

sustainable development

Could food fit for a prince soon be available in four London hospitals? It will be if the Hospital Food Project gets its way. The project aims to boost NHS hospitals' use of locally produced and/or organic food, and is run by London Food Link together with the Soil Association.

Launched in January this year, following encouraging research by the Soil Association and the Foundation for Local Food Initiatives on the feasibility of adapting hospital catering to include organic food, the project covers four London hospitals: St George's, the Royal Brompton, Ealing General and the Lambeth Hospital.

The initial goal of the scheme is to help participating hospitals direct 10 per cent of their routine catering budgets to local and/or organic food. Longer term aims are to provide fresher food for patients, staff and visitors, and to support farm and food businesses in the south east and London.

The hospitals have developed lists of key products they would like to buy from local and/or organic producers, including seasonal summer salads, free range eggs, and various cuts of beef, pork and lamb.

The project also aims to build and strengthen supply chains for local farmers in London and the south east, boosting local economies and creating links within communities.

According to the Sustainable Development Commission, £10 spent in a conventional retailer generates only £14 for the local economy – but the same £10

spent on local organic food would generate £25.

And the NHS spends a lot of £10 notes. As Niall Dickson, chief executive of the King's Fund – one of the project's funders – points out: 'The NHS serves over 300 million meals each year in approximately 1,200 hospitals, spending £500m in the process. That's nearly £60,000 per hour, every single hour of the year.

'This project is an excellent example of how the NHS can use its corporate spending power to boost the local economy at the same time as improving direct services to patients.'

To that end, the project is forging links with local producers and suppliers. To reduce administration for the hospitals, the emphasis is on using existing supply chains. In addition, a number of events have taken place, including a farm visit for hospital staff to a potential supplier's premises. Future events include organic certification training for hospital staff and distributors, and a workshop for potential producers to increase their understanding of the supply requirements of the public sector.

At the beginning of July, Prince Charles visited St George's, offering his support to the farmers, hospital staff, project organisers and suppliers, including those who brought in the project's first delivery – 300 punnets of organic strawberries from Cambridgeshire.

The prince, attending in his capacity as head of the King's Fund, also toured a mini-farmer's market, with stalls showing the types of organic and local pro-

duce that hospitals will be able to obtain through the project.

An organic dairy co-operative of farms in Sussex is due to begin supplying the hospitals this autumn. The dairy is coordinating deliveries with customers other than hospitals to create a more cost-effective, viable system.

The co-operative is also applying for funding from the Milk Development Council to install 'milk bars' in the hospital canteens. The milk bars would sell ordinary and flavoured glasses of milk to staff and visitors, and the money generated would help to subsidise the milk supplied to patients.

Other future suppliers include a free-range egg producer farming just 20 miles away from one of the hospitals, and a producer growing mushrooms under the North Circular road in Newham.

A health evaluation will assess whether the project affects the food choices, food knowledge and attitudes to sustainable food of people in the hospitals. In addition, an economic evaluation will analyse the effect on the local economy of hospitals buying more sustainable food.

The hope is that the lessons learnt by the project can be extended to hospitals across the country, and that government policy assists the development of a more sustainable food supply chain within NHS catering.

Emma Hockridge is food policy officer at Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming

→ For more details about the project, contact Emma Hockridge on emma@sustainweb.org.

→ See also *Good food on the public plate: A manual for sustainability in public sector food and catering*, available from Sustain (www.sustainweb.org.uk).

→ The Soil Association is running a Public Procurement Helpline – on 0117 914 2424 – for enquiries from food suppliers who are interested in taking part in the project.



Catering for local needs

The NHS spends almost £60,000 an hour on food. **Emma Hockridge** reports on a project which aims to get more than food for its money

Lowdown on the London Food Link

LFL, which connects food producers and consumers and encourages positive choices for sustainable food, is part of Sustain – the alliance for better food and farming.

The project is funded by the King's Fund, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund.