



**TRANSFORMING
UK FOOD
SYSTEMS**
Strategic Priorities Fund

POWERING UP CHEF-LED MENU TRANSFORMATION

RECOMMENDATIONS

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Create predictable demand for UK-grown fruit, vegetables and pulses via dynamic, SME-friendly contracts.
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Implement simple, comparable metrics across the sector.
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Build relationships between growers, suppliers and culinary teams.
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Reframe consumer choice through tactical messaging to increase the appeal of plant-forward dishes.
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Adopt choice-architecture techniques to make healthy and sustainable choices easier and to drive continuous improvement.
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Embed sustainability competencies as assessed outcomes in chef accreditation.
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Develop an integrated chef training pathway underpinned by regional hubs.

Chefs are the link between food producers, procurement teams, kitchens, and the diners they serve. They make daily decisions about menus, recipes, and ingredients, yet sector-wide and organisational barriers often make it hard for them to act on sustainability goals. Findings from across the TUKFS programme point to fragmented governance and inconsistent policy signals that undermine whole-chain coordination and make it harder to align actions across the entire system.

This is a key barrier to scaling chef-driven food system transformation.⁽¹⁾ Evidence shows that food system misalignment with EAT-Lancet recommendations⁽²⁾ is rooted in hidden costs, lack of information and power imbalances across the supply chain. These create misaligned incentives and restrict the agency of innovative practitioners such as chefs.⁽¹⁾

Harnessing chefs' potential to drive food system transformation depends on building diverse, resilient connections across supply and demand – linking growers, processors, kitchens and menu design with the marketing that shapes customer choices. Public procurement in particular has a huge influence,

shaping who can supply food and how supply chains evolve. This makes public institutions key players in shifting the system.^(3,4) Evidence from across TUKFS shows that chef-led approaches in schools, hospitals and university canteens can shift demand toward pulse- and veg-forward dishes while reducing carbon footprints and improving diet quality. To scale what already works, chefs across the food service and hospitality sector need support – better skills training, procurement rules that give them flexibility, the right kitchen infrastructure, and business models that reward sustainable choices.⁽¹⁴⁾

Challenge: Tight margins and contract constraints

Sustainability is becoming strategically important across the food service and hospitality sector due to regulation, investor pressure, and client demand. However, food service contracts have traditionally been driven by low margins, capacity constraints, and ROI-driven key performance indicators.^(5,6)

These factors restrict the sector's ability to drive meaningful change on sustainability, for example by limiting investment in menu R&D, equipment and training. Procurement terms and pre-existing frameworks can also lock in commodity specifications that work against UK-grown fruit, vegetables and pulses. Large public procurement contracts influence entire supply chains and shape which producers can participate, positioning public institutions as pivotal system actors.^(3,7)

CASE STUDY 1

The SME Toolkit for Low-Carbon Menus (Brunel University of London) enables chefs to align recipe design and waste reduction with greenhouse gas (GHG) measurement to integrate plant-forward dishes into everyday operations.⁽⁵⁾ During pilots of the toolkit, SME chefs identified fast operational wins that protected margins while improving environmental performance. This research demonstrates that even small businesses can adopt low-carbon practices when supported through practical tools and participatory learning (workshops and on-site coaching).

Opportunity: Harnessing data, metrics and frameworks

Case study 1 shows that simple tools and hands-on facilitation can support even resource-constrained businesses to adopt low-carbon practices without compromising margins. Introducing a minimum metrics pack covering GHG per dish, fibre content, waste and sales mix would give businesses a practical, light-touch framework that mirrors the approach that proved effective in the pilots. Building on this approach, procurement guidance and finance templates could provide an opportunity to de-risk buying decisions and make UK-grown fruit, vegetables and pulses more accessible to small operators. Pairing core environmental metrics with social indicators – such as jobs, training and inclusion – would help caterers to demonstrate wider value to local economies alongside carbon improvements. For example, The University Caterers Organisation (TUCO) – a not-for-profit, member-led organisation for in-house caterers (in universities, hospitals, local education authorities and others) – integrates social, economic and environmental factors at the specification phase of all framework agreements.⁽⁸⁾

Birmingham Children's Hospital is collaborating with the [Mandala Consortium](#) to transform its catering offer into one that is better for the planet and its young patients.



Credit: Carlos Farinah, Chefs Forum

Dishes on its in-patient menu are being reformulated to reduce less sustainable ingredients (such as red meat) and make them more plant-rich. The approach exemplifies the balancing act between improving environmental sustainability of food served with a range of outcomes: nutrition, appeal and satisfaction, safety, cost, and operational practicality. The joint trial is being evaluated over an 18-month period to determine its effectiveness and to understand the process of implementation.⁽⁹⁾

Opportunity: Values-based business models

Social enterprises, such as Windmill City Farm in Bristol, illustrate how combining local growing projects with community cafes and ultra-local menu design can reinforce both environmental and social outcomes.^(10,11) The value of social enterprise structures and transparent operations is also being explored as part of the Mandala Consortium to determine whether a Community Interest Company model can support the viable delivery of healthier, more sustainable takeaway formats.^(12,13)

Challenge: Consumer norms and menu defaults favour meat-centric choices

Consumer preferences are shaped by entrenched habits, targeted marketing, and food environments dominated by meat options. Widespread confusion about sustainability claims further reinforces demand for familiar meat-centred dishes.⁽¹⁴⁾

The social significance and symbolism of meat consumption⁽¹⁵⁾ supports marketing norms that privilege meat ‘heroes’, reinforcing expectations across restaurants and contract catering.⁽¹⁶⁾ Corporate caterers face additional constraints, e.g. no “meat-free days”, and must comply with standards that mandate meat within menus (school food, NHS).⁽¹⁷⁾ Plant-forward meals remain less visible and are not providing a strong demand signal.

CASE STUDY 2

The food revolution campaign, part of the **Raising the Pulse** project, was a campus-wide initiative at the University of Reading, which combined pulse-based menus, live cooking demonstrations with Jamie Oliver’s Ministry of Food, an interactive treasure hunt, and related price promotions in campus retail outlets. The campaign aimed to encourage students and staff to adopt more nutritious, sustainable pulse-rich foods, and has supported longer-term reformulation of pulse-rich dishes across university canteen menus.



Credit: University of Reading

Opportunity: Visible leadership for plant-forward approaches

Visibility matters: celebrating plant-forward leadership through awards, PR and campaigns helps reset norms and reduces the perceived risk for operators.

Case study 2 highlights how higher-education settings can act as living labs, providing a testbed for innovation alongside a clear mandate for healthy and sustainable diets. At universities including Reading and Leeds (in collaboration with the **H3 project**), reformulating familiar dishes as well as comfort-food framing – such as lentil-enriched lasagne or mushroom-blended burgers – supports trial among

non-vegans and can significantly improve the uptake of plant-based and plant-forward dishes.^(18,19) This approach offers a practical route to normalising lower-impact meals across food service. However, scaling is predicated on stable procurement partnerships and product availability.^(7,16,21)

It is important to note that redesigning menus to be healthier and more sustainable is relatively straightforward on paper, the real challenge is creating dishes that people *want* to eat! At the University of Reading, the **Menus of Change University Research Collaborative (MCURC)** plays a key role in this process by helping translate healthy, sustainable menu concepts into dishes that are genuinely appealing, supporting operators to bridge the gap between nutritional intent and real-world customer uptake.⁽¹⁹⁾ Producer-chef innovation sprints focused on taste, texture, hydration and product specifications could also accelerate the development of dishes that work in high-volume kitchens, supported by expanded open recipe libraries.⁽²²⁾

CASE STUDY 3

Choice-architecture research has shown that renaming, placement, and changing the sequence of dishes across a weekly menu can lift the selection of lower-impact options without removing choice. The **SNEAK project** demonstrated that strategically rearranging dishes on weekly menus can yield substantial carbon and health benefits by reducing competition between dishes without having to alter recipes. Kitchens appreciated that the approach required no extra equipment, training or cost, making it attractive for large-scale operators. However, wider adoption depends on menu planning autonomy and the ability to test changes iteratively within existing contract constraints.⁽²³⁾

Opportunity: Questioning choice

The strategy highlighted in **case study 3** – to strategically change the competition between dishes on a menu – provides an opportunity to cut carbon footprints without changing any recipes or adding costs.⁽²³⁾ Building on this, operators could adopt core choice-architecture standards – such as appeal-focused naming, default swaps and strategic placement – to make plant-rich options the easy, desirable choice.^(10,11,24,25,26)

Publishing combined health and sustainability scores on menus paired with pricing nudges, as piloted by the **SusHealth project**, can further support uptake of lower impact dishes where appropriate.^(27,28)

Challenge: Gaps in culinary training and accreditation

Professional cookery qualifications still prioritise classical techniques and animal protein preparation. Plant-forward culinary design, pulse cookery at volume, carbon literacy and waste minimisation are rarely core competencies. This limits the consistent delivery of appealing, cost-effective healthy and sustainable dishes, especially in high-throughput settings.^(21,29,30)

CASE STUDY 4

Whole school approaches, as trialed by the **Beanmeals project**, have demonstrated that introducing new pulse-based dishes is more effective when staff across the whole school are trained and involved, not just the catering team. The research demonstrated that integrating kitchen CPD, curriculum-linked training and resources for teachers, alongside playful learning activities increased the likelihood that pupils would choose bean-based foods.^(20,31)

Opportunity: Building skills beyond the kitchen

Case study 4 shows the importance of linking training with wider institutional approaches to healthy and sustainable dietary change.^(31,32) Sustaining this progress requires stronger skills pathways and practical support for kitchen teams. Embedding sustainability competencies and plant-based cookery into chef training and apprenticeships – co-designed with culinary colleges and employers – would help to normalise plant-forward dishes across menus.

Dedicated chef-trainer roles could provide the on-site coaching and menu-development time that made initiatives like BeanMeals effective. Publishing open, scalable standard operating procedures for beans and vegetables would further support consistency in texture, flavour and quality, enabling caterers to adopt these approaches at scale.

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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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