



An analysis of UK councils' plans for tackling climate change through food

Advance release – the following is a preview of a full report to be released in December

Overview

The Climate Action Plans of 92 UK local authorities were analysed to investigate how well they address issues related to food, farming and climate change. In all but 13 plans, food is not included in enough detail, or with enough ambition, to create the changes needed to address the climate emergency. Commitments to buying lower-emission food for schools and other services were particularly missing, especially serving less but better meat. Some councils are bucking the trend and have taken action to cut food-related emissions already, or have strong commitments to do so. National leadership is urgently required to set the direction, resource councils better, and create conditions for more climate-friendly food policies from local authorities.

Headline figures

300 out of 404 (74%) UK local authorities have declared a climate and nature emergency. From our research 92 councils have approved and published action plans with policy and resource commitments for addressing the emergency. Of the 92 plans analysed:

67% do not propose any action to improve the impact of our diets or food system that is *substantial* or *new*.

FOOD WASTE: 75% councils mentioned this issue. Either referring to existing collection and/or composting services, or plans for the future

PROCUREMENT: Only 20% councils plan to make food they buy (for example school meals) more climate-friendly

LAND: 28% mention increasing the amount of food grown sustainably in their area

13 Councils have released climate action plans with an extensive consideration of a number of food issues - commensurate with the kind of action needed to tackle the climate and nature emergency. They are; Bristol City, Camden, Cornwall Count, County Durham, East Lothian, Enfield, Hounslow, Lewisham, Middlesbrough, Stockport, Stroud Town, Somerset West & Taunton, and Southwark.

Recommendations

National Leadership is needed, to resource local communities

13 councils have shown that they can help the government achieve net zero in a way that meets local needs, empowers citizens, and creates nature-rich green spaces. But more work is needed to make this the norm:

01

Good diets in the public sector must be normalised at a national level. At the moment it is the exception, making it more difficult to implement changes. Mandatory standards for serving meals high in fruit and vegetables, low in ultra-processed food and low in meat across the public sector are needed. In addition, it needs to be easier (and common) to serve better meat, and locally-sourced produce from smaller enterprises.

02

Councils should be given more resources and support to find local solutions to design-out food waste, plant trees, install water fountains, and a host of other actions to cut the UK's climate impact

03

Planning policy must allow local areas to protect and increase land available for growing sustainable food

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Sustain: The alliance for better food and 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. www.sustainweb.org

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How are councils addressing key food issues?

Food use, recycling and waste

Councils can minimise food waste by providing spaces and resources for redistributing usable food, supporting citizens and businesses to reduce waste, and making sure as much unavoidable food waste as possible is composted.

In London, 21 councils offer a food waste collection service to households, 14 to schools, and 8 to food businesses. A number are trialing or investigating adding schools and/or businesses to their food waste service.

Procurement and the diets of citizens

All Local Authorities have some role in food buying; some for schools, others care services, council buildings, events, libraries and leisure centres. They can demonstrate sustainable diets and ensure public money is supporting sustainable food and farming. A number of councils have clear targets to deliver change at a scale commensurate with the climate emergency: Enfield council have a commitment to serve vegetarian food as default for council meetings and events. A number of areas have meat-free days across all the food they operate, and Southwark plans to become the first borough to only serve vegetarian food in primary schools by 2030. Many councils including Havering have, or are committed to, offering '[Food For Life Served Here](#)' standard meals, which means serving minimal ultra-processed foods, some organic produce, and sourcing some food locally.

Catering Leeds' trailblazing 'Planet Friendly Menus' project, introducing meat free school dinners and some vegan options, is exemplary. The project achieves health and climate goals while educating children as to the climate impact of our food choices. As Leeds City Council's research demonstrates, there is an appetite among young people for this kind of change: 95% of children surveyed indicated that they would be happy to eat meat-free food once a week to help tackle climate change.

Council land

Increasing the amount of food grown sustainably on council land can dramatically cut the area's food emissions footprint whilst creating jobs, improving access to wildlife-rich nature and increasing biodiversity, flood protection and tree cover.

Many councils have ambitious targets to plant trees, and some - like Waltham Forest, are specifically planting fruit and nut trees.

Somerset West and Taunton Council are exploring new spaces for community allotments and orchards, and using under-used land to grow food. Enfield are exploring new land that can be used for growing food sustainably to supply communities with locally produced fruit and veg.

Other actions

Councils are incredible innovators, and they can use their powers in a range of other ways to create a lower-emission food system, for example installing publicly-available drinking water fountains (see the [50 Fountains Challenge](#)), using their power as

What do these findings mean?

At the moment, all but a handful of council action plans fall short of what is needed to address the climate and nature emergency. There would appear to be a lack of appreciation of how food can help councils deliver their emissions reduction targets.

Some councils are showing exceptional leadership - proving that it is possible.

Councils are missing out on some quick wins to deliver their climate commitments - many of the actions needed on this issue are straightforward and low-cost.

Action on sustainable food procurement was particularly lacking - most councils buy a very large amount of food and can set the standard for what a sustainable diet looks like.

Improving food comes with a raft of other benefits to councils, including improving citizens' health and wellbeing and access to nature. Areas that procure more food locally and have a diverse local food infrastructure are more resilient to disruption and food shortages.

For councils developing their action plans, there are some easy wins, including:

Council catering, including serving vegetarian food as default for council meetings and events, and embarking on a journey to serve less but better meat, more fruit and veg, more local, higher-welfare, organic and seasonal produce and less ultra-processed food across all settings.

Tree planting: Many councils have ambitious tree-planting ambitions. Fruit and nut trees deliver a raft of benefits for people and nature, and mini-orchards can be achieved in a surprisingly small amount of space.

Protect and increase food growing spaces. Growing food close to people, in allotments, urban parks and community growing spaces could produce a surprising amount of food, and as a minimum should be protected as valuable community assets.

Increase food growing: Local authorities own about 4% of the land in England - including housing, industrial land, grassland, farmland and county parks. Councils should consider how this land can be used to grow food - especially fruit and veg - sustainably

Power as a license granter: Only a few councils are currently using licensing and business rates to influence business behaviour (for example Westminster are controlling polluting food deliveries). Haringey, Lambeth and Camden have a food policy for festivals and events - even simple event license conditions like banning single-use plastic at festivals could have a huge impact.

Engage citizens - only a handful of councils mentioned any awareness-raising about sustainable diets or reducing food waste, using the councils communication channels to do so.

Food Partnerships - We encourage councils to set up or support, set up, or actively engage in a food partnership for their local area. There are 60 such partnerships around the UK who are part of the Sustainable Food Places network, bringing together local authorities, communities, enterprises and other stakeholders locally to improve their food system.

More information about the study

To find the published public action plans for the purposes of this research, we used two sources:

- The national [‘Declare a Climate Emergency’](#) website. All the action plans listed as of 20th October were included
- A request was sent to all councils to submit any action plans that might be missing from the above website

Action plans were categorised according to how well they include food, as follows:

- No mention - no core areas of the food system are mentioned
- Little mention - one or two core areas mentioned without any concrete proposals, targets, or commitments to improve the status quo. Food treated as incidental
- Fair mention - three or more core areas mentioned, with some targets or specific commitments
- Extensive consideration - 13 councils met this criteria - four or more core areas are addressed and a demonstrated understanding of the power of food as a policy lever in the fight against climate change

Core areas are food waste, land use/planning, procurement, dietary change and food growing. 67% councils met the criteria for either ‘no mention’ or ‘little mention’.

A note about responsibilities and power of different councils

Unitary, district, town and city councils have different responsibilities and opportunities to tackle food-related emissions, for example some control school meals, some manage waste, some manage events and festivals on their land, some none of the above. Quantitative data about the relative performance of different types of council is not included as part of this release, but it was noted that a number of councils considered to have ‘less power’ to act on the food system (for example lower-tier local authorities), came out top in our analysis, proving that all councils have the power to take considerable action on food.