

# HEALTHY, SUSTAINABLE AND PLANT-BASED CATERING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

## POLICY BRIEFING

Food not only lies at the centre of health and sustainability issues but also lies at the heart of personal choice. We live in an age of multiple and interlinked crises, including climate breakdown, biodiversity loss and widening health inequalities. All significantly driven by our food choices. The implication for government is that providing choice in public sector catering, that makes room for change in how people eat, and embeds it for the long term is the smart option for public policymakers.

**Successful public sector procurement systems are ones that enable people to access the food they wish to eat. Research, polls and public feedback on current provision in schools and NHS settings tells us demand is up for plant-based food.**



Research from Exeter University, shows that a shift in public sector consumption can generate important tipping points for social change that can, in turn, scale up to the level required for Net Zero consumption patterns. Promoting healthy, climate friendly meals in public sector settings could be pivotal.

Today around half of UK households purchase meat and/or dairy alternative products with a 115% increase in household consumption in under 10 years, however, currently plant-based alternatives do not enjoy a level playing field in terms of subsidy and other fiscal measures to support their place in the food economy.

The public sector is the key to reinforcing feedbacks for improving the economic position of beneficial plant-based foods. With a clear policy of public procurement in place to source alternative plant-proteins in public sector catering, a number of reinforcing feedbacks could occur to help propel change. A guaranteed market helps products get improved, and as products become more widely consumed, prices come down through economies of scale. The wider the consumption, the more optimal the social cascade effect.

Nanny-state or meeting a demand? As a nation we are eating more plant-based foods. Proactive public sector institutions who have been vocal on this issue view it as their responsibility to reflect dietary trends, and to give NHS patients and pupils in schools the choice to be able to make those decisions for themselves. The pandemic has made Britons more aware of where their food is coming from. The number of people eating a plant-based diet has doubled in the last decade to as many as 1 in 22 people. More significantly a survey in June 2022 found the majority of meat-eaters (61%) are willing to eat less meat and there has been a 45% increase in the number of people who eat meat only one or two days a week in the space of just two years.

Making British public sector food procurement truly healthy and sustainable means addressing two main barriers:

### **UPGRADING HOSPITAL AND SCHOOLS' FOOD STANDARDS IN LINE WITH NET ZERO DIET CHANGE RECOMMENDATIONS**

In terms of food procurement, the fastest route to healthier diets and tackling the climate emergency, is to be achieved through reducing animal sourced products and eating more plant-based foods. NHS ward staff and dietitians say plant-based should be part of "what good looks like" in hospital food, and 70% of children want to see more vegetarian and vegan meals on their school menu.

### **REFORMING THE PROCUREMENT ACT DUE TO COME INTO FORCE IN OCTOBER 2024 IN LINE WITH POTENTIAL PLANT-BASED HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY BENEFITS**

Public sector food procurement has the power to make big transformational change: with centralised buying power and a guaranteed market, it can drive change through sheer economies of scale. Elevating the visibility of plant-based eating in the public sector could potentially mitigate the need for direct public messaging on meat reduction in this politically sensitive area.

## What is the Vegetarian Society doing?

The Vegetarian Society is calling for an increase in both the quality and quantity of plant-based foods served by a range of public sector organisations. Not only can this help deliver better health outcomes, it can also help organisations in achieving their climate action plan targets. In the first instance we are planning to focus on schools. Through surveys, we have already established that in many cases the plant-based offering in schools is generally poor, with low quality meals, lacking in nutrition.

We intend to commission research aimed at assessing the role that plant-based foods can play within the school environment while still hitting the required nutritional targets required under the School Food Standards. This research will also review these standards, with a view to developing a revised set of standards which place greater emphasis on plant-based nutrition and Net Zero goals.

## Why is plant-based catering so important for the public sector?

How we consume food is contributing to a dual UK crisis in health and environment, with consumption of animal products playing a key role in both. Meat, particularly beef and lamb, has higher carbon emissions per kg than most other foods, and diet is now the leading cause of ill health in the UK, with consumption of red meat and processed meats linked to a range of diseases. Elevated risk of cancer, heart disease and diabetes in the UK can all be related (among other factors) to meat intake and as a nation we are eating far too much meat, with 43% of men and 26% of women eating more red and processed meat than the limit recommended for health by the UK's Scientific Advisory Committee for Nutrition (SACN). In environmental terms, the average UK adult is eating double the amount required for planetary sustainability, and a key way to help people improve their diets is to increase the provision of plant-based foods across schools, hospitals, local authorities and other workplaces in the public sector.

## Consumer Trends

It's a fact that, when it comes to food, our consumption patterns are changing. The number of vegans and vegetarians has increased by between two and four-fold in the last 10 years, and more than half of Gen Z (citizens born 1997-2012) could be eating a meat-free diet by 2025. As many as 6.4m people in the UK in 2024 intend to adopt a meat-free diet in the coming year.

## KEY NUMBERS:

# 70%

of school children aged 8-16 years want more vegetarian and vegan school meals.



# 1 in 22 people

in the UK is vegetarian or vegan.



# ↑45%

Between 2020 and 2022 there was a 45% increase in people eating meat just one or two days a week.



Britain needs a **90%** increase in the consumption of beans...

...and a **75%** decrease in red meat consumption to meet healthy eating targets.

Plant-protein crops can have **1/10 of the carbon emissions** per kilo of protein compared to red meat.



# 1/2

Around half of UK households regularly use meat and dairy alternatives



# We would be delighted to arrange a full briefing with you.

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## About the Vegetarian Society

The Vegetarian Society is the UK's original and leading voice for the vegetarian and vegan movement. Our aim is to inspire and support everyone to move towards more sustainable and cruelty-free choices in their lives because kindness counts.

Through our education and engagement programmes to campaigning, policy work and product accreditation, we strive for a world without animal cruelty.

We do this by using our knowledge and expertise to work across our membership, communities, business, government, and likeminded organisations to help change behaviour, drive innovation and expand food choice across the industry.

In doing so we continue to build on our 175+ year legacy to grow a community driven by a collective desire to secure a kinder, healthier and more sustainable future for every life on earth.

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