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POLICY AND PRACTICE NOTE CATAPULTING SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY PUBLIC FOOD PROCUREMENT IN THE UK

KEY POINTS

VIEWING

public sector food as a strategic asset could leverage significant public benefits, supporting healthier communities, a thriving agricultural sector, and a more sustainable planet.

CO-CREATING

knowledge is crucial to drive transformation and scale best practice across the public sector.

SUPPORTING

British farmers and integrating more Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) into public food procurement should be a key objective for investment in resilient supply chains.

RECOMMENDATIONS

are listed on page 5.

The UK's public sector food and drink procurement represents an annual expenditure of approximately £5 billion. This significant spending, encompassing schools, hospitals, prisons, the armed forces, and local authorities, presents a powerful lever to deliver across key outcomes in the new UK Government food strategy.

Public food procurement aligns directly with the following priority outcomes in the Towards a Good Food Cycle¹ framework:

- **An improved food environment** that supports healthier and more environmentally sustainable food sales.
- **Access for all** to safe, affordable, healthy, convenient and appealing food options.
- **Conditions for the food sector to thrive and grow sustainably**, including investment in innovation and productivity, and fairer more transparent supply chains.

However, the Government strategy thus far does not specifically mention public food procurement by Government or strengthening the mandatory or best practice Government Buying Standards

for food and catering services² as a mechanism for achieving its goals.

Aiming to close this gap, this policy and practice note builds on recent work including the [Will Quince MP Public Food Procurement Review \(May 2024\)](#)³, food procurement meetings across the Transforming UK Food Systems Programme, and a Public Food Procurement Roundtable hosted by FixOurFood (University of York) on 23 July 2025.

In synthesising insights from these recent discussions, as well as reports and evidence arising from TUKFS research, this document aims to outline a strategic approach to deliver on some of the clear goals and outcomes of the Good Food Cycle for catapulting best practices in public sector food procurement.

Current landscape and challenges

Despite substantial public expenditure on food, there is a lack of transparency regarding where this spending goes and what standards are being met. Several systemic challenges impede the realisation of a public sector food procurement system where health and equity as well as sustainable and resilient supply chains are prioritised alongside value for money⁴.

Fragmented systems and silos

Decentralised procurement: The NHS, for instance, comprises 22 independent trusts, leading to fragmented procurement power. Similarly, the school food system is complex, with varying governance models (private caterers, in-house services, local authorities), making it difficult to set and enforce unified standards⁵.

Lack of prioritisation: Food, until recently, has often not been prioritised nationally or within local resilience strategies. It sits across multiple government departments, leading to a lack of coordinated governance.

Rural voice and devolution: Urban-centric mayoral authorities often overlook rural hinterlands, necessitating a strong rural voice in devolution discussions to ensure farmers' and farm-based business needs are considered.

Barriers for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and growers

Procurement complexity: SMEs, including growers, face challenges with short contracts, confusing tender frameworks and inconsistent metrics. Tender processes are often complicated, time consuming and inaccessible, favouring larger suppliers. For growers, this complexity is a current factor in hesitancy to innovate (e.g. transition to regenerative agriculture) due to income uncertainty in supply chains and climate change risks.

'Missing middle' infrastructure: The lack of mid-scale processing, aggregation, and distribution infrastructure can prevent SMEs and growers from effectively supplying public sector food procurement contracts.

Data and transparency: Patchy data on food sourcing and uptake means local authorities and public health teams struggle to influence commercial caterers who often have no obligation to provide such data or change practices.

Food waste and nutritional gaps

Significant food waste: Approximately 100,000 meals are wasted across the NHS each day. In schools too, food waste is a significant issue (unpublished lunchtime observations by FixOurFood and BeanMeals project teams), with vegetable and fibre waste witnessed specifically by FixOurFood.

BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDY Give peas a chance



A successful pilot project, connecting an organic Aberdeenshire farm with school catering services across the city of Aberdeen, Moray, and the Highlands. The project developed a new, short supply chain for local organic peas through a multi-partner approach involving councils, catering teams, and third-sector organisations. Subsidising the price difference between organic peas and conventionally grown peas was key to overcoming the cost barrier. However, it demonstrates how targeted support and strong partnerships can simultaneously bolster local sustainable agriculture, improve children's nutrition, and create resilient local food systems⁶.

Dietary imbalance: UK diets are typically low in pulses, with the average person consuming only 28g per day, far below the recommended 80g⁷. This impacts health outcomes and overall dietary sustainability.

Cooking skills and acceptance: Catering teams may lack training to cook with fresh, unfamiliar ingredients like celeriac or dried beans. Children's palates are often accustomed to a limited range of familiar foods, and limited time for eating in schools presents a challenge for introducing new, healthy options⁸.

Opportunities and innovations

There are a number of opportunities and innovations emerging across the UK Public Food Procurement sector to deliver on the UK food strategy outcomes. While interventions may appear costly upfront, they often generate net benefits over time by reducing the burden of environmental degradation, healthcare expenditures and social inequalities as well as fostering local economic growth.

Priority outcomes for publicly procured food



Credit: FoodSEqual

Food as a strategic asset: A crucial cultural shift is needed to emphasise food's role in improving community health, jobs, economic growth, and community wealth building, rather than merely being a cost to be minimised. For example, the Plymouth Fish Finger project has opened up pathways for local children to benefit from affordable, healthier school meals and to learn about sustainable fishing practices, as well as providing a route to a fair income for local fishermen⁹.

Leveraging targets: The government's commitment to source 50% of public sector food locally or to high environmental standards presents a significant opportunity to boost sourcing from British farmers and growers. While 'local' can be vague, a focus on 'seasonal' and 'British' produce can align with carbon reduction goals and improve resilience.

Strengthening supply chains and infrastructure

Derisking investment: There's a strong willingness from growers to supply if conditions are right, emphasising the need for secure, long-term contracts (e.g. three-year procurement planning) that align with harvest cycles. This can reduce risk for farmers and encourage investment.

Capacity building events can support SMEs through the tender/procurement process. Regional partnerships and co-operatives can connect demand with local supply (see best practice case study: [Bridging the Gap learning exchange](#)),

and there are opportunities to co-ordinate sharing good practice in order to drive regional change e.g. 'exemplar trusts' in the NHS and the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) Procurement for Good Initiative¹⁰.

Dynamic procurement systems can facilitate easier engagement for SMEs, providing potential for aggregation of produce from different suppliers and allowing for 'concentric circles of sourcing,' which could enable local produce to be prioritised and supplemented with broader British and seasonal options. This includes breaking down tenders into smaller lots.

Investment in processing: Addressing the 'missing middle' requires investment in infrastructure for cleaning, preparing, storing, transporting, processing, and manufacturing UK produce. This is particularly evident for pulses¹¹. It also presents an opportunity to develop value-added enterprises at the farm or co-operative level.

BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDY NHS Recipe Bank



A centralised online platform – developed in partnership with Nutritics and powered by its Foodprint carbon-scoring system – that equips NHS chefs and catering teams with nutritionally analysed, allergen-aware, and carbon-rated recipes. By reimagining traditional menu favourites using plant-forward or locally-sourced ingredients, NHS chefs are enabled to create comforting, culturally resonant dishes with a lower carbon footprint. For example, Mildmay Mission Hospital used recipes from the recipe bank to create a low-carbon menu that achieved an 18% reduction in average meal carbon emissions and reduced plate waste to just 10%¹².



Promoting healthy and sustainable diets

Menu swaps: strategically altering dishes can improve nutrition, carbon footprint, and reduce waste. TUKFS research is adding to this evidence base through pilot work in schools^{8,13}, universities¹⁴ and hospitals¹⁵, for example by integrating pulses into familiar meals to increase their acceptance. This can also provide more cost flexibility due to the expense of meat. Additionally, the SNEAK project has demonstrated that it is possible to optimise menus to benefit health and the environment without having to change recipes¹⁶.

High fibre school breakfasts: The H3 project team has shown that white bread offered as part of school breakfasts can be replaced with higher fibre breads or bagels that meet children's taste preferences and for almost no additional cost. Such school breakfast programmes also led to increased attendance, improved punctuality and behaviour in primary schools. Mandating such a change offers an opportunity for a generational shift in eating habits¹⁷.

Education and engagement: Empowering catering staff with training and tools can increase their confidence in cooking with diverse ingredients. Engaging children in growing food and understanding its origins can shift preferences and create a circular economy within schools.

BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDY Welsh veg in schools



This national initiative, coordinated by Food Sense Wales and a key wholesale partner, has built a resilient supply chain for local, organic vegetables into school meals across 12 local authorities. The model's success hinges on a coordinated growing plan between multiple Welsh farms and the local authorities, providing farmers with a guaranteed market, while grant funding covers the price differential (approximately 35%) between organic and conventional produce. This approach has created viable opportunities for a diverse range of new and existing growers, enabling them to expand production and diversify crops based on secure demand¹⁸.

Recommendations to catalyse food procurement transformation

For education, culture, and demand generation



Provide targeted training to public sector catering teams on preparing healthy, sustainable meals using diverse, seasonal, and British ingredients, particularly pulses.

Implement best practice training for procurement leads in local authorities and public institutions, ensuring alignment of health and sustainability goals in tenders and contracting arrangements.

Whole school approach to food: Integrate food education into school curricula to involve children in growing and cooking in order to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation for sustainable food systems.

Public storytelling and awareness: Launch campaigns to shift public norms and preferences towards more sustainable diets. Highlight the co-benefits of sustainable food procurement, including health, environment, and economic development.

For policy interventions and governance reform

Strengthen food standards: Make health and sustainability standards legally binding across all public sector catering. For example, relax requirements for schools to serve meat multiple days a week and support the inclusion of beans, pulses. This will also provide more cost flexibility due to the expense of meat. Also monitor compliance with standards.

Clearer definitions and metrics: Prioritise 'seasonal' and 'British' for procurement to align with environmental goals and support domestic production. Develop measurable policies and transparent data collection mechanisms to track food sourcing and impact.

Integrate with wider strategies: Ensure food procurement is explicitly included in national and local resilience strategies, climate plans, and broader economic development agendas to support the delivery of UK food strategy aims. Devolution efforts should embed a rural voice and consider food as a core mandate for combined authorities.

For supply chain support and SME engagement

Implement longer-term procurement contracts (e.g. three-year plans) to provide certainty for growers and enable them to plan production.

Simplify tendering processes and develop accessible frameworks for SMEs that also enable local authorities to utilise the social value and positive impact on local economic growth.

Investment in infrastructure: Fund and incentivise the development of mid-scale food processing, aggregation, and distribution hubs across the UK to build resilience into supply chains.

Broker relationships between local authorities, NHS trusts, and SMEs through supplier events and regional platforms. Support initiatives that help SMEs understand and access procurement opportunities.

Support replication and scaling of innovative local models: Provide strategic funding to increase the inclusion of organic, local/regional and SME suppliers.

BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDY Bridging the Gap learning exchange (Manchester)



Credit: Sustain

A collaborative model for diagnosing systemic barriers and co-designing solutions to connect willing suppliers with public sector demand. The exchange, involving practitioners, researchers, and supply chain experts, began with visits to Royal Oak Farm, a large-scale organic producer, and Organic North, a major regional wholesaler. It culminated in a workshop that identified key strategies for progress, focusing on a multi-pronged approach: collaborating with existing pioneers, gathering data on economic benefits, using storytelling to influence decision-makers, and developing practical toolkits for local authorities¹⁹.

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Credit: BeanMeals

About TUKFS The £47.5M 'Transforming the UK Food System for Healthy People and a Healthy Environment SPF Programme' is delivered by UKRI, in partnership with the Global Food Security Programme, BBSRC, ESRC, MRC, NERC, Defra, DHSC, PHE, Innovate UK and FSA. It aims to fundamentally transform the UK food system by placing healthy people and a healthy natural environment at its centre, addressing questions around

what we should eat, produce and manufacture and what we should import, taking into account the complex interactions between health, environment and socioeconomic factors.

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