Serving Better: every meal counts in a climate and nature emergency

A guide for local authorities on sustainable and healthy food procurement.
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Executive Summary

What is this resource about?

This guide shows how local authorities can address the climate and nature emergencies and improve public health by promoting sustainable diets through the food they serve. With a focus on the role of meat and dairy, we provide an overview of the key principles underpinning policy to promote sustainable healthy diets and show how simple changes to menus can have a big impact on health and sustainability outcomes. It has been developed by Eating Better, an alliance of over 60 civil society organisations working together on sustainable and healthy food and farming.

In a climate and nature emergency, every meal counts

Local authorities recognise the threat that the climate and nature emergencies pose, acknowledging the devastating impact that global temperature increases and environmental degradation will have on the lives and livelihoods of local people and others around the world. More and more are signing up to The Glasgow Declaration, a global commitment by sub-national governments, UN agencies and NGOs to make food part of the solution to the unprecedented challenges we face.

The food we eat, in particular meat and dairy, is a significant source of emissions and how we produce it is driving the nature and biodiversity crisis: it is a key driver of deforestation, nature loss and species extinction. In order to deliver a sustainable, low carbon future in their local communities, local authorities need to commit to bold action on food. We won’t be able to avert catastrophic climate change without changing what we eat, and the public sector has a critical role in normalising sustainable diets through public procurement of food, as presented in the National Food Strategy. Nourishing meals for schools, hospitals, government buildings, military and prisons should reflect dietary guidelines and deliver in line with net-zero emission reduction targets.

Serve more veg, serve ‘less and better’ meat and dairy

Local authorities should publish a Sustainable Food Procurement policy and strategy that drives a 25% reduction in the volume of meat and dairy served in council controlled settings. Delivering healthy, sustainable diets is achievable. Serving meat and dairy more sustainably means, primarily, serving less of it. Local authorities can drastically reduce the carbon footprint of meals under council control by implementing strategies to serve less meat (of all types, including beef, lamb and chicken) and dairy, increase the content of vegetables in all meals and offer more vegetarian and plant-based meals, as outlined in Eating Better’s roadmap.

Within the context of serving less meat, serving 25% of meat and dairy products from better production can be a powerful way to minimise our impact on the natural environment and public health. Local authorities can require that meat and dairy is sourced from animals raised in systems with good levels of animal welfare, low antibiotic use and emphasis on local sources of feed, such as certified organic. Better meat and dairy may be more expensive, but that doesn’t mean the menus should cost more: balancing the menu with more vegetables and plant proteins can help keep costs down, as plant-based meals tend to be cheaper than meat-based dishes.
8 key benefits of Serving Better

- Public Health
- GHG Emissions
- Land Use Change
- Local Economy
- Biodiversity
- Budget
- Animal Welfare
- Antibiotic Use
The science is clear: the global food system is a key driver of climate change, deforestation and catastrophic biodiversity decline. We can’t tackle the climate, nature and public health crises without addressing food. With the challenges we face, every meal counts.

Factors such as the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and public health already shape food procurement decisions in public settings, as evidenced by local strategies for reducing sugar, sourcing sustainable fish and minimising food waste. However, despite its clear environmental impact, the pathway to serve meat and dairy sustainably is less well understood on a practical level. Yet, it is a key element of more sustainable food procurement. A sustainable, healthy diet emphasises foods of plant origin, based around whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes. Meat and dairy can be important parts of the diet, but in significantly smaller proportions. It doesn’t need to cost more.

In this resource we show how and why a ‘less and better’ approach to serving and sourcing meat and dairy can help local areas to reduce their food emissions. We focus primarily on schools, but the principles we propose apply across all public settings. Reducing meat and dairy consumption will help reduce the greenhouse gas emissions footprint of our diet. Beyond a single focus on reducing carbon emissions, taking steps to serve ‘less and better’ meat alongside more vegetables, beans and pulses, in line with the Eatwell Guide, is a tool local authorities can use to improve outcomes for public health and nature.

There are huge differences in the greenhouse gas emissions of different foods.
The case for action:

Why local areas should serve ‘less and better’ meat and dairy

Addressing the climate and nature emergency

Local authorities recognise the threat that the climate and nature emergencies pose. By 2021, three quarters of local authorities in the UK have declared a climate emergency\(^5\) intended to put climate change at the centre of policy and planning, acknowledging the devastating impact that global temperature increases and environmental degradation will have on the lives and livelihoods of local people and others around the world, and committing to bold action to deliver a sustainable, low carbon future in their local communities. For many the focus has been on tackling energy and transport challenges first. It is time to tackle food, as recognised by those signing up to The Glasgow Declaration, a global commitment by sub-national governments to make food part of the solution to the unprecedented challenges we face.

Globally, food system emissions are of a scale that they could preclude achieving the 1.5° and 2°C climate change targets\(^6\), putting us on the path to dangerous climate change. The food we consume locally has far reaching impacts. In most cities, the majority of GHG emissions arise from the lifestyle and consumption habits of its residents\(^7\). According to a C40 cities report, food is the largest source of consumption-based emissions\(^8\) of cities, representing 13% of total. Cities’ food related emissions could increase by 38% by 2050 if no action is taken to mitigate them. Consumption of animal-based foods, such as meat and dairy, represents around 75% of food emissions for cities\(^9\).

Beyond emissions, the way we produce meat and dairy is driving the nature and biodiversity crisis: it is a key driver of deforestation, biodiversity loss and species extinction\(^10\). Every year the world loses around 5 million hectares of forest, 95% of which occurs in the tropics. At least three-quarters of this is driven by agriculture – clearing forests to grow crops such as soy and raise livestock\(^11\).

More than three-quarters of global soy is fed to animals. It is a key part of the diet of chickens, with over one-third (37%) of global soy fed to poultry\(^12\). 85% of the land used to produce food for the UK population is devoted to rearing animals\(^13\). In order to tackle the climate emergency and restore nature, some of this land will need to be freed up for other uses, including tree planting and restoring peatlands, as recommended by the National Food Strategy.
The case for action:

Supporting healthy diets

Given the impact of food on the climate and nature, a transition to diets that combine adequate nutritional quality and low climate impact is essential for human and planetary health. Changing diets to include more vegetables and less meat and dairy offers the opportunity for the biggest emissions savings and can have co-benefits for population health at local level. Healthier diets have significantly lower environmental impacts: if everyone in the UK adopted a diet in line with the Eatwell Guide, it is estimated dietary emissions would fall by 45%, water use by 4% and land use by 49%. For most of us, adhering to the Eatwell diet would mean consuming substantially more fruits, vegetables, beans and pulses and a lot less meat and cheese. Meat reduction, in particular, would result in the biggest carbon savings.

Less than 0.1% of adults in the UK adhere to Eatwell Guide recommendations, and children’s diets are also poor. Childhood obesity rates are more than double during primary school. A third of children aged 5–10 years old eat less than one portion of veg a day. On average, children of primary and secondary school age eat less than half of the recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, no age group or income quintile meets the recommendation. This is not only a problem in childhood, but also leads to long-term issues: a childhood diet low in fruits and vegetables is linked to increased cardiovascular risk in adults.

Good nutrition and maintaining a healthy weight in childhood can help prevent obesity and diet-related ill health later in life.

If everyone in the UK adopted a diet in line with the Eatwell Guide, it is estimated dietary emissions would fall by 45%, water use by 4% and land use by 49%.
The case for action:

Protecting Public Health

Human-driven changes in ecosystems, such as deforestation, intensive agriculture and antimicrobial use, are increasing infectious disease transmission risks and impact\(^\text{22}\). Approximately two thirds of known human infectious diseases are shared with animals, and the majority of recently emerging diseases are associated with animals. Biodiversity may serve as a protective factor for preventing transmission\(^\text{23}\), and maintaining ecosystems may help reduce exposure to infectious agents and prevent zoonotic “spillover” events where viruses move from one species to another, as seen with the COVID-19 pandemic\(^\text{24}\).

Farming is major user of antibiotics, including important ones for human medicine. Large increases in antibiotic resistance in livestock are contributing to the resistance problem in human medicine\(^\text{25}\). The UN says that unless we act urgently, antibiotic resistance will have a disastrous effect within a generation, with millions of people dying annually and economic damage\(^\text{26}\). At a local level, antibiotic resistance already leads to longer hospital stays, higher medical costs and increased mortality, placing a further strain on the NHS.

Better animal welfare reduces the need for medication\(^\text{27}\). Globally, antibiotic use tends to be highest in intensively farmed animals, including pigs, chickens and beef and dairy cows. In intensive production, animals live very close to each other and their waste. These conditions increase the risk of disease incubation, and antibiotics are used to control and prevent the spread of disease. Less intensive production methods that use slower growing breeds, give animals more space and feed them a natural diet, such as organic, can result in significantly lower antibiotic use\(^\text{28}\).

Farm animals account for almost 60% of all antibiotics used in 29 European countries\(^\text{29}\), and around 30% of all antibiotics used in the UK.
The case for action:

Local action can make a world of difference

Unhealthy diets with too much meat and dairy and not enough vegetables are a local issue and should be addressed at a local level. Successfully supporting people to eat better requires a depth of understanding about the needs and preferences of the local population, and an effective network of relationships with local communities and institutions. The expertise that local areas have about their populations is a huge asset that policy makers can access when designing and planning for the most sustainable food provision within their public contracts.

Local authorities are ideally placed to promote sustainable, healthy diets through the food they serve and the contracts they control. Schools and early years settings, for example, offer a golden opportunity to improve children’s diets. School-aged children eat a substantial proportion of their meals in school during term time, and for some a free school lunch is their main meal of the day. It can have long-term impacts, as children learn what a healthy sustainable diet looks like. Serving healthy, sustainable meals in public settings can also support a number of local priorities, such as strategies to improve sustainability, tackle health inequalities, address food poverty and childhood obesity and promote the best start in life. Due to the size of public contracts, local authorities can help create a vibrant market for sustainably produced local foods. Dynamic procurement principles can be used to source locally produced ‘less and better’ meat and more plant foods. Food for Life estimates that for every £1 invested in buying food locally through their framework, local communities receive £3.04 in economic benefits. The greatest share of the benefits is experienced by local businesses – wholesale and primary producers, such as farmers – in the form of greater business security and, especially, enhanced local presence which leads to additional contracts and income, as well as additional jobs.

For every £1 invested in procuring local food, local communities receive £3 in economic benefits
What can local areas do?

**Commit to serving ‘less and better’**

Public procurement of food for schools, hospitals, government buildings, military and prisons should reflect dietary guidelines and deliver in line with net-zero emission reduction targets. Local areas can set targets to support this through the meals they control.

Serving meat and dairy more sustainably means, primarily, serving less of it. Yet, sustainable livestock farming has a role to play in delivering sustainable food and agriculture and maintaining thriving local economies. We need a shift from intensive, impactful forms of livestock production that rely on high amounts of inputs and land for growing cereals for animal feed, to farming significantly fewer animals in tune with nature. As a minimum, all meat and dairy served must be farm assured, to ensure it meets UK standards.
Commit to serving ‘less and better’

Why aim for a 25% reduction?

A 25% reduction in the volume of meat and dairy served by 2025 is an achievable target that helps to put us on the path to net zero. It provides an achievable step local authorities can take to reduce their environmental and carbon footprints.

There’s wide agreement that government bodies should promote meat reduction and support public institutions to make the necessary changes. A 25% reduction is in line with recommendations from the Government’s official climate change advisor, the Climate Change Committee (CCC) and the National Food Strategy, the first independent review of England’s food system in 75 years.

Many public sector catering operators are already taking action. In March 2021, Eating Better and Public Sector Catering polled nearly 90 public sector caterers, representing around 5000 sites across the UK, including schools, hospitals, universities and care homes. We found that nearly 80% of those surveyed have decided to reduce meat content across menus, and 83% have increased beans and pulses in dishes by up to a fifth.
Commit to serving ‘less and better’

What is ‘better’ meat and dairy?

Within the context of serving less meat, choosing ‘better’ production can be a powerful way to minimise our impact on the natural environment. Better meat and dairy comes from animals reared within healthy ecosystems, favouring more natural diets from sustainable sources, in well managed farms that deliver high standards of animal welfare and robust assurance on antibiotic use. Supporting this kind of farming helps to maintain good soil health and fertility for crop production, manage landscapes and support biodiversity, whilst delivering a smaller volume of ‘better’ meat and dairy products. Currently, the simplest and most comprehensive way of identifying ‘better’ meat is whether it meets a credible independent certification. ‘Better’ schemes can offer significant benefits over standard production across a number of issues, including animal welfare, soil health, biodiversity and antibiotic use.

**BASIC**
- Standard UK production.
  - Farm assurance schemes that certify minimum EU production standards (poultry, pigs & dairy); minimum UK standards; Red Tractor [broiler chickens and poussins (V4.2), pigs, beef, dairy].

**BETTER**
- A first step to better.
  - RSPCA Assured (all species indoor production), British Lion Barn Eggs (laying hens), Red Tractor Indoor Enhanced Welfare (broiler chicken, V1)

**BEST**
- Raising the bar.
  - EU free range range or Organic (poultry & pigs), Pasture for Life (beef & dairy), Soil Association (poultry, pigs, beef & dairy), Label Rouge (broiler chickens) RSPCA Assured (all species for free range/organic production)
Commit to serving ‘less and better’

Is switching to chicken the solution?

Replacing some beef and lamb with chicken has been suggested as a sustainability solution, but chicken still comes with high environmental and animal welfare costs. Switching to plant proteins like beans and lentils is a much better option if we are looking to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions, pollution and land use footprints of our diets. The global scale of chicken production is already vast. The poultry industry is a major user of soy and a significant source of water and ground pollution. Carbon efficiencies in intensive chicken production have been achieved at the expense of animal welfare: for intensive chickens, it is not a life worth living.\(^3\)
How to do it?

Create a Sustainable Food Procurement policy

Local authorities should publish a Sustainable Food Procurement strategy, as recommended by the National Food Strategy. The local strategy should promote healthy and sustainable diets and incorporate specific commitments to source ‘less and better’ meat, in line with the targets we propose. Strategies should apply to all food and catering the council provides, contracts, or has control over.

Strategies for promoting sustainable diets through public procurement should be based on the idea that plant-based or vegetarian meals are an essential part of a sustainable healthy diet for everyone, and not simply an alternative option for people who are vegan or vegetarian.

There are a number of effective strategies for reducing the volume of meat and dairy served in council controlled settings, which can be added to policy, or catering contracts. We detail some requirements on this page.

What requirements could you introduce?

Reducing the volume of meat served

- Require that all mains contain at least 2 portions of veg, or 1 portion of veg and 1 pulse.
- A vegetarian or plant-based main must always be available on the menu, and where applicable should appear first on the menu, or list of options.
- 5 days out of every 3 week cycle all mains served are vegetable and pulse-based dishes. Depending on context, it might be helpful if these days are not singled out.
- Specify a % reduction in the number of meat dishes served, working towards at least half of meal options being meat-free.
- Specify a % reduction in the volume of meat served, by weight, aiming for a 25% reduction by 2025.
- Specify a % increase in the number of meals served that contain plant-based sources of protein such as beans, lentils, peas and tofu.

Promoting sustainable production

- Require all meat served to be farm assured, such as Red Tractor, as a minimum.
- By 2025, 25% of all meat and dairy sourced meets a ‘better’ standard.
How to do it?

How are public sector caterers reducing the volume of meat and dairy served? Insights from our survey:

“If you set up an ambition for contract caterers, or whoever is bidding, to do the best for children rather than the cheapest, great things happen. And with that, meal numbers go up, more children are eating great food and the economies of scale means that it is financially viable as well.”

Stephanie Slater, CEO and Founder of School Food Matters
How to do it?

Engaging with caterers

A catering contract may not be due for renewal for a number of years, but changes can still be made, working with an existing caterer and outlining the ambition. Many large catering companies have emissions reductions commitments and may be open to making changes. For instance, they may be able to adapt their menus or make other impactful changes, such as presenting vegetarian or plant-based options as the main meal, not the alternative. Another good suggestion is avoiding terms such as ‘vegan’, ‘vegetarian’, ‘healthy’ or ‘meat-free’ when describing or representing meals. Research shows these often have a negative effect and may stop people from selecting the dish. Instead, a small (v), (ve) or (pb) can be added at the end of the meal name.

Engaging with suppliers

Engaging with suppliers is a good way to put sustainability at the heart of all sourcing, helping to raise standards of production and improve animal welfare. Dynamic purchasing systems are a procurement tool that can be used to support sustainable farming and benefit the local economy. Local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) may have excellent products and even be able to outbid national suppliers on price, but they are less likely to be able to support the volumes and distribution service required by public contracts. Dynamic purchasing systems take a flexible approach, creating a pool of suitable suppliers that may meet smaller local authority orders. By setting supplier selection criteria that favours sustainable production and building close partnerships with multiple local distributors, local authorities can manage a broader supply chain of seasonal, cost-effective, sustainably produced local food. The provision of school food in Bath offers a good example.

Delivering change together

A number of organisations offer support to local authorities and other institutions on the path to serving healthier more sustainable meals. Local authorities are well placed to lead change through their local partnerships. It is worth engaging with institutions and businesses on the benefits of serving healthy and sustainable food, offering support and signposting resources. The Soil Association Food for Life programme offers a framework for helping schools, nurseries, hospitals and care homes serve healthy, tasty and sustainable meals with well sourced ingredients. Sustain’s Food for the Planet offers practical guidance to local authorities, businesses and organisations on simple steps towards more sustainable food. ProVeg UK’s School Plates programme works with school catering teams to increase the availability of plant-based school meals and provide healthier and more sustainable meal options. Kale Yeah! Kitchens is a new accreditation scheme from Friends of the Earth for universities, designed to engage caterers to make menus more sustainable.

Key benefits

- [Image of a globe with a house icon]
- [Image of a cross with a clock icon]
- [Image of a heart with an arrow up and down]
- [Image of a dollar sign]
- [Image of a butterfly]
Making an impact with simple menu swaps

Adapting recipes to reduce meat and dairy content, and swapping some meat meals for vegetarian or plant-based ones can have a huge impact. A number of initiatives have shown it is possible to reduce the carbon footprint of recipes by reducing meat and dairy and serve delicious, nutritious meals. School Plates, Kale Yeah, Green and Lean and Peas Please: Caterers offer practical tips and inspiration.

The public sector delivers an estimated one billion school meals per year, so individual meal changes will quickly add up. The potential for positive change is vast.

Swapping* a primary school spaghetti bolognese made with beef…

for a plant-based version using lentils …

66% less carbon emissions

a similar amount of protein

x2 as much fibre

20% less cost

*Calculations from ProVeg’s School Food Plates
Appetite for Change

“We cannot tackle the climate and nature emergencies and secure a future for next generations if we don’t tackle food. We are calling on local authorities to put food at the centre of their plans to address the challenges we face. The Serving Better resource shows this doesn’t have to be complicated: it’s all about serving more veg, pulses and ‘less and better’ meat.”

Elena Salazar, Policy and Knowledge Manager, Eating Better

Climate change is a top concern for young people. In 2019, Eating Better commissioned a YouGov survey to find out if eating habits were changing amongst teenagers in response to growing concerns around meat and climate change.

63% said the environment and climate change was one of their most important issues for the country.

29% of meat eaters surveyed want to reduce their meat consumption.

25% of 18 year olds are vegan or vegetarian compared to just 6% of 11-year olds - reflecting the increased freedom to choose how they eat as they get older.
Leading the way: serving better

What's happening at Mandeville:

- Two meat-free days and a vegetarian option every day for 70p per meal (food cost)
- Sources from local growers and suppliers
- Kitchen staff up-skilled to scratch cook on site

Louise Nichols
Executive headteacher, Mandeville Primary School:

“It is possible to change your food for the better and to do it for no extra cost. If the drive is there among school leaders, governors and local authorities to make that happen, then children will eat better and be healthier, and in the future be less of a cost on our health service”

Click here to play a video of Serving Better in action at Mandeville Primary School: Serving Better: every meal counts in a climate and nature emergency

Mandeville Primary School
West Lothian Council has pledged to:
• offer more local food within budget

What’s happening at West Lothian Council:
• 95% of fresh butcher meat – and 88% of all meat – served in primary schools - is sourced from Scottish farms.
• All meat sourced satisfies UK animal welfare standards and eggs are free-range
• Fresh, seasonal and sustainably grown food is sourced locally
• Bronze Food For Life in the council’s 67 primary schools

Kirsteen Sullivan
Depute leader, West Lothian Council:
“A lot of people may think their food would be more expensive to have homegrown produce brought into schools. That isn’t necessarily the case. We can buy food locally, we can cook from scratch and save money. We can make a pot of soup in half an hour or forty minutes, using fresh vegetables from the fields just a few miles away.”

West Lothian Council
Leading the way: serving better

What's happening at Greenside:

- Moved to 100% vegetarian menu in 2016 for 220 pupils
- School kitchen produces two vegetarian options every day for £2.00 per pupil.
- Sources from local growers and suppliers

George Webber
Deputy headteacher, Greenside Primary School:

“We offer only vegetarian food, as we believe it’s a better way. We cook from scratch, using locally sourced ingredients at no extra cost. Across the curriculum, food is integral to everything we do - it's about eating, education and enjoyment.”

Greenside school
Leading the way: serving better

The city has pledged to:
- Buy and serve more food produced in Yorkshire and neighbouring counties.
- End the purchase of air freighted goods, after current contracts have expired.
- Halve the average carbon footprint of meals by 2030.

What’s happening at Catering Leeds (the council’s school meal service):
- Procures all meat and poultry from Red Tractor assured producers.
- Procures only free range eggs.
- Offers a non-meat day every week at 182 schools.
- Offers Bronze Food for Life menu to all schools.

Cllr Helen Hayden
Executive member for infrastructure and climate:
“Sustainability is really important for so many reasons and it’s something we take seriously. These new commitments will contribute to the council’s three strategic priorities for Leeds: facilitating inclusive growth by supporting local farmers and food producers; helping to improve the health and wellbeing of our food customers by improving the nutrition and quality of food served; and reducing our environmental impact in support of our ambition to become the first carbon-neutral major city in the UK.”

Leeds City Council
Leading the way: serving better

What’s happening at Winchester:

- RSPCA assured free range pork and chicken
- Seasonal and local produce sourced from Hampshire and neighbouring counties.
- A gradual switch to include plant-based alternatives on menus has seen a 22% reduction in Co2 equivalents since 15/16
- 3 silvers and 1 gold Food For Life
- CIWF good egg and good chicken award
- Accredited Kale Yeah! Kitchen member

David Morton
Catering operations manager:

"By reducing our procurement of meat and dairy, we have lowered our food-related carbon footprint by 39%. Our chefs are adapting dishes to be ‘less and better’. For example, with chicken risotto, we use organic chicken meat, but we use less per portion and up the veg content, with only positive feedback from diners."

University of Winchester
Addressing common questions

Is serving more vegetarian or plant-based meals discriminating towards meat eaters?

Supporting healthy diets for everyone is a key way to address health inequalities. Everyone can have vegetarian and plant-based dishes, not just vegetarians and vegans. Eating meat at every meal is unsustainable, and in a climate and nature emergency plant-based and vegetarian meals are an essential part of a sustainable healthy diet for everyone. Eating vegetarian and plant-based dishes at certain meals is an excellent way for meat eaters to increase their vegetable intake.

How to achieve buy-in?

When making changes to menus, it is really important to do this gradually. A good place to start is by improving the quality of the vegetarian and plant-based options on offer. Giving people the opportunity to engage from the outset is also crucial. Discussing the proposed changes and rationale and presenting an exciting plan for delivery will help tailor the approach and can help successful implementation. Securing buy-in at an early stage from all key stakeholders is critical for success.

Will serving ‘less and better’ meat cost more?

Better meat and dairy may be more expensive, but that doesn’t mean the menus should cost more. There are many ways to balance the cost of higher priced meat including reducing meat portion sizes and using cheaper cuts to utilise the whole carcass. Moreover, balancing the menu with more vegetables and plant proteins can help keep costs down, as plant-based meals tend to be cheaper than meat-based dishes. Animal-based products are among the most expensive food items in a recipe, and plant-based proteins such as beans and lentils cost a fraction of the price of meat. Millions of meals are already served in schools each month which include organic products, higher-welfare meat and dairy and local produce, many of them accredited by Food for Life Served Here. Using dynamic procurement, or collaborating with other local areas to set up common procurement frameworks can boost the ability to procure ethical and sustainable products.

Will serving ‘less and better’ meat and dairy be bad for UK farmers?

Local food production needs to transform to deliver food that is healthier and more sustainable. We are proposing that all meat and dairy sourced meets UK production standards as a minimum. In stripping out imports that don’t meet our legal standards, meat and dairy spend can be re-channelled towards UK producers. We are also proposing that local authorities trade-up to ‘better’ meat, managing the cost implications by serving less. Local authorities can channel their spend towards local, higher welfare producers.

Increased provision of vegetables and plant proteins will also direct spend towards UK producers of vegetables, wholegrains, nuts, seeds, fruit and pulses, supporting UK horticultural and agroecological production. Creating demand for local, sustainably produced plant-based foods and ‘less and better’ meat and dairy will help UK farmers to maximise plant production and deliver the highest standards of environmental protection and animal welfare.
Addressing common questions

How does less meat align with the School Food Standards? Can I have 2 meat-free days?

Having a vegetarian or plant-based dish always available on the menu works well with the School Food Standards. You can have two meat-free days most weeks. Currently the school food standards require meat to be served three times per week. If the food being served is vegetarian, the requirement is to serve non-dairy sources of protein, such as beans and pulses, three times per week.

Don't children need protein?

Children need protein in their diets, but it doesn’t just come from meat. It's easy to meet their protein needs by serving protein-rich foods. These include lentils, beans, chickpeas, seeds, nuts and nut butters, tofu and tempeh. Processed meat substitutes like soya sausages, mycoprotein (such as Quorn), and seitan (from wheat) are high quality protein sources too and can be useful replacements. However, like other processed foods these can often be high in salt and fat. Minimally processed plant-based sources of protein, such as beans and pulses, are low in fat, highly nutritious and cost effective.

Will reducing meat be less healthy?

Healthy diets are about getting a good balance of nutrients. At the moment, most of us do not eat enough vegetables or pulses, which is harmful to our health. Cutting down some meat from dishes, and replacing it with quality plant proteins like beans and pulses, as well as vegetables, can help to address that imbalance. Well planned vegetarian and vegan diets are healthy for people of all ages, and vegetarian dishes can be eaten as part of any diet. Reducing our reliance on intensive meat production can also benefit health, as it is a key source of water, air and ground pollution, as well as a driver of climate change, which is widely recognised as a key threat to public health.

What about dairy?

Milk can be an important part of the diet for young children. Where milk is served, certified organic is recommended. Cheese can often be high in salt and fat, and tends to have a high environmental impact, so it is best not to replace meat dishes with cheese-based ones. Pulse and vegetable-based dishes are a better option.

What about fish?

Overfishing is devastating marine environments, so replacing meat dishes with more fish isn’t a solution. Fish is an important part of the diet, and serving one portion every three weeks is a requirement of the School Food Standards, but it is important to choose well and diversify seafood choices – helping to take pressure of the big five species. We recommend including a requirement that all fish is verifiably sustainable (ie MSC/ASC certified or rated 1-3 by the Marine Conservation Society).
Our asks of UK governments

Governments have a duty to support local areas in delivering healthy, sustainable diets. The Glasgow Declaration recognises that “the majority of sustainable food system innovation and change are occurring at the local and regional levels.” But sub-national governments can’t do it on their own, which is why national governments must act by introducing integrated food and farming policies. As a first step, in England, this means implementing the National Food Strategy recommendations.

Across the UK, governments should:

• Promote a clear definition of what healthy sustainable diets are and deliver it through dietary guidelines. Messaging about sustainability within the dietary guidelines should be explicit, and include clear targets for meat and dairy reduction.
• Ensure everyone has access to a healthy sustainable diet that is affordable. Require that any new policies, or trade deals through the Westminster parliament, embed people’s right to a safe, healthy and sustainable diet.
• Embed a requirement for implementing sustainable procurement across government. Place responsibility for delivering strategic targets within individual government departments. Support public bodies to assess and improve the carbon and environmental footprint of their catering contracts.
• Eliminate barriers to serving more sustainable diets in public settings. For instance, currently England’s School Food Standards require meat to be served 3 times per week, but the requirement could be expanded to include plant-based, protein-rich foods, such as beans and pulses.
• Promote learning about healthy sustainable diets in schools, with a strong emphasis on promoting fruit and vegetable consumption.
North America, had consumption-based emissions twice the size of their sector-based GHG emissions. Over half of the cities had change targets. Science, 370(6517), 705–708. Available at: https://www.science.org/lookup/doi/10.1126/science.1131682

8 A city’s consumption-based GHG emissions are, in simple terms, those that arise from what is consumed in the city. They include GHG emissions from the use of energy in homes and vehicles by residents, and GHG emissions associated with the consumption of goods and services (such as food, clothing, electronic equipment, etc.) by the residents of a city, but excludes GHG emissions embodied in exports from the city. It is an alternative to the sector-based approach, which accounts for emissions where they are produced. Most cities have larger consumption-based emissions than sector-based GHG emissions.

9 C40 Cities, Arup & University of Leeds (2019) ADDRESSING FOOD-RELATED CONSUMPTION-BASED EMISSIONS IN C40 CITIES. Available at: https://www.c40.org/research/consumption-based-emissions


25 Leading authorities such as the European Medicines Agency and the WHO say that the overuse of antibiotics in farming contributes to high levels of antibiotic resistance in some human infections. WHO (2017) What guidelines on use of medically important antimicrobials in food-producing animals. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2017. Licence: CC-BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. Available at: https://www.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/256917/185941531503-eng.pdf


32 In 2019, the Eating Better alliance proposed a target for reducing consumption by 50% by 2030. The Climate Change Committee (CCC), has called for the implementation of policies to achieve a 35% shift away from meat (of all types) by 2050, and 20% shift from dairy products by 2030. The National Food Strategy recommends a 30% reduction in meat consumption by 2032 in order to tackle childhood obesity and reduce the risk of diet-related diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, hypertension, diabetes and several types of cancer.

For most schools, it is practical to have 5 meat free days in every 3 week cycle, to accommodate the School Food Standards requirement to serve 1 portion of oily fish every three weeks.
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Eating Better inspires, informs, collaborates and showcases solutions. We work with producers, the food service industry, retailers and the public sector to chart a route to eating ‘less and better’ meat and dairy, in favour of more plant-based meals for health, environment, animal welfare and social justice. Together we are working towards a target of a 50% reduction in meat and dairy consumption in the UK by 2030 and for a transition to ‘better’ meat and dairy, as standard. We have created a national roadmap which sets out 24 actions that the key actors, from food business to government, need to take to support people to eat more plants, and ‘less and better’ meat and dairy. Within this, we collectively recognise the critical role of the public sector in normalising sustainable diets through public procurement of food.

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