

Campaigner guide

Local authorities, food and climate



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Introduction

Who is this Campaigner guide for?

This is for anyone that would like to make the food served by their local council (mainly school meals) better for the climate, nature and our health. You don't need to know anything about procurement, school food or climate change to make a big difference – everything you need is here and there are people to help you along the way.

This Campaigner guide should be used together with **“Serving Better: why every meal counts in a climate and nature emergency”** (the Serving Better guide). The Serving Better guide and film has been written for local authorities and sets out why meat and dairy reduction is important, what local councils can do, and highlights inspiring examples of best practice. As well as sending the Serving Better guide to your local authority, please read through it yourself as it contains more detail about what we're calling for and why.

Why focus on school food?

Food and farming accounts for over **a third of global greenhouse gas emissions**, and industrial farming is the leading cause of biodiversity loss globally and wildlife decline in the UK and overseas. Despite this, very few councils have targets to reduce emissions from food.

School food is incredibly important because this is the largest area of procurement for most councils, and an opportunity to help give children a better diet. The public sector serves around **1bn meals a year** to school children alone, so even small changes will have a big impact. However, we want to see councils act across all their food procurement, and this approach could easily be applied to nurseries, hospitals, care homes and prisons, as well as councils' own catering for events.

Although the focus of this guide is on schools, there are many other ways local councils can have influence, see 'What else can local authorities do?' on page 7.

What are the main issues?

This guide focuses on less and better meat and dairy as this is the part of our diets with the greatest environmental impact. Globally, production of animal products uses 83% of the world's farmland and is responsible for over half of food-related emissions (and 14.5% of total global emissions), despite providing only 37% of our protein and 18% of our calories¹.

For health and environmental reasons, our diets should include more vegetables, pulses and fruit, more seasonal and locally grown food, and less meat, dairy and ultra-processed food like sugary drinks. The **Eatwell Guide** sets out government recommendations on what a healthy diet looks like, and incorporates some sustainability measures.

For further information on making the case for action, see the **Serving Better guide**, pg 4-9.



¹ Poore and Nemecek (2019), Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers. Science 360(6392):987-992 Available online https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325532198_Reducing_food's_environmental_impacts_through_producers_and_consumers

What should local authorities do?

In a nutshell, we are calling on local authorities to:

- 1. Introduce a Sustainable Food Policy** (or amend any existing policy), which commits them, by 2025, to serve more climate and nature-friendly meals in council-controlled settings, including:
 - Reducing meat and dairy by at least 25% by volume and replacing with plant proteins and vegetables
 - Sourcing 25% of meat and dairy from 'better' sources (these include RSPCA assured, organic, free-range²)
 - Sourcing all meat and dairy to farm assured standards, as a minimum
- 2. Integrate food into Climate Change Action Plans.** Looking more widely than procurement, commit to measurable action to improve the food system locally (see 'What else can local authorities do?' on page 7)
- 3. Join the Food for the Planet campaign.** Here councils can join others in recording the actions they are taking on food and climate change, being recognised for taking positive steps and keeping a track of progress.

For further details, see the **Serving Better guide**, pg 10-16.



² See full list on pg 12 of the Serving Better guide https://www.eating-better.org/uploads/images/EB_ServingBetterReport_Final_LowRes.pdf

How to get started: A checklist for action

1. Find out if there are other food or climate campaign groups in your area – you are stronger together! For example:

- A Sustainable Food Partnership (there's a list of existing partnerships [here](#))
- A **Climate Action Group** or Friends of the Earth local group
- Other local community, environmental, health, wildlife or sustainability groups in your area
- Have a look at the **Food for the Planet** website. Someone in your area may already be looking into this!

2. Do your research – carry out a web search, this could throw up information on the council's own website, as well as useful media articles.

Key questions to find out:

- Does the council have a Sustainable Food Policy? Who is responsible?
- Who provides school meals (in house chefs or an external catering company? If the latter, when does the contract come up for renewal?) Who is responsible for school meals?
- Are they **Food for Life** accredited (Bronze, Silver, Gold?)
- Do they already offer a meat free day?
- Have they declared a **Climate Emergency**? Have they produced a **climate action plan**? Who is responsible?
- Have they made any commitments on meat and dairy reduction, or have the councillors discussed it, either in committee or full council meetings?
- Are there any exemplary organisations in your area that can inspire the council, for example a university, college, restaurant or venue?

3. If you can't find what you're looking for, get in touch with the council by email, or call them. Because there is not one obvious council department responsible for sustainable food procurement, finding the right place to start in your council may require a bit of investigation, but here are some suggestions:

- The head of Children's Services (there's a list [here](#))
- The individual named as the lead contact for the climate action plan, if you have one
- Director of Public Health (here are their names for **England** – unfortunately no such list exists for Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland)

We've written a template letter in the Appendix which you can adapt, see page 8.

Asking these questions should help you identify which individual council officers are working on relevant issues and could also help you find key people that support your campaign.

4. Choose a campaign focus. Depending on results of research above, and on what the council has or hasn't done already, decide on the focus of your campaign and use our further resources (page 9) to plan and run it.

We've recommended starting with school food, but you could encourage the council to start with food served at events, and/or other settings, if you think that will be an easier quick win.

Ideally link up with **Food for the Planet** or **Climate Action Groups** and have a look at Friends of the Earth's **Climate Action plan for schools and colleges**.

5. What if council officers are unresponsive?

Contact your elected councillors, particularly those who are on, or chair, a relevant committee, and look for ways to use public campaigning to raise the issue up their agenda and that of the officers. Here are a few ideas for doing so:

- Contact your own councillors – their details are [here](#)
- Find out when your next relevant council meeting is (they should be listed on their website) and ask a question. If you forewarn and engage with the leader in advance, they may have time to consider your request and give you a positive response promising some action.
- Organise a public petition, which can also be presented at a council meeting
- Work with a supportive councillor to table a motion at a council meeting (check your council website for information about how to do so)
- You can find out which councillors hold portfolios like environment and health by looking on your council's website. See the further resources below for more information on how councils work and how to lobby them.

6. **Celebrate success!** Let us know when your council makes progress via info@foodfortheplanet.org.uk. We can then include the news on the Food for the Planet website.



For every £1 invested in procuring local food, local communities receive £3 in economic benefits

Other information to help your campaign

The benefits of serving good food for the council

We know that local authorities are under a lot of pressure, especially since the pandemic, as well as from previous budget cuts. To achieve buy-in, we need to show that taking action on food is a win-win, helping to both meet existing commitments, as well as deliver other benefits.

Actions which reduce greenhouse gas emissions can have important additional co-benefits. This is important as through one action, councils can have a positive impact in multiple areas. Lower meat and dairy diets have been identified as one of the top actions a council can take which produces the most co-benefits – in particular, improved public health and equity³.

Existing commitments your local council has made will require some research but might include:

- Declaring a Climate Emergency – there's a list of places that have done so on the [Declare a climate emergency](#) website.
- Some councils have declared an ecological or nature emergency.⁴
- Signing up to the [Sustainable Development Goals](#).
- Strategies to improve public health, eg children's health and best start in life, obesity reduction and promoting the [Eatwell Guide](#).
- A [Sustainable Food Policy](#), or other sustainability commitments.
- Strategies to support the local economy.

Who has responsibility for school meals?

School meals in England and Wales are managed by the Local Authority which is normally the

county council, city council or a unitary authority (such as Cornwall). These councils normally also have responsibility for food waste and planning policy, and a list is available [here](#).

In Scotland, they are provided by the Local Authority (a list of which is [here](#)) and in Northern Ireland they are managed by the [NI Education Authority](#).

The situation can be a bit more complicated because some schools' meals aren't managed by the Local Authority. This may be because the school is independent, or they may have chosen to opt out of the council meal service. A few councils have stopped providing a school meal service altogether. In this case however, a local authority can still have an influence over schools in their area especially if it has made commitments to work in partnership to deliver on aims such as tackling climate change or improving health.

Who provides the meals?

Some schools will have contracts with a catering company like Sodexo or Caterlink that brings food on site every day, whilst others have their own kitchens and prepare the lunches in-house. It's important to find out which, as this will determine how much flexibility schools and local authorities have to make changes.

For example, if a school prepares and cooks its own lunches on site, they can adapt their menus themselves. On the other hand, if a school is served by a catering company, contracts will usually be agreed for several years although it should still be possible to adapt menus within contracts. Often a local council awards the school meals contract for all its schools to a single catering company that works to the council's specifications.

Many private catering companies are making commitments to reduce their climate emissions.

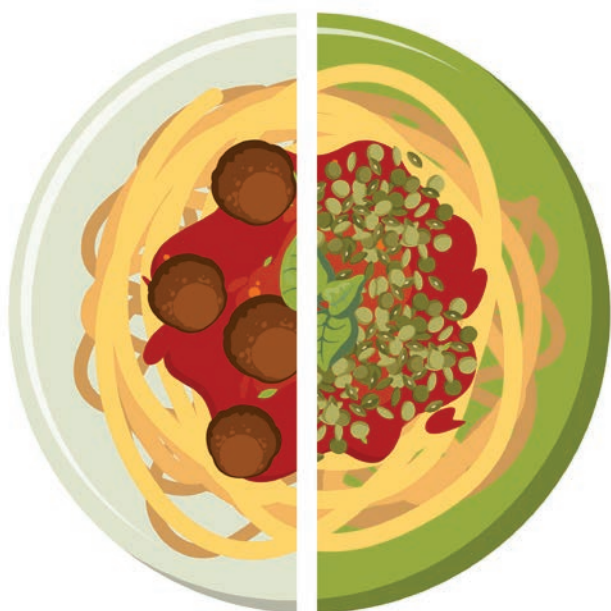
³ Affordability, co-benefits and carbon saving: the top Climate Actions for councils <https://takeclimateaction.uk/take-action/affordability-co-benefits-and-carbon-saving-top-climate-actions-councils>

⁴ This list is from June 2021 and may not be up to date: <https://www.inkcapjournal.co.uk/less-15-of-councils-have-declared-an-ecological-emergency-why-the-delay/>

For example, Sodexo has included a commitment in its **carbon reduction plan** to increase plant based meals and recipes to 33% by 2025.

Food for Life Served Here Awards

Individual schools can directly, or via the catering company that provides their meals, have a Food for Life Served Here award (Bronze, Silver, or Gold). FFLSH encourages schools to work towards high environmental, health and animal welfare standards in the food they serve. Within the Gold and Silver awards, schools can get points for serving less and better meat. Many schools are already having a meat-free day a week.



Swapping* a primary school spaghetti bolognese made with beef... for a **plant-based** version using lentils ...



*Calculations from ProVeg's School Food Plates

What can schools do in relation to meat and dairy?

School Food Standards - When it comes to school meals, local authorities and most schools must adhere to the **School Food Standards**⁵. The SFS set out requirements for nutrition and how often certain types of foods should be served as well as restrictions on how many times less healthy foods can be served.

Under the SFS, schools can:

1. Serve up to 2 completely meat free days most weeks.

The SFS state that meat must be served at least 3 times a week and oily fish must be served once every three weeks. A portion of dairy in food and lower fat milk to drink every day is also required.

2. Reduce the meat content in meaty meals.

The SFS guidance for portion sizes sets out recommended weight of each portion of food types but allows for substitution with other protein sources in some instances. So, even on a day where meat is served, school chefs could halve the meat content of eg a curry and replace it with lentils⁶ - the Association of UK Dieticians has produced '**Making favourite meals more sustainable**' a useful resource for meal swap inspiration.

3. Provide a meat free dish every day and encourage take up by presenting it as the main meal, not the alternative.

The SFS state that meat-free meals must include a non-dairy source of protein, like beans and lentils, at least three times per week.

⁵ The SFS do not apply to academies or free schools established between September 2010 and May 2014, nursery schools not within primary schools or independent schools, although many do work to them.

⁶ "Red meat & poultry dishes (stews, pie, curry, casseroles) Note: weight may be reduced proportionately in composite dishes if adding another protein based food, such as beans, cheese, or milk." <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools/portion-sizes-and-food-groups>

Government buying standards for food - the NHS, prisons and the armed forces, as well as government departments must comply with the **GBSF**. Schools must follow the school food standards but may also choose to use the GBSF. A consultation of the GBSF will be launched in early 2022 to review the standards.

Constraints and barriers to think about

It's important to be aware of the pressures councils are under, particularly from successive budget cuts and the response to the pandemic. It's important to emphasise that the changes we're calling for can be done within existing budgets and do not need to cost more.

There is a separate concern over the need for council budgets for school meals to be increased to allow for example sourcing higher welfare meat and dairy, but changing menus to serve less and better meat needn't cost more. In fact, reducing the amount of meat served, and switching to pulses or veg can even save money that can then go towards higher welfare meat and dairy, as well as deliver improved public health (see the **Serving Better guide** for more information).

What else can local authorities do?

In addition to school meals, there are other areas local authorities can influence in relation to food, including:

- Using their convening powers to encourage healthy, sustainable menus in schools not under their control, for example some Academies and independent schools
- Extending to other procurement (including nurseries, hospitals, care homes, prisons)

- Promote health and wellbeing by encouraging healthy, sustainable diets as part of their public health remit and powers
- Rebalancing the council's own catering for internal and external events
- Reducing food waste
- Encouraging sustainable farming on local authority land
- Banning junk food adverts in council-controlled advertising space⁷
- Restricting fast food outlets within a certain radius of schools (or more widely) using the planning system⁸
- Using their public health remit to broaden beyond issues of food safety and hygiene
- **Divest from industrial agriculture**

What is needed from national government?

While local authorities can make certain changes that have a real impact, there is an urgent need for national government action to support and enable bolder local action. For England, this means implementing the recommendations of the **National Food Strategy**, and championing and mandating principles of sustainable, healthy diets through all levels of government – see the **Serving Better guide** for more details.

⁷ For example Southwark council <https://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/2019/jun/junk-food-ads-banned-across-southwark-council-s-advertising-network>

⁸ See Using the planning system to promote healthy weight environments https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/863821/PHE_Planning_healthy_weight_environments_guidance__1_.pdf

Appendix: Template letter to local authorities

Please adapt this letter according to your local context.

Dear [name]

Can [name of place] use your buying power to tackle the climate impact of the food served by the council?

I am writing to you as a resident, [working with... say any groups you are working with] to ask about the food that the council buys, or has control over, in schools, hospitals, care homes, staff restaurants and events. If this food reflected a climate-friendly diet it would improve the health of our children, contribute to our net-zero commitments and help support sustainable and higher-welfare farmers.

As I'm sure you know, our food system is taking a huge toll on the planet and is responsible for about a third of global emissions. Even if all other sources of emissions stopped, greenhouse gases from food and farming alone would put the Paris Agreement target of 1.5 degrees warming out of reach.

Local councils have enormous power – you can normalise climate-friendly diets and ensure public money is spent in a way which halts, not worsens, the climate and nature emergency.

I would like to talk to you about the meals we serve currently and look at how we might do better. As a first step, please read the guide **“Serving Better: why every meal counts in a climate and nature emergency”**. This resource and film for local authorities makes the case for meat and dairy reduction, sets out what local councils can do, and highlights inspiring examples of best practice.

I would like to see the council introduce a Sustainable Food Policy (or amend an existing policy), which includes:

- Reducing meat and dairy by at least 25%, replacing this with healthy plant proteins and vegetables;
- Sourcing all meat and dairy to farm assured standards, as a minimum;
- Sourcing 25% of meat and dairy from 'better' sources (these include RSPCA assured, organic, free-range, pasture-fed and certified sustainable fish (see pg 12 of the Serving Better guide for further details).

You would be in great company – more and more councils are looking at the impact of food procurement and taking action to serve more climate friendly meals, you can see some on the **Food for the Planet website**.

The public overwhelmingly supports action – in a **recent poll** 80% of people agreed that food served in the public sector should help people minimise their impact on the environment and limit climate change.

Please can you refer me to the correct person to discuss what the council is doing already and how I may help? This would most likely be the procurement or contract manager for school meals.

Thank you, I look forward to hearing from you,

Further resources

Less and better meat in public settings

- Eating Better: Serving Better – local authority guide and film
<https://www.eating-better.org/blog/serving-better-every-meal-counts-in-a-climate-and-nature-emergency>
- Eating Better: Better by half roadmap
<https://www.eating-better.org/betterbyhalf>
- Friends of the Earth: Climate Action Plan for local authorities
<https://takeclimateaction.uk/download/climate-action-plan-councils>
Point 44: “Use influence with others, for example with schools to ensure....purchasing is green (eg, meals follow the official Eatwell Guide on healthy eating and most menu options are plant-based, with less and better meat or fish as other options).”
- Food for the Planet
<https://www.foodfortheplanet.org.uk/>
- Sustainable Food Places
<https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/>
- Sustain
<https://www.sustainweb.org/climatechange/councils/>
- FOUR PAWS UK local authority Make Food Kinder campaign
<https://www.four-paws.org.uk/campaigns-topics/campaigns/make-food-kinder>
- Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration
<https://www.glasgowdeclaration.org/>

Lobbying your council

- Understanding how your council works
<https://takeclimateaction.uk/resources/understanding-how-your-council-works>
- Lots of resources, from how to get media coverage to using social media and more:
<https://takeclimateaction.uk/resources>
- Tips for lobbying:
<https://takeclimateaction.uk/lobbying-whats-it-all-about>

Universities

- Kale Yeah! Kitchens
<http://foe.uk/Kale-Yeah>

Schools

- Friends of the Earth's Climate Action Plan for schools
<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/take-action/climate-action-plan-schools-and-colleges>
- School food Matters
<https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/>
- ProVeg
<https://proveg.com/uk/school-plates/>
- Food for Life
<https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/>
- WWF Green & Lean
<https://www.hospitalityandcateringnews.com/2015/11/sodexo-wwf-pilot-green-lean-meals/>

Health/nutrients

- Eatwell Guide – official government healthy eating advice
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide>
- Association of UK Dieticians (BDA) – One Blue Dot toolkit
<https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/one-blue-dot.html>
- Making our favourite meals more sustainable
<https://www.bda.uk.com/uploads/assets/89de0ac6-5141-4258-9c34ff71566821ef/One-Blue-Dot-Meal-swaps.pdf>
- British Nutrition Foundation
<https://www.nutrition.org.uk/healthy-sustainable-diets/>

Farming

- Sustain report: Fringe Farming: peri-urban agroecology towards resilient food economies and public goods
<https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/feb22-fringe-farming/>
- Dynamic Food Procurement
<https://www.dynamicfood.org/>

Other

- Hospital Food Campaign
<https://www.sustainweb.org/hospitalfood/>
- Children's Food Campaign (advertising)
<https://www.sustainweb.org/childrensfoodcampaign/>

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A publication by Eating Better, Four Paws, Friends of the Earth, Soil Association and Sustain

February 2022



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Sustain is a Registered Charity No. 1018643