

Local and sustainable food buying: new ideas to help British farmers

A practical route to delivering the government's 50% procurement commitment

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Executive summary

This report sets out how the government can deliver its commitment to source 50% of public sector food from local suppliers or those meeting higher environmental standards (HES).

Public procurement is a powerful tool to support farming, improve food security and drive progress on nature and climate.

It recommends that the government:

- Set the 50% target in policy with a clear delivery timetable
- Strengthen and mandate Government Buying Standards for Food (GBSF)
- Prioritise HES and support local supply chains
- Aligns procurement with farming, land use and environmental policy

Delivering these actions would strengthen domestic food production, support rural economies, improve public sector food and ensure public spending contributes to wider government priorities.

The report provides evidence from the UK and internationally showing that more sustainable and local procurement can be delivered within existing budgets and systems when supported by the right policy framework.

A phased approach, combined with investment in supply chains and skills, will be necessary to enable supply to grow alongside demand, so making an early start on this commitment is essential to make strong progress during the remainder of this Parliament.

Successful delivery of the 50% procurement target would deliver meaningful progress towards a more resilient, sustainable and equitable food system, with clear benefits across economic, environmental and social outcomes.

1. The opportunity: Using sustainable local food procurement to deliver government priorities

The impact of public sector food procurement extends well beyond how food is purchased and served. Decisions about sourcing and standards shape outcomes across the wider food system, influencing local economic activity, the resilience of farming and environmental performance. The chapter that follows explores how procurement can support the delivery of multiple government objectives.

Public procurement as a strategic lever

Public sector food procurement represents a significant and underused lever for delivering the government's priorities on growth, food security and environmental sustainability. Each year, around £5 billion is spent on food across the public sector¹ shaping demand across supply chains that reach farmers, processors and catering suppliers nationwide. We have minimal public information on how much of this spend already goes on food with 'higher environmental standards' such from certified LEAF or organic producers, but it may only be in the low millions. Yet, how this spending is directed can directly influence the viability of farm businesses, the strength of local economies and the environmental impact of food production.

Used strategically, public procurement can help align public spending with wider policy objectives, supporting a transition towards more sustainable farming, strengthening domestic supply chains and improving resilience in the food system. It offers a practical mechanism for government to translate its existing commitments into tangible outcomes across multiple policy areas.

Supporting economic growth and rural economies

Local food should, by definition, be geographically constrained. By increasing demand through procurement, business opportunities can be created across regions where food is grown and processed, including in areas with weak economic activity. Without this, large-scale and national catering companies and wholesalers are more likely to source food from national or international suppliers, limiting benefits to SMEs and local economies.

Evidence shows that local sourcing can generate strong economic multiplier effects. Research by the New Economics Foundation found that, in Plymouth and Nottingham, every £1 spent on local ingredients in school meals generated an additional £0.85 to £1.19 in local economic activity.² More recent work by Sustain and Aberdeen City Council found £1 spent on locally sourced food generated £1.66 in Scotland; with local processing infrastructure in place, this

could have increased to £1.96.³ Across the wider pilot, £2.10 of combined public and customer investment in local fruit, vegetable and pulse supply chains delivered £9.46 in total benefits, including £1.44 to the local economy.⁴

In contrast, procurement through non-local supply chains is more likely to see economic value flow out of an area and be spent elsewhere in the UK or abroad. Increasing local food trade therefore has the potential to support local and rural economies by retaining value in the region and directing investment to areas where economic activity is weaker.

Supporting farm viability and fair returns

Public procurement can play an important role in improving the viability of farm businesses and SMEs. In the current food system, buyer power is concentrated among a handful of retailers (mainly nine major supermarket chains) and processors, leaving farmers with limited bargaining power to secure fair prices, and many operating at cost or minimal profit.

Evidence from Sustain shows that producers of a range of staple foods (such as cheddar, beefburgers, bread, apples and carrots) receive very low returns, with profits typically less than 1%.⁵

Conversely, shorter, more local supply chains offer producers a way to retain a greater share of the food pound. Supplying directly into markets through public procurement can support SME farm businesses to diversify into processing to add value and become more financially resilient.

Strengthening local procurement can also support a shift towards more sustainable farming systems. Agroecological and regenerative approaches typically have greater crop and livestock diversity and can be less well suited to the mainstream commodities market, where accepted produce is often standardised. Public procurement contracts can help create stable demand for these products locally, opening up new routes to market and supporting the transition to more sustainable forms of production.

Delivering environmental and climate outcomes

Aligning public spending with environmental and climate objectives represents a key opportunity to accelerate the transition to more sustainable farming systems. Significant investment is already being made to support this shift. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is planning to spend over £8 billion on sustainable farming and nature recovery between 2026 and 2030, with the majority earmarked for Environmental Land Management schemes in England.⁶ This is alongside further government funding for Landscape Recovery projects to improve biodiversity, water quality and flood resilience. However, the

scale of need remains substantial, with estimates suggesting that at least £2.4 billion per year is required to meet environmental targets over the next decade.⁷

Public food procurement is not currently aligned with these wider government objectives. As a result, it continues to support conventional farming approaches that contribute to soil degradation, biodiversity loss, greenhouse gas emissions, and air and river pollution.

Increasing the proportion of food procured to higher environmental standards would help address this gap. Redirecting half of the existing public food spending towards producers meeting recognised higher environmental standards would support the transition to more sustainable farming practices. It could, we estimate, invest an extra £0.9 to £1.1 billion annually in buying food, which contributes to key environmental and climate goals.⁸

Strengthening food system resilience

Improving the resilience of the UK's food system is increasingly urgent, alongside its long-term sustainability. A 2026 government national security assessment advised that 'significant increases in UK food system and supply chain resilience' are needed to avoid hunger, conflict and political instability in the future decline and crop failures.⁹

The National Preparedness Commission's 2025 Just in Case report identified the need to shift from a 'just-in-time' approach to food distribution and logistics towards a 'just-in-case' model. This would include building community capacity at regional and local levels to produce and process food for times of crisis, supporting more decentralised food production, and making better use of land around urban areas for food growing.¹⁰

Given that the Just in Case report forms part of the evidence base for the government's Food Strategy Action Plan, there is an opportunity to include policies to support:

- Investment in catering facilities and staff skills in schools, hospitals, care homes, prisons and other public institutions to rebuild capacity to prepare food communally in a crisis.
- More distributed regional and sub-regional food supply chains that reduce reliance on a small number of national supply chains, which may be vulnerable to disruption.¹¹
- Addressing the UK production gap (in vegetables, fruit and pulses) and securing high-quality land close to urban areas for growing,¹²

The example of Wales (case study below) shows how these three points can be practically integrated.

Case study: Welsh vegetables in schools – building local supply chains

Through Sustain's Bridging the Gap programme, Food Sense Wales and supplier Castell Howell have worked with schools to increase the use of locally grown organic vegetables in school catering. With Welsh Government support, the programme now reaches half of Welsh local authorities, involving five suppliers and over 400 schools, and has delivered one million portions of organic produce in a year.

Cost increases have been minimal, estimated at 1.7p to 3.3p (or 0.5% to 1.1%) per meal. They supply organic veg, typically carrots, broccoli and cucumbers, at a 25% discount with the gap funded to give growers a fair price. Benefits include guaranteed markets for growers, leading to a 20% increase in land farmed for growing nature-friendly produce compared to 2022.¹³

2. What should the government do now?

The government has committed to increasing the proportion of public-sector food sourced locally or to higher environmental standards. With the Land Use Framework and the 25-Year Farming Roadmap recently published, and the Food Strategy Action Plan now in development, there is a timely opportunity to translate this commitment into policy and delivery. The following four actions set out practical steps that can be taken within this Parliament to align public procurement with wider objectives on food security, economic growth and environmental sustainability.

2a. Set the 50% procurement target in policy

The forthcoming Food Strategy Action Plan provides an immediate opportunity to formalise the government's manifesto commitment to source 50% of public sector food from local suppliers or those meeting higher environmental standards.¹⁴

Establishing this target in policy would provide clarity and direction across the public sector and signal long-term demand to producers. This is particularly important given current imbalances in the UK food system, including low domestic production of fruit and vegetables.¹⁵ The UK production of fruit and vegetables is, at around 15% and 57% of UK total demand, respectively, far lower than for other foodstuffs. Worse still, despite this deficit, CPRE analysis of government data (2011 to 2023) shows the UK vegetable area in open fields fell by 17% and by 33% in under-cover areas.¹⁶ This will require:

- Using the Food Strategy Action Plan to formalise the target and set a clear delivery timetable, including interim milestones.
- Applying the target consistently across the full public sector, including schools, hospitals and local authorities.
- Setting out cross-government responsibilities for delivery across all government departments.
- Aligning the target with wider policy objectives on health, food security and sustainable land use, including increasing consumption of fruit, vegetables and plant-based proteins.
- Establishing mechanisms to monitor progress, report on delivery and evaluate wider impacts on local economies, job creation, business innovation and sustainable land management, supporting ongoing assessment and improvement of the policy.¹⁷
- Identifying and allocating the necessary funding to support implementation and supply chain development.

2b. Strengthen and mandate government buying standards for food

The Government Buying Standards for Food (GBSF) provide an important framework for public sector food procurement, but they are not consistently applied across the full public sector or enforced where they do apply.

In practice, this has led to variation in standards, limited monitoring of outcomes and a continued emphasis on cost over quality. Strengthening and mandating the GBSF will be essential to ensure that public procurement supports higher environmental standards, healthier diets and more sustainable supply chains.¹⁸

This will require:

- Revising the GBSF to ensure they support delivery of the 50% procurement target in a unified, consistent way across the whole public sector, including central government departments and schools, and local, unitary, combined and mayoral authorities.
- Introducing more ambitious minimum standards for all public sector meals, aligned with a healthy and sustainable diet and higher environmental standards.
- Establishing and mandating a clear requirement within procurement processes to balance cost and quality, including stipulating weightings (for example, 10% social value, 40% cost and 50% quality) to support higher quality, sustainably produced food.
- Mandating the application of GBSF across the public sector and placing them on a statutory footing, similar to school food standards, to ensure consistent implementation.
- Strengthening monitoring, reporting and enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance and track progress against policy objectives.

2c. Prioritise food produced to higher environmental standards and support local supply chains

Increasing the proportion of food sourced to higher environmental standards (certified through recognised schemes including LEAF or organic certification), alongside strengthening local supply chains, will be central to delivering more sustainable and resilient public food procurement.

This requires both a shift in demand and the development of supply-side capacity. At present, gaps in infrastructure, skills and investment limit the ability of small and medium-sized producers to access public procurement markets and scale up sustainable production.

This will require:

- Investing in local and regional food infrastructure, including facilities for aggregation, processing, storage and distribution, to address gaps in supply chains and support SMEs.¹⁹
- Supporting the viability of key sectors, such as livestock, by improving access to local processing, including sustaining and expanding smaller abattoirs, which have declined significantly in number.^{20 21 22}
- Enabling growth in sectors aligned with healthier and more sustainable diets, including horticulture and grain-growing, through investment in on-farm infrastructure, processing machinery and storage.²³
- Providing more stable and long-term funding to support rural development and local food systems, building on previous programmes that enabled investment in local businesses and supply chains.^{24 25}
- Strengthening public sector catering capacity, including investment in kitchens, workforce skills and menu planning, to support the use of fresh, seasonal and minimally processed ingredients.²⁶
- Adapting procurement and contracting approaches to improve access for smaller suppliers and support shorter, more local supply chains.

Case studies: Bath and North East Somerset and Bury – dynamic procurement in action

Bath and North East Somerset Council has introduced a dynamic purchasing system for school food procurement, enabling contracts to be fulfilled by a mix of suppliers, including SMEs. This approach allows suppliers to move in and out of the system depending on availability, thereby overcoming barriers associated with traditional framework contracts, such as stringent pre-qualification requirements and limited tender windows. By partnering with a local delivery hub and an online platform, the council has been able to efficiently manage supply from multiple producers. The contract, awarded in 2016 for five years at a value of £700,000 per annum, demonstrates how procurement can be redesigned to support local supply chains and SME participation.^{27 28}

Bury Council has also used a dynamic purchasing system to award £5.6 million in school catering contracts to small, local food providers. This approach has enabled the council to meet quality requirements for school meals at a lower cost.²⁹

2d. Align procurement with wider farming and land use policy

Delivering this shift in public food procurement will require alignment between public procurement and wider policies on farming, land use and environmental management. A coordinated, cross-government approach will be needed to ensure that supply can respond to increased demand while supporting a transition to more sustainable forms of production.

This will require:

- Ensuring that delivery of the 25-Year Farming Roadmap builds on the Organic Action Plan and other procurement commitments to drive growth in LEAF, organic and other agroecological production systems, including sustainable horticulture, to meet future procurement demand.³⁰
- Strengthening the Sustainable Farming Incentive to support a whole-farm approach to sustainable production, including baseline assessment and monitoring of environmental outcomes to build the evidence base for expanding sustainable food supply.
- Using the next iteration of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to identify and more robustly protect high-quality agricultural land as critical national infrastructure for long-term food security, resilience and sustainable food production.
- Supporting the adoption of proven procurement models across the public sector, building on UK experience such as Bath and North East Somerset where dynamic procurement has enabled greater use of local suppliers and more flexible sourcing.
- Expanding the use of shared tools and platforms, such as the Crown Commercial Service's Buying Better Food and Drink platform, to simplify access to a wider range of suppliers and support consistent application of standards and implementation across the public sector.³¹
- Strengthening knowledge exchange, leadership and capability within procurement teams to support cultural and operational change, including adapting menus, supply chains and sourcing practices.³²
- Taking a multi-faceted, coordinated, cross-government approach to delivery, drawing on international best practice, particularly the Danish model, which combined procurement policy with support for producers, supply chains and skills development.³³

While most of the recommendations above can be delivered within this Parliament, a policy alignment sustained over a much longer period will be essential to progress delivery of the 50% target.

3. Policy barriers and how they can be overcome

Delivering this shift in public food procurement will require coordinated action across policy, procurement systems and supply chains. This section outlines the key enablers needed to support effective implementation, including policy alignment, leadership, data and practical delivery mechanisms.

Providing clear leadership and direction on delivery

While the government's Industrial Strategy acknowledges the agri-food sector and advances in biology linked to food supply, there is scope to more fully recognise the role of farming and food production in delivering sustainable growth and supporting a wider green economy.^{34 35} By embedding public procurement more clearly within this agenda, the government can connect food policy with broader economic and environmental priorities.

Similarly, greater integration of wider food policy will be important.

The Defra Food Strategy takes a food system perspective but does not include the role of public procurement in shaping demand and supporting local and sustainable food systems. Building on progress made in the 2050 Farming Roadmap, the forthcoming Food Strategy Action Plan is a critical opportunity to ensure that procurement is recognised as a key delivery mechanism within the wider Food Strategy.

Leadership across these policy areas will be needed to ensure a coordinated approach and to maximise the contribution of public procurement to national priorities on food security, economic development and environmental sustainability.

Establish a clear baseline for public food procurement

An up-to-date understanding of food spend across the public sector will be essential to support effective policy development and delivery. At present, there is no comprehensive robust recent assessment of how much is spent on food across the public sector or how that spending is distributed. Establishing a reliable baseline is a vital first step to enabling the government to set a meaningful target and put in place appropriate funding and delivery mechanisms to achieve it.

Improved data would also enhance understanding of the wider economic, social and environmental impact of public food procurement. Existing estimates of total spend vary significantly. Key literature refers to around £2.4 billion annually,³⁶ while the 2021 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee report cited a figure of over £2 billion,

based on earlier Defra evidence.^{37 38} Adjusting the £2.4 billion figure for inflation suggests that current spending may be closer to £3.94 billion per year.³⁹ More recent estimates, including the Quince Independent Review, suggest that total public sector food procurement could be in the region of £5 billion annually, a figure also referenced in ministerial statements.^{40 41}

Establishing a consistent and transparent baseline would provide a stronger foundation for setting targets, monitoring progress and maximising the impact of public procurement in delivering wider policy objectives.

Strengthened coordination across government policy and procurement

Strong policy direction is essential to support effective delivery of the government's commitment on public food procurement. To date, there has been variation in how the scope of the commitment has been described in political statements. By establishing a coherent and unified approach, the government can provide greater certainty for public bodies and suppliers and support more effective implementation.⁴²

Clear definitions of 'local' and 'sustainable' food are needed

Establishing clear definitions and criteria for 'local' and 'sustainable' food from the outset will be essential to support monitoring, compliance and the overall effectiveness of the 50% procurement target.

Previous commitments in political speeches and the 2024 Labour manifesto by this government have variously referred to food that is 'locally produced', 'sustainable' or 'certified to higher environmental standards' but the terms are rarely defined.^{43 44}

The National Procurement Policy Statement provides a useful foundation, aiming to 'increase the proportion of food purchased across the public sector that is certified to higher environmental standards and which high-quality producers, including local suppliers, are well placed to meet'. There is also an opportunity to build on existing frameworks to establish workable definitions. Sustainable, or higher environmental, standards can align with recognised certification schemes, such as Integrated Farm Management or organic production, and buying standards already referenced by the government.⁴⁵ Using established standards in this way would provide a practical starting point for implementation while ensuring credibility and consistency.

Defining 'local' is complex, but existing policy and practice provide a basis for a practical approach. The previous government's 2022 consultation considered regional and county-based definitions,⁴⁶ while the 2025 UK Food Strategy recognises 'local' as sub-regional, within the UK

food system, 'made up of smaller regional and local food systems'.⁴⁷ Further reform to public procurement to support small businesses (SMEs) and social enterprises was set out in a Cabinet Office consultation running from June to September 2025.⁴⁸ Specifically this proposes large 'contracting authorities' to set their own stretching targets for 3 years for spend with SMEs as well as voluntary and social enterprises, together with annual reporting requirements. Supporting SMEs in procurement suggests that 'local' is not defined solely by geography but by the nature and size of a business. This fits with a more nuanced understanding of food systems, defined as much by 'the kinds of production and trading relationships in which businesses are engaged' as their location.⁴⁹ In practice, a functional definition that reflects both geography and supply chain characteristics may offer the most effective approach.

In the absence of universally agreed definitions, an initial set of proxy criteria could be adopted and refined over time as supply chains develop. This would enable implementation to begin without delay while allowing for flexibility as production, certification and supply capacity expand.

The characteristics of such local food systems include short supply chains, direct-from-producer arrangements, and the type of enterprises that build wealth locally, like social enterprises, cooperatives and SMEs. These are typically the characteristics that drive benefits for farming communities, the economy and the environment.

Overall, a more integrated approach that supports both local supply chains and sustainable production will help ensure that procurement contributes effectively to wider objectives on land use, nature recovery and climate.

Costs and affordability can be managed

Cost is a central consideration in public sector procurement, with evidence showing that price can account for 50-80% of contract evaluation criteria.⁵⁰ This can limit the ability of public bodies to prioritise food quality, sustainability and local sourcing. Moving towards higher environmental standards and more local supply chains may involve some upfront investment, particularly in catering capacity, workforce skills and adapting procurement practices.

However, evidence from both the UK and internationally (in particular, the case study of Denmark set out below) suggests that these costs can be managed and, in some cases, offset over time. Changes to menus, including increased use of seasonal produce and plant-based foods, can reduce overall costs, while improved procurement practices can deliver efficiencies. For example, the Bath and North East Somerset dynamic procurement model has demonstrated that sourcing from local suppliers can achieve cost control through clearer pricing, better management information and intelligent substitution of ingredients.⁵¹

This evidence indicates that cost should not be a barrier to reform. With the right procurement frameworks, investment and support, public bodies can improve food quality and sustainability while continuing to operate within existing or manageable budgets.

Case study: Denmark - delivering higher standards within existing budgets

Denmark's Organic Action Plan (2015) aimed to double the 2007 area under organic production by 2020.⁵² It combined state-funded policy initiatives across finance, organic labelling, supporting producers, the organic supply chain and educating kitchen staff and caterers. A key aspect is the public sector modelling the change to organic on publicly owned land and in public sector kitchens.⁵³ The Government requires public canteens to meet their silver Organic Cuisine Label, meaning that at least 60% (with an aspirational further target of 90%) of food served must be organic. Over 3,200 canteens were certified by 2021, with the city of Copenhagen's public kitchens achieving 90% organic food served.^{54 55} More broadly, experience from Denmark shows that a transition to higher environmental standards can be delivered within existing budgets by reducing food waste, shifting towards seasonal produce and increasing the use of plant-based ingredients. This approach has also delivered wider benefits, such as improved diets and estimated economic gains of around €300 per person.⁵⁶

4. What success looks like

Successful delivery of the 50% procurement target would result in a more resilient, sustainable and equitable food system. This section sets out what this would look like in practice across economic, environmental and social outcomes.

A more resilient food system

A stronger domestic supply of food, particularly fruit, vegetables and plant-based proteins, reducing reliance on imports and improving the UK's ability to respond to future shocks and disruptions.

Stronger farm businesses and rural economies

More stable and fairer returns for farmers and producers, with increased participation of SMEs in public procurement and greater economic activity retained within local and regional economies.

Progress on nature and climate

An expansion of farming systems that support nature recovery, improved soil and water quality, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to national environmental and net zero targets.

Healthier public sector food

Improved quality and nutritional value of meals served across schools, hospitals and other public institutions, supporting healthier diets and better long-term health outcomes This issue is not considered in detail in this report and is covered in work by Sustain and others.

Better use of public spending

Public sector food procurement aligned with wider government priorities, delivering greater value for money through social, economic and environmental benefits.

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¹ The [Independent review of public sector food and drink procurement](#) led by Will Quince MP uses a figure of 'approximately £5 billion a year' May 2024, p2 Foreword.

² NEF, [The Benefits of Procuring School Meals through the Food for Life Partnership: An Economic Analysis](#), 2011, pp.3-4, Cited in RSPB/Sustain, [The Case for Local Food](#), p.11.

³ Sustain, [Bridging the Gap, How to make school food work for children, farmers and planet](#) , March 2026, p.13.

⁴ Sustain, [Bridging the Gap, How to make school food work for children, farmers and planet](#) , March 2026, p.7, based on analysis by Organic Research Centre and University of Portsmouth.

⁵ Jack, L. and Hammans, H. [Unpicking Food Prices: Where Does Your Food Pound Go?](#) Sustain 2022, p.6.

⁶ HM Treasury, [Spending Review 2025: A Commitment to Farming](#), 2025. The June 2025 Comprehensive Spending Review allocated over £8 billion towards sustainable farming and nature recovery from 2026 to 2030. This includes Environmental Land Management schemes, farming innovation and productivity support and dedicated nature schemes.

⁷ Rayment, M. [An Assessment of the Financial Resources Needed for Environmental Land Management in the UK](#), 2023. Report for RSPB, National Trust and Wildlife Trusts.

⁸ See the accompanying statistical note to this briefing in Appendix A. School Food Matters, [Cost of a School Meal](#), 2024, p.27. Analysis of 2024 school meal costs indicates that food ingredients account for approximately 35.8-43.6% of total meal costs (ranging from £1.06-£1.17 per meal out of total costs of £2.68-£2.96 in secondary and primary settings respectively). Applied to an estimated £5 billion annual public sector food spend - The [Independent Review of Public Sector Food and Drink Procurement](#), 2024, p 2 led by Will Quince MP uses a figure of 'approximately £5 billion a year' - this suggests total ingredient spend of £1.79-£2.18 billion so a 50% spend on local/sustainable food could direct £0.895 to £1.09 billion to producers of this food. No comparable data was identified for NHS food procurement spend.

⁹ HM Government, [Global Biodiversity Loss, Ecosystem Collapse and National Security: A National Security Assessment](#), 2026.

¹⁰ Lang, T. Neumann, N. and So, A. [Just in Case: 7 Steps to Narrow the UK Civil Food Resilience Gap](#), National Preparedness Commission, (2025) p.43. See also, Key Recommendations 3 and 12.

¹¹ Lang, T. Neumann, N. and So, A. Just in Case, 2025, p.35.

¹² This would reduce dependency on low lying productive land in the East particularly vulnerable to flooding such as in the Fens - see CPRE, [Building on Our Food Security](#), July 2022, p.11, p.20. Over 84% of grade 1 land and 63% of grade 2 land in the zone 3 flood risk area is in the East Midlands and East Anglia regions, with most in the Fens.

¹³ O’Leary, K / Sustain, Bridging the Gap Dishing up the detail on school food, March 2026 pp14-15, 32-33.(in press)

¹⁴ As a cross governmental strategy this should mean the requisite investment for the development of sustainable local food procurement flows from across Government and not only via Defra.

¹⁵ Stehl, J. et al. [Gap Between National Food Production and Dietary Guidance](#), Nature Food 6, 2025, p. 571-576. The study highlights a mismatch between current UK food production and dietary recommendations. While the UK is broadly self-sufficient in cereals, eggs, dairy, lamb and poultry, increased consumption of fruit, vegetables and pulses is recommended to support healthier and more sustainable diets. However, domestic production of fruit and vegetables remains significantly lower, meeting approximately 15% and 57% of UK demand respectively.

¹⁶ CPRE, [Farming on the edge](#), 2025, p.17 (Table 8). Analysis of UK Government data (2011-2023) shows a decline in domestic vegetable production, with the area under cultivation falling by 17% and total production by 14%, alongside increased reliance on imports and growth in exports.

¹⁷ This may include developing metrics linking procurement to biodiversity, soil health, emissions reduction, and food security outcomes. The government should research whether this could include the contribution of public sector food procurement to national food security and resilience.

¹⁸ The Government Buying Standards more generally are currently under review following consultation via a stakeholder survey and public webinars. [Sustainable procurement: the Government Buying Standards \(GBS\) - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁹ Stahlbrand, L. [Public food procurement as a tool for building food system resilience in the UK](#) Nature Food 6, 2018, p.77–95. The study highlights a long-term trend towards consolidation in farming, processing and distribution, resulting in a ‘missing middle’ in food infrastructure between primary producers and large-scale national supply chains.

²⁰ Brighton and Hove and Wealden Food Partnerships, [The Local Meat Report](#), 2025. NFU, [NFU calls for more support for local abattoirs after latest closure confirmed](#), January 2025. Evidence indicates continued closure of smaller abattoirs, increasing costs and logistical pressures for livestock farmers, and weakening local meat supply chains.

²¹ Sustainable Food Trust, [FSA Call for Evidence: Impact of discounts on charges for official controls for meat](#), March 2025. The number of UK abattoirs has declined from over 2,500 in the 1970s to just over 200 by the mid-2020s, reflecting long-term structural consolidation in the sector.

²² Defra, [Introducing the Smaller Abattoir Fund](#), 2023. The fund provides capital grants to support investment in smaller abattoirs; however, its long-term continuation and impact remain uncertain.

²³ Ehrgartner, U. et al. [Public food procurement as a tool for building food system resilience in the UK](#), Nature Food 6, 2023.

²⁴ Defra, [The Rural Development Programme for England, 2014 to 2020: Final Impact Assessment](#), 2014, p. 23. EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funding, including LEADER programmes, supported local capacity-building and investment in rural businesses, including food processing, marketing and distribution. The UK’s exit from the EU brought an end to these multi-year funding cycles.

²⁵ [Rural England Prosperity Fund: prospectus - GOV.UK](#) ; Prospectus. This funding has since been replaced by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and short-term central government funding pots such as the Rural England Prosperity Fund, granted to eligible local authorities, which may vary in their capacity to utilise funding effectively.

²⁶ Sustain, Bridging the Gap, March 2026 p. 20-21. This shift requires a new approach to public contracting and tendering. While in-house public sector caterers are better placed to support local supply chains, most public contracts in England are operated by large-scale private businesses.

²⁷ Parsons, K. and Barling, D. [What would a transformational approach to food public procurement look like?](#), 2021, p.14. A report for the UKRI Transforming the UK Food System Programme, Food Systems and Policy Research Group, University of Hertfordshire.

²⁸ Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board, [Case Study for the Provision of School Food in Bath & North East Somerset](#), April 2021.

²⁹ Local Government Association [From ground to table: The role of local government in local food and drink supply chains](#), 2024

³⁰ UK Government, Farming Roadmap 2050 Growing England's Future, June 2026 –[Farming Roadmap 2050: Growing England's Future \(accessible version\) - GOV.UK](#)

this has two supportive sections on public food procurement but does not explicitly commit to the 50% manifesto target; it refers to high environmental standards but does not explicitly link this to higher environmental standards defined as certified organic or LEAF marque produce.

³¹ Government Commercial Agency, [Buying Better Food and Drink](#). Michaels, L. and Barling, D. [School meal nutrition and procurement policies in England: governance variability and innovation in implementation settings](#), Front. Sustain. Food Syst. 9:1643778. 2025, p.5, p.11. The online platform acts as a single access point for public sector and other bodies to procure food that meets GBSF requirements from national, regional and SME suppliers.

³² Ryland, D. [Procuring Food for the Future: An assessment of EU and UK food procurement regulations, guidance and sustainability](#), 2020. According to Love British Food, guidance and standards alone are not enough; there is a need for leaders with passion to enthuse staff and build relationships with suppliers. See Love British Food's [Public Sector Influencers Meeting to discuss British Supply Chains](#), 24 March 2024.

³³ Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries of Denmark, [Organic Action Plan for Denmark - Working together for more organics](#), January 2015. The Danish model combined policy initiatives across finance, organic labelling, NGO capacity and public procurement, alongside support for producers, supply chains and catering skills. Delivery included cross-departmental coordination, promotion of organic food in public institutions and an Organic Land Subsidy Scheme.

³⁴ UK Government, [The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy](#), June 2025, pp.35, 55.

³⁵ The Government's Industrial Strategy green paper- Department for Business and Trade, Consultation outcome [Invest 2035: the UK's modern industrial strategy](#) – recently updated (8 May 2026) - set out an ambition to 'support net zero, regional growth, and economic security and resilience' but focused on high growth areas such as advanced manufacturing, professional and business services. While the role of public procurement in driving investment and innovation is recognised, the limited emphasis on food and farming sits in tension with wider policy commitments on food security, resilience and sustainable procurement.

³⁶ Dimbleby, H. [The National Food Strategy: The Plan](#), July 2021, p.160. This refers to the spend on food ingredients – see Appendix A statistical note.

³⁷ House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Public Sector Procurement of Food](#), 2021. [Sixth Report of Session 2019–21 HC469](#), April 2021. They reported an annual spend in 2010 on procuring public food and catering services which totalled £2.4bn.

³⁸ Defra, [Written evidence submitted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs \(PRO0037\)](#), 2021. Cites an estimate of £2.4bn public food procurement spend in 2010.

³⁹ Office for National Statistics, [RPI: Percentage change over 12 months - Food and catering](#), 2025. See time series data from 1988 to 2025; the food and catering index increased from 209.8 (January 2010) to 344.9 (January 2025) giving a coefficient of 1.64 (rounded down) applied to £2.4 billion to give £3.94 billion as a revised estimate. See also Appendix A statistical note.

⁴⁰ [Independent Review of Public Sector Food and Drink Procurement](#), 2024, p.2-5. This uses a figure of ‘approximately £5 billion a year’.

⁴¹ Reed, S. [Speech at Oxford Farming Conference](#), 9 January 2025.

⁴² The current Defra Secretary of State, Emma Reynolds did not make any reference to the food procurement commitment in major speeches to the Food and Drink Federation and Country Land and Business Association (both November 2025) eg see UK Government, [Secretary of State’s Address to CLA Rural Business Conference](#), November 2025.

⁴³ Labour Party, [Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024](#), 2024, p.59

⁴⁴ Reed, S. [Speech at Oxford Farming Conference](#), 9 January 2025.

⁴⁵ [Government Buying Standard for food and catering services - GOV.UK](#) Updated 18 August 2021

⁴⁶ Defra, [Public sector food and catering policy for England The Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services \(GBSF\) Proposed document for June 2022 consultation](#), 2022

⁴⁷ Defra, [A UK government food strategy for England, considering the wider UK food system](#), 2025.

⁴⁸ Cabinet Office, [Public Procurement: Growing British industry, jobs and skills Consultation on further reforms to public procurement CP 1349](#), June 2025: specifically this proposes large ‘contracting authorities’ to set their own stretching targets for 3 years for spend with SMEs as well as voluntary and social enterprises, together with annual reporting requirements.

⁴⁹ RSPB/Sustain, [The case for local food: building better local food systems to benefit society and nature](#), 2021 p.15.

⁵⁰ Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Public sector procurement of food](#), 2021. Cited in Dimbleby, H. [The National Food Strategy: The Plan](#), July 2021, p.254.

⁵¹ Dynamic Food Procurement National Advisory Board, [Case Study for the Provision of School Food in Bath & North East Somerset](#), April 2021, p. 4-5.

⁵² The Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries of Denmark, [Organic Action Plan for Denmark Working together for more organics](#), January 2015 p3.

⁵³ [The Danish Organic Action Plan | One Planet network](#).

⁵⁴ Soil Association, [Organic for All: A Danish success story for organic](#), 2 April 2024.

⁵⁵ Extract from Parsons, K., and Barling, D. (2021) [What would a transformational approach to food public procurement look like?](#) A report for the UKRI Transforming the UK Food System Programme. Food Systems and Policy Research Group, University of Hertfordshire. p10

⁵⁶ Holbeck, P. [Best practice in Organic Public Procurement: The case of Denmark](#), 2020. IFOAM Organics Europe.

Appendix A - Statistical note

Introduction

The briefing section on Delivering environmental and climate outcomes states the following:

“Redirecting half of the existing public food spending towards producers meeting recognised higher environmental standards would support the transition to more sustainable farming practices. It could, we estimate, invest an extra £0.9 to £1.1 billion annually in buying food, which contributes to key environmental and climate goals.”

This statistical note sets out in further detail how this figure was generated.

Caveats and limitations

Most figures of total spend on public food procurement in the literature examined are estimates with no or few references to how the figure was calculated. Some figures referenced are dated. Estimates as reported also refer variously to the cost of public procurement, meaning ingredients and catering services, or the cost of buying the food, so excluding catering services and cost, which increases confusion. The lack of monitoring of public procurement spend means we lack authoritative data to work with. Food procurement research published recently by Defra emphasizes the ‘substantial uncertainty’ of its own estimates due to ‘limited robust data.’¹

Estimates in the public domain

A figure of £2.4 billion is cited by Defra in evidence to EFRA Committee in 2021 as follows:

“In 2010 it was estimated that annual spend on procuring public food and catering services totalled £2.4bn.” This refers to annual total spend on ingredients and catering costs such as on staff and energy

This figure appears elsewhere but, as needs to be made clear, refers to food buying alone not additional catering costs:

- Keir Starmer stated to the NFU Conference, February 2023: “50% of all food purchased by the public sector will be food produced locally and sustainably, That is £1.2 billion of public money spent on quality food that is genuinely better for peoples’ health. And 50% is just the minimum. We will do everything to go beyond it.” This implies a total public spend on food of **£2.4 billion** but limited to **food buying** but **not catering services**.
- The Dimbleby National Food Strategy (2021) refers to (p160): “The Government spends £2.4 billion every year buying food for schools, hospitals, the Armed Forces, prisons and Government offices.” Again, this explicitly does not include catering costs.

A different estimate has been quoted more recently of £5 billion both by the Quince Independent Review (May 2024) and Steve Reed MP when Defra Secretary of State (January 2025).²³ Both of these refer to the £5 billion as the spend on overall **public sector food procurement** ie **both food buying and catering costs**.

How we calculated the figure of ‘an extra £0.9 to £1.1 billion annually’

We decided to use the most recent estimated quotes of £5 billion for overall public sector procurement as used by the Quince Review. A careful reading of the £2.4 billion estimates for food buying within that used by both Keir Starmer and the Dimpleby report do suggest a similar total, depending on the split between food ingredients and catering spend.

To give us greater reassurance about the £5 billion figure we applied food and catering price inflation to the historic figure cited by Defra to the EFRA select committee and referenced in their evidence to generate an inflation adjusted spend for 2025: the ONS RPI food and catering index increased from 209.8 (January 2010) to 344.9 (January 2025) giving a coefficient of 1.64 (rounded down). This coefficient applied to £2.4 billion gives £3.94 billion as a revised estimate.⁴

Taking the £5 billion figure, we wanted to estimate the food buying component of this to assess the potential spend under delivery of a 50% target for buying sustainable local food for public catering. We were unable to find NHS spend data but identified recent School Food Matters data on the costs of school meals and the food share of procurement costs ie excluding catering. We used this school meals data as a proxy for the food ingredient share of wider public sector food procurement spending.⁵ This data uses actual costs on food per meal reported by primary and secondary schools for school meals in 2024:

- The range of spend on food is from £1.06 to £1.17 in primary and secondary respectively of £2.96 and £2.68 total on meals or a range of 35.8 – 43.6% of the overall meal cost.

We’ve used the range of percentages here as a basis for an initial estimate of how much of the £5 billion public sector spend on food procurement could be allocated to the food ingredients and so to sustainable/local food as a 50% share as follows:

Of the £5 billion public sector spend this could mean a spend of £1.79 bn to £2.18 bn on food ingredients in the public sector; so a 50% spend on local/sustainable food could redirect half of this - £0.895 to £1.09 billion to suppliers/ producers of such food via the procurement target.

Recent research

Since this analysis was completed, Defra has published new research by City University and WRAP.⁶ This provides helpful new estimates of the total number of meals served in the public sector as well as an estimate of total spend, which strongly support the £5 billion figure quoted. These are as follows:

“Original estimates of the scale of public sector food service in England suggest that 1.9 billion meals are served per year, with more than 90% being in educational and healthcare institutions. An original estimate of expenditure suggests that £4.9 billion is spent on food and catering services, approximately double an older but much-cited estimate, suggesting that the economic impact of food procurement has been under-appreciated.”⁷

They further note that: “Of this total expenditure, we estimate that around half (52%) is expenditure on ingredients or foodstuffs, about 41% on labour, with remaining costs elsewhere (energy, water, waste treatment, administration and so on)”.⁸

The new research gives breakdowns of meals and costs in different sectors of the public domain: education, healthcare and other including prisons, military and civil service. It appears to omit local authority staff, which could – depending on how broadly public sector is framed – add even further potential.

While the total figure largely underpins the £5 billion estimate, the share of food spend is slightly higher than we calculated – it suggests that using school meals for food cost may be an underestimate as adults tend to eat larger portions than certainly primary school children. If we apply the 52% food share they use to this slightly lower overall estimate of 4.9 billion, a 50% spend on sustainable/local food should be £1.27 billion making our range of £0.9 to 1.1 billion a conservative estimate.

References

¹ “These estimates have substantial uncertainty in some subsectors due to limited robust data identified. The data are particularly uncertain for further and higher education, healthcare staff and civil service office workers.” Section 3.1 Defra, [Sustainable food procurement Summary report](#), May 2024 Version: FO0523; report by City University/WRAP for Defra.

² The [Independent review of public sector food and drink procurement](#) led by Will Quince MP, May 2024

³ [Steve Reed speech at the 2025 Oxford Farming Conference - GOV.UK](#) 9 01 25

⁴ [RPI:Percentage change over 12 months - Food and catering - Office for National Statistics](#) – see Excel time series data from 1988 to 2025

⁵ School Food Matters [COST OF A SCHOOL MEAL Calculating the cost of a healthy and sustainable school lunch](#), 2024, p27

⁶ Defra, [Sustainable food procurement Summary report](#), May 2024 Version: FO0523; report by City University/WRAP for Defra

⁷ Defra 2024, p19; the researchers here refer to A Plan for Public Procurement (2014) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/332756/food-plan-july-2014.pdf and Dimpleby, H. [The National Food Strategy: The Plan](#), July 2021 - although, as noted above, this refers to food spend alone so we believe the total would be much higher.

⁸ Defra 2024, p20