



Sustainable food in care catering

Briefing paper

What the National Association of Care Catering is doing

In 2005, the National Association of Care Catering (NACC) and Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming, embarked on a project to explore the opportunities for sustainable food procurement in care catering. Through funding from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) a sustainable food procurement working group was set up and plans for a pilot project were made. While care catering also encompasses meals on wheels, young people in care and people with physical and mental health needs and learning difficulties, the pilot project will focus on residential care homes for older people as a manageable starting point. This paper gives a brief explanation of what we mean by sustainable food and why there is a need for the project, outlines the key obstacles and opportunities and points readers to sources of more information and useful case studies.



Why we should promote sustainable food in care catering

Evidence suggests that what we eat has more impact on climate change than any other aspect of daily life. The production, retailing, transport, packaging and preparation of food accounts for 31% of the EU's contribution to global warming.¹ Buying sustainable food reduces energy use and thereby reduces adverse environmental effects. Sustainable food can also support struggling rural economies.

In recognition of the role public sector catering can play in promoting sustainable development, the Government, in 2003, launched the Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative (PSFPI) as part of its Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy for England.²

"The PSFPI's five priority objectives are to:

- 1. Raise production and process standards*
- 2. Increase tenders from small and local producers*
- 3. Increase consumption of healthy and nutritious food*
- 4. Reduce adverse environmental impacts of production and supply*
- 5. Increase capacity of small and local suppliers to meet demand."*

Some schools, hospitals and other public sector bodies are already beginning to demonstrate good practice in these areas.³ The Royal Brompton Hospital, London, for example, now buys almost 15% of its food from local and/or organic sources,⁴ Bradford City Council buys most of its vegetables from local suppliers as well as eggs and fresh meat for their school

meal service⁵ and Staffordshire County Council have a contract with eight small independent butchers to supply residential homes, Day Services and early learning centres with meat and poultry sourced from a maximum of ten miles from the establishment within Staffordshire or the West Midlands.⁶ By bringing care catering into the sustainable food procurement agenda, positive contributions will be made to the environment, UK rural communities and care home residents alike.

The NACC sustainable food procurement policy

The NACC advocates food procurement practices that support sustainable development. As such, the NACC will:

- Engage and raise awareness amongst all those involved in care catering (local authorities, private and voluntary care providers, suppliers and clients) in issues of sustainable food procurement.
- Work with all parties to identify how they can contribute to more sustainable catering in residential care home for older people.
- Develop a broad framework for change that the whole sector can work with.

What we mean by sustainable food

By sustainable food we mean food that, through its production, processing, distribution, sale and consumption, provides social benefits, such as good quality food, good health and education, protects the environment and avoids unnecessary use of natural resources, and contributes towards economic development. In other words, food that supports sustainable development. Sustainable food includes:

Healthy food

Healthy food is.

- food uncontaminated by microbiological poisons or toxic residues;
- food that does not compromise our resistance to infection, or render ineffective medical treatments;
- a food supply that is micronutrient-dense, fibre-rich and provides essential fats to reduce the risks of developing cardiovascular diseases, some cancers and other diet-related illnesses. (This largely comprises a variety of whole-grain cereals and other starchy staples, plentiful and varied vegetables and fruit, diverse nuts, seeds and pulses, some dairy produce and, for non-vegetarians, occasional fish and meat);
- access to the best quality food (as outlined above) for the most vulnerable in society, particularly low income groups and, especially, babies and children, older people, and those who are ill.

Local food

Local food is food that is consumed as close as possible to the point of production and processing. "Possible" may be from a mile down the road, it may be from within the region or it may be from the UK. Local food can be sustainable food because, with reduced transportation, it produces less carbon dioxide emissions and therefore has a reduced impact on climate change. Buying local food also supports local jobs and livelihoods. Studies have shown that every £10 spent with a local food business generates £25 for the local area compared to £14 for every £10 spent in a non-local food business, such as a supermarket.⁷ One way to encourage the use of local food is to design seasonal menus - menus that use ingredients when they are in season in the UK. See <http://www.sustainweb.org/publications/downloads/goodfoodpp.pdf> (pp 48-51) for a UK seasonality chart.

Food produced using minimal amounts of pesticides and fertilisers

About one-quarter of the carbon dioxide emissions created by the food system comes from food's production. This includes the manufacture and transporting of fertilisers and pesticides and use of fuel on the farm.⁸ Some farming systems use reduced amounts of artificial fertilisers and pesticides, thereby reducing carbon dioxide emissions. The environmental benefits of using products from these systems can be significant. Organically grown crops, for example, require 50% less energy input per unit area than conventionally grown crops, and organic dairy production has been shown to require 74% less energy inputs per unit output compared to conventional systems. Organic farming systems have also been shown to encourage greater biodiversity.⁹

Marine Stewardship Council certified fish

While fish can be a nutritious choice, fishing practices often have detrimental effects on stocks and ecosystems. In 2005 it was estimated that 97% of world's fish stocks were either fully exploited, over exploited, depleted or moderately exploited.¹⁰ The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) runs an assurance scheme where fish come from fisheries with a rigorous sustainability policy: fish are not from threatened fish stocks and not fished using unsustainable fishing methods. See <http://www.msc.org/>.

Fairly traded food

Fairly traded products ensure that the producers and farmers in the developing countries where the products originate get a fair wage for their work and are more able to improve their living and working conditions.¹¹ For guidance on how more fairly traded products can be procured in the public sector see <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/sustain/procurement/trade.htm>

Food produced with higher animal welfare standards

Conventional farming systems are usually intensive with the health and welfare of the animals often compromised. For example, factory farmed animals may never see natural light and selective breeding has resulted in broiler chickens that grow so fast their legs can not support them and consequently become crippled.¹² Some examples of production methods that guarantee higher animal welfare standards include RSPCA Freedom Foods,¹³ free range and organic.¹⁴

Traditional, regional foods

Foods that have a unique link to a geographical place and/or culture can be designated protected name status (either PDO (Protected Designations of Origin), PGI (Protected Geographical Indications of supply) or TSG (Traditional Speciality Guarantee)). There are 31 registered products in the UK, including Jersey potatoes, Scotch Beef and Blue Stilton. Using these products supports UK producers and can promote taste, diversity and cultural richness. For information see <http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodrin/foodname/uk.htm>.

Food with reduced packaging and waste

Huge amounts of waste from food and food and drink packaging are produced in the UK each year. Most waste in the UK is either incinerated or buried with significant environmental implications due to, with incineration, the amount of fossil fuels used and pollution created, and, with landfill, the methane gas and toxic substances released. Some ways of reducing packaging and food waste in catering include requiring:

- Goods to be supplied in bulk.
- Reusable containers.
- Recycled or biodegradable materials.
- Improved quality and taste of meals served.
- Appropriate portion sizes.

Food from social enterprises

Social enterprises are committed to generating not only economic profit but also social and environmental "profit". Buying food from social enterprises can support sustainable development. See <http://www.sustainweb.org/sauce/> for more details.

Mains water

Mains drinking water in the UK is safe to drink and of high quality. By using mains water in care homes rather than bottled water, or less healthy bottled and packaged drinks, environment benefits from reduced packaging and food miles are realised, the health of the residents is promoted and significant financial savings can be made. For example, water from bottled-fed cooling machines costs £6 per 19 litres compared to 2p per 19 litres for mains-fed cooling machines¹⁵ and being well hydrated helps reduce the overall costs of looking after those in care. The health and safety concerns associated with moving heavy bottles around are also avoided and storage space is saved. See <http://www.water.org.uk> for more details.

Food cooked with energy efficient equipment

A sustainable catering service uses energy efficient catering equipment and saves money as well as energy. An efficiently managed service will also reduce the amount of cooking oil, chemicals, and water used, as well as electricity and gas through heating and lighting. Good practice can involve regular servicing, refurbishment and recycling of catering equipment and recycling of cooking oil. See Hospitable Climates, <http://www.hospitableclimates.co.uk/> for guidance.

Current members of the NACC sustainable food procurement working group

as of February 2006, include representatives from Anchor Trust, apetito, Donisthorpe Hall Care Home, ESPO, Leicestershire County Council, Staffordshire County Council (seconded to Government Office West Midlands), Sustain, Rhondda Cynon Taff County Council and the Vale of Glamorgan Council. The working group seeks to represent all key players in care catering. If you would like to be involved and/or kept informed of group activity, please contact the Chair, Bob Bird at bob.bird@anchor.org.uk.

What about ready meals and frozen food?

In terms of sustainability (protecting the environment, promoting health and well-being and supporting the local economy), the preferred catering service is one that uses as many as possible of the food options described previously. The budgets, kitchen facilities, staff capacity and motivation, customer needs and logistics of supply of individual care home will determine how quickly and to what extent the various sustainable food options can be introduced. Not all care home caterers will be able to use seasonal, fresh, local and sustainably produced food from the outset but they will still be able to take significant steps towards becoming more sustainable, however gradual these might be.

While ready meals, for example, have higher food miles associated with their production and transport than meals cooked on-site with ingredients from a local producer, they may still be able to support UK producers by buying some of the ingredients from producers local to the factory. Ready meals also have a role to play where care homes have limited kitchen facilities and staff capacity. While freezing is probably the most energy-intensive type of food processing (freezing 1kg of peas and storing them for 6 months uses almost as much energy as flying them in from Kenya¹⁶), it provides a way of using UK rather than imported produce year round, thereby supporting UK producers. Frozen products can sometimes be more nutritious than fresh (notably in the case of legumes (including beans, peas, broad beans) and also in the case of some brassica such as broccoli).



Obstacles and opportunities to introducing more sustainable food into care catering

Supply

One of the biggest obstacles to introducing more sustainable food into care catering is lack of supply. In recent decades, smaller and more sustainable food suppliers and producers have found it increasingly hard to survive, having to compete against ever larger food producers buying products more cheaply on world markets. As a result, it is not always possible to buy produce in the quantities required from the immediate locality or region. Where sustainable food producers do exist in the immediate area with the capacity to supply, further obstacles may include their lacking the infrastructure to handle deliveries, undertake food processing and meet health and safety requirements, most notably Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems. Sustain's Hospital Food Project found that co-operative groups (sometimes including smaller producers) and medium-sized producers and distributors were often more able than smaller enterprises to supply hospitals having auditing processes in place, being able to handle bulk consignments, and employing quality control staff. They would also often have more flexibility than the larger enterprises.

Methods of overcoming these obstacles will vary according to the type and size of the care home. A smaller independent care home is more likely to be able to identify a local producer able to supply food in the quantities they require and have the flexibility in contract and catering arrangements to buy products from them. A larger independent care home may purchase food from supply intermediaries, such as 3663, which have their own centralised supply and distribution networks. It may be possible to work with these intermediaries so

that they adopt sustainable criteria, thereby, as far as possible, encouraging local suppliers to feed into their supply chain. Care homes managed by local authorities, while having to adhere to EU procurement legislation (see below), may have the advantage over independent care homes of having increased purchasing power. Both independent care homes and local authority managed care homes, however, may be able to buy collaboratively with other local authority services and organisations to increase their purchasing power. Both may also be able to work with existing wholesalers, encouraging them to use local producers.

In every case, procurement officers and catering managers can seek support and advice from national organisations, regional Defra teams and local food groups (see Useful publications and websites, and People who might be able to help). These experts can help to encourage small food producers apply for contracts and help them, for example, work through HACCP or cooperate with other local producers and invest in processing equipment and other infrastructure. The Defra website includes lots of case studies that show what is possible. See www.defra.gov.uk/farm/sustain/procurement/casestudies/index.htm

EU legislation

One of the barriers to sustainable food procurement most commonly identified by buyers is the range of procurement legislation which appears at global, European and national level. The European legislation poses the greatest restrictions on sustainable food procurement but, as long the key principles of procedural transparency, non-discrimination on grounds of nationality and value for money are adhered to, the legislation does not present as many barriers as many people believe. Value for money, as required by the UK government, requires that goods are procured on the basis of a combination of whole-life costs (such as running and disposal costs) and quality, not just purchase price enabling, as Defra says, "plenty of scope for public sector bodies to pursue sustainable development considerations in their procurement of food and catering services".

EU law currently allows purchasers to:

- Specify sustainable food with a legal basis, for example free range and organic.
- Ask for food produced according to standards of recognised assurance schemes, or equivalent (see box below for explanation of assurance schemes). These can greatly simplify the task of ensuring environmental, quality and social considerations are met.

- Specify produce with protected name status, e.g. PDO, PGI or TSG. This is legal as long as not part of an explicit local supply policy and that the proviso 'or equivalent' is included.
- Specify food for menus based on seasonality, local availability and regional identity.
- Specify non-GM.
- Require the supplier to use reusable containers, provide a take back service and deliver in bulk units, and/or recyclable packaging.

EU law currently does not allow purchasers to:

- Specify Fairtrade product or labels. However, caterers and food suppliers can be encouraged to buy fairly traded products through voluntary non-contractual means.
- Specify local (as this implies origin and therefore discriminates on grounds of nationality). However, purchasers can ask for fresh, seasonal food of high nutritional value, and flexible and frequent delivery times.

This EU procurement legislation applies to contracts over a certain threshold.



Cost

Sustainable food, such as organic and fairly traded food, can be more expensive than conventional food. To minimise cost increases purchasers can:

- Specify sustainable products with the smallest premiums, for example potatoes and milk.
- Buy produce when it is in season.
- Accept class II rather than class I produce which is usually only deficient in one or two cosmetic requirements such as shape, colour, small blemishes and marks.
- Use menus that contain more fruit and vegetables and moderate amounts of meat (as advised by health experts).
- Offer fewer meal options and so buy fewer ingredients in larger quantities (tempered by the desire and need to provide residents with an adequate choice of meals).

In addition, it is worth noting that:

- Better quality meat and meat products, often have less added water and fat and therefore 'shrink' less in cooking, so less needs to be bought in the first place.
- If tastier, better quality meals are provided, uptake is likely to increase and consequently economies of scale.
- Price increases can sometimes be partly compensated for by other changes in the catering system, for example using more energy efficient cooking equipment, cutting down on wastage and using auditing tools.

Skills

Sustainable food can often involve preparing meals from scratch using fresh, raw ingredients. Public sector catering has, in recent decades, as part of cost saving, experienced some deskilling among kitchen staff. Where menus are changing, it may be necessary to train the kitchen staff in use of seasonal produce and appropriate cooking skills and also increase their hours. While this may incur some costs, staff are likely to feel more valued, experience greater job satisfaction and be less likely to leave.

Attitudes of consumers

For successful introduction of sustainable food, it is important that the consumers, in this case the residents in the care homes, understand and support the changes. They should be consulted from the start, involved in decision making and kept informed throughout.

Assurance Schemes

Assurance Schemes have been developed in the last ten years to support claims about production methods, environmental aspects and animal welfare standards. Assured Food Standards (AFS) is the umbrella body for the British Farm Standard and its Red Tractor logo, as well as several member schemes including ABM (Assured British Meat), APS (Assured Produce Scheme), ACP (Assured Chicken Production). The AFS commits suppliers to meeting basic production and food safety standards and most do little more than obey the law and Defra codes of practice. There are several schemes outside the AFS, some of which support higher sustainability standards, for example organic, biodynamic principles, Integrated Farm Management systems and LEAF (Linking the Environment and Farming) marque. For details of assurance schemes refer to Defra's guidance document, 'Integrating sustainable development into procurement of food and catering', <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/sustain/procurement/pdf/foodprocure.pdf> and Sustain's Good Food on the Public Plate, available on <http://www.sustainweb.org/publications/downloads/goodfoodpp.pdf> (Directory, pp1-4)

Useful publications and websites:

Caroline Walker Trust, *Eating well for older people*, revised 2004. (Practical and nutritional guidelines for older people in residential and community care), www.cwt.org.uk

Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), *Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative* (PSFPI):

- Introductory leaflet: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/sustain/procurement/pdf/GF%20Leaflet.pdf>
- Case study information: www.defra.gov.uk/farm/sustain/procurement/casestudies/index.htm
- Frequently asked questions, including details on PSFPI, procurement rules, local sourcing, supply side, assurance schemes, organic food, fair trade, health and nutrition: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/sustain/procurement/pdf/psfpi-faqs.pdf>
- Toolkit: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/FARM/sustain/procurement/toolkit.htm>

EurepGAP, The Global Partnership for Safe and Sustainable Agriculture. Designed to help producers improve food quality and safety, biodiversity, more efficient use of natural resources, minimum use of pesticides and fertilizers and worker health and safety. See http://www.eurepgap.org/Languages/English/index_html

Europa, *EU Interpretive Communication on Public Procurement and the Environment*, http://europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/publicprocurement/index_en.htm

Hospitable Climates. A free advisory programme on energy saving, managed on behalf of the Carbon Trust by the Hotel and Catering International Management Association (HCIMA), dedicated to the hospitality sector. <http://www.hospitableclimates.co.uk>

Marine Conservation Society, *The Good Fish Guide*, 2003, <http://www.fishonline.org>

Marine Stewardship Council. Certifies sustainable fisheries. <http://www.msc.org>

The National Association of Care Catering. Provides a range of publications including *The National Minimum Standard for Care Catering (Care Homes for Older People)*, 2005, *The Catering Check List, 2005 and Menu and Planning and Special Diets Manual*, Spring 2006. Details and order facility on <http://www.thenacc.org.uk>

New Economics Foundation, *Public spending for public benefit, How the public sector can use its purchasing power to deliver local economic development*, July 2005, <http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/uploads/ddgebi55g5qi3w55quuj3n5521082005175605.pdf>

Office of Government Commerce, Procurement Policy Unit. Provides advice and guidance to contracting authorities about how sustainable objectives may be incorporated into public contracts within the EU rules and value for money policy. See www.ogc.gov.uk

Oxford Brookes University, *Sustainable Food Procurement for Contract Caterers*, October 2005, www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/ceshi/

Sustain/East Anglia Food Link, *Good Food on the Public Plate: A manual for sustainability in public sector food and catering*, June 2003, <http://www.sustainweb.org/publications/downloads/goodfoodpp.pdf>

Water UK, *Water for Healthy Ageing, Hydration Best Practice Toolkit for Care Homes*, October 2005, <http://www.water.org.uk/home/water-for-health/older-people>

People who might be able to help:

Food Links UK, <http://www.foodlinks-uk.org/>, 01225 787921. A network of organisations active in supporting the local food sector and working towards fairer, healthier more sustainable local food systems.

Royal Institute of Public Health and Hygiene. Run 'Eating for Health in Care Homes' courses and sell a practical handbook. <http://www.riph.org.uk/>, 020 7291 8361, pmoore@riph.org.uk

Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming, www.sustainweb.org, 020 7837 1228. Sustain has experience of working with several public sector catering, including local education authorities and hospitals.

References

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2. See <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/sustain/procurement/>
3. See <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/sustain/procurement/casestudies/index.htm> for several other case studies.
4. See http://www.sustainweb.org/hospital_index.asp for details of Sustain's Hospital Food Project
5. See <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/sustain/procurement/casestudies/bs-ecs.htm> for details
6. See <http://www.defra.gov.uk/FARM/sustain/procurement/casestudies/freshmeat.htm> for details
7. Plugging the Leaks, New Economics Foundation, <http://www.pluggingtheleaks.org/>
8. East Anglia Food Link Food and climate change briefing, <http://www.eafl.org.uk/downloads/FoodAndClimateChange.doc>
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11. www.fairtrade.org.uk - the website of the Fair Trade Foundation
12. www.ciwf.co.uk - the website of Compassion in World Farming
13. www.rspca.org.uk - the website of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
14. www.soilassociation.org - the website of the Soil Association
15. Water UK, Water for Healthy Ageing, Hydration Best Practice Toolkit for Care Homes, 2005
16. East Anglia Food Link, Oil and Climate, www.eafl.org.uk