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**Friends of  
the Earth**

# Briefing

# Healthy and sustainable food for the public sector

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## **Introduction**

The public sector – including schools, hospitals, care homes and the armed forces – is a major purchaser of food. More than £2.2 billion – about 7% of all the money spent in the UK catering sector – is spent every year feeding patients, pupils and other public sector service users.<sup>1</sup> This is money which could be used to create a market for healthy and planet-friendly food, but so far little is happening to make this a reality.

Standards for public sector food purchasing are currently very weak and the potential the public purse has to transform our food system has not been realised. A glut of voluntary initiatives has been introduced, each failing to make a difference to the standard of food on the public plate.<sup>2</sup>

This is particularly evident for the standards and quantity of meat and dairy on public menus. It is not currently possible to say exactly how much of the annual £2.2 billion spent on food goes on meat and dairy, but data from household expenditure surveys suggest the amount could be around £0.77bn.<sup>3</sup>

The drive for short-term financial savings – rather than investing in better quality food for longer term health, sustainability and economic benefits – means cheap, processed meat is the norm.

Less but better meat and dairy on public menus would have direct health and environmental benefits. This briefing shows how a radical alignment of public food with criteria for sustainable diets would bring benefits for health, biodiversity and climate.

## **The Food Chain bigger picture**

Friends of the Earth's Food Chain campaign aims to tackle the environmental and social impacts of factory farming, and halt the wildlife and forest destruction in South America driven by intensive production of meat and dairy in the UK. Vast areas of forest are being cleared, and communities forced from their land, to make way for soy plantations to feed our factory farms. Our demand for cheap meat and dairy – including the food we are served in the public sector – is driving this destruction.

Friends of the Earth believes that public money must not be spent on food that is destroying the environment and damaging our health – but instead should be used to kick-start the market for sustainable meat and dairy, incentivising farmers to rear their animals in grass-based systems or using alternative feeds to soy. The Sustainable Livestock Bill would ensure that schools, hospitals and other public sector institutions purchase less but better meat and dairy – with rewards for both our health and the environment.

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<sup>1</sup> National Audit Office (2006) Smarter food procurement in the public sector

<sup>2</sup> Sustain (2009) A decade of hospital food failure and Sustain (2010) Yet more hospital food failure The bill rises to £54 million, and still counting...  
[http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf/GFFOM\\_Hospital\\_Food\\_Second\\_Report.pdf](http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf/GFFOM_Hospital_Food_Second_Report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Approximately 35% of total average weekly household spend is on meat and dairy products (£16.60 of £46.90):  
[http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_social/Family\\_Spending\\_2006/FamilySpending2007\\_w eb.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Family_Spending_2006/FamilySpending2007_w eb.pdf)

## Benefits of less but better meat and dairy on public menus

### Health

The average Briton eats three times as much meat as recommended by the World Health Organisation. Overconsumption of meat has been linked to diet-related diseases including, heart disease, strokes and some cancers. This has a direct cost to the public purse through treatment.

Modelling carried out by Oxford University for friends of the Earth shows that switching to lower but better meat diets could prevent around 45000 early deaths and save the NHS £1.2bn per year.<sup>4</sup> Specific health benefits of a reduced meat diet include:

- Reductions in unhealthy saturated fats and cholesterol in diets, overconsumption of which is linked to cardiovascular disease.<sup>5</sup>
- Reduced incidence of some forms of cancer linked to high consumption of red and processed meat.<sup>6</sup>

### Environment

Eating less but better meat and dairy would also significantly reduce the impact of our diets on the environment.

The “less but better” approach would cause a reduction in green house gas (GHG) emissions from livestock, currently estimated to be 18% of total global emissions. This figure constitutes three main areas of approximately equal proportion:

- Methane
- Nitrous oxides
- Emissions from land use change as forest is converted to soy plantations for animal feed and to pasture for ranching.<sup>7</sup>

Less livestock production would also reduce the loss of precious biodiversity due to deforestation and habitat clearance to make way for soy plantations and for ranching.<sup>8</sup>

More land would also be freed up. Livestock uses 70% of available global agricultural land - producing and consuming less would see additional areas of land released for other forms of agricultural use. Our report *Eating the Planet* showed that we can feed the growing global population far more efficiently and sustainably and without trashing the planet. But it would require developed countries to eat less meat and dairy allowing for a more equitable distribution of food and a more nutritious diet for people in developing countries.

Significant amounts of water would become available for human consumption and other agricultural purposes if we produced less meat and dairy. The livestock sector currently uses 8% of global human water supply.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Friends of the Earth, October 2010, Healthy Planet Eating: How lower meat diets can save lives and the planet [http://www.foe.co.uk/news/healthy\\_eating\\_planet\\_25578.html](http://www.foe.co.uk/news/healthy_eating_planet_25578.html)

<sup>5</sup> WHO (2003) Diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases

<sup>6</sup> World Cancer Research Fund and American Institute for Cancer Research (2007) Food, nutrition, physical activity, and the prevention of cancer: a global perspective

<sup>7</sup> FAO (2006) Livestock's Long Shadow

<sup>8</sup> Friends of the Earth, Forest to Fork, October 2010

<sup>9</sup> For fuller analysis of the environmental impacts of intensive meat production and consumption, see Friends of the Earth's report (2008) What's feeding our food?

## Economic

Plant-based foods are generally cheaper than meat therefore if we pay more for better quality meat but eat less of it there can be a net zero difference in outgoings.<sup>10</sup>

People in lower income groups would benefit to a greater extent to dietary changes of eating less meat and more plant based foods because of above average consumption of unhealthy meat products.<sup>11</sup>

## The failure of the voluntary approach

According to research by Sustain – the alliance for better food and farming – over £53 million of Government money has been spent in the last ten years on voluntary initiatives to improve the sustainability of public sector food, with no demonstrable benefit for health or the environment.<sup>12</sup> This includes the flagship Sustainable Food Procurement Initiative which set out, amongst other things, to improve consumption of healthy and nutritious food, improve sustainability of production and promote animal welfare.

After six years – and around £2.5m of taxpayers' money – the initiative was wound up after an evaluation concluded that its take-up had been limited and it had failed to make the impact it had sought.<sup>13</sup>

More recent efforts to improve public sector food include the Healthier Food Mark, which despite the use of an extensive team of management consultants for its development, and being part of official Government policy on food,<sup>14</sup> didn't manage to progress beyond the pilot stage. Analysis by Sustain of the draft standards also demonstrated the weakness of the criteria – for example, a caterer could achieve a 'gold star' for purchasing meat and dairy to standards no higher than the current legal minimum.

The need for mandatory standards was identified by the Council of Food Policy Advisors in a 2009 report in order to ensure that 'health and sustainability count against the bottom line and levels the playing field for contractors and procurers'.<sup>15</sup>

## A planet-friendly plate – what sustainable meat and dairy in the public sector could look like

In its report on sustainable diets, the Sustainable Development Commission concluded that one of the changes likely to have the most significant impact on making our diets healthier and more sustainable would be to reduce consumption of meat and dairy products.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> McMichael, Powels, Butler, Uauy (2007) Food, livestock production energy, climate change, and health; Lancet

<sup>11</sup> Nelson, Erens, Bates, Church, Boshier (2007) Low income diet and nutrition survey; Food Standards Agency

<sup>12</sup> Sustain (2009) A decade of hospital food failure

<sup>13</sup> Deloitte (2009) Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative: An Evaluation

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/policy/publicsectorfood/documents/090311-PSFPI-%20evaluation.pdf>

See also [http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf/GFFOM\\_Hospital\\_Food\\_Second\\_Report.pdf](http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf/GFFOM_Hospital_Food_Second_Report.pdf) (p.20)

<sup>14</sup> Cabinet Office (2008) Food Matters: towards a strategy for sustainable food

[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/strategy/assets/food/food\\_matters\\_es.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/strategy/assets/food/food_matters_es.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Defra (2009) First Report of the Council of Food Policy Advisors

Friends of the Earth is calling for public menus to be aligned with advice on sustainable and healthy diets – for example the World Cancer Research Fund recommends an average daily intake of no more than 70g of red meat,<sup>17</sup> while modelling commissioned by Compassion in World Farming and Friends of the Earth has shown that globally we can continue to eat meat equitably and without factory farming, if Western diets were to reduce meat consumption to three times a week.<sup>18</sup>

Despite considerable institutional barriers, some public sector organisations in the UK and abroad are already leading the way in the shift towards a more sustainable diet. These 'islands in a sea of mediocrity'<sup>19</sup> show that changing menus and reducing meat consumption in public institutions can reduce costs and emissions whilst stimulating purchasing of sustainable food.

## Case studies

### Public sector

#### Nottingham University Hospitals NHS trust

Following a major realignment of its catering plan the city hospital campus redesigned its menu to allow for seasonal food supply and began to engage proactively with local and regional suppliers, initially through an open day. As a result 95% of the campus' meat is now sourced from local suppliers in the East Midlands and all of its milk – nearly 1000 pints a day – comes from a farm 11 miles away.<sup>20</sup>

As a result of these changes the Trust has saved money and has boosted the fortunes of local farmers,<sup>21</sup> although there have been no claims regarding reduced meat or dairy consumption.

#### Ghent

The city of Ghent in Belgium has a designated meat-free day every Thursday – promoting vegetarian food in public canteens for Councillors and officials, in its 35 city-funded schools and promoting vegetarian eating options in town through the distribution of street maps showing vegetarian eateries.<sup>22</sup> The Belgian cities of Hasselt and Mechelen have now followed.

#### San Francisco

The city council in San Francisco passed a resolution in 2010 to promote a meat-free day a week to schools, grocery shops, restaurants and cafes.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> SDC (2009) Setting the table [www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=1033](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=1033)

<sup>17</sup> World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF, 2007). Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity and the Prevention of Cancer: A Global Perspective

<sup>18</sup> Friends of the Earth and Compassion in World Farming (2009) Eating the Planet? How we can feed the world without trashing it

<sup>19</sup> Professor Kevin Morgan of Cardiff University, a leading academic analysing public procurement quoted in [http://sustainweb.org/pdf/GFPP\\_Eval\\_2008.pdf](http://sustainweb.org/pdf/GFPP_Eval_2008.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/080208NottinghamCaseStudy2.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2010/sep/15/radio-review-farming-today>

<sup>22</sup> BBC online 'Belgian city plans 'veggie days'', 12 May 2009, accessed 7 Sept 2010:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8046970.stm>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.sfexaminer.com/local/Mondays-now-meat-free-in-The-City-90066777.html>

### Netherlands

The Netherlands government has announced that it will aim for 100% sustainable procurement by 2010, to include sustainable food – with criteria relating to agricultural chemical use, energy use, farming methods and animal welfare. The criteria specify the procured products must demonstrably consist of 40% organic products and/or products with one or more other “sustainability properties”. There is no criteria specific to meat and dairy, however.<sup>24</sup>

### Sweden

The Swedish government has developed guidelines for climate-friendly food choices developed recommending citizens reduce their meat consumption as a way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>25</sup>

### Cornwall Food Programme

Covering Royal Cornwall Hospital, St Michael’s and the West of Cornwall Hospital, the programme aims to transform hospital food so it is more nutritious, to cut emissions from unsustainable farming and production systems and transportation, and to boost the local economy by increasing local purchasing.

Launched in 2001, it has had significant success with increased turnover and new customers for small, local producers, directly from NHS contracts and also as a trigger for other opportunities. Contracts for all fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy are with Cornish companies, and the costs have not increased. A farm shop at the Royal Cornwall Hospital enables patients, staff and visitors to buy fresh, local and organic produce two days a week. A new Cornwall Food Production unit offers the potential to extend what has been achieved in the three hospitals involved so far to benefit the wider health community and the public sector throughout Cornwall. It is hoped there will be scope for more long-term NHS supply contracts for producers, including the organic meat sector, with potential also to develop links with schools and other new customers.<sup>26</sup>

## Voluntary sector initiatives

### Food for Life

The Food for Life Partnership is a network of schools and communities across England committed to transforming food culture. The stated aim is to reach out through schools to give communities access to seasonal, local and organic food, and to the skills they need to cook and grow fresh food.<sup>27</sup>

An awards scheme credits schools with a Bronze, Silver or Gold mark depending on sustainability criteria. The Gold mark criteria include increasing non-meat dishes, eating less but better quality meat, trialling meat-free days and reducing meat portion sizes. Benchmarks for organic content and welfare standards also feature.

The Bronze award follows the “farm assured” criteria of the Little Red Tractor Scheme. The Sustainable Development Commission has noted, however, that the Red Tractor is

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<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (2010) Criteria for the Sustainable Public Procurement of Catering:

[http://www.senternovem.nl/mmfiles/Criteriadocument%20Catering\\_tcm24-323613.pdf](http://www.senternovem.nl/mmfiles/Criteriadocument%20Catering_tcm24-323613.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.actionsustainability.com/news/156/Sweden-promotes-climate-friendly-food-choices/>

See also National Food Administration (2009) Environmentally effective food choices:

[http://www.slv.se/upload/dokument/miljo/environmentally\\_effective\\_food\\_choices\\_proposal\\_eu\\_2009.pdf](http://www.slv.se/upload/dokument/miljo/environmentally_effective_food_choices_proposal_eu_2009.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Soil Association (2007) A fresh approach for hospital food: the Cornwall Food Programme

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.foodforlife.org.uk/>

problematic as it provides assurance of compliance with only baseline legal standards and not sustainability criteria.<sup>28</sup>

### **Sustain's Good Food on the Public Plate**

Part of the London Food Strategy Local Food Infrastructure project, Good Food on the Public Plate provides a wide range of free of charge assistance to public-sector bodies in London, helping them to buy and use more sustainable food. The project anticipated more than £700,000 being redirected to purchasing sustainable products in 2009, money that previously was spent on food with poor sustainability credentials.<sup>29</sup>

### **Fife Diet**

Beginning in October 2007, the Fife Diet asked people to sign-up to eating food from the region of Fife, for a year, monitor their progress and share their experience. Since then the project has developed into a 1,000 strong network of people trying to re-localise and to explore what sustainable food might be.

The project drives to source as much locally produced food as possible and reports that people following this diet generate 27% less carbon emissions than the UK average.<sup>30</sup>

### **San Francisco 'Balanced Menus'**

As well as the city council initiative mentioned above, San Francisco has recently seen the implementation of 'Balanced Menus' – a voluntary programme that seeks to improve nutrition and benefit the environment by reducing meat purchasing among participating hospitals by 20 per cent within 12 months. The program also promotes shifting towards serving more sustainably produced meat. A pilot evaluation of the programme found that the participating hospitals exceeded their 20 per cent goal and saw substantial savings in costs and greenhouse gas emissions, as well as, potentially, some improvements in health for those eating reduced quantities of meat.

First implemented in 2008 in four San Francisco Bay Area hospitals, the programme has now been launched nationally and is being adopted by 32 hospitals.<sup>31</sup>

## **Fixing the public plate – the way ahead**

Public procurement is a vital tool for fixing the food chain. Friends of the Earth is calling for a new strategy on meat and dairy as part of the Sustainable Livestock Bill – and public procurement is an essential part of this.

The Government should commit to assessing the impact of meat, dairy and eggs bought with taxpayers' money. It should ensure that all livestock products (meat, dairy, poultry products) procured publicly, do not damage important biodiverse sites, address carbon reduction targets, follow national environmental legislation and support local sustainable livestock production such as organic where possible. This should affect meals in the

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<sup>28</sup> Levett-Therivel report for the Sustainable Development Commission (2005) Sustainability Implications of the Little Red Tractor Scheme

<sup>29</sup> Sustain (2009) Good Food on the Public Plate: What we have done and what we have learned [http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf2/GFPP\\_interim\\_report\\_Sept09.pdf](http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf2/GFPP_interim_report_Sept09.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> Fife Diet (2010) Carbon Footprint: comparative study and member analysis <http://fifediet.co.uk/read/>

<sup>31</sup> John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (2010) Balanced Menus: A Pilot Evaluation of Implementation in Four San Francisco Bay Area Hospitals [http://www.noharm.org/lib/downloads/food/balanced\\_menus/Balanced\\_Menus\\_Pilot\\_Eval.pdf](http://www.noharm.org/lib/downloads/food/balanced_menus/Balanced_Menus_Pilot_Eval.pdf)

government estate, in local and national government, schools, hospitals, care homes, and other publicly funded food service and the armed forces.

Public sector caterers must source less but better meat and dairy through mandatory standards that are in line with advice on sustainable diets. This includes much reduced meat and dairy on public menus, with reduced portion sizes. It should also include education and awareness-raising schemes to encompass a change in overall consumption, and skills development in the public sector.

The meat and dairy products on offer in public institutions must be more sustainably produced – this includes products from livestock that are grass-fed, organically-reared and that are fed on a homegrown diet such as peas and beans. Our research shows that alternative feeds are possible but require incentives for development.<sup>32</sup>

By sourcing less meat the procuring of sustainably-produced meat could be cost neutral.

Local Authorities also have a key role to play in providing a market for sustainably produced meat and dairy.

Councils should develop a sustainable food procurement policy, which maximises social, environmental and economic benefits, and as part of delivering this:

- develop and implement better standards for meat and dairy sourcing – note the Red Tractor mark provides assurance only for meeting minimum legal standards
- commit to sourcing grass-fed meat and dairy or that bred on home-grown protein
- reduce the amount of meat and dairy in canteens, schools, care homes and other catering within local authority control, in line with evidence on sustainable diets.
- phase in meat reduction with initiatives such as meat free days and reduced meat meals with explanatory table top leaflets etc.
- start to assess how meat and dairy purchasing contributes to local objectives including local economic development targets (using local small business suppliers may mean providing less but better quality) and climate reduction targets (reducing meat and dairy use to reduce GHG emissions).

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<sup>32</sup> Friends of the Earth (2010) Pastures New A Sustainable Future for Meat and dairy farming.