

Showcase: Public Sector Sustainable Food Procurement - UK and European Perspectives

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The British public sector spends around £1.8m annually on food – often poor quality from the cheapest possible supplier. From 2003 the Public Sector Procurement Initiative encouraged public bodies to procure food “sustainably”: i.e., nutritious, with good environmental impacts and opportunities for small producers. Reasons for limited success are discussed as is outlook since the change of government.

Background

The British public sector buys large amounts of food, principally for schools and hospitals. It produces almost a third of all meals prepared by caterers. Quality has often been unsatisfactory: “Meat of low quality with high levels of fat while sausages and processed products have sometimes included too little meat. Fruit and vegetables have been even worse, often arriving at school in poor condition, already wilted and lacking much of their original nutritional value” (Wakeman, 2007, p. 240).

To save money Mrs Thatcher had abolished the nutritional standards put in place in 1944. This has had costly consequences: poorly nourished hospital patients, and a generation of obese children who may face a lifetime of ill-health.

In recent years Britain’s agricultural sector has been in crisis: BSE and foot and mouth disease, import penetration, the stranglehold of the supermarkets and farm incomes falling below the cost of production. The world has entered an era of volatile food prices: Growing demand from India and China and biofuels are mopping up the healthy food surpluses which has kept food cheap for most of the last twenty years. Food production – including transport (“food miles”) – makes a significant contribution to the greenhouse gas emissions which may cause catastrophic global warming.

The Public Sector Food Procurement Initiative (PSPFI) in the UK

Public Sector Food Procurement became the subject of a high profile UK government initiative which was launched in August 2003. Its primary purpose was to encourage public bodies to procure food in a manner that considered the principles of sustainable development. The aims of the PSPFI included to:



- increase the consumption of healthy and nutritious food,
- improve the sustainability of production, processing and distribution,
- increase tenders from small and local producers and offer fair treatment for suppliers,
- increase co-operation among buyers and producers,
- promote organic food, animal welfare and better working conditions for catering staff.

New approach to school nutrition

The introduction of PSFPI coincided with a radical policy shift towards school catering. Jamie Oliver's campaign in 2005 obtained a very high profile for its criticisms of the poor quality of school catering. The government responded by introducing stringent new standards for school meals. These required concentration on nutritious foods and exclusion of junk foods. These new standards were made mandatory for every school and school catering had to change its practices to meet them. Preparation of foods from fresh ingredients increased and heating up of microwaved ready meals diminished.

Limited success of PSFPI

It is difficult to quantify PSFPI's success because it has not been measured or monitored regularly during its lifetime and quantifiable targets were not established at the outset.

There is evidence of limited progress towards PSFPI goals:

- a very slight increase in the proportion of UK food used by government departments,
- increasing availability of healthy food, use of seasonal produce and small producers and co-operation among buyers and producers,
- reduction of packaging energy and water consumption and lower food waste.

The main obstacles to achievement were:

- Buyers lacked required skills.
- The initiative relied on the heroic efforts of enthusiastic individuals for success.
- There was a perceived cost barrier (although Deloitte's research showed that PSFPI had often been implemented with reduced or stable costs).
- The initiative lacked political backing.
- There was no clear definition of "sustainability" or of "local food".
- There were too many objectives and lack of prioritisation.
- Small and local suppliers still found it very difficult to break into public sector supply chains – the tender process was over-complex and contracts, tenders and specifications needed to be standardized between agencies and publicized better.
- Many public sector buyers wanted to reduce the number of suppliers in which case an effort needed to be made to get the larger "tier 1" providers to use small and local suppliers.

- There was unclear ownership of food policy at national level: split between six different departments/agencies.

Policy developments after the change of UK government

The incoming government which has many votes in rural areas has aspirations to re-direct public sector food procurement back to British producers and specify quality and production standards which would support this goal. However the first instinct of the new government might be to reject the new nutrition criteria for school catering as expensive and part of the “nanny state” (see Andrew Lansley’s criticism of Jamie Oliver and healthy school meals (Stamford, 2010)). There was cross-party support for a private members bill put forward by Joan Walley MP – the Public Bodies Sustainable Food Bill. The Bill provides “for the creation of a Code regarding the procurement of sustainable food by public bodies; for the review and development of the Code; for the regulatory enforcement of the Code by public bodies.” (Walley, 2010, p.5). The bill failed to reach a Second Reading in the House of Commons on 14th November 2010 due to lack of parliamentary time. It will be debated again on 21st January 2011.

The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is now consulting on proposals to introduce mandatory basic health and sustainability standards for food bought by central government and its agencies. These proposals are criticized by food campaigners for being extremely limited. They will exclude vital parts of the public sector, including hospitals, and will not cover two thirds of the food bought with public money. Where Government Buying Standards for public sector food are to be introduced, they will be weak. For example, the current proposals will only ensure that half of the food served meets the Food Standard Agency’s salt recommendations, while all eggs purchased can be from caged hens and 40% of seafood from endangered stocks.

A European perspective

European Green Public Procurement (GPP) regulations do permit countries to take sustainability into account in food procurement decisions and there are several possible ways for central governments and local and regional authorities alike to promote more sustainable food in practice.

As regards relevant initiatives by central governments – following relevant recommendations by the European Commission already in 2003¹ – most EU member states have already developed national action plans (NAPs) to promote GPP (EC, 2010). The product category “catering services and food” is usually defined as one of the priority product categories for GPP in these NAPs.²

Illustrative examples of quantitative targets defined in GPP NAPs of selected EU member states to promote more sustainable food consumption in the public sector are provided in the textbox below.

¹ The European Commission called member states to develop national action plans to promote GPP in its Communication on Integrated Product Policy (IPP) (EC, 2003).

² Especially in those adopted lately, after the publication of the Commission’s Communication on GPP (EC, 2008), in which priority product categories for GPP in the EU were defined, including catering services and food.

Illustrative examples of national targets to promote more sustainable food in the public sector**Austria**

There is general obligation for procurement entities at the federal level to procure sustainable products, including the product category catering and food, according at least the EU core GPP criteria. Mandatory quantitative targets for the federal level will be defined by 2012, based on the monitoring period between 2010 and 2012. There are recommendations for regional authorities and municipalities to adopt similar goals. (EC, 2010; Lebensministerium, 2010)

Belgium

According to the Federal Action Plan for Sustainable Procurement for the period 2009-2011, 50% of public procurement at the federal level must meet national GPP criteria by 2011 in six product categories, amongst them food and catering. In the Flemish region the target that 100% of public procurement must meet national GPP criteria was set. (CIDD, 2009; EC, 2010).

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, as a follow up to the National Action Plan on Sustainable Development (2003) the federal government made a pledge to achieve 100% GPP according to national criteria, including the product category catering and food, the latest by 2010. The target for provinces was defined as 50% by 2010 and 100% by 2015 and for municipalities 75% by 2010 and 100% by 2015. (EC, 2010).

Finland

According to the resolution by the Finnish Government "Sustainable Choices in Public Procurement" (2009), the amount of organic, vegetable-based or seasonal food purchased for public food services across the country will be increased in two steps: such food will be available in all public canteens at least once a week in 2010 and at least twice a week by 2015. In addition, the targets that 70% of procurement by central government is "sustainable" according to national criteria by 2010 and 100% by 2015 were set. Municipalities and local state government are encouraged to achieve 25% by 2010 and 50% by 2015. (Ymparisto, 2009; EC, 2010).

France

According to the Green Public Procurement Policy and National Action Plan of France for the time period 2007-2010 (updated in 2010), in order to foster the wider distribution of organic food in society, by 2012 the latest catering facilities run by the state at all levels must ensure that at least 20% of their menus consist of organic farm products. (MEDD, 2010).

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Projects

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

Kindling Trust: www.kindling.org

Website links

European Commission green public procurement - food and beverages:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/food_products_and_beverages_en.htm

EU Green Public Procurement Toolkit Food:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/pdf/toolkit/food_GPP_product_sheet.pdf

Good Food for Our Money Campaign: <http://www.sustainweb.org/goodfoodforourmoney/>

World Wildlife Fund Food Campaign Better food for people and nature

http://www.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/campaigning/food_campaign

You fund it, government buys it and we all pay: <http://www.sustainweb.org/publications/?id=184>