

# Sustain Briefing: Good Food Retail

January 2020



Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming, has produced this briefing in response to recent references to Good Food Retail in the London Food Strategy, among other documents. Our aim is to show how ‘good food’ ([see Sustain’s definition here](#)) works in a retail setting and the types of venues and operations this would apply to.

This briefing draws on our experience of working in the sustainable food and farming sector for over 20 years, as well as from coordinating an action learning set among six London councils in 2019 who were running Good Food Retail projects. Five were funded by the Mayor of London and one by Guy’s and St Thomas’ Charity, with all receiving support from London Food Link as a partner. The London boroughs of Bexley, Camden, Croydon, Kensington and Chelsea, Newham and Southwark took part, each with a unique approach to improving healthy and affordable food options in various retail settings. A summary of learning and case studies are available in our publication, [Good Food Retail: Six London boroughs taking action in 2019](#).

We aim to provide useful ideas to help shape the concept of Good Food Retail, but this is not a definitive guide and as such we welcome comments.



Sustain advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the working and living environment, promote equity and enrich society and culture.

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Working for a healthy, sustainable and ethical food system for the capital. Through our projects and campaigns we strive for a food system that benefits all Londoners.

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# What is Good Food Retail?

We use 'Good Food Retail' to refer to outlets that sell food mainly for consumption at home. As well as traditional shops, this also includes markets, stalls, box schemes, food co-ops, as well as small-scale production kitchens and bakeries that have a retail outlet. Foodservice only outlets, such as cafés, restaurants and takeaways, fall outside the remit of this briefing.

The term 'good food' refers both to the quality of the food and to the wider activities of a values-driven enterprise. Good Food Retail outlets may be social and community enterprises, or for-profit food retailers that play a part in their community beyond just trading. Importantly we see Good Food Retail as seeking not only to sell food, but also explicitly to contribute to a healthier, more sustainable and resilient food supply that is affordable and accessible to all.

Good Food Retail outlets would be recognised by doing several, or preferably all, of the following:

- Focusing on selling foods that contribute to a healthier diet and are affordable.
- Reducing promotion and/or access to highly processed fatty, salty and sugary foods and sugary drinks.
- Providing safe and nutritious food for diverse cultures and needs, and making special efforts to make good food available and affordable to people living on a lower income.
- Treating employees and suppliers fairly, and championing the real Living Wage or real London Living Wage (ideally with Living Wage Foundation accreditation).
- Developing collaborative relationships with suppliers, including paying farmers and fishers a fair amount for their produce, and promptly, and buying imported products such as tea, coffee and chocolate with the Fairtrade Mark.
- Reducing environmental impact through the supply chain and aiming to reduce waste radically.
- Sourcing sustainably produced and seasonal produce, sustainably produced meat, dairy and fish, wholegrain foods and Real Bread.

Good Food Retail is often run by people and groups who are motivated not only by profit, but also want to run successful enterprises that deliver on social and environmental goals and contribute to a healthy and sustainable food system. By pursuing such aims, they are providing good food, helping to implement local or regional food strategies and policies, and making life better for residents.

Retailers' contributions to improving their local food environment may vary significantly depending on the scale of their store and type of outlet. For example, some retailers such as small, independent convenience stores may begin by offering single pieces of fruit for sale at the till or stocking more low sugar cereals and rearranging how they are promoted on shelves. In other cases, it could include helping a market become London Living Wage accredited or a larger retailer switching to a Real Bread bakery supplier.

# How can local councils support Good Food Retail?

When councils, local partnerships or initiatives such as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) support and promote Good Food Retail, then smaller-scale, values-driven and community-led food enterprises have a better chance of thriving. This could be through providing land, premises, market stalls, business advice, tax/business rate incentives and other support to help enterprises start, get established and eventually expand. There are a wide variety of ways for councils to link this agenda to existing work on public health, enterprise, planning and more.

## Start small

There is a significant appetite among retailers to make changes that improve the health and affordability of food on offer. However, small, independent retailers run on very tight margins and so making a business case for change is key to bringing them on board. Remember, fresh fruit and vegetables are often in competition with industries that have massive advertising budgets to get their products stocked and sold so there may be challenges in this process.

When working with retailers like this, suggesting small substitutions among products is a good first step to demonstrate that there is demand for healthier products and that they bring in profit. Councils, such as Southwark and Camden, have been most successful in this area when working with external retail experts who can offer tailored advice to stores about things like product substitutions that matches each business's unique situation.

## Use existing schemes

Healthy Start vouchers can act as a good starting point for building positive relationships with retailers, particularly when the vouchers are framed as a free marketing channel. Framing the voucher scheme as a unique opportunity to reach customers, rather than framed as a healthy eating initiative, can be an effective way of improving retailer participation. Our recent publication of [Making the most of Healthy Start: A toolkit for local action](#) includes more detailed advice.

Other councils have found it effective to link with existing health promotion campaigns and marketing materials, such as the national Change4Life programme, as they may be already familiar for retail managers and customers.

## Building relationships

Councils have found that developing trusting relationships with shopkeepers is also key, particularly as some may only interact with council officers who hold enforcement positions. This requires significant time and therefore it can be helpful to find ways to align Good Food Retail work with other agendas and/or other teams who are already visiting stores, such as Environmental Health. The Food Research Collaboration recently published a related briefing, [Engaging with convenience stores for healthier food provision: what works?](#), which reviews best practice in this area.

## Have a plan, across council departments

Developing a Good Food Retail plan for a borough can also be a way to galvanise action across many departments and secure high level commitments to the wider agenda. Councils have found this to be most successful when aligned with other relevant agendas, such as those on obesity, health and well-being, climate change, economic development or regeneration. Coordinating an action plan can also act as a stepping stone towards a borough developing a broader food partnership and considering becoming a member of [Sustainable Food Cities](#). Given that food is rarely the remit of any one department or person, working collaboratively across a council and embedding activities among a variety of teams is essential.

## Consider the supply chain

Importantly, councils can also enable cooperation along values-led supply chains and help to connect Good Food Retail outlets with food producers and community food growers. Councils can help to increase access and affordability of fruit and vegetables in a variety of ways, such as by encouraging or working with local social enterprises that are building short supply chains with local farmers. Often these will be box schemes or trading models that fall into the growing network of [Better Food Traders](#), which are providing local jobs and building resilient supply chains. These benefit from council support related to start-up costs, premises or promotion.



## Measuring success

There is no fixed set of measures that define a Good Food Retail borough, but indicators could include:

- Development of a **Good Food Retail Plan** that considers the opportunities and priorities within the borough/ward/BID, and allocates responsibilities for supporting growth in the sector, with built-in measures of success and senior buy-in.
- **High number of retail outlets accepting Healthy Start vouchers**, in a variety of different types of outlets, in order to help young children and pregnant women on a lower income be able to eat well.
- The presence of **street markets** with thriving fruit and vegetable stalls.
- **Rose Vouchers are available in the borough**, working especially with settings that can reach lower income parents, such as Children's Centres and neighbourhood shops.
- Preferential access to street markets, empty retail premises and **street food trading opportunities** for fresh fruit and vegetable vendors, especially in areas with low access.
- Consideration of reduced or removed rental costs, or reduced business rates, to help facilitate more **healthy food retail outlets** through low-cost, low-risk opportunities for start-ups.
- **Food co-ops or projects that increase access and affordability of healthy, sustainable, organic produce** across the borough, with central information and support.
- **A Better Food Trader and/or independent fruit and vegetable box scheme** in the borough.
- **Identification of premises** suitable for a range of Good Food Retail trading models; identification of any gaps and opportunities within the area for encouraging such retail.
- Small-scale **loans or grants for start-up costs**, perhaps with business support from an enterprise specialist or recognised start-up support or other specialist network.
- **Innovative retail approaches** to tackling household food insecurity, for example Growing Communities fruit and vegetable stall at Dagenham East station in Barking & Dagenham, Croydon Council's The Food Stop, or BuyWell in Tower Hamlets.

Local councils can also go further in their role as a convener or enabler by incorporating Good Food Retail issues into their existing plans and activities, as well as influencing the actions of other partners and organisations through:

- Good food featuring in business support, regeneration and planning.
- Environmental Health teams engaged in healthy messaging and support for retailers, particularly when working with independent, small or convenience stores.
- Public Health incorporating retail into their plans and initiatives.
- Local authority business support, economic development, regeneration and planning teams engaged in encouraging more Good Food Retail in the borough. This might include:
  - increasing local fruit and vegetable supply, e.g. by allocating or encouraging local authority, park and social housing land for small-scale horticultural production.
  - a remit to collaborate with other boroughs on wholesale routes to market for food growers in nearby rural and peri-urban areas.
  - land, stalls and premises available for Good Food Retail and for small-scale packing and processing of fresh produce; and to encourage community food growing and trading enterprises.
- An advertising approach that restricts advertising of less healthy foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar and supports the promotion of healthier products.
- Reporting on the number of (food) retailers that are accepting Healthy Start vouchers and paying the London Living Wage and promoting both.
- Coordinating marketing programmes and celebrations to help Good Food Retail gain recognition and customers.

## What is Sustain doing in this area?

As part of Sustain's London Food Link programme of work, we are supporting a second cohort of councils to develop Good Food Retail plans and projects in London throughout 2020, funded by the Mayor of London. Other previous and current work in this area includes:

- **Buywell:** We were a delivery partner in a London-based project to increase access to healthy food in convenience stores. [Read more.](#)
- **Food Co-ops Toolkit and Network:** Since 2007 we have run a [food co-ops network](#) and developed a popular toolkit to help co-ops start and thrive. We have also supported students in colleges and universities to set up food co-ops and buying groups through the Our Bright Futures Student Eats project.
- **London Food Poverty Campaign:** We run a campaign to tackle some of the underlying issues that are creating food poverty in London. This includes producing our annual [Beyond the Food Bank](#) report on actions that councils are taking to address food poverty and helping to address these through focused campaigns and actions.
- **Food Power:** We work with 60 communities across the UK to strengthen their ability to reduce food poverty and tackle its root causes. This includes increasing the availability, accessibility and affordability of fresh and healthy food, linked in to local food poverty action plans, as well as amplifying the voices of those who have lived experience of food poverty in decision-making. [Learn more.](#)
- **Veg Cities:** This is a national campaign to increase vegetable consumption being run by Sustain as part of the Sustainable Food Cities network, which includes increasing retail promotion and sales. [Learn more.](#)

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