has produced food deserts, ultra-processed diets, and a public health cost running, by one estimate, well north of £200 billion a year. That is what cheap food actually costs.

Making the true cost visible

The UK dairy and arable farmer Patrick Holden has been making this case since 1984, arguing that intensive food production was not cheap at all. The shelf price said one thing. The true cost said another. Forty years later, leading the Sustainable Food Trust, he has built that argument into True Cost Accounting, a framework that makes the full ledger visible. When researcher Dr Harpinder Sandhu built complete accounting systems for farming operations, capturing not just product sales but soil carbon, pollination, water quality, and emissions, his conclusion was unambiguous. The so-called cheap

food from intensive systems is not cheap at point of delivery to the farm. It is cheap at the point of sale. It is expensive everywhere else.

Locally rooted businesses generate more jobs, more tax revenue, and more community wealth per pound of sales than their globally integrated competitors. The communities most resilient to economic shock are those with the strongest local economic ecosystems.



Pressure across the supply chain

But the farmers who ended up in those systems are not the villains of this story. At the 1974 Agriculture for Small Planet Symposium, Wendell Berry said that the destruction of farming communities was "not primarily the work of farmers, though it has burgeoned upon their weaknesses. It is the work of institutions of agriculture, the experts and agribusinessmen who have promoted so-called efficiency at the expense of community and quantity at the expense of quality." Farmers were handed a logic, get bigger or get out, and most followed it because the system gave them no other viable path. Understanding that is not excusing the outcomes. It is the precondition for fixing them, because "food is a cultural, not a technological, product." The moment we reduced farming to an input-output problem, we began losing something that efficiency metrics were never designed to measure. The preserver of abundance is excellence. Quantity pursued alone destroys the disciplines that make quantity sustainable. We are living, right now, in the consequence of that error.

More than a short-term challenge

In *The Small-Mart Revolution*, Michael Schuman demonstrated that locally

rooted businesses generate more jobs, more tax revenue, and more community wealth per pound of sales than their globally integrated competitors. The communities most resilient to economic shock are those with the strongest local economic ecosystems. The food system is not an exception to this principle, and behind every abstraction there are people.

James Rebanks, in *English Pastoral*, describes watching his family's farm transformed piece by piece in the name of modernisation, mixed rotations replaced by monocultures, livestock removed, hedgerows grubbed out. Each change made sense against the metrics that policy rewarded. Together, they stripped the farm of the resilience that had sustained it through every difficulty the market and weather had ever thrown at it. He writes of older farmers whose knowledge of a particular piece of land was irreplaceable, and once lost, simply gone.

The real impact on Jersey's food system

I think about the grower I met this morning, out early in the fields, farming the same land his family has for 150 years or more, building its health quietly. He is working 14-hour days to produce a bag of carrots selling for £1.40, which must compete with a supermarket price of 70p. He is operating in a system structured, at every level, to make his kind of farming financially precarious. What he carries –his skill and knowledge, the land stewardship, the food security he quietly underwrites for the rest of us– does not appear on any balance sheet. These are the people this story is actually about.

Building resilience into the food system

At Davos in January 2026, the Prime Minister of Canada Mark Carney, said, "A country that can't feed itself, fuel itself or defend itself has few options. When the rules no longer protect you, you must protect yourself." This should land differently on an island than it does on a continent. We import the majority of our food. We have no meaningful stake in the logistics chains that deliver it. When freight costs spike, when a shipping provider changes its terms, when the world gets a little more unstable (and it is getting more unstable), we are at the back of someone else's queue. That is not a hypothetical. Professor Tim Lang, the UK's leading food security expert, said that in a crisis there is essentially only what is on supermarket shelves right now, what is on the wagons coming in the next twenty-four hours, and whatever is growing in the fields. In some products, less than six days. That is the fragility we have built by choosing cheap over resilient, convenient over local, price over cost.

What happens next

Carney's point is that resilience has to be engineered. It doesn't emerge from markets optimised for efficiency. It requires deliberate choices, made by governments and industry together, to invest in the capacity to feed yourself before you need it, rather than after. Jersey has that opportunity – to make deliberate choices to engineer a truly resilient food system within a sustainable economic, social and environmental model where public interventions combine with private enterprise to create a better future for Islanders.

The good news is the work has started. A reimagining of our rural economy, backed by public funds delivering more sustainable outcomes. To learn more visit FarmJersey.je.

This article first appeared in the Business Brief in May 2026