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Public food procurement as a tool for building food system resilience in the UK

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Public institutions, as essential providers of meals to diverse communities, have a responsibility to support sustainable and equitable food systems through strategic procurement policies. By adopting robust sustainability criteria and supporting rural economies, they can strengthen food system resilience. By also ensuring nutritious food is accessible, public-sector catering plays a key role in the transition to a resilient, equitable food future.

Public institutions have the economic leverage to support farmers and food manufacturers who prioritize sustainable practices. Public food procurement — the provision of food in schools, hospitals, care homes, prisons and government offices — accounts for a substantial 5.5% of total UK food sales at £2.4 billion annually[1]. Even in the context of UK schools alone, the importance of public food procurement is evident, with children consuming around 30% of their daily food and drink during the school day[2]. Spending public money on responsibly sourced food can greatly benefit public health, food security and environmental sustainability. This can be achieved by sourcing produce from agroecological farming systems, which are characterized by a holistic approach that integrates ecological principles, reduces input consumption, and enhances biodiversity and soil health while also addressing the social and political dimensions of the food system — with a focus on social equity, community empowerment and food sovereignty[3,4].

The UK government's 2022 initiation of a review process of its public food procurement standards, governed by the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services, represents a critical moment for shaping the UK's commitment to support health, equity and environmental sustainability in the food system. Events in this ongoing process, however, highlight the need for a clear strategic direction and decisive action. Directions from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (DEFRA's) summer 2022 consultation and Keir Starmer's recent pledge to allocate half of public sector food spending to local or environmentally certified food, signal a shift in procurement strategy. However, the May 2024 announcement of the former government in support of the farming and food sectors notably excluded public procurement. Similarly, an independent review of public sector food procurement, conducted by Will Quince and released before the 2024 general election, offered limited impact. Although Quince's recommendations focused on operational improvements such as standardization, innovation and data monitoring to support small- and medium-sized enterprises and farmers, they failed to address broader responsibilities such as public health, social equity and resilience in food systems. As the Labour government implements its commitments, it remains to be seen how effectively these pledges will translate into actionable policies embedding agroecological principles and sustainable food systems. This is especially important given the tendency to frame local and environmental standards as alternatives rather than as interconnected elements of a comprehensive approach, as well as the ambiguity surrounding definitions of 'local' and environmentally certified standards. Institutional meal provision, given its scale and buying power, can enhance the food and farming economy and ensure equitable access to nutritious meals. A robust plan is needed to integrate public food procurement into strategies for a resilient food system, including measures to drive sustainable and equitable food system transformation.

Challenges in short and local supply chains

Short, local supply chains centred around agroecological producers are conducive to resilient food systems. However, owing to economic and political conditions in recent decades, they have not received adequate support in the UK. The dominance of large-scale agribusinesses prioritizing cost efficiency over sustainability, coupled with limited market access and insufficient support for local food initiatives, has diminished the viability of these short, local supply chains, leaving agroecological enterprises struggling to sustain their operations. Extensive research highlights the critical role of the currently missing 'infrastructure in the middle'[5] — facilities to aggregate, process and distribute food — in enabling small- and mid-sized local farmers to reach larger markets without compromising their values or sustainable practices[5,6]. These essential localized 'middle' facilities support collective solutions that are central to agroecological production and foster the re-embedding of food systems within local economies[7]. Both farmers and small- and medium-sized enterprises in the food sector have a keen desire to shorten supply chains and keep food local. However,

owing to a persistent historical lack of investment in critical areas, they encounter substantial challenges in accessing the necessary infrastructure and technology, such as equipment for aggregation, processing, storage and transportation. Issues are evident across the industry, with the number of processing facilities having markedly dropped over recent years. While the decline of small abattoirs has received media and policy attention, independent local grain growers, for example, face similar challenges given the severe lack of cleaning, processing and storage facilities. Farmers and growers, regardless of the type of produce, often face the dilemma of having to sell to the global market unless they transport their goods across the country, which increases costs, carbon emissions and workforce strain, ironically in the effort to keep food supplies as local as possible.

Local producers seeking to supply to public caterers in the current system would encounter considerable constraints owing to a lack of resources such as transport, storage, cooking facilities and skilled staff. Public canteens typically rely on pre-prepared or partially processed foods, prioritizing convenience over cooking from scratch, limiting the demand for fresh, locally sourced ingredients that require more preparation time and resources, which undermines the capacity of small-scale agroecological producers to compete in the public sector procurement system. Furthermore, smaller local suppliers often lack the knowledge and skills coupled with time to compete for public tender contracts. This includes, for example, also knowing when large public sector framework contracts are up for renewal.

Recent research developed against the backdrop of the Bath and north-east Somerset pilot, often cited as a best practice in UK public procurement reform towards the dynamic purchasing approach, has highlighted that local producers face challenges related to the demand for just-in-time supply chains, compounded by a sense of mistrust and perceived inefficiencies in their engagement with public procurement[8]. Dynamic procurement is characterized by flexible contract arrangements that allow institutions to procure in smaller quantities, thereby opening public procurement to a broader range of bidders and enabling them to join or exit as needed. This adaptability, along with contracts that can be tailored over time, enhances responsiveness to fluctuating market conditions. However, it does not provide the stability that suppliers need to foster economic resilience and develop robust local supply chain networks. Local suppliers seek to cultivate reliable buyer relationships as they require stable, long-term contracts to make the investments to scale up and satisfy the demands of institutional caterers. Likewise, many enterprises already practicing and supporting agroecological methods have attempted to serve local communities by working with public institutions — with little success. Often, governmental efforts to establish a platform that allows institutional caterers to connect with local producers, as suggested in Will Quince's review, are hindered by fundamental infrastructural deficiencies at various levels of the system.

Inefficiencies in UK food production and consumption

The UK's food production is inefficient and reliant on imports, failing to provide sustainable and balanced meals in public institutions[9]. Despite more than 70% of the land available being used for agriculture[10], sustainable agroecological methods are almost non-existent, with only 3% of farmland being used for organic production. Most land is dedicated to industrial livestock production, which has severe negative impacts on the environmental sustainability and economic resilience of the food system. Around 40% of UK arable land grows feed grains for industrial livestock, yet 25% of total feed needed is still imported. In 2020, livestock farmers spent £5.6 billion on 30 million tonnes of feed — the largest input cost in UK agriculture, according to DEFRA. Meanwhile, the fresh produce sector remains underdeveloped, supplying just 17% of fruit and 55% of fresh vegetables consumed.

Also, with a view on consumption, the UK food system is highly inefficient with poor nutrition representing a major burden to the NHS. Poor quality school food specifically has a historic legacy in the UK that is strongly intertwined with the principle of tendering out school meal provision to private companies. Going back to the Education Act reform of 1980 (ref. 11), school meals have been treated as a commercial service rather than one focused on the welfare of children. The 1988 Local Government Act reinforced this by mandating competitive tendering that prioritized cost over quality. Consequently, public food procurement often sources lower-standard products, including imported meats and eggs from countries with less stringent regulations, driven by persistent budget constraints. Although Jamie Oliver's advocacy in the mid-2000s brought these issues to the forefront of public consciousness, unhealthy and substandard meals are still widely accepted as the norm, with occasional reports highlighting the poor quality of food served in schools.

In addition to that, the school meals procurement landscape is fragmented, with local authorities, single academies and multi-academy trusts operating independently within the same region. The stranglehold of wholesalers such as Bidfood and Brakes, whose market dominance is reinforced by long-term contracts, can limit the flexibility and choice of buyers. In the context of such institutional diversity and fragmented organization of public sector procurement, each organization sets its own standards and priorities, constrained by budgets and administrative policies. This fragmentation hinders cohesive practices as well as the prioritization of nutritious, sustainable food, and weakens collective buying power.

Existing procurement specifications are both insufficient and poorly monitored. A UK parliamentary inquiry revealed that the Plan for Public Procurement policy had not been audited in 6 years, leaving no evidence of its impact on food service or the supply chain. The only relevant report, from the Department of Health in 2007, showed 48% non-compliance in hospital food[12]. Various exemptions further weaken implementation. Although certification bodies and advocacy groups offer guidance for institutions willing to change, without political backing, local council support and a procurement framework for sustainable food, institutions find it impossible to implement changes, especially with tightening budgets.

Best practice examples in public food procurement do exist. Programmes are also emerging across the country, for example, the Soil Association's Food for Life early years and schools schemes, or the Menus of Change initiative being adopted by several UK colleges and universities. However, only a few local authorities have committed to a cohesive 'whole place' approach. Scotland, with its Good Food Nation legislation, leads in this area by mandating sustainable procurement and food education in public institutions. In England and Wales, similar initiatives such as Food for Life rely on voluntary participation, meaning that for these to succeed, exceptional dedication is needed from individual institutions or food champions, such as school chefs, alongside of the ability and willingness of producers to invest in resources to accommodate institutional requirements.

Pathways to sustainable food procurement

The increase of consumption of sustainably produced foods in the public sector can provide an essential lever for transforming both the

UK's food consumption and production. The effectiveness of public procurement as a strategy for change has been demonstrated in sustainable public kitchens overseas, notably in the Scandinavian countries, where initiatives to increase organic food consumption have led to positive cascading effects throughout the food system[13,14].

Copenhagen's successful conversion to 90% organic food in public kitchens since 2017 reveals a strategic commitment to ecological well-being. Denmark's approach is marked by dedicated conversion management, prioritizing agroecological production and investing in comprehensive training for kitchen staff. By sharp contrast, the UK's approach to change primarily focuses on enabling smaller British producers to join suppliers through an online portal. While streamlining procurement is essential, Copenhagen's example highlights the importance of a more holistic approach — enabling access to organic produce, sourcing seasonally where grown, and empowering kitchen professionals and the wider school community to support and engage in sustainable practices.

Given the UK's current limited capacity for sustainable food production, achieving meaningful sustainability and food security goals necessitates intentional international sourcing in the short to medium term. The UK food system faces not only the challenge of bringing fresh, local and environmentally sustainable food to public institutions but also the need to scale up agroecological production domestically to meet this demand. Public institutions, as stewards of public resources, have a responsibility to support societal goals by adopting sourcing policies that foster local enterprise growth. By prioritizing small- and medium-sized farmers and investment in local infrastructure for aggregation, processing and distribution, public procurement can drive a shift away from purely cost-based supply chains dominated by competitive pricing and externalized costs.

As an initial step to address the complexity and fragmentation in school food procurement, establishing mandatory standards for school food — enforced by existing bodies such as Ofsted potentially working with local authorities and informed by dedicated organizations such as School Food Matters — will be essential. This approach would address inconsistencies in meal quality and sustainability stemming from the fragmented procurement landscape across local authorities and academy trusts. A unified framework will hold all schools accountable to clear benchmarks, streamline procurement practices, leverage collective buying power and ensure consistent standards across diverse school governance structures. To truly improve the UK's food security and ensure equal access to quality food, these standards must go beyond simply supporting the existing local economy and instead be aligned with broader food and farming strategies that actively support UK farmers and growers in transitioning to future-proof, sustainable methods of production. Consequently, the government's commitment to a specific percentage target for sourcing needs to be about foods produced with agroecological production methods in the first place, rather than sourcing from any British (or more local) suppliers.

To assist procurers in identifying agroecological products, establishing clear labelling and certification frameworks is necessary. In the absence of formal agroecological certifications, procurement buyers can use organic products as a practical baseline, as many organic practices share principles with agroecology. Standards could thus include a mandate for sourcing at least 50% of food from organic agriculture. Additionally, collaboration with organizations that advocate for agroecology can further aid in pinpointing suppliers who use agroecological methods, such as agroforestry or advanced soil health practices such as composting, and diverse cropping systems that enhance ecosystem resilience. These partnerships would provide procurement teams with a clearer pathway to identifying and sourcing from producers who meet agroecological standards.

In addition, in order to achieve the goal of sourcing primarily from British farms in the medium and long term, investment in processing, storage and distribution infrastructure is paramount. Although DEFRA currently supports small and mobile abattoirs, efficient local food production requires more comprehensive support. A resilient food system necessitates investment in local food industries beyond livestock, such as grain and vegetable processing facilities. Additionally, these industries require robust transport, storage and distribution infrastructure to ensure products move effectively and safely from farm to table. Establishing local food hubs and cooperatives helps small-scale farmers and producers aggregate their products to supply the quantity and variety needed for institutional catering. This infrastructure is essential to a functional local supply chain in which the quality of local produce is maintained and food waste minimized while products are kept within local markets.

Bringing domestically produced food into public institutions and offering a simplified tendering process to enable smaller suppliers to penetrate public sector markets, as suggested in current government reviews, can be beneficial for local producers. However, year-round, large-scale supply of uniform goods is fundamentally at odds with agroecological principles, which emphasize the adaptation of crops and livestock to local environmental conditions, biodiversity and seasonal variability. Transitioning to local (therefore seasonal) and sustainable (therefore inconsistent) public procurement also requires public institutions to be stable, reliable and adaptive buyers. To enable public procurement sourcing from agroecological suppliers, institutional caterers need to buy into a process rather than a set of products — they need to commit to supporting the growth and development of sustainable practices over time, rather than just selecting available products as needed. Simplified tendering alone will therefore not suffice if local farmers cannot depend on the government as a consistent buyer. Adaptability in procurement further necessitates that public kitchens have the facilities and staff knowledge to cook from scratch and plan meals according to seasonal availability. Upgrading public kitchens and training their staff to handle fresh, seasonal produce demands considerable initial investment. However, in the long term, this approach reduces costs owing to higher staff satisfaction and the economic benefits of purchasing in-season produce, as well as by promoting public health.

As an immediate effect of the government committing to a percentage target of food from agroecological production systems for the public sector, security and economic stability can be provided for both farmers committed to sustainable practices and the food manufacturers who source from these farmers. Reliability demonstrated by public buyers enables UK farmers and businesses to commit to future-proof production methods, while gradually increasing their contributions to the public food supply. Moreover, by serving healthier meals, public institutions can directly address food inequality, enhance public health, reduce healthcare costs and improve overall productivity.

In the medium to long term, focusing public food procurement on fresh, seasonal agroecological products generates widespread economic, ecological and public health benefits. Increased demand for these products encourages more farmers to adopt sustainable practices, improving soil quality, ecosystem health and crop resilience, while reducing environmental impacts such as pollution and greenhouse gas emissions — improving security and resilience across

the food system[15]. Establishing agroecological food as a standard option in public institutions helps create a ripple effect; as these foods become more visible in schools, hospitals and government facilities, consumers will gradually become more familiar with them and better understand their advantages. In addition, educational initiatives, promotional campaigns and community engagement efforts can facilitate this transition, enhancing public knowledge of agroecological practices and their benefits. As the public becomes more accustomed to and aware of the benefits of agroecological food, private sector demand will also rise, prompting further transitions to sustainable farming. This shift will further benefit rural communities by creating meaningful jobs in production, processing, distribution and food preparation, strengthening food security and supply chain resilience.

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