



Getting started

The Really Simple Guide to Buying More Sustainable Food

For Caterers, Chefs & Food Buyers Working in the Public Sector



A joint publication by the South East Food Group Partnership & Sustain: the Alliance for Better Food & Farming

About SEFGP

The South East Food Group Partnership Ltd is the sector group for regional food in the region. The Partnership coordinates trade and business development of the industry at national level and works closely with the London market; it also works to raise the level of regional food in the public sector in conjunction with the Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative (PSFPI) project and has recently embarked on implementing a strategy for the South East fisheries industry. In addition to this the Partnership forms the umbrella organization for 6 county food groups in the region. The Partnership is funded by the South East England Development Agency and receives support from Food from Britain, Government Office for the South East and DEFRA.

About Sustain

Sustain, the Alliance for Better Food & Farming, advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the working and living environment, enrich society and culture and promote equity. They are responsible for delivering the 'Good Food on the Public Plate' Project which builds on the pilot 'London Hospital Food Project'. Both projects have sought to increase the amount of local and, if possible, organic food in hospitals in London & the South East.

What do we mean by Sustainable Food?

Sustainable food doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. Put simply, it is food which is bought, consumed and prepared with as little impact on the environment as possible, for a fair price, and which makes a positive contribution to your local economy. Making just a few simple improvements to the way you purchase food counts as success.

Some simple guidelines include:

- Using local, seasonally available ingredients as standard, to minimise food transport, storage and energy use.
- Specifying produce from farming systems that minimise harm to the environment, such as certified organic.
- Limiting foods of animal origin (meat, dairy products and eggs), as livestock farming is one of the most significant contributors to climate change, and promoting meals rich in fruit, vegetables, pulses and nuts.
- Ensuring that meat, dairy and egg products are produced to high environmental and animal welfare standards.
- Excluding fish species identified as most at risk by the Marine Conservation Society, and specifying fish only from sustainable sources e.g. those accredited by the Marine Stewardship Council.
- Buying Fairtrade-certified products for foods and drinks imported from poorer countries, to ensure a fair deal for disadvantaged producers.
- Avoiding bottled water and instead serving plain or filtered tap water in reusable jugs or bottles, to minimise transport and packaging waste.

The Simple 5-Step Guide

This guide is intended to inspire you to take the first step (often the most difficult) along the road to improved food sustainability. Each section includes practical tools, such as sample sustainability policies, suggested agendas for meetings & example marketing ideas. You can follow the links throughout to download ready-to-use templates from the SEFGP website.

What's in it for you?

Food and food culture is a visible demonstration of an organisation's attitude to caring for the basic needs of its customers, employees and visitors. It tends to be a highly emotive subject, particularly in the public sector, where the recipients often have the greatest need for excellent nutrition – schools, hospitals, prisons, armed forces and elderly care.

Some benefits are easy to see – reduced waste, improved recycling processes, increased revenues and the reward of publicity. However, many of the benefits are likely to be intangible, yet may have an even greater impact on your team.

Organisations where the whole team commits to, and becomes involved in, the task of learning about and appreciating food, have found staff retention improves, team morale is strengthened and relationships with the local community are greatly improved.

STEP 1

Where are you now?

1

STEP 2

Gaining support from decision-makers

2

STEP 3

Building relationships with suppliers

3

STEP 4

A whole-team approach

4

STEP 5

Measuring & celebrating success

5

STEP 1: Where Are You Now?

Getting started is easy. All you need to do is carry out a little research to record any efforts which have been made already, and to establish a baseline for some of the information you will be gathering to measure your progress as time goes on.

Areas to investigate include:

- Whether you are tied in to long-term supply contracts.
- Whether there is a food sustainability policy in place.
- Whether you have already made a conscious effort to source sustainably eg. buying local produce or stocking Fairtrade tea & coffee.
- The amount you are spending on food and where you are spending it (including country of origin):
Measuring spend is the most commonly used indicator to measure progress on sustainability, largely because it enables you to highlight how much money you are contributing to local producers in your area. It will also become important later on when you start to buy different products which may cost more.
- Whether wastage is being recorded in financial terms:
As mentioned above, you may find that buying local fresh food increases costs in the short-term, but in the longer term, wastage is almost certain to fall to off-set the higher cost.
- Food sales:
This is final key piece of information you may need. If you have the opportunity to sell food, in a staff or public restaurant for example, sales of more local / organic food on offer are likely to rise, again off-setting any slight increases in food cost.
- Frequency of deliveries to your organisation.

It's not just about the food...

You might also like to investigate other areas of your food operation, including:

- Recycling: Aiming to increase the amount of recycled waste and decrease the amount of mixed general waste.
- Whether you are buying bio-degradable disposables & eco-friendly chemicals.
- Whether your electrical appliances, such as ovens & refrigeration equipment, can be run more efficiently.

STEP 1: Useful Tools

- Frequency of deliveries chart
- Food Procurement Audit Tool (see opposite)

All tools are available to download and use at www.southeastenglandfoodanddrink.co.uk/tools



| Item | Supplier | Price | Quantity |
|-------------|----------|-------|----------|
| Soft Cheese | Wolton | 1.00 | 100 |
| Soft Cheese | Wolton | 1.00 | 100 |
| Soft Cheese | Wolton | 1.00 | 100 |
| Soft Cheese | Wolton | 1.00 | 100 |
| Soft Cheese | Wolton | 1.00 | 100 |

Food Procurement Audit Tool: An easy to use spreadsheet which monitors a mixed basket of goods and produces graphs to display your progress.

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STEP 2: Gaining Support from Decision-Makers

Once you have done a bit of investigating, you can move on to seeking support from key decision-makers in your organisation. It's important that your senior team is interested and supportive, because their support will allow you to experiment and try new ways of doing things, rather than being held back by having to 'do it the way we always do it'.

It's important to point out the possible benefits to the organisation of buying more sustainable food, as well as being able to counter the objections other people are likely to raise. Tell them how you can minimise potential risks as well.

Potential Benefits

- Improved nutrition of customers
- Increased revenue from food
- Reduction in food wastage
- Reduction in food miles
- Reduction in general waste disposal costs
- Improved team morale
- Improved staff retention

Potential Objections

- Increase in food cost of certain items
- Higher workload for those involved
- Quality assurance may be compromised by using small local suppliers
- Concern about EU regulations

Potential Actions

- Likely to be offset by increased sales & decreased wastage
- Higher workload likely to be required only at the beginning of the project
- Support available from government co-ordinators who can help with sourcing, quality assurance standards, training & advice

Actions to take at this stage include:

- **Set up a meeting with key decision-makers in your organisation:**
This may include your line manager or interested senior manager, the senior manager who reports to you, procurement officer, head chef or cook, representative from any interested body such as a School Food Action Group or Patient Environment Action Group. We have included a suggested agenda in the tools attached to this section.
- **Agree a Sustainable Food Procurement Policy:**
This is likely to be a broad statement of intent which can be made available to anyone who is interested. We have included a model policy in the tools attached to this section, which you may wish to take to the meeting.
- **Agree a specific duration for the project and some detailed commitments.**
For example, you may ask for commitment from management for a 6-month period in which you can prove that an initial increase in food costs can be offset by an increase in sales and a reduction in food wastage.
This is also a good time to discuss the organisation's commitment to supporting smaller, local producers who may require prompt payment and who may have alternative quality assurance accreditations and who may struggle to meet your own particular audit requirements. There are plenty of alternatives, which are outlined in the Quality Assurance paper included in the tools attached to this section.

STEP 2: Useful Tools

- Model Sustainable Food Procurement Policy
- Suggested agenda for meeting of key decision-makers
- Explanation of Quality Assurance standards for smaller suppliers
- Explanation of support available from food groups and government agencies in your region

All tools are available to download and use at www.southeastenglandfoodanddrink.co.uk/tools



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STEP 3: Building Relationships with Suppliers

Buying more sustainable food doesn't mean that you have to stop working with your existing suppliers and find new ones. Very few public sector organisations buy directly from farms and producers because individual producer-suppliers tend not to have the distribution capability needed for large regional contracts.

You may find that your existing wholesaler, foodservice company or dairy supplier already buys from many local producers and may be willing to find more for you.

It is essential to sit down with your key fresh produce suppliers (fruit & veg, meat, fish, dairy & patisserie) and let them know about your intention to source food more sustainably. You may want to give them a copy of your sustainability policy at this point and take along our suggested agenda which we have included in the tools section.

Should you need to find some new suppliers, you will be able to get plenty of support from your county food group.

Areas to investigate with a supplier include:

- **Where they are sourcing goods from at the moment:**
You will need to agree how they can give you the data you need to use your monitoring tool, including county of origin and monthly spend per key item.
- **What they are buying 'in-season':**
Most fruit & veg wholesalers will be able to show you their 'buying plan', which will show you where and when they are buying from the UK and when they are buying from abroad. When fresh produce is in season, it is at its most abundant and therefore at its cheapest. Take along our seasonality chart (included in the tools) to help you.
- **What the production strengths of your region are:**
Some regions are better at growing things than others. For example, Sussex is noted for its South Downs lamb, salad production and fresh sweetcorn, whereas Kent is known for apples, soft fruit & brassicas. As with seasonality, local abundance makes these items more affordable.
- **Whether they can supply more fresh items:**
Using frozen goods increases the likelihood that the goods in question have travelled a considerable distance within the UK or come from abroad. Blast freezing also uses a considerable amount of energy and storing frozen goods is less energy efficient than storing chilled fresh goods.
- **What their delivery arrangements are:**
Between you, you may wish to consider whether you can manage with less frequent deliveries. You may also be able to find ways for your supplier to share or co-deliver with other suppliers you use. Using the delivery matrix included in the Section 1 tools will help you do this.
- **Whether they are willing to arrange producer visits and visit your team at work:**
Suppliers are an important part of building the food culture in your organisation and seeing how food is produced first-hand is something that most teams find interesting and inspiring.

STEP 3: Useful Tools

- Agenda for a meeting with a wholesaler or supplier
- Seasonality chart

All tools are available to download and use at www.southeastenglandfoodanddrink.co.uk/tools





STEP 4: A Whole Team Approach

Buying more sustainably offers a great opportunity to involve everyone in the organisation in the project and inspire them to find out more about food from their local area.

Organisations where the whole team commits to, and becomes involved in, the task of learning about and appreciating food, have found staff retention improves, team morale is strengthened and relationships with the local community are greatly improved.

An important part of any sustainable food project is to go further than just 'talking the talk'. Sitting down together around a table to enjoy food as a team will give you plenty of opportunities to discuss new food products, menus & activities as well as giving you and your team a chance to assess your organisation's food from a customer perspective.

Activities to consider include:

- **Meet with your key team members to explain, contribute to and agree a vision for the project:**
Ask your team to read through your sustainability policy and discuss how they feel about it. You may get a negative reaction from some people who think sustainability is not practical or affordable 'in the real world'. It's important to emphasize that progress is relative and even making a few small changes is better than doing nothing at all.
- **Organise promotions that reflect seasonality or celebrate your success in obtaining local produce:**
There are plenty of ways to celebrate seasonal produce, from Apple Day to the arrival of the first summer strawberries. If you have sourced a new local product, create a new dish to celebrate it and promote your success. We have included some examples of promotions which have been used in hospitals in Kent & Hampshire recently. You're doing a great job – make sure your customers and colleagues know about it.
- **Delegate responsibility for certain tasks:**
Your chefs, for example, could review current menus to see where changes could be made to favour more seasonal produce. We have included a seasonal breakdown of some of the recipes from the Better Hospital Food programme to give you some inspiration.
- **Organise a visit to a farmer or producer in your area whose produce you use or intend to use:**
To do this, enlist the help of one of your wholesale suppliers or ask for help from your local food group. This is a great opportunity to have some fun, get inspired about the produce and convert any sceptics in your team. Don't forget to take along a camera – you can use these photos to promote your food within your organisation and to the local press.
- **Sit down for a meal with your team after service at least every season/quarter to eat some seasonal food:**
Sharing a meal is a fun, informal way for the whole team to learn about the food you are using which is currently in season. You may consider delegating responsibility for organising the meal to a different person or team each time. Ask the responsible person to invite the producer or farmer to join you for the meal and tell you how the food is produced. This is a great way of linking in with a seasonal promotion and enthusing your team about it.

STEP 4: Useful Tools

- Example month-by-month seasonal recipe chart
- Examples of promotional posters and menus used by organisations in the south east region

All tools are available to download and use at www.southeastenglandfoodanddrink.co.uk/tools



STEP 5: Measuring & Celebrating Success

It may have taken you some months to reach this point, but by now you are likely to be enjoying the fruits of your labour. You will have been recording basic data over a period of time and should be able to report your progress in a number of ways:

- percentage of food sourced locally, nationally & abroad
- decrease in food wastage
- reduction in food miles
- financial contribution to the local economy
- increase in recycling
- increase in food sales

Don't forget to review your goals regularly by targeting new products and sharing ideas with others in your region.

Communicating with your customers

By now, you may have visited some of your suppliers as a team, and have a good understanding of, and commitment to, making your food more sustainable. You may already be holding regular food promotions, but do consider making your achievements more visible and passing on some of the interesting information you have gained about your suppliers. Commercial caterers are very good at doing this. A quick trip round your local supermarket will give you some ideas about highlighting the provenance and sustainability of your food, using descriptions and images.

Don't forget, at this stage, to review your customer's dining experience. Do school children have long enough to eat their meal? Are elderly people getting enough assistance? Could hospital patients who are mobile be provided with a communal folding dining table?

Try some of the following activities:

- For schools, send a newsletter home to parents.
- In any restaurants or dining areas, put up a permanent display which changes with the seasons, setting out your policy in a fun way, with pictures and facts, and inviting feedback.

- Highlight local, seasonal produce at every opportunity – use blackboards, menu cards, stickers, trayliners etc. Meals are the highlight of the day for many public sector customers and they will appreciate the extra information.

Communicating with the press

You may also have been holding regular team visits to suppliers. These are particularly good opportunities to involve the local press, your relevant trade press and contribute to internal company newsletters.

Included in the tools for this section are some sample press releases and examples of photos which have been published successfully. If your activity is particularly newsworthy and visually exciting, don't forget to contact your local television news station.

Most publications or news stations have a website with a newsdesk number and email address. Once you have compiled a list, you will be able to send out future press releases quickly and easily.

STEP 5: Useful Tools

- Example point-of-sale materials
- Example press releases
- Example photos

All tools are available to download and use at www.southeastenglandfoodanddrink.co.uk/tools



Need More Help?

Every region has a co-ordinator dedicated to public sector food sustainability, who is funded by Defra and the Regional Development Agency. To find yours, visit the Defra website (link below) where you can also read about the government's Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative (PSFPI).



In addition, your local food groups are a good source of information when looking for new suppliers.

- Contact the south east regional co-ordinator at the South East Food Group Partnership & find suppliers at www.southeastenglandfoodanddrink.co.uk
- Find out more about the Good Food On the Public Plate Project at Sustain, the Alliance for Better Food & Farming at www.sustainweb.org
- Read about the government's Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative(PSFPI) www.defra.gov.uk/farm/policy/sustain/procurement/index.htm
- Find out more about the Soil Association's Food For Life Partnership at www.foodforlife.org.uk
- Find out more about the Year of Food & Farming at www.yearoffoodandfarming.org.uk

Need Some Inspiration?

Meat

According to figures from the United Nations, animal farming globally produces more greenhouse gas emissions than all of the cars, lorries and planes' carbon emissions in the world put together. Also, much of the imported meat on sale in the UK is produced intensively with little regard for animal welfare. However, meat sourced from British assured or organic farms is produced to higher, audited animal welfare standards, and has lower carbon emissions than intensive farming.

Organic and assured British meat can cost more than imported varieties produced under less strict animal welfare methods. However savings can be made by choosing cheaper cuts and joints and also by serving meat products less often and in smaller portions. Using less meat in meals is also an easy way to reduce your impact on the environment. If organic meat is not an option, insist on assured meat that comes with a guarantee that it is traceable and reared to minimum - or above - standards.

Dairy

Research by the Danish Institute of Agricultural Research found that organic milk has more Omega 3, higher content of some vitamins, and more antioxidants. Local and organic dairy produce can cost more than conventional varieties. However many hospitals have chosen to buy a better quality product that's more likely to be eaten and enjoyed, but in slightly smaller portion sizes e.g. the Royal Cornwall Hospital buys 80g pots of fresh yoghurt rather than 115g pots of long-life yoghurt. In addition, organic dairy cows are very rarely given antibiotics.

Bread & Baked Goods

Bread, baked goods and sandwiches made locally on a smaller scale are often more popular with patients to those sourced via national contracts, as they're often fresher and made with better quality and more nutritious ingredients. By buying products that can be sold at a higher margin in the staff and visitor dining rooms, income generated from sales can be used to recover any additional costs. Barnsley PCT has started sourcing sandwiches from Potts Bakery who bake their own bread and make sandwiches with locally produced fillings. There has been an increase in sales in the hospital restaurants and wastage has been reduced as products are supplied fresh daily.

Working with Contract Caterers

If you are working with or for a contract caterer, you can still get involved with making your food more sustainable.

- Ask for a meeting with the contractor to discuss your ideas – many contract caterers are already making efforts to source local food and are happy to listen to their clients.
- Find out when the contract is due to end and consider including sustainability targets in the next contract.
- Ask if your caterer is happy to highlight which food is already being procured locally. You might be buying more than you realise.
- If meals are bought in or prepared centrally, consider sourcing third party items like fruit & baked goods locally.
- If you are buying prepared meals, you might like to consider finding a local caterer who can help. Your county food group would be happy to help with further information.

Is Your Local Really Local?

Buying from a local business is a great way to support your community, but that doesn't mean the food is produced locally. Make sure you ask new suppliers plenty of questions about the actual origin of their products.



Did you know...

The public sector spends £2 billion pounds every year on food and catering services and less than 20% is spent on food produced in the UK.