



# The Vegan Society Evidence for EFRA Inquiry:

## Public Sector Procurement of Food

The Vegan Society is a Charity working towards a sustainable, ethical world where everyone's needs are met, and animals are free to exist in their own right. Food is central to sustainability, and at the heart of ethical food is plant-based food production and consumption.

We assert that the UK needs to completely re-programme our public procurement system for food. If Government chooses to do so, by radically re-directing the sizeable resources of public food procurement, we can move much closer to our proper food system, public health, sustainability, and other shared goals.

### **1.1 How effective have current food procurement rules been at achieving environmental outcomes, encouraging healthy eating and supporting local suppliers, including SMEs?**

The current food procurement rules have been relatively ineffective at achieving these goals. The people working under current rules and procedures, have not in practice been empowered to make the significant progress which we need in sourcing tasty, healthy, sustainable public food.

We have an ongoing, multi-decade epidemic of deaths due to poor nutrition in the UK. In 2017, Medact concluded<sup>1</sup>, "Diet-related ill health costs the NHS approximately £8 billion a year, and 70,000 deaths each year could be avoided if diets met nutritional guidelines." This is comparable to the over 59,000 excess deaths estimated across the UK during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic so far.

Current food procurement is not achieving the existing standards. Medact reported in 2017, "Taking the Pulse of Hospital Food<sup>2</sup>, the Campaign for Better Hospital Food's report into the current state of hospital food, using London as a test case, found that half of all hospitals had not met all of the five basic standards required by the NHS Standard Contract".

Medact presented a case study of Nottingham University Hospital (NUH), the first NHS trust to be awarded the Soil Association's 'Gold' level 'Food for Life Served Here' independent Catering Mark. At all levels (Bronze, Silver and Gold), this Mark requires<sup>3</sup> fresh, healthy meals, that meet all dietary and cultural needs, made with local, sustainably ingredients. NUH supplied such meals (breakfast, lunch, supper, snacks and seven beverages) at an ingredient cost of £4.53 per person per day for in-

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<sup>1</sup> p2, Hospital Food Campaigning Toolkit: Making hospital food healthier and more sustainable: a toolkit for bringing about change, 2017, Medact 2017a

<https://www.medact.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Hospital-Food-Campaign-Toolkit-WEB.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Taking the Pulse of Hospital Food, 2017, The Campaign for Better Hospital Food

[https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/taking\\_the\\_pulse/](https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/taking_the_pulse/)

<sup>3</sup> Soil Association Food For Life Catering Award, 2015

[https://www.soilassociation.org/media/5148/sa\\_what\\_is\\_the\\_difference\\_a5\\_4pp\\_online.pdf](https://www.soilassociation.org/media/5148/sa_what_is_the_difference_a5_4pp_online.pdf)



patients – below the national average ingredient costs<sup>4</sup>.

NUH has made many practical food procurement improvements on current insufficient guidelines – improvements which are transferable to other public sector areas.

## **1.2 What impact have Defra’s 2014 Plan for Public Procurement and the Government Buying Standard (GBS) had, and how could they be improved?**

As we set out in *Grow Green: Solutions for the Farm of the Future*<sup>5</sup>, Government Buying Standards need significant improvements - both for environmental reasons, and to support sustainable UK produce.

A fundamental impact of these policies ought to be, to lead healthier eating at a national scale. But collectively, we are failing to make progress even on the most basic measure: fruit and vegetable consumption. In the England considerably fewer than a third of adults eat the recommended five or more portions of vegetables and fruit daily; most eat fewer than four portions.

Fundamental, too, is support for best sustainability practices in food production. We have officially, nationally recognised and declared that we are in a Climate Emergency. Our Government now must choose decisive action, including actively enabling us all to adopt environmentally sustainable consumption behaviours.

The official estimate<sup>6</sup> of the UK’s ‘consumption footprint’ greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions for 2016 was 784 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent (Mt CO<sub>2e</sub>). UK food GHG emissions<sup>7</sup> are an estimated 10 – 30% of our overall consumption GHG emissions. Public sector food probably causes a similar proportion of the GHG ‘consumption footprint’ of public sector activities.

However, public sector food may be much more significant in terms of reducing our overall national ‘consumption footprint’. The Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board reports that currently, significantly below one third (by value) of UK public sector food procured is fresh, local produce from sustainable small or medium producers. The policy and practice changes needed for sustainable public sector food procurement will support the processes we need to bring down the overall GHG emissions of the UK food system.

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix 8, *Digesting The Indigestible Unravelling Hospital Food Policy And Practices, And Finding The Way Towards Healthier, Tastier And More Sustainable Hospital Food*, 2017, Medact <https://www.medact.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Digesting-the-Indigestible-WEB.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> *Grow Green: Solutions for the farm of the future report*, 2017, [https://www.vegansociety.com/sites/default/files/Grow%20Green%20%20Full%20Report\\_0.pdf](https://www.vegansociety.com/sites/default/files/Grow%20Green%20%20Full%20Report_0.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> p5, *Net zero and the different official measures of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/netzeroandthedifferentofficialmeasuresoftheuksgreenhousegasemissions/2019-07-24/pdf>

<sup>7</sup> p4 *How low can we go? An assessment of greenhouse gas emissions from the UK food system and the scope to reduce them by 2050*, WWF, 2009 [http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/how\\_low\\_report\\_1.pdf](http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/how_low_report_1.pdf)



We are also failing on farming standards<sup>8</sup>. This harms everyone, including farmers and the animals whom they farm.

*“Defra sets food procurement standards for the public sector but, regrettably, its [animal] welfare standards are lower than those of McDonald’s.”* - Peter Stevenson, Chief Policy Advisor, Compassion in World Farming

The UK needs better dietary guidelines implemented in public sector food that support a just, sustainable, healthy plant-based food system. Currently, our dietary guidelines are ‘incompatible with climate change, land use, freshwater, and nitrogen targets’ and far too many of us are dying from avoidable diet-related conditions<sup>9</sup>.

As part of taking our proper responsibility for global climate change, we in the UK will need to phase out our use of non-human animals in our farming and our food. We envisage a collaboration between people in UK climate change response, land management, food supply and public health to ensure our procurement, dietary and buying standards always follow best health and sustainability practices.<sup>10,11</sup>

Researchers at Oxford University have concluded<sup>12</sup> that eating a plant-based diet could be the single biggest way to reduce an individual’s environmental impact. “[I]f everybody around the world followed the national dietary guidelines of either the USA or the UK, then food-related emissions would exceed the food-system limits for avoiding dangerous levels of climate change by more than three times. .. [R]eformed dietary guidelines could .. [involve] much stricter limits for meat and dairy, both for health and environmental reasons .. dietary patterns based around plenty of whole grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts, and legumes”.

The Committee on Climate Change has been recommended that the UK public sector lead the way by serving plant-based food<sup>13</sup>.

### **1.3 How much flexibility will the UK have to change food procurement rules outside the EU?**

Our collective public sector food procurement failings are primarily due to lack of political will by successive Westminster Governments, and not due to EU rules. Our Government needs to choose to use the flexibility which was always there, to build the system which we need and deserve.

In their *“Manifesto for a resilient, adaptable and sustainable UK food system: Fast lessons from*

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<sup>8</sup> Farm animal welfare in the UK: setting the bar higher, Peter Stevenson, 2019

<sup>9</sup> Springmann, M. et al, The healthiness and sustainability of national and global food based dietary guidelines: modelling study, BMJ 2020, 370:m2322, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2322>.

<sup>10</sup> Our Vision for a Fairer Food System, 2020, The Vegan Society (forthcoming)

<sup>11</sup> Lang T, 2020, Feeding Britain: Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them p451

<sup>12</sup> Springmann, M 2020, Why food based dietary guidelines need to be more sustainable/ <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/07/15/why-food-based-dietary-guidelines-need-to-be-more-sustainable/>

<sup>13</sup> Climate change and diets, 2019, Tim Benton, <https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Tim-Benton-2019-Climate-change-and-diets-a-CCC-discussion-meeting.pdf>



COVID-19”, the Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board state<sup>14</sup>

1) “A regional food supply chain infrastructure needs to be established for the UK as an immediate priority to mitigate against future crises. In the first instance, it would be prudent to serve the most vulnerable in society via catering in the public sectors of schools, hospitals, care homes, prisons and the military. This £2 billion market would enable scale to be established for SME food producers in the short term. Then, once this infrastructure is established, SMEs would have a foundation from which they could bridge to other channels such as the private catering market and the retail store and online home delivery market. “

This recommendation is very much in line with The Vegan Society’s Catering for Everyone campaign, which builds upon work we as a charity have been doing for more than 15 years. The estimated over £2 billion pounds spent on UK public sector food procurement annually, carefully redirected, will be hugely influential. Public sector food can help transform the whole UK food supply system to be fit for mitigating the global climate crisis, our national health crises, and other ongoing, foreseen and as-yet unforeseen crises, too.

#### **1.4 What should the Government’s priorities for future food procurement be? (a) How should the Government support these priorities in the negotiation of new trade deals?**

No one in the UK should be malnourished. That means, no one should be going hungry. But it also means, no one should be forced to rely upon foods which are only occasionally included in healthy diets. No one should be relying upon foods which are produced in unsustainable or unethical ways, either. Everyone deserves tasty, healthy, sustainable, affordable, ethical diets.

Government public procurement policies are increasingly being shaped by the Barber Review into so-called ‘public value’. Michael Barber defines this as, ‘The value created when public money is translated into outputs and outcomes which improve people’s lives and economic wellbeing.’ The public sector food budget is big enough that the policies we set for public food strongly influence – to shape, or to distort – the whole UK food system.

The RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) have said<sup>15</sup>, “We therefore propose strengthening a statutory duty for healthy and sustainable procurement, on local authorities and the full government estate, including the NHS. This should extend beyond food to other goods which support sustainable economies, for example driving procurement towards sustainable timber. .. We argue that this duty is better rested with chief officers and this, along with our suggested ‘duty [upon public bodies] to cooperate’, will make this vital ambition happen. Preston<sup>16</sup> and Nottingham<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>14</sup> Manifesto for a resilient, adaptable and sustainable UK food system Fast lessons from COVID-19, 2020, Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board  
[https://ad555873-f343-4a7c-b674-b0e4792f5f9a.filesusr.com/ugd/6b24d7\\_a54481998a1c4b45bbd44542515b592e.pdf](https://ad555873-f343-4a7c-b674-b0e4792f5f9a.filesusr.com/ugd/6b24d7_a54481998a1c4b45bbd44542515b592e.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> p 54 Food, Farming and Countryside Commission: Our common ground, 2018, RSA  
<https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa-our-common-ground.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Chakraborty, A, 2018 In 2011 Preston hit rock bottom. Then it took back control. The Guardian  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/31/preston-hit-rock-bottom-took-back-control>



beacons for sustainable procurement, offer inspiring examples of what can happen when this commitment is shared across the system.”

We believe the UK should go further still. The current UK spend on public sector food is an estimated<sup>10</sup> £2.4bn or over 5% of all UK food sales revenue. All relevant policies and guidelines should direct and support everyone working in food procurement to prioritise vegetables, pulses, wholegrain foods, fruits, nuts, seeds, and other plant-based foods. This will help ensure that public sector menus are tasty, healthy, sustainable, affordable and ethical, with food which is over one third vegetables and fruits; over one third whole grains and other higher fibre starchy foods; and with pulse-based (beans, chickpeas, peas and lentils) main dishes and plant dairy alternatives available at every meal. This in turn will help accelerate the transition to a sustainable, ethical plant-based UK food and land management system.

The new guidelines should be comprehensive, supporting all national, regional and local authorities to develop plant-rich menus. The strategies set out in our *Grow Green: Solutions for the farm of the future* report<sup>5</sup> as well as the relevant parts of other reports including *Better by Half*, *Eating Better*, *Government Procurement*, Institute for Government and the existing *A Plan for Public Procurement*, DEFRA will enable the development of these guidelines.

In 2017, Medact estimated<sup>4</sup> that at Nottingham University Hospital (NUH) – who prioritise sustainable plant-based menus that meet all dietary and cultural needs – every £1 of their estimated £6 million food spend yielded £3 return in social value, which is nearly £18 million equivalent ‘public value’.

The Dynamic Food Procurement Board warn explicitly<sup>14</sup> that the UK food system, and our long term goals for food in the UK, are severely threatened by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic:

“If the agri-food sector is crippled by COVID-19, the delivery of sustainability and climate and biodiversity crisis mitigation strategies and goals could be impaired, resulting in local economies becoming fractured. “

Therefore, it is even more urgent that the significant resources of public sector food procurement are used wisely. Public sector resources must help safeguard a UK food system capable of delivering tasty, healthy, sustainable, affordable, ethical food for everyone. Also, no trade deal should be made which in any way reduces or undermines any of this work.

The Dynamic Food Procurement Board also offers “*Fast lessons from COVID-19*” focused specifically upon horticulture:

“Some local producers/outlets are looking to quickly set up online shops as well as ‘local delivery ONLY’ technology that allows local customers to order. This means a viable local delivery run can be set up where the van also collects produce grown by local people for the local delivery service. Broader adoption of this could encourage people (and especially schools) to grow, cook, and trade food. Having the opportunity to partake in this collaborative system would be a win-win, as it forms part of the solution whilst engendering a sense of pride in how growers can actively contribute to and benefit their local community.”

Research suggests that both young people and adults who are involved in local and community horticulture are more likely than the population average to eat a wider, healthier range of fruit and vegetables. Through well-planned plant-based menus, the public sector can also support the re-



emergence of sustainable UK protein crops for our direct consumption.

An employment tribunal case in 2020 affirmed<sup>17</sup> that as a philosophical belief, veganism can qualify for protection under the Equal Act 2010. Public sector policymakers and managers must take appropriate action to ensure that they neither directly nor indirectly unlawfully discriminate against vegans.

For example, there should be vegan-friendly meals on all public sector menus. The National Procurement Service food and drinks framework agreements note that plant-based products are available. But little else has yet been done to ensure this provision in practice, and people cannot buy or eat what is not provided. We have found that people seeking vegan-friendly food in the public sector still too often find too little, and frequently have to arrange their own food elsewhere.

*Hospital In-Patient: "I was in hospital for three days recently. I asked a number of times for vegan food options and was told that they could not provide anything vegan. I had to arrange for my wife to bring in food for me. Some people will not be able to rely on family."*

*New parent: "After delivering a baby, the only food available to me was potatoes, salad and toast. This was very difficult as I had anaemia following childbirth and needed to discharge myself to get a healthy, balanced meal at home."*

*Guardian: "Our local primary school has vegetarian but not vegan options. In order to obtain 'other' dietary requirements, you have to prove medical need."*

This is divisive, potentially harmful, and potentially unlawful for belief-based dietary needs. Yet, well-planned - tasty, healthy, sustainable and ethical - vegan-friendly dishes are suitable for a wide range of cultural, dietary and belief-based requirements. Plant-based catering can help the public sector find solutions to a range of ethical, environmental and other challenges.

**Therefore, we call for vegan-friendly meals to be actively required on all public sector menus. This will help public sector organisations to meet their Public Sector Equality Duty as well as our proper, shared health and sustainability obligations and goals.**

### **1.5 To what extent should the public sector be encouraged to "buy British"? (a) What are the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach?**

The UK could be virtually self-reliant in staple foods – grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits – and many other foods as well – seeds, herbs, and some nuts and spices. We need to play our fair role in how food supports a healthy, sustainable, just world. This means largely meeting our own needs for staple foods, whilst trading in a fair, sustainable way for luxuries which do not grow well in the UK, such as chocolate, coffee, tropical fruits, and many nuts and spices. This will support people in the Global Majority World to feed their own communities. The Vegan Society stands in solidarity with those fighting against all injustice, to humans as well as to non-human animals.

Zero carbon diets in the UK, concordant with EAT-Lancet guidelines, are an important part of our contribution to global climate justice under 'fair share' principles. The British Empire, our role in the

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<sup>17</sup> Preliminary Hearing Judgement Case Number: 3331129/2018, Employment Judge Postle



Industrial Revolution, and our ongoing economic activities have disproportionately, and to some extent, cumulatively, added to global atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations. Plant-based UK food systems are a vital way for us to be part of global climate justice<sup>10</sup>.

A recent report<sup>18</sup> estimated the total 'hidden' cost of all UK food to public health and the environment as £1 for every £1 we spend, totalling over £120 billion. The 'hidden costs' of current public sector food procurement could therefore be over £2 billion.

Plant-based public food procurement has significant potential to improve UK rural livelihoods. Farmers and other land managers must be fully and fairly paid for their fundamental role in ensuring tasty, healthy, sustainable, affordable, ethical local food in our schools, hospitals, prisons, local government offices and other institutions. The contribution of land management, agriculture and forestry at 2% of rural England's Gross Value Added (GVA)<sup>19</sup> is currently significantly undervalued: they represent 16% of rural businesses.

The RSA FFCC<sup>20</sup> also recommends public sector food procurement be re-balanced to stimulate UK food production, for example by stipulating UK sourced vegetables and fruit. They are doing in-depth work in Wales, in the context of the seven goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act to be: Globally responsible; Prosperous; Resilient; Healthier; More equal; Cohesive Communities; with Vibrant Culture, Thriving Language. Through action learning with Welsh public sector procurement officers, food producers and researchers, the RSA FFC are developing new practices for procurement to support sustainable farming systems.

The RSA urge Government align all public resourcing through food, farming and the countryside – procurement, and also subsidies, taxes, tax reliefs, regulations and more – to re-build and protect natural and social capital, and increase public value from our food and land management sectors.

The Vegan Society agree: 'Procurement is one of the most significant ways that the Government can positively impact food systems and rural communities.'

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<sup>18</sup> The Hidden Cost of UK Food, 2017, The Sustainable Food Trust <http://sustainablefoodtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/HCOF-Report-online-version.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Centre for Rural Economy, Reimagining the rural: what's missing in UK rural policy? <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/centreforruraleconomy/files/reimagining-rural.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Food, Farming and Countryside Commission: Our common ground, 2018, RSA <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa-our-common-ground.pdf>