



the national organisation
for local economies

Feeding the future

A roadmap for a sustainable, healthy
and local food economy in Sheffield

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About CLES

Established in 1986, we are an independent charity working towards a future where local economies benefit people, place and the planet. This will happen when wealth and power serve local people, rather than the other way around, enabling communities to flourish. We have an international reputation for our pioneering work on community wealth building and are recognised as the curators of the movement in the UK.



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Executive summary



The local public sector in Sheffield spends £14m on food every year, but two-thirds of that is spent with large national suppliers based outside of the city. How can we change that? And why should we?

The procurement of food by our local anchor institutions – schools, hospitals, universities and the like – is a complex but vital topic, bringing together diverse policy areas including health, the food industry and agriculture. Our current food system is reliant on unsustainable practices by extractive, shareholder-oriented companies and is delivering soaring food bank use, childhood obesity and unequal health outcomes. The government’s commitments – to reforming procurement rules in favour of SMEs, insourcing public services and sourcing at least 50% of the £5bn of national public sector food spend from within the UK – at least partially seek to address this sorry state of affairs and form a supportive backdrop to this project.

There are many obstacles to buying food locally, ranging from constraints among anchor institutions to deficiencies in local supply. However, this report sets out a roadmap of interventions that food system actors in Sheffield can follow to deliver healthy, sustainable and local food to their communities.

To develop the roadmap, CLES worked with the University of Sheffield and ShefFood, a cross-sector food partnership in the city, to understand how and where the city’s hospitals, universities, schools and colleges were buying their food.

What we learned

The data revealed that universities spent the highest share of their food spend with locally based suppliers (42%), followed by hospitals (38%) and then schools and colleges (27%).

Interviews with procurement and catering managers revealed that university catering departments had the greatest flexibility on procurement processes, as well as greater ambition and focused efforts to source locally. By contrast, hospitals faced strong incentives to procure via the NHS’s national procurement system. School catering is outsourced, with food procurement managed by a private sector contractor in line with contract standards specified by the City Council.

We identified many restrictions on anchor institutions in procuring more local, sustainable and healthy food, although chief amongst these were budget and capacity constraints. Despite these obstacles, some success has been seen in procuring food from local suppliers including coffee, milk and dairy products, fruit and vegetables, bakery products, meat and cheese. In one notable case, a local

dairy was able to borrow capital for operational expansion on the strength of a university's four-year purchasing commitment.

Local suppliers who engaged with this research were generally interested in developing their business with the public sector as a reliable source of demand and called for more opportunities to meet and build trust with anchor buyers, simplified tender processes and long-term purchasing commitments which acknowledge the wider economic benefits of purchasing locally.

What can be done?



At the heart of the short, medium and long-term measures presented in our roadmap of interventions for food system actors in Sheffield is the need for deeper collaboration among the city's anchor institutions. Working together to develop a greater sense of shared ambition, better data collection and information sharing with suppliers around their demand for healthy, sustainable and local food is fundamental to changing the picture we saw in the city.

Quick wins could be achieved by focusing on products where local supply is strongest, making use of the existing infrastructure of large national suppliers and framework agreements. Initiatives to introduce anchor buyers to local suppliers, forge strategic partnerships between suppliers and develop best practice procurement guides for anchors should also be pursued in the short-term.

In the medium-term, anchor institutions could collaboratively revise their menus (informed by local context such as the availability of food supply, capacity in kitchens and city-wide health and sustainability priorities). This could be linked to a Sheffield-wide buying standard co-developed by anchor institutions, potentially building on Sheffield City Council's school food contract standards. Intentional use of space by anchors to promote less extractive food systems – whether giving space in universities and hospitals to social enterprises at peppercorn rents, or allocating Council-owned land to regenerative agriculture – should also be considered.

With the current Sheffield schools catering contract due to expire in July 2025, there is an opportunity for a review of the commissioning process. Other longer-term interventions to consider include closer and more formal collaboration between anchor institution buyers via a consortium which could eventually result in shared catering facilities, and between producers in the form of a virtual or physical hub.

Introduction



Project background

The food system is a significant component of local economies, spanning primary production, manufacturing, processing, wholesale, retail and hospitality. Currently, however, the UK food system is heavily reliant on imported food, fossil fuels and large multinational corporations.

As such, it encapsulates many of the failings and dysfunctions of the prevailing economic model: fossil fuel dependent, capital intensive, environmentally destructive, exploitative, and concentrating ownership, wealth and power through market concentration at the expense of producers, workers, communities and the environment. The resulting human consequences of the UK food system as it currently stands include food poverty, soaring reliance on food banks, childhood obesity and unequal health outcomes.

However, food has massive potential to be a powerful lever for progressive local economic change, and to drive improvements in social, cultural, environmental, health and wellbeing outcomes. Recognising this, organisations across Sheffield – local public agencies, businesses, individuals, academic and community organisations – are working together via the Sheffield Food Partnership (SheffFood),¹ to create a more sustainable and healthy food system.

This includes a recognition that the combined food procurement spend of local public sector institutions could support businesses and workers around Sheffield through increased demand for local produce and improved employment outcomes. Understanding the power of local anchor institutions² – such as local authorities, hospitals, universities, colleges and others – as economic agents capable of rewiring local economies to be fairer is core to the community wealth

¹ The SheffFood Partnership is a cross-sector collaboration of public institutions, businesses, community organisations and academic institutions in Sheffield. Its goal is to create a more sustainable, equitable and resilient food system for the city that works for people and planet. See [Sheffod.org.uk](https://sheffod.org.uk) for more details.

² The term “anchor institutions” is used to refer to organisations which have an important presence in a place, usually through a combination of: being largescale employers, the largest purchasers of goods and services in the locality, controlling large areas of land and/or having relatively fixed assets. They are also tied to a particular place by their mission, histories, physical assets and local relationships. Examples include local authorities, NHS trusts, universities, trade unions, large local businesses, the combined activities of the community and voluntary sector and housing associations. For more on anchor institutions, see CLES. (2024). How to Build an Anchor Network. [Link](#).

building approach.³ As the leading organisation for community wealth building in the UK, CLES provides both thought and practice leadership in this growing movement for economic change. Procurement is the focus of this study but is only one of five core ways in which community wealth building can be operationalised – we have given consideration to the others (ownership, employment, finance, land/assets) wherever possible but further work could explore these in more depth.

Project aims and approach

CLES worked with the University of Sheffield and ShefFood to deliver this research, contributing to ongoing efforts to transform the local food system in Sheffield by leveraging the power of public procurement to increase the health and sustainability of Sheffield's food supply.⁴ Anchor institutions participating in the research were Sheffield Health & Social Care NHS Trust (SHSC), Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (STH), University of Sheffield catering service (UNICUS), Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) catering service, Sheffield Colleges and Taylor Shaw, the company delivering the schools catering contract for Sheffield City Council.

The project approach consisted of:

- **Demand side assessment:** working with anchor institutions to understand current expenditure and procurement practices on food. This included interviews with procurement and catering managers at six anchor institutions and reviewing relevant organisational strategies and documents. A spend analysis on food procurement data was also conducted.
- **Supply side assessment:** working with local food producers to assess their capacity to supply the public sector. This consisted of collecting data from external providers on local businesses and organisations involved in food supply, before conducting a bespoke survey and then focus groups with key local producers. A directory of suppliers was also developed.
- **Bridging the gap:** designing intervention options through a co-design workshop with research participants to be developed into a roadmap to start bridging the gap between demand and supply, with final outputs being launched at a public event.

³ CLES. (2025). Community wealth building. [Link](#).

⁴ Public procurement refers to the process by which public authorities – such as local authorities, hospitals and universities – purchase goods or services from other organisations.

Definitions of healthy, sustainable and local food

Existing definitions

In the relevant literature, the extent to which food is healthy has received the most focus to date, with a range of definitions and standards in use. The sustainability of food is a growing area of interest for policymakers and researchers, while “local” food is less commonly discussed and less easily defined.

The National Food Strategy (2021) is the most commonly cited source in debates on healthy and sustainable food in the UK.⁵ The report recommends the development of a new “Reference Diet” by the Food Standards Agency and other public scientific bodies, suggesting this would be likely to recommend “serving less meat and dairy and more wholegrains, fruit, vegetables and pulses, to maximise the health and sustainability of the food served”.⁶

A 2024 House of Lords committee report summarises the state of play on healthy food.⁷ It notes scientific consensus that a diet high in fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds and whole grains as well as fibre and low in foods high in fat, salt and sugar supports health and helps protect against diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, stroke and cancer. The UK government publishes dietary recommendations setting out reference intakes for energy and nutrients, based on evidence from the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN). The Eatwell Guide published in 2016 offers dietary advice to the public, setting out what proportions of different food groups should be eaten to meet the dietary recommendations. For regulatory purposes, the least healthy foods – those high in calories, fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) – are defined by the UK Nutrient Profiling Model (NPM).⁸

The sustainability of food is usually considered in relation to the environmental impact of its production and distribution in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, soil health, biodiversity, etc. For instance, one third of global GHG emissions comes from the food system.⁹ However, unlike in the area of health, there are not clearly agreed frameworks or definitions for the sustainability of food. The Sheffield Food Strategy, authored by Sheffield City Council in consultation with local food system partners, envisions a “greener” food system as one where:

⁵ In 2018 the then DEFRA Secretary of State, Michael Gove, commissioned Henry Dimbleby to conduct an independent review, which is usually referred to as the National Food Strategy although it was never adopted as government policy.

⁶ DEFRA. (2021). National Food Strategy: The Plan. [Link](#).

⁷ House of Lords. (2024). Food, Diet and Obesity Committee. Report of Session 2024–25. Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system. [Link](#).

⁸ NPM scores food and drink according to their overall nutritional composition. Points are awarded for unhealthy qualities (e.g. energy density, saturated fat, sugar and salt) and for healthy qualities (e.g. fruit, vegetables and nut content, fibre and protein). A score is calculated by subtracting the healthy points from the unhealthy points. Foods which score over 4 points and drinks which score over 1 are defined as HFSS.

⁹ Crippa et al. (2021). Food systems are responsible for a third of global anthropogenic GHG emissions. [Link](#).



Food is produced and transported in a way that minimises damage to the environment. Agroecological principles are followed to regenerate degraded farmland and improve biodiversity. Artificial chemical inputs are reduced and supply chains are shortened through a focus on diets based around seasonal and locally-grown produce.

Wastage is minimised at all stages of the food system and surplus redistribution initiatives are recognised for the role they play in both environmental sustainability and social justice. Nutrient-recovery is promoted through a programme of food waste composting.¹⁰



Sustainability and localism are often mentioned in the same breath, on the basis that food sourced locally means lower food miles and carbon emissions from transportation. Debate continues over the extent to which emissions from transportation compare to those from production, with huge differences by product, production techniques and transportation methods. Li et al (2022) found that transporting food creates triple the amount of emissions as previously estimated – 6% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions – and nearly 20% of total food-systems emissions.¹¹

Again, no clear framework is available to determine what counts as local. ShefFood’s Local Food Action Plan for Sheffield defined local as food that is produced in South Yorkshire, with a more general call for shortening supply chains as much as possible – e.g. encouraging food grown in Sheffield or surrounding peri-urban areas.¹² In contrast, other definitions of local refer to food originating anywhere in the UK, such as the Labour Party proposal mentioned in the policy section below.

Definitions for this project

A “framing ambition” workshop sought to develop a shared understanding about key terms and priorities to guide the project. While it was determined that we did not seek to agree on strict definitions, the group explored the following commentary on terms and priorities.

What is sustainable?

Participants expressed and agreed on a degree of caution when establishing the objective of reaching a sustainable food system to procurement teams and caterers. It was agreed that sustainability generally is concerned with tackling the climate and nature emergency, while securing good outcomes for suppliers and

¹⁰ Sheffield City Council. (2023). Fairer, Healthier, Greener - A Food Strategy for Sheffield [Link](#).

¹¹ Li et al. (2022) Global food-miles account for nearly 20% of total food-systems emissions. [Link](#).

¹² ShefFood. (2023). Local Food Action Plan for Sheffield. [Link](#).

producers. It was also agreed that the project should aim for “more sustainable”, rather than “truly sustainable” in order to appeal to the will and ability of procurement professionals. Participants agreed on the sentiment that dictating the perfect can make an enemy of the good and would not enable good practice to be progressed. At the same time, participants expressed that any framework for greater sustainability should be vigilant against “ethically washed” sources of food – a practice which sees suppliers and producers be deceptive through ethical rhetoric without taking meaningful action on sustainability.

What do we mean by local?

Participants recognised the need to be pragmatic with spatial proximity from suppliers, producers, caterers and anchor institutions. Here, a radius of 60 miles was agreed as a general rule but space for flexibility should be maintained when specific supply chains and seasonality are accounted for. For example, if there is only one supplier of a seasonal vegetable outside of the agreed radius, the radius should be expanded. Additionally, there are further caveats that were made clear: radius can be problematic when the aim is to reduce distance in supply chains from point of production or processing. In a globalised world, these supply chains are vast and the project should aim to tackle segments to claim tangible wins. Yet supply chain length is better defined in terms of the number of actors and intermediaries rather than the distance travelled – spending more locally aims to reduce the number of intermediaries taking a profit from the supply chain and so improve farming viability and consumer affordability.

What do we mean by healthy?

There was a consensus among participants that we want food to be nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate for people. Further, there was an acknowledgement that single metrics can be misleading and cannot capture necessary trade-offs, e.g. between healthiness and affordability or sustainability in certain contexts. Here, it was suggested that partners could agree to a set of properties considered to be “more healthy” than the current supply to set a direction of travel. It was noted that there is no one metric for healthiness of food unless it is pre-packed. The composition, degree of processing and manner of sale influences health as much as what is procured.

1. Procuring food locally: experience and policy



The 2021 National Food Strategy notes that the public sector is a major buyer of food, serving 1.9bn meals a year – over 5% of the total UK food service turnover – at a cost of £2.4bn.¹³ Yet the quality of the food served by public bodies is low – only 39% of primary school children who have to pay for school meals choose to eat them, while in hospitals, 39% of staff rated the food as poor.¹⁴

The report identifies that these problems are in part due to a lack of competition, with public food procurement dominated by a small number of larger suppliers. The top four contract caterers – Compass Group, Sodexo, Westbury Street Holding and Elior – have 61% of the contract catering market share. The complexity of tendering processes has made it difficult for smaller businesses to compete. This quasi-monopoly means there is little incentive for innovation and improvement, and procuring bodies' choice and their power to demand high quality is limited.

The changing policy context for public sector food procurement – linked to the National Food Strategy, the Procurement Act (2023) and the new government's priorities discussed below – are significant. They support public sector procurers to adopt a more holistic and strategic approach to food procurement, taking into account not only the cost and quality of food, but also its impact on health, environment, society and economy. This creates potential new opportunities for food suppliers, especially SMEs and social enterprises, to access and supply public sector markets.

However, a range of challenges and barriers to connecting local food supply to public procurement remain. On the supplier side, these include: the capacity of smaller suppliers and producers to meet buyers' expectations in terms of quality, quantity and cost; limited access and information to the public procurement market; and difficulties in complying with food safety and quality standards. For anchor institutions, challenges include budget constraints; the inability of some anchor institutions to deviate from nationally agreed sector procurement frameworks; and a lack of desire and/or capacity to manage multiple, smaller contracts.

¹³ DEFRA. (2021). National Food Strategy: The Plan. [Link](#).

¹⁴ Ibid.

Case studies of local food procurement

Recent studies have highlighted that procurement can be an effective tool for progressive local economic development to drive wider benefits for people, planet and place through the support of SMEs and green business.¹⁵ However, studies also highlight that local authorities are often more likely to engage in “off-the-shelf” procurement rather than developing bespoke systems that enable greater control of supply chains.¹⁶ These decisions are often guided by real and perceived risks, resource and capacity constraints as well as communication and trust – many of these themes are explored in the demand side assessment chapter of this report.

Despite these constraints, the following case studies highlight places, in the UK and beyond, that are driving positive impacts for communities, economies and ecosystems alike through strategic food procurement. These case studies demonstrate the art of the possible and the growing recognition that the power of procurement can transform local food systems to shape healthier and more equitable local economies, creating positive impacts for people, planet and place.

Cases were identified through the experience and research of the project team, and while external sources are provided where available, not all information could be independently verified.

Wales: increasing the proportion of spend that goes to Welsh firms and food of Welsh origin

Public sector food procurement in Wales is worth around £85m annually, with local government and NHS Wales together accounting for more than 80% of that. According to the Welsh Government, 58% of the overall public sector food spend is currently with Welsh companies and 23% on food of Welsh origin.

Core values and objectives

Welsh Government’s economic policy includes a specific focus on the importance of the foundational economy (those everyday goods and services on which we all rely), of which food is a crucial sector – so there is a strong strategic policy intent to support the sector by re-localising food chains and maximising self- sufficiency and resilience.

Implementation

To encourage this, Welsh Government has published a new online food procurement resource, [Buying Food Fit for the Future](#), which includes legal guidance on what can be included in food tenders, whilst remaining compliant with procurement rules, to maximise opportunities for local food producers and suppliers.

¹⁵ Genovese et al. (2020). An investigation into the design and performance of supply chains for public procurement projects. [Link](#).

¹⁶ Ibid.

It is hoped that this guidance will help local authorities, health boards and schools to increase the proportion of spend that goes to Welsh firms and food of Welsh origin. This would build on some already impactful good practice across Wales.

For example, in Carmarthenshire where local anchor institutions including the County Council, Hywel Dda University Health Board, along with Natural Resources Wales and the Carmarthenshire Association of Voluntary Services (CAVS) are partnering with the Carmarthenshire Food Network, local growers and food providers under the banner of Carmarthenshire's Local Food Partnership, Bwyd Sir Gâr Food. One of the partnership's recent initiatives is a food systems development project that is trialling new ways of getting local vegetables onto the plates of the county's primary schools and care homes.

The project team has taken over the running of a 100-acre council farm in Llanarthe and is trialling nature and climate friendly production of a range of vegetables destined for the plates of local school children and people in care.

Bath & North East Somerset Council (B&NES): dynamic food procurement system

B&NES has adopted a progressive approach to local food procurement, emphasizing health, sustainability and support for local businesses. As part of the procurement process the Council agreed a partnership with food logistics company Fresh-range which took on responsibility for order consolidation and delivery.¹⁷ An online platform was then developed in consultation with producers, suppliers and schools and enabled contracts to be fulfilled by a mixture of different (including small) suppliers, because suppliers have flexibility to move in and out of the system depending on availability, compared to conventional framework contracts which tend to limit access to SMEs due to their stringent pre-qualification requirements (e.g. proven track record and minimum production capacity) and narrow time-windows for (re)tendering. In order to streamline the consolidation and delivery of orders from multiple suppliers, the local authority formed a partnership with an online food store with a local delivery hub and knowledge of local suppliers.¹⁸

This has since been praised by the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee as an exemplar of sustainable food procurement, and a model to be emulated nationwide, with a pilot being deployed across the South West by the government's Crown Commercial Service.¹⁹

Core values and objectives

The Council's Dynamic Food Procurement (DFP) system, launched in 2016, focuses on:

¹⁷ Family Matters. (2021). Council leads the way in sustainable food procurement. [Link](#).

¹⁸ Ryland, D. (2020). Procuring Food for the Future: An Assessment of EU and UK food procurement regulations, guidance and sustainability. [Link](#).

¹⁹ House of Commons. (2021). Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Public Sector Procurement of Food: Sixth Report of Session 2019–21. [Link](#). Bath Echo. (2021). Food procurement system hailed as "best practice" ahead of possible rollout. [Link](#).

- Sustainability: prioritising organic, seasonal and fresh food, particularly from local sources, to reduce food miles and environmental impact.
- Local economic development: enabling local businesses and small suppliers to participate in public contracts alongside larger firms, promoting local economic growth.
- Health: encouraging the use of fresh, nutritious food in schools and other institutions.

Implementation

The DFP provides meals for over 60 schools in the region, serving around 7,000 meals daily. This has brought several key benefits:

- Cost reduction: the Council saved 6% in food costs compared to previous contracts while improving food quality.
- Environmental benefits: shortened supply chains reduced carbon emissions and food miles, with an emphasis on consumption of seasonal produce.
- Education and engagement: The Council also integrated educational initiatives, like "cook off" events, to teach students about food sourcing and nutrition.²⁰

Oxford Colleges: FoodBuy

The FoodBuy scheme is a long-standing partnership that aims to streamline procurement for 38 of Oxford University's colleges, covering 24,000 students.²¹ The collaboration began in 2009 and was extended with a £60m contract for an additional five years in 2019.²² The scheme was designed to provide access to a wide range of suppliers, delivering cost-effective solutions while maintaining the high quality required by Oxford's academic institutions.

Core values and objectives

Oxford's colleges work with FoodBuy to deliver the following commitments:

- Supporting local businesses and small producers: the partnership has created a supplier framework that includes a competitive mix of suppliers and producers ranging from small family-run businesses to large national wholesalers.
- Cost savings: the FoodBuy partnership has been praised for delivering significant savings to the colleges. By consolidating purchasing across multiple suppliers and creating an economy of scale, the scheme helps

²⁰ Family Matters. (2021). Council leads the way in sustainable food procurement. [Link](#).

²¹ Foodbuy: Oxford University Colleges. [Link](#).

²² Moody, M. (2019). Foodbuy extends contract with the University of Oxford. Public Sector Catering. [Link](#).

manage food costs through leveraging collective spend to negotiate favourable prices while ensuring the quality of ingredients remains high.

- Sustainability and social responsibility: The program also emphasises sourcing sustainable products. FoodBuy is committed to reducing food waste and working with suppliers that meet environmental standards, aligning with Oxford's goals to reduce its environmental impact. For example, FoodBuy has engaged with partners who focus on sustainable agriculture and reducing food waste through innovative solutions.²³

Implementation

FoodBuy's involvement has allowed Oxford colleges to focus on enhancing the student experience, providing high-quality food while minimising administrative burdens. Looking forward, the partnership will continue to explore opportunities beyond food procurement, potentially expanding into non-food services such as waste management.

Chicago: Good Food Purchasing Programme

The Good Food Purchasing Programme (GFPP) in Chicago is a transformative initiative aimed at creating a sustainable, equitable and health-focused food system. Adopted in 2017, Chicago was one of the first cities in the USA to implement this programme. Across the USA, 57 institutions in 24 cities have adopted the programme, representing a total of over \$1bn in annual food spend. The GFPP emphasises values-based food procurement across various public institutions, including schools, hospitals and local government departments.

Core values and objectives

The GFPP is built on six core values:

- Equity, accountability and transparency: engaging with workers, constituents and businesses.
- Local economies: supporting regional food producers and creating local jobs.
- Environmental sustainability: reducing the environmental impact of food production.
- Valued workforce: ensuring fair labour practices and promoting workers' rights.
- Animal welfare: promoting humane treatment of animals.
- Health nutrition: improving public health through better food choices.²⁴

²³ Foodbuy: Oxford University Colleges. [Link](#).

²⁴ Centre for Good Food Purchasing. The Programme: Overview. [Link](#).

Implementation

Chicago's GFPP aims to redirect substantial portions of its public food spending towards local and sustainable food sources. This includes a projected \$100m annual spend directed to local businesses and farmers, promoting a healthier and more equitable food system.²⁵ To do this, the programme has developed good food standards to guide procurement decisions.

The Good Food Standard

The good food standards set for local economies, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare and nutrition rely on best practice and third-party certifications for their definition, which are updated every five years by a wide coalition of key stakeholders. These currently include:

- Local economies
 - The local economies definition is based on a combination of farm size (defined by gross cash farm income) and farm distance from purchasing institutions (250 miles for produce; 500 miles for meat, eggs, and dairy).
 - Any farm that is family-run or cooperatively owned within this radius qualifies for the local economies standard. More points are awarded depending on the size of the farm. There are three levels, with definitions based on the USDA Agricultural Census.
- Environmental sustainability:
 - Examples of qualifying certifications for the environmental sustainability standard include: USDA Organic, Animal Welfare Approved, Certified Humane, American Grassfed Alliance Certified, Seafood Watch, Protected Harvest and Food Alliance Certified.
 - If a farm uses sustainable practices but does not hold a certification, their products can still qualify for this standard. They can instead provide the institutional buyer with a signed affidavit that verifies the produce has been grown without chemical pesticides, herbicides or any neonicotinoids.
- Valued workforce:
 - Examples of certifications that qualify farms and food businesses in the valued workforce standard include Food Justice Certified, Equitable Food Initiative, Fair for Life and Fairtrade USA. Unionised companies and worker-owned co-operatives score highest in the valued workforce standard.
 - Companies that have a strong social responsibility policy can also qualify for the valued workforce standard. That policy must include the following:

²⁵ Chicago Food Policy Action Council. (2021). The Good Food Purchasing Initiative's Guide for Growers & Food Businesses: Selling to Your Community's Institutions. [Link](#).

- Union or non-poverty wages
 - Respect for freedom of association and collective bargaining
 - Safe and healthy working conditions
 - Proactive prevention of sexual harassment and assault
 - Prohibition of child labour
 - At least one employee benefit, like employer-paid health insurance, paid sick days and profit sharing with employees.
- Animal welfare:
 - Examples of certifications for animal welfare standards include; Animal Welfare approved, American Grassfed, Global Animal Partnership, Certified Humane Raised & Handled, USDA Organic and PCO certified 100% Grassfed.
 - Nutrition:
 - While there are no specific certifications for farms or food businesses that would help products meet the nutrition standard, people who are growing fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and culturally relevant ingredients can promote how their products will better meet the nutrition standard for an institution.
 - Food businesses that produce healthier, minimally processed products and/or culturally important foods for local populations may also leverage the nutrition standard.

Podravje, Slovenia: self-sufficiency project

Podravje's self-sufficiency project focuses on enhancing local food production and sustainability. Initiated in response to concerns over food security and dependency on imports, the project emphasises the use of local resources and community involvement to create a resilient food system.

Core values and objectives

Key objectives of the project are to:

- increase the level of food self-sufficiency in the territory
- provide safe and healthy food
- increase the use of locally produced food in public institutions; and
- create new jobs at the farm level.²⁶

²⁶ European Committee of the Regions. (2018). Sustainable public procurement of food. [Link](#).

Implementation

In the short term, the project first seeks to increase the consumption of locally grown food in public school canteens, with a target of 20% of the annual public school food spend spent with local food suppliers. In the longer term, the goal is to strengthen the supply capacity of local producers and enable them to participate in the procurement processes of public institutions and increase the budget threshold.²⁷

To achieve the shorter-term goal, emphasis was given to menu planning and, in doing so, to understanding which parts of the food provision may be available locally, with these parts then treated as separate lots in the procurement process and awarded to local providers by means of direct contracts.²⁸

USA: food hubs

Food hubs are organisations in the USA food system that aggregate, distribute and sell locally sourced food from multiple producers. They emerged as a solution to help small and mid-sized farms reach larger markets such as restaurants, public sector institutions and retail.²⁹ Food hubs seek not only to support local agriculture but also promote equitable access to healthy food, while strengthening local and regional economies by providing higher return to producers, while committing to fair prices for consumers.³⁰

Core values and objectives

- Economic development: food hubs provide small and mid-sized producers with access to larger markets, which they might not be able to reach individually.
- Local sourcing and sustainability: a primary goal is to support sustainable agricultural practices by promoting local and organic food production, reducing food miles and minimizing environmental impacts.
- Equitable access: many food hubs have a strong focus on ensuring underserved communities have access to healthy, local food, often partnering with food banks and schools

Food hubs operate various business models, including for-profit, nonprofit, and co-operative structures. They often offer additional services such as product aggregation, distribution, branding, marketing and food safety training to ensure that producers meet market demands. These hubs act as intermediaries between producers and institutional buyers like hospitals, schools or restaurants, significantly reducing logistical burdens for smaller farms.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Parsons & Barling. (2021). What would a transformational approach to food public procurement look like? [Link](#).

²⁹ Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Programme. Food Hubs & Values-Based Supply Chains. [Link](#).

³⁰ Yarnit, M. (2021). Time to invest in Local Food Hubs. Sustain. [Link](#).

Key achievements include:

- Increased market access: by acting as a centralised point for local producers, food hubs help scale small businesses. Producers can focus on production while food hubs handle marketing, sales and distribution. Additionally, food hubs have already proven to serve urban food deserts in the UK, where communities lack access to fresh fruit and vegetables, alleviating food insecurity.³¹
- Economic impact: in the US, the financial impact of selling into regional markets is shown to be greater for fruit and vegetable farms with gross annual revenue under \$350,000. Small and mid-size farms that sell in regional markets are shown to be more likely to earn a positive net income and have lower operating costs, resulting in increased farm viability.³² Some economic impact assessments suggest that nearly 32 jobs are created for every \$1m in revenue generated by producers involved in direct sales, compared to only 10.5 jobs for those involved in wholesalers.³³
- Support for local farms: one example, the Appalachian sustainable development food hub, aggregates a total value of \$37m worth of products for regional producers, creating much needed stability for local business. Further, the food hub has supported the development of over 300 new agriculture startups, and 3 social enterprises, through training and resources.³⁴

Implementation

Food hubs face several challenges, particularly around financial viability. To remain open, food hubs often rely on some cost-saving advantages such as volunteer labour or external funding in the form of grants. Additionally, logistical issues such as access to cold storage transportation appears as another viability challenge to many active food hubs. However, with long term strategic planning, access to demand through public procurement and established partnerships for shared-use logistical arrangements, these challenges are not insurmountable.³⁵

Food hubs have grown significantly in number across the U.S. Between 2007 and 2014, regional food hubs grew in number by 288%³⁶ and, in 2017, there were nearly 400 food hubs identified in the United States.³⁷ Today, they are utilising new

³¹ Foodwise Leeds: Research on the Impacts of Food Hubs. [Link](#).

³² Maston Consulting. (2023). NC Food Hub Economic Impact Assessment. NC Food Hub Collaborative. [Link](#).

³³ Dumont, A. (2017). The Economic Impact of Locally Produced Food. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. [Link](#).

³⁴ Appalachian Sustainable Development: Our Work. [Link](#).

³⁵ Matson, J. (2015). Running a Food Hub: Lessons learned from the field. USDA. [Link](#).

³⁶ Low, S et al. (2015). Trends in U.S. Local and Regional Food Systems: Report to Congress. USDA. [Link](#).

³⁷ Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Programme (n.d.). Food Hubs & Values-Based Supply Chains. [Link](#).

technologies to scale up operations, extend reach, manage logistics and gain access to public procurement opportunities.³⁸

Policy

National policy

The Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services (GBSF) set standards for public sector food procurement. They are encouraged in schools and mandatory in government buildings, the armed forces, hospitals and prisons.

The independent 2021 National Food Strategy was critical of GBSF, saying they “do not guarantee that the food is any good”, and recommended the introduction of a new food standard for public sector food procurement to ensure that taxpayer money is spent on healthy and sustainable food. This would replace GBSF and would require public sector caterers to source more fresh and minimally processed foods, more fruit and vegetables, more British produce and more produce that meets higher standards of environmental sustainability and animal welfare.

In 2022, DEFRA consulted on updating the GBSF to ensure procurement of healthy and sustainable food, making standards mandatory across the public sector (through inclusion in tender specifications), and improving and monitoring compliance through contract performance conditions. Standards would include nutrition guidelines aiming to reduce the intake of salt, sugar, saturated fat, and increase the intake of fibre, fruit and vegetables.

A House of Lords select committee report of October 2024 noted that no consultation response has yet been published, and recommended:



The government should immediately take forward reforms to the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services to ensure that schools as well as other public sector organisations must procure healthier food. In the meantime, the government should introduce guidance on best practice for procuring healthy catering services for schools and local authorities.³⁹



This last recommendation reflects one in the independent 2021 National Food Strategy that “Government should work with existing certifiers – such as Food For Life – to introduce a mandatory accreditation scheme for the food served in schools, hospitals and prisons.”

³⁸ Yarnit, M. (2021). Time to invest in Local Food Hubs. Sustain. [Link](#).

³⁹ House of Lords. (2024). Food, Diet and Obesity Committee. Report of Session 2024–25. Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system. [Link](#).

Direction of travel under the previous government

The previous government set out a blueprint to boost the British fruit and vegetable sector, noting the need to reduce the UK's reliance on overseas supply and support national producers.⁴⁰ As part of this ambition, the then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak pledged to increase the amount of funding given to horticulture businesses and to make more money available to English orchard growers to access necessary equipment, technologies and infrastructure to improve output and upscale. These pledges coincided with the release of the first UK Food Security Index, led by DEFRA, which captures a set of indicators that reflect trends in national food security.⁴¹ While these ambitions and pledges are limited in terms of supporting particularly generative forms of local and sustainable producers, when taken into account alongside the Procurement Act and Quince Review explored below, it reflects a broader positive direction of travel from Westminster regarding the need to disconnect our food supply chains from extractive, and often carbon intensive, global supply chains.

Quince Review

Under the previous government, DEFRA commissioned an independent review, led by Will Quince MP, to enhance public sector food procurement and sought opportunities to raise standards, drive sustainability and increase accessibility of public procurement opportunities to SMEs.⁴²

The Quince Review argued that the GBSF sets mandatory and best practice standards that goes beyond food and nutrition alone and have an increasing focus on wider social challenges and benefits.⁴³ The Review highlighted some opportunities for extending the GBSF, which is currently only mandatory within central government departments, the NHS, armed forces and prisons, to public sector education settings which account for 60% of the total £5bn annual spend on public sector food.⁴⁴ The Review also noted that GBSF compliance is not monitored or enforced, leaving minimal incentives for organisations to fully adopt the standards. The Review pointed to the more systemic barriers, such as complexity and cost, to SMEs in accessing the food supply chain. Among the review's 17 recommendations was a call for government provision of grant funding to pay for infrastructure and training to connect local producers and procurers.

Procurement Act

The Procurement Act (2023) is a recently passed piece of legislation that aims to reform the UK's public procurement regime. The Act was introduced following the

⁴⁰ UK Government. (2024). PM sets out blueprint to boost fruit and vegetable sector. Press Release. [Link](#).

⁴¹ DEFRA. (2024). UK Food Security Index 2024. Research & Analysis. [Link](#).

⁴² DEFRA. (2024) Independent Review into Public Sector Food Procurement. [Link](#)

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

UK's exit from the EU and is intended to create a simpler, more transparent system.⁴⁵

In an attempt to increase the opportunities for local and socially responsible small businesses to enter the public sector supply chain, it intends to create a requirement for public sector buyers to break down contracts and increases the thresholds at which formal procurement processes kick in, as well as formalising the ability to "reserve" contracts for UK SMEs and/or socially responsible businesses.⁴⁶

There is also a shift in language in the Act, away from narrow considerations on price mandating selection of the "most economically advantageous tender" (MEAT), preferencing instead the "most advantageous tender" (MAT) – a broader definition of value that includes contributions to solving social and environmental challenges. Whilst it does not specifically mention environmental, social and governance (ESG) goals, it intends to make it easier to mark or actively exclude suppliers who have underperformed on contracts, with a publicly accessible "debarment register" showing poor performance on pre-defined KPIs.

The Procurement Act completed its passage through Parliament, received Royal Assent in October 2023 and the new regime came into force in February 2025.⁴⁷ The accompanying National Procurement Policy Statement (NPPS) says "the Government wants 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".⁴⁸ The interpretation and implementation of the new regime by public sector buyers, and therefore its impact, remain to be seen at the time of writing.

Current government policy

With a new government elected in July 2024, a renewed policy and legislative agenda has been prioritised. The Labour manifesto contained commitments to improving public health, followed by an announcement in December 2024 of a junk food advertising ban to curb childhood obesity.⁴⁹ Labour also pledged reform to procurement rules to favour SMEs, which the Procurement Act and NPSS mentioned above are a step towards, including through a commitment to 30-day payment terms for all public contracts.⁵⁰ The Labour government is committed to the "biggest wave of insourcing of public services in a generation" and confirmed in March 2025 that at least 50% of food supplied into the £5bn public sector catering contracts is to be sourced from British producers or those certified to

⁴⁵ Institute for Government. (2022). The Procurement Bill: an expert briefing. [Link](#).

⁴⁶ Burch, D. (2023). The Procurement Bill risks becoming window dressing. [Link](#).

⁴⁷ Gov.uk. (2022). Transforming Public Procurement. [Link](#).

⁴⁸ Gov.uk. (2025). National Procurement Policy Statement. [Link](#).

⁴⁹ Gov.uk. (2024). Junk food ad ban legislation progresses to curb childhood obesity. [Link](#).

⁵⁰ Gov.uk. (2025). New public procurement rules to drive growth, opportunities for small businesses and exclude suppliers that fail to deliver. [Link](#).

higher environmental standards.⁵¹ A government food strategy is expected in early 2025, with objectives around improving health, food security and the decarbonisation of food and farming.



“The government is committed to harnessing the purchasing power of the public procurement supply chain and set the tone in delivering our wider ambitions on sustainability, animal welfare, economic growth, and health. We have an ambition to be able to supply half of all food into the public sector from British producers or producers certified to higher environmental standards, whilst remaining in line with our WTO and domestic procurement obligations.

DEFRA official, October 2024



Sheffield policy context

ShefFood and ongoing initiatives

ShefFood is a cross-sector collaboration involving local public agencies, businesses, individuals, academic institutions and community organizations.⁵² Their mission is to create a sustainable, equitable, and resilient food system for Sheffield.

ShefFood’s Local Food Action Plan for Sheffield 2023-2030 outlines a comprehensive strategy to create a fairer, more sustainable and more resilient food system in Sheffield. Developed through collaboration with nearly 100 organizations, the plan identifies key challenges and opportunities within the local food system.⁵³ It emphasises the need for connected and systemic approaches, focusing on five main strategies: strengthening food networks, building capacity on data related to Sheffield’s food system, ambitious local food policy, an inclusive food movement and leveraging spaces for food initiatives. The plan also highlights successes to date and sets specific commitments for action over the next seven years.

Sheffield City Council food and procurement strategies

The Sheffield Food Strategy focuses on creating a sustainable, equitable and resilient local food system.⁵⁴ It is titled “Fairer, Healthier, Greener” which captures the three outcomes addressed throughout the strategy. Underlying these, the key themes around which actions are organised are:

- Financial access to food: ensuring everyone, at all times, has access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food.

⁵¹ Partridge, J. (2025). Labour hopes to heal rift with farmers with public sector food targets. The Guardian. [Link](#).

⁵² See [Sheffod.org.uk](https://sheffod.org.uk) for more details

⁵³ ShefFood. (2023). Local Food Action Plan for Sheffield. [Link](#).

⁵⁴ Sheffield City Council. (2023). Fairer, Healthier, Greener - A Food Strategy for Sheffield [Link](#).

- Physical access to nutritious food: people can access food that makes them well instead of sick and are protected from harmful commercial influences.
- Future access to food: safeguarding our food system by ensuring it produces nutritious food, helps to restore nature and halt climate change and is resilient to withstand global shocks.

The strategy emphasizes collaboration with local partners and community initiatives to achieve these goals and improve overall health and wellbeing in Sheffield.

Sheffield City Council's Ethical Procurement Policy sets out a progressive approach to procurement for the city and its supply chains.⁵⁵ It includes a framework to enhance social value in procurement by aligning it with the Council's strategic goals, such as promoting a strong economy, thriving communities, better health and tackling inequalities. There are questions for suppliers around their plans to buy local and support individuals "furthest from employment" to access training and job opportunities.

South Yorkshire region

The South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) is leading a number of initiatives to streamline procurement and employment approaches across the region, for instance through the South Yorkshire Inclusion Plan, Progressive Procurement Policy and Strategic Economic Plan 2021-2041.

Food and its economic weight was a key theme of the discussions in the South Yorkshire Mayor's Climate Assembly (2023). One of the Assembly's recommendations was for the implementation of a whole school food education programme across South Yorkshire.

The South Yorkshire Integrated Care System (ICS) delivers joined up health and care services across the region, and its South Yorkshire Five Year Joint Forward Plan 2024/25 highlights the need to strengthen focus on prevention, including improving diets as a key factor in promoting healthy weight.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Sheffield City Council.(Accessed 2025). Ethical Procurement Policy. [Link](#).

⁵⁶ South Yorkshire ICS. (2024). NHS Joint Forward Plan for South Yorkshire. [Link](#).

2. Sheffield's public sector food purchasing



We completed a demand side assessment to understand current expenditure and procurement practices for food within anchor institutions in Sheffield, based on data collected through interviews with procurement and catering managers, and reviewing relevant organisational strategies and documents. A spend analysis on food procurement data was also conducted.

Quantitative data from anchor institutions

We requested data from anchor institutions for their spend on food by supplier and food category. We estimate that the six institutions included in this study spend around £14m per year on procurement of food products and related services. Two-thirds (66%) of this is spent with large national suppliers. If some of this spend can be localised, it represents a huge potential market opportunity for local suppliers and a source of economic benefit to local communities.

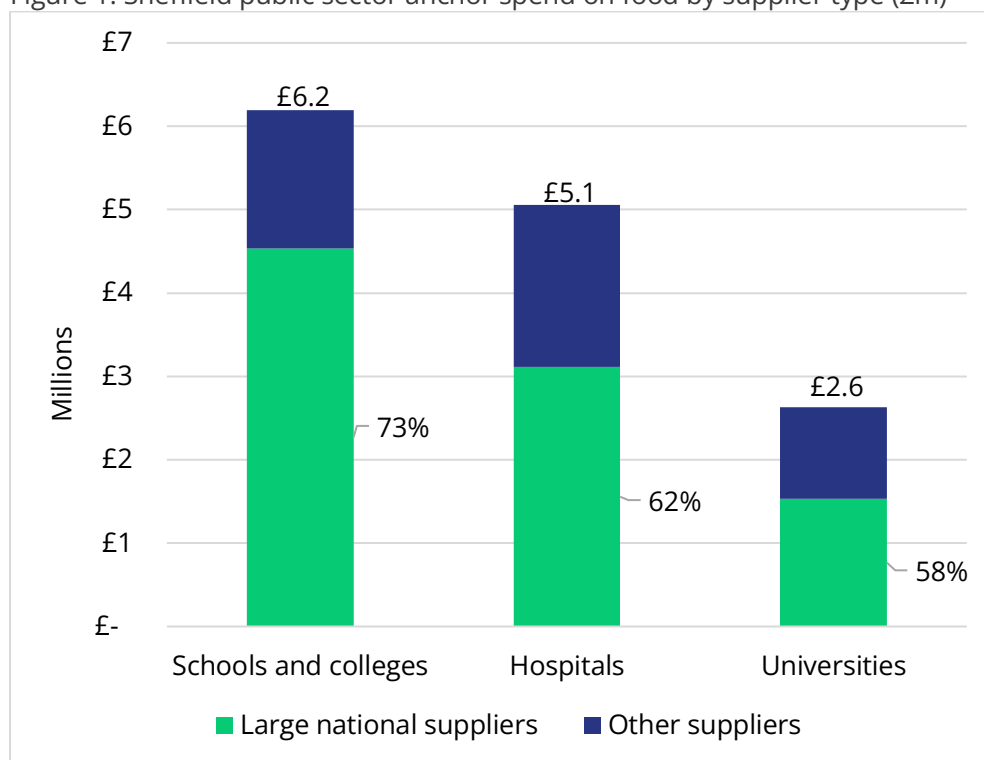
Table 1: Summary of anchor data

Anchor category	Spend with large national suppliers*	Spend with other suppliers*	Total spend	Notes
Schools and colleges	£4.5m (73%)	£1.7m (27%)	£6.2m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One large national supplier indicated that for a major contract in this category, 53% of their produce is from within the UK. • Spend with other suppliers is mostly with two local wholesalers, sourcing nationally and internationally.
Hospitals	£3.1m (62%)	£1.9m (38%)	£5.1m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the larger hospital, nearly 90% of spend with 'other suppliers' is with local wholesalers sourcing nationally and internationally; 10% is from locally based producers (e.g. bakers, processors).
Universities	£1.5m (58%)	£1.1m (42%)	£2.6m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For one university, while 33% of spend was with local suppliers within ~60 miles of Sheffield, 17% (of total spend) was with suppliers with Sheffield postcodes.
Total	£9.2m (66%)	£4.7m (34%)	£13.9m	

Note: Percentages are of row totals.

*Supplier location does not determine origin of food – large national suppliers (e.g. Bidfood, Brakes) may source some food locally, while other suppliers may source locally, nationally or internationally.

Figure 1: Sheffield public sector anchor spend on food by supplier type (£m)



Limited data on location of suppliers (e.g. based on postcode of business address) meant it was not possible to estimate the extent to which supply was local. In any case, supplier location doesn't say much about the origin of food: many of the suppliers and wholesalers based in or around Sheffield source their produce from around the UK and globally. Requests were made for data on the origin of wholesalers' produce, but either this was not available or was not shared. Some anchor institutions were able to provide detailed lists of products procured from national suppliers/wholesalers, but units were not comparable and could not be aggregated straightforwardly.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with participating anchor institutions across sectors, with lead chefs, catering managers, dieticians and heads of procurement.

Schools and colleges

Sheffield Colleges caters for over 15,000 students and staff, through their seven catering outlets. Along with some of the university caterers, Sheffield Colleges are members of The University Caterers Organisation (TUCO) purchasing organisation.

Catering for 89 primary and nine secondary schools in Sheffield is managed by Taylor Shaw, a private limited company owned by the French multinational company Elixir, under a contract with Sheffield City Council. Since 2011, Taylor Shaw has had multiple iterations of this school meals contract and its procurement handled by Elixir's central purchasing team. Most school kitchens are "fixed units" (i.e. do their own cooking), though a handful are "container meal points" (i.e. pre-

prepared food is delivered to schools without kitchen facilities). Taylor Shaw works closely with the Council, holding weekly meetings and undergoing annual food audits conducted by the Council. Regular lunchtime service assessments ensure the delivery of service meets school food standards and necessary accreditations.

Current supply chain

A significant amount of the colleges' food spend is spent with 3-4 wholesalers, such as Brakes and BidFood – mostly on frozen and processed food products. They do not have contracts in place, instead making orders on an ad hoc basis, with two deliveries a week from each supplier with specific delivery days specified. Beyond the large suppliers, they purchase from a bakery based within the region and local soft drinks retailer.

For the schools' contract, Elior's central purchasing division is responsible for buying all products and negotiating key lines. While Elior's contracts are generally with national suppliers, the specific standards in Sheffield necessitate some local contracts for meat and vegetables, which are managed through wholesalers.

The Sheffield school catering contract standards mandate that all meat, poultry, and fish products meet specific accreditation standards such as Red Tractor, British Retail Consortium Global Standard, and Marine Stewardship Council. The service must comply with the Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014 and the Food for Life Served Here Bronze level. Certain additives and ingredients, including specific food colours, flavour enhancers, preservatives, sweeteners, antioxidants, irradiated food, mechanically recovered meat, genetically modified ingredients, and raw or softly cooked eggs, are prohibited. The standards also require that school food meets the dietary needs of pupils requiring medical diets, religious and ethnic minority groups, and includes pre-stunned Halal poultry and lamb. Raw meat must be sourced from the UK, EU or New Zealand, with specific fat content limits for whole meat, burgers, mince and sausages. Fats and oils should be from vegetable sources only, with no trans or hydrogenated fats allowed.

Challenges to further localise supply chains

The colleges noted that it was very difficult to get a full overview of the food types bought and sold, and they do not hold spend per item data, and only collect data on suppliers. Constraints on cooking more from fresh local ingredients include catering staff capacity, internal budgetary pressures and competition from fast food outlets nearby.

There is also a perception that local suppliers are unable to match the consistency of supply provided by large national wholesalers, like BidFood. These large wholesalers can provide reliability and ad hoc services that smaller, more local suppliers may not be able to match due to smaller operations. The colleges do not have viable and safe food transport to be able to collect supplies from local producers and deliver to several sites.

For schools, local sourcing is defined as within the UK, with no specific data on local spending around Sheffield available. While there is a willingness to source from

local suppliers if the price is right, inflationary pressures significantly influence purchasing decisions. Vegetables arrive pre-cleaned but require secondary cleaning, including a fresh produce wash with steriliser for fruit, salad and vegetables. High-volume schools receive pre-cut fresh produce or frozen items, depending on the time of year.

Opportunities

Opportunities were mooted for anchor institutions to use their collective spend with large wholesalers as leverage to lobby for a localisation of their supply chains, while accounting for healthiness and sustainability. A digital hub to get local suppliers and producers to market what they have available, alongside an online ordering system, was also discussed although existing systems in this space can take a large profit margin which makes them unfeasible.

Potential opportunities to shift procurement practices include initiatives like Green Earth Monday, where no meat is served. Learners, initially hesitant, embrace it when it is explicitly linked to environmental benefits. One school has gone fully vegetarian to be more inclusive and reduce food waste by serving one meal for all, mostly focused on lentils and pulses. This approach has been in place for a year, presenting challenges with allergens but the children are happy to eat what is provided.

NHS foundation trusts

Sheffield Health & Social Care NHS Trust (SHSC) operates multiple catered services across several sites, including care homes and dementia care services and have a collective food spend of around £400,000. Some sites have facilities to cook from fresh on site, some rely entirely on frozen meals and some provide a mix.

The Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust's (STH) central production unit at Northern General Hospital delivers 35,000 meals per week, cooking from scratch for patient menus and serving Northern General Hospital, Royal Hallamshire Hospital and Weston Park, the main acute units in the city. Meals are cooked on the first day and must be used by the fifth day, delivered cold to the wards where they are reheated. This seven-day operation has its main production from Monday to Friday but still produces fresh meals on weekends and daily salads. The catering department employs 200 people, including part-timers, catering assistants, chefs, and managers. The overall food spend is around £4.6m per year, with a daily budget of £5.60 per patient for food and drink. There is also an in-house retail offer.

Current supply chain

Both Trusts procure food mostly through NHS Supply Chain, the predominant procurement framework used by the NHS, which awards contracts to suppliers on a national or regional basis. The use of NHS Supply Chain frameworks is heavily incentivised, with a portion of internal Trust budget allocated to them in a "top-

slicing” arrangement.⁵⁷ These frameworks also ensure compliance and reduce administrative burden for Trusts, which are especially important in the context of vulnerable patients and heightened food safety risk. Suppliers generally dislike them due to the additional on-costs, including a 2% rebate that covers the framework’s operating costs. This rebate is justified by the time suppliers save by not having to tender, though some suppliers incorporate this cost into their pricing.

NHS Supply Chain includes social value considerations and interviewees noted the possibility of “incorporating local supply chains when appropriate”. One example is SHSC purchasing from a locally registered fruit and vegetable business through NHS Supply Chain, although the supplier sources its produce nationally. SHSC has also retendered milk and bread contracts in the past year, awarding to a Leeds-based supplier who can deliver both at the same time to reduce carbon footprint, make cost savings and relieve invoice processing capacity – although the extent to which products are “local” is unknown. STH also source from a local bakery outside the NHS framework, though supplying retail outlets only, which is considered lower risk from a food safety perspective.

Challenges to further localise supply chains

Although the day-to-day management of procurement is handled in-house, with budgets held internally, the potential to further localise supply chains partly depends on capacity to procure outside of NHS Supply Chain frameworks. It was reported that some capacity does exist in this regard, and local suppliers would always be considered. Local produce is believed to be better quality but can be more expensive, and there are risks associated with working off-framework, e.g. ingredients must come ready-prepared due to existing infrastructure and food safety risks, with no soil allowed in kitchens and produce having to arrive weighed and ready to use, though not pre-cooked. Some services have more specific requirements, e.g. the use of glass bottles is prohibited within sites that provide mental health support. Additionally, capacity for more fresh produce is limited due to lack of appropriate infrastructure, like storage, on sites. To justify a shift to more local suppliers with greater perceived risk and cost, significant savings would need to be demonstrated.

Opportunities

As mentioned, local suppliers can find routes in to hospitals, outside of but also through NHS Supply Chain, and there is a general aspiration to cook more from fresh where possible. A local bakery has been set up as a supplier on STH’s finance

⁵⁷ One interviewee said they are “required to use the NHS Supply Chain framework” for food procurement, and that they can therefore “only access suppliers that have been awarded contracts under these frameworks”. However others said Trusts are free to manage their own budgets and procurement, with no legal requirement to use NHS Supply Chain, as evidenced by both Trusts procuring some products locally outside NHS Supply Chain. This reflects NAO’s assessment that “DHSC did not make it mandatory for NHS bodies to use Supply Chain for NHS procurement” and that “Trusts remain largely free to buy directly from suppliers... outside of Supply Chain”. [Link](#).

system, with food safety checks being potentially required. Local suppliers can join NHS and other frameworks, with one Trust becoming a member of TUCO to purchase coffee from Cafeology, a local roaster, for retail outlets. Working with frameworks is generally seen as easier and cheaper by procurement staff. There is interest in local suppliers if they are cost-competitive, offering quality at a good price and capable of supplying the required volumes.

Universities

Both the University of Sheffield (UoS) and Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) have in-house catering services across their campus sites, including cafes and bars, conferencing, delivered catering and catered accommodation. Many operated sites do not have preparation facilities, so food supply is highly pre-prepared/processed.

UoS has made efforts to localise supply of milk and ice cream and has previously switched sugar supply from cane to beet, which is more locally produced. They also have redirected their spend on coffee to a local company purchasing beans directly from a single-origin supplier, accounting for fair trade concerns. SHU source a range of products locally, including dairy products, coffee and baked goods.

Current supply chain

At present, the universities rely heavily on wholesale distributors, such as BidFood and Brakes. While these wholesalers don't proactively provide information about local supply, this data could be available upon request. However, Brakes reportedly do consider social value within their own purchasing, and may change supply based on demand and incentives from large buyers like universities. Much procurement is done through the TUCO purchasing system – a membership body supporting procurement professions – which manages accounts and deals with compliance.

UoS strived to localise their milk supply, which required working with a local producer to give assurances of purchase over a four year period – which enabled the local producer to secure a loan to expand their operation to meet the higher demand. While this meant UoS spend on milk had an initial increase of 12%, the relationship with the local producer opened doors for collaboration, such as antibiotic resistance research programmes.

Challenges to further localise supply chains

One interviewee noted that they have a “mission to buy as local as possible...but we are constrained by the large commercial nature of our operation.” Additionally, they noted that “small providers can struggle with legislative checks – this means more local suppliers work through a larger carrier like Brakes to offload a lot of those checks.”

Further challenges were noted around consumer choice – while healthier options are provided on menus, students will often choose less healthy options through off-site retail close by, such as fast food franchises within the city.

Officers' primary concern was price and quality over supply location, as many of the food items purchased are processed – like pre-packaged sandwiches – and it would be difficult to get a full image of the production and supply chain of those particular goods.

Again, a lack of onsite facilities and infrastructure was noted as a significant challenge to localising supply chains. Due to the lack of onsite preparation facilities, universities would require suppliers to process and prepare many of their food items prior to delivery unless additional funds to invest in facilities and staff were secured. Additionally, due to the large commercial nature of university caterers, the geographic spread of their university sites, and the number of delivery points, larger suppliers are often better suited.

Opportunities

The interviewee expressed that leverage may be applied to TUCO by large buyer-members to consider locality, rather than only scale. Here, there was a recognition that buyers spend tens of millions of pounds through the TUCO system and, as a membership organisation, there could be routes to ensure that the system is more friendly to local, more sustainable and healthy suppliers.

One university has also begun to report on scope three emissions, which is now mandated by net zero ambitions. While this presents some challenges, such as opting for larger suppliers who can make fewer deliveries with larger and lower emission vehicles, the drive for more sustainable food purchasing exists as a core organisational objective.

Summary

Procurement practices varied across the anchor institutions interviewed, with some notable trends by institution type. Universities and colleges have more flexibility on procurement processes, while NHS trusts face strong incentives to procure via NHS Supply Chain frameworks. Since school food procurement is outsourced, purchasing is managed centrally by the private sector contractor Elior (owner of Taylor Shaw). Compliance requirements are varied and include food safety and modern slavery conditions, but these are often managed by external organisations, e.g. through framework agreements. The use of these agreements was common, with TUCO favoured by universities and NHS frameworks used by the Trusts. The means of procurement ranged from formal systems such as Procure Wizard to placing orders with suppliers directly by phone.

Food was overwhelmingly supplied by large national suppliers, but local procurement has been achieved in a few product areas. The majority of public sector food procurement is dominated by large national suppliers (e.g. Brakes, Bidfood), who provided 60-80% of purchased food by value to the anchor institutions in this study. Some of the food coming from these suppliers will be local however, but data was not available on this so it was not possible to ascertain the extent to which food supply was local overall. Local wholesalers sourcing nationally

supply most of the remaining amount, with only a very small percentage being supplied by locally based producers.

Local companies were supplying

- coffee (Cafeology where roasting beans are directly purchased from global south producer);
- milk (Our Cow Molly where the university's assurances of purchase for four years enabled a loan for operational expansion);
- fruit and vegetables;
- bakery products;
- meat; and
- cheese.

However, for many of the "local" suppliers, although the business is based in or near Sheffield, the produce or ingredients may be sourced nationally or internationally.

A multitude of significant challenges were identified to procuring more local, sustainable and healthy food. Economic pressures were topmost in people's minds, with price being an overriding criterion in procurement decisions and many anchor institutions constrained from spending more on smaller local suppliers by profit targets and budget pressures. The lack of facilities or capacity for onsite preparation results in having to buy processed ingredients rather than cooking from fresh; with no soil allowed in NHS kitchens to reduce health risk and manage food safety.

Other perceived barriers were:

- a lack of transportation and storage capacity;
- concerns about the consistency and reliability of supply from local producers;
- the extra administrative burden of dealing with local supplier onboarding;
- compliance and management;
- general perceptions of food safety-related risks of shifting to smaller suppliers, especially in the NHS; and
- the perception that just-in-time (JIT) efficiency of big national suppliers' supply chains ensured longer shelf lives and less food waste.

3. Sheffield's local food suppliers



The aim of the supply side assessment phase of the project was to understand the capacity of local food producers to supply the public sector in Sheffield.

A survey was designed to capture this information about food suppliers and circulated to around 400 organizations by email. Potential respondents were identified through existing producer networks, the list of suppliers provided by anchor institutions and external business databases. Survey respondents were invited to participate in focus groups to delve more deeply into their answers.

Survey results

Category	Number of respondents	Full time equivalent employees (Average.)	Average of annual turnover (total sales)	Average of % of sales to public sector
Meat, meat products	9	63	13,000,000	20%
Wholesaler	4	53	13,666,667	25%
Fresh vegetables	4	13	1,750,000	9%
Dairy	2	28	3,000,000	8%
Beverages	2	3.5	400,000	2%
Ready meals	1	5	No data	No data
Total	22			

The survey received 22 full responses by named individuals/organisations. 15 were currently or had previously supplied public sector institutions. Only two had not previously supplied the public sector but wanted to in the future.

The survey responses from suppliers revealed a diverse range of experiences and strategic orientations towards public sector engagement. Many suppliers had long-standing relationships with public sector clients, particularly in education, and considered these contracts a core part of their business. Some suppliers were expanding their customer base, including hospitals, care homes and schools, while others faced challenges aligning their business models with public sector demands or managing the required quantities. Overall, suppliers expressed a mix of satisfaction with reliable, forecastable demand and a desire to broaden their reach and impact within the public sector.

We asked in more depth about the main advantages and challenges of supplying anchor institutions. Many suppliers had maintained relationships with institutions like universities, hospitals and care homes for several years, often citing reliable payments and regular orders as key advantages. However, challenges such as poor communication, complex tender processes and logistical issues like parking and access were common. Some suppliers had bespoke financial arrangements to streamline billing, while others expressed frustration with the lack of recognition for local and sustainable sourcing benefits. Overall, while there were positive aspects to these relationships, suppliers also needed to navigate significant hurdles.

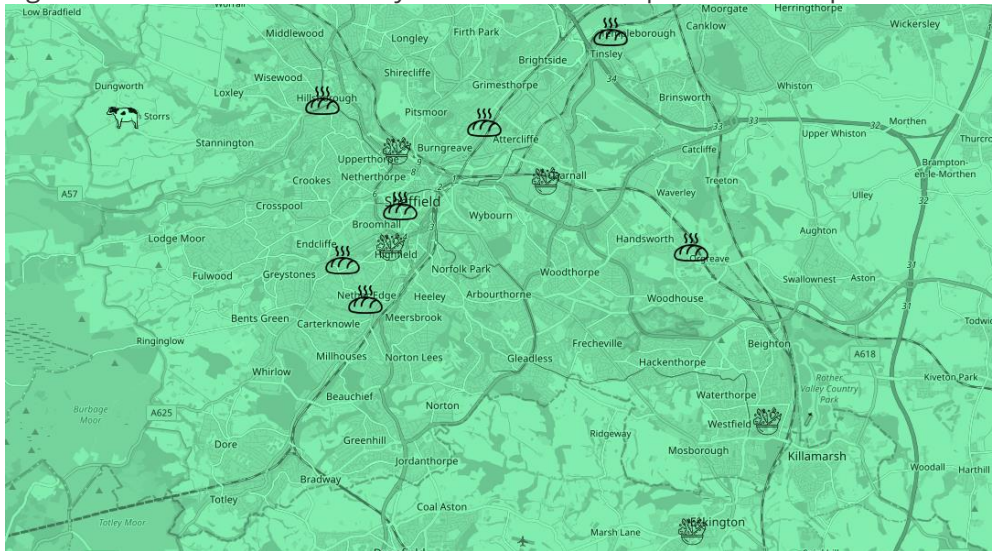
Suppliers were asked how organisations like theirs could supply more to anchor institutions. Responses indicated that suppliers believed increased trust, support and access to start-up funds are crucial for small organisations to scale up and meet public sector demands. One supplier to the NHS found the process straightforward due to standing orders, but, while dealing with Local Education Authorities, faced challenges like limited delivery windows and small order values. Suggestions for improvement included more proactive buyer engagement, participation in trade shows, and long-term institutional investments. Suppliers also emphasised the importance of local sourcing and the potential benefits of tasting sessions to showcase products. Additionally, simplifying procurement processes and recognizing the economic value of local spending could enhance supplier participation.

Directory of suppliers

An objective of this project was to increase awareness among anchor institution procurement and catering managers of the existence of local suppliers. Besides the survey and interview data presented here, we also produced a directory and interactive map of local food producers. This resource includes details of over 140 suppliers and allows for filtering by a range of options, such as food category and health and safety rating. This functionality, alongside the presentation of the data as a map, should allow for informed decisions to be made about suppliers, with respect to factors such as location and category.⁵⁸ Figure 2 shows a screenshot of the map, displaying three of the 10 food categories (fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy and milk, and bakery).

⁵⁸ The map was produced by student intern Callum Niddrie and is accessible via the ShefFood website. [Link](#).

Figure 2: Screenshot of directory and interactive map of local food producers



Focus groups with local producers

The focus groups responses revealed varied experiences with public sector procurement, highlighting both informal and structured supply arrangements.

Several small suppliers serving hospitals, care homes and schools operate on a direct order basis without formal contracts. Others have more complex arrangements, including routes through larger private sector supply chain intermediaries (e.g. a council requested a contract holder source processed vegetables from a small farmer and processor as a preferred supplier). Small family businesses and niche suppliers face challenges with the new NHS dynamic tendering processes and compliance requirements. Larger organisations (e.g. wholesalers) with dedicated procurement teams engage with public procurement through frameworks and tender processes specific to universities, academy trusts and councils. The need for better communication, local engagement and support for small suppliers was a recurring theme, with suggestions for more accessible “meet the buyer/seller” events and recognition of the economic value of local sourcing.

Focus group participants identified a range of barriers to increasing local food supply to the public sector, including buyer preferences for fewer contracts, restrictive processes in anchor institutions and the administrative burden of NHS frameworks.

One solution was to work with an existing caterer already on a framework agreement to supply a university – if an event put on at the university specified they wanted to offer local produce, the caterer would source from the supplier in question. A significant issue is the lack of personal connections, as having contacts within institutions like universities can be crucial for securing contracts. Participants again emphasized the need for regular “meet the buyer/seller” events to build these relationships.

“

You need to get in the door, face to face, then they know you.

”

The business models of small producers often do not align with public sector needs, facing challenges with pricing, order regularity, and margins. It was observed that some “local” suppliers effectively act as middlemen, taking inputs from across the country and world adding minimal local value. Large national suppliers prioritize profits, squeezing smaller producers to offer the lowest prices. The overall food system model, with multiple profit margins along the supply chain, results in less quality food in public sector meals.

“

Profit for the middleman means lower profit for producers.

”

A range of hopes, concerns and potential solutions were discussed regarding increased involvement with public sector procurement supply chains. Participants highlighted the importance of personal contacts and “meet the buyer/seller” events, noting that brief, in-person interactions with catering managers are invaluable compared to being just another listing in a large supplier’s brochure.

“

5-10 mins with a catering manager in person is gold – can’t get that across in a brochure.

”

The idea of food hubs to aggregate small producers’ supply was met with scepticism, due to overlooking fundamental issues like land availability and market conditions, with fears expressed that adding an extra layer to the supply chain could promote consolidation and even push smaller producers out of business. It was noted that 49% of growers surveyed recently feared they could go out of business in the following year.⁵⁹

“

We’re so far off having enough on the supply side to justify [a hub]... We already have food hubs – they’re called supermarkets!

”

Participants also discussed the potential of public sector-owned land for horticulture, though they questioned whether it could or should compete on price, given that current market prices don’t take into account the social, environmental and health costs of production.

They did, however, see anchor institutions as potential demand centres that could foster food citizenship through imaginative initiatives like pop-up markets and box collection points, e.g. hospitals with spare space offering peppercorn rents to traders selling nutritious food to service users. Sharing

⁵⁹ Kennedy, S. (2023). Half of UK fruit and veg farmers fear closure due to supermarket buying behaviour. [Link](#).

logistics and transport between small local suppliers was seen as an opportunity. The idea of partnerships with large wholesalers/distributors who already hold contracts with the public sector was explored, with hope expressed that anchor institutions could help prove the market for local producers by actively demanding their products from national suppliers.

Some focus group participants had business models based on entirely local growing and production, but others were sourcing ingredients and inputs nationally or globally. One meat products supplier stated that the extent of local sourcing is driven by customer demand, e.g. if they specify Red Tractor then it has to be British meat. Otherwise, they source from around the country, EU (Ireland especially), South America etc. It was noted that customers have a misguided perception that British meat is better despite quality standards being similar elsewhere – e.g. production in Poland is safe, efficient and perhaps promotes more animal welfare than the UK. A locally based wholesaler stated that they purchase products commercially, with no consideration of origin. By contrast local growers of vegetables have inherently local production.

Different views were expressed by suppliers about their ability to scale up sales to meet any new demand from the public sector. One larger farmer said it would be possible to scale-up production, while a smaller vegetable grower highlighted broader supply-side challenges in the horticulture sector which limited their capacity to meet increased demand. Those sourcing internationally were confident that they could meet any increase in demand, by expanding their processing capacity.

“

We could easily scale if we had contacts to supply universities.

”

A roadmap for a sustainable, healthy and local food economy in Sheffield



SHORT TERM

1. Greater collaboration through the ShefFood partnership
2. Develop focused initiatives on a few key product lines
- 3a. Promote local supply routes through tier 1 suppliers/direct contract holders
- 3b. Promote local supply routes through frameworks
4. Organise meet the buyer/seller events
5. Develop a best practice guide for buyers
6. Forge strategic partnerships between suppliers



MEDIUM TERM

7. Explore menu reformulation and review food provisioning
8. Develop a Sheffield buying standard for local, healthy and sustainable food
9. Share physical space for sustainable food initiatives
10. Allocate land for regenerative agriculture



LONG TERM

11. Review school catering commissioning
12. Support the development of a producer consortium and food hub(s)
13. Establish a buyer consortium of anchor institutions



4. A roadmap for a sustainable, healthy and local food economy in Sheffield

This section brings together the ideas for interventions in the local food system emerging from this research into a roadmap for change.

These ideas were discussed and developed by representatives of anchor institutions in a co-design workshop, and participants were keen to progress with the nearer-term actions in particular as soon as possible.

Many of these options require central coordination and resources, which may partly be provided by ShefFood and partner organisations but would likely require additional support. In the meantime, ShefFood's Good Food Economy and Procurement working group, which contains representatives of the anchor institutions involved in this research, is taking forward as many of these actions as possible with the resources available.

Short term

Options under this section work with the existing system, structures and relationships to deliver quick results without requiring transformational changes.

1. Greater collaboration through the ShefFood partnership

An intensification of collaboration through the existing ShefFood partnership should be pursued to advance the interventions below. The Good Food Economy and Procurement working group includes the six anchor institutions engaged for this research and meets regularly, but has no official standing. More formal commitments on the goals of the working group, information sharing, principles and greater resources (from the anchor institutions or elsewhere) would support deeper collaboration.

An initial focus could be developing shared definitions and ambitions around "healthy", "local" and "sustainable" food – with a view to moving towards a Sheffield Food Standard (see below). This could send a strong signal about the direction of travel around public sector food procurement in Sheffield, shaping markets proactively.

Collaboration is also needed to improve data collection among anchor institutions. This project found that the data currently collected does not permit an estimation of overall demand by product or the extent to which food is local. Greater and more structured data collection, sharing and monitoring could achieve this, e.g. through collecting postcodes of suppliers and routinely requesting the origin of products from large national suppliers (e.g. BidFood, Brakes) as standard. Information sharing between anchor institutions on their local suppliers, e.g. through updating the directory developed for this project (see [directory of suppliers](#), above), would also increase transparency. Collective action to frameworks to encourage the recruitment of local suppliers could also be promoted.

The group could also streamline sharing of information between anchor institutions and local suppliers. Once data is available, this could include total demand for key products. More immediately, anchor institutions should share information about their requirements of suppliers, e.g. requirements of suppliers, food hygiene audit forms, audit processes, etc. For instance one NHS trust is keen to buy local milk but can't accept glass bottles on its premises for patient safety reasons. Communication around evolving definitions and ambitions around procurement of "healthy", "local" and "sustainable" food would also help local suppliers. Information about upcoming procurement exercises and potential contracts of interest to local suppliers should be routinely shared in an accessible way, e.g. through an online platform or social media account.

2. Develop focused initiatives on a few key product lines

An early focus for anchor institutions, with potential for "quick wins", would be to identify and explore procuring a few key products known to be available from local suppliers. This would build on the success of local dairy procurement from Our Cow Molly, where the long term commitment of a university caterer to buy milk provided the confidence needed to finance the expansion of production and processing capacity.

Potential product areas to focus on identified during the research include potatoes (particularly pre-processed), dairy (e.g. cheese, yoghurt), eggs, bread and bakery products. Task and finish groups on particular products could be formed in ShefFood's Good Food Economy and Procurement working group. Those anchor institutions that have already made progress in procuring a product locally could share knowledge and experience with others keen to do the same. The priority products chosen could also be the focus of other interventions listed below.

3a. Promote local supply routes through tier one suppliers/direct contract holders

Large wholesalers and national suppliers are better able to win supply contracts with anchor institutions and meet their needs for volume, range of produce and logistical services. Acknowledging this reality, anchor institutions could do more to use their combined spend as leverage to request healthy, sustainable and local products from their first tier suppliers. A good first step would be demanding greater transparency from large wholesalers and national suppliers about the

origin of their products. ShefFood and anchor institutions could also support efforts to provide information and training to suppliers to help them get into wholesaler catalogues. Wholesalers require evidence of demand before listing products, and anchor institutions requesting specific local products is a way to achieve this. The successful case of one local fresh vegetable producer supplying into a university via a bigger supplier who is the direct contract holder could be explored for potential replication.

3b. Promote local supply routes through frameworks

Framework agreements enable anchor institutions to procure food from a list of pre-approved suppliers, reducing the burden for staff in terms of compliance and supplier onboarding and management. Sheffield anchor institutions could agree a preferred framework provider and leverage their collective spend to promote local supply. The TUCO framework arrangement in particular is already in use by universities and hospitals, so is an obvious candidate, as well as NHS Supply Chain frameworks for the hospitals. The Yorkshire Purchasing Organisation (YPO) is another possibility, which works with local authorities to procure goods including food, although this is viewed by some as a relatively expensive framework provider.⁶⁰ A more ambitious option would be to setup a framework subsidiary just for Sheffield which, depending on scale and governance arrangements, could potentially get around going through existing framework providers who take a margin to cover their costs.

A quick win under this intervention would be the provision of support and information to local producers to get onto existing framework agreements. For instance, sponsorship by buyers enables registration of suppliers with TUCO, so anchor institutions could work collectively to support local suppliers in that way. The new NHS Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) may also offer opportunities, though it is early stages and may not reduce the preference of procurement managers for fewer suppliers. Hospital anchor institutions could support suppliers through the onerous documentation and administrative requirements for registration on the NHS DPS.

4. Organise meet the buyer/seller events

A major obstacle identified by local suppliers was their lack of personal contacts among Sheffield's public sector procurement practitioners. Events could be organised to link suppliers in and around Sheffield to public sector procurement and catering managers, to understand each others' products and needs. These should be regular, free and well publicised to ensure transparency and accessibility. By contrast, national "meet the buyer" events are very expensive to attend and therefore exclusive.

⁶⁰ Further details on YPO can be found [here](#).

5. Develop a best practice guide for anchor institution buyers

A best practice guide for catering and procurement managers in Sheffield anchor institutions could bring together knowledge from within and beyond the city.⁶¹ This could cover food procurement standards – market engagement, procurement routes, dynamic purchasing, contract design, support to suppliers etc. – but also preparation, production and marketing standards too. The overall aim would be to create more equity and prosperity in the supply chain by broadening the supplier base, whilst improving food sustainability and health. The process could start with sharing best practice between Sheffield anchor institution experts, before bringing in outside expertise to fill gaps and review practices as needed.

6. Forge strategic partnerships between suppliers

Suppliers expressed interest in exploring ways to collaborate with each other in order to serve public sector buyers. This could take the form of sharing resources, for instance vehicles or staff time. Sharing vehicles for deliveries avoids the need for multiple small suppliers making separate deliveries, reducing cost and carbon emissions. Sharing staff time between small organisations is practiced in some places as a way to balance out discrepancies in activity, e.g. if one producer's harvest and peak delivery time coincides with a slower period for another.

Collaboration would likely start informally and on an ad hoc basis to build trust, based on marriages of convenience between pairs or small groups of suppliers, and building on existing relationships. However, a more structured system could be developed to facilitate this – e.g. through regular meetings between suppliers, social media groups for sharing requests, suppliers procuring or sub-contracting from each other, etc. In the longer term formal arrangements like a shared bonded warehouse facility or an online/digital or physical hub could be explored (see intervention 12 below).⁶² Anchor institution buyers could facilitate this intervention by looking for opportunities to make connections and introductions between their suppliers.

Medium term

7. Explore menu reformulation and review food provisioning

In the medium term a collaborative approach could be developed to menu reformulation and redesign informed by local circumstances such as the availability of food supply, capacity in kitchens, city-wide health and sustainability priorities etc. Such an initiative could explicitly target identifying cost savings which in turn free up budget to make longer term commitments to local suppliers to invest in

⁶¹ See also URBACT's tutorials on food procurement. [Link](#).

⁶² One possible 'E-hub' infrastructure offering is that of E-Foods/Freshmarkets.

healthy, sustainable production (following the example of the university's relationship with Our Cow Molly).

One aspect of menu reformulation already underway in several Sheffield anchor institutions is a move towards plant-based diets, or towards “less and better” meat. For instance, the University of Sheffield has taken the step to exclude red meat from its menus and, as mentioned above, one school has gone fully vegetarian. With other anchor institutions (e.g. an NHS trust) interested in offering more plant-based meals, there are opportunities for caterers to share experience and best practice from their journeys. During discussions some felt the need to stress that their aim is not to “eradicate” meat and dairy, which remain important as part of a regenerative agriculture movement for soil health and carbon sequestration.

8. Develop a Sheffield buying standard for local, healthy and sustainable food

A relatively resource-intensive and high commitment but also high impact intervention would be to develop a local food buying standard, analogous to the government's national buying standard. A Sheffield specific version could commit signatories to more ambitious targets in accordance with city priorities, for instance building on Sheffield City Council's school food contract standards including Red Tractor meat, Food For Life etc (see above). The development of a standard would likely require additional resource and sponsorship from an institution with a democratic, city-wide mandate such as the Council itself.

The process would have to be gradual and inclusive to bring signatories on a journey together, with sufficient lead time for making the required changes e.g. 6-12 months for shifting to 100% Red Tractor meat. It would need to be built on explicitly agreed and universally shared principles such as the need to increase sustainability through reduced embedded carbon emissions, whether or not linked to specific initiatives e.g. “less and better” meat. Any increased costs could be funded by the savings identified through menu reformulation in intervention seven, although one university stated that they have flexibility to spend more on food if there are demonstrable carbon savings as a result. Shared tools could be developed such as a carbon calculator for buyers to understand emissions from different menu options and ingredients.⁶³ The design of this intervention should take into account lessons learned from experiences in other cities.⁶⁴

9. Share physical space for sustainable food initiatives

In their capacity as demand centres, public sector anchor institutions could support food citizenship and activism by providing physical spaces to initiatives creating direct relationships between producers and eaters. In delivering their core functions, anchor institutions bring together staff, patients and visitors in hospitals as well as students, teachers and staff in schools, colleges and universities. Using

⁶³ Though such carbon calculators are in their early stages, relying on proxy figures and not accounting for food production nuances.

⁶⁴ E.g. [London](#).

land and property assets more intentionally, e.g. through peppercorn rents for underutilised space in areas with high footfall, is a well established intervention in the community wealth building toolkit.

For instance one Manchester hospital has given space near its entrance to affordable vegetable kiosks, run by traders who go to wholesale markets, pick up discounted produce at the end of the day (which would have been on shelves for several more days in shops), then sell them for affordable prices in the hospital the next day. This results in nutritious fresh food being made cheaper and more accessible, meeting patients' needs and supporting NHS objectives to improve the wider determinants of health. Other imaginative ways to connect people to local suppliers, even if not through public procurement, include "pop-up" markets/menus in catering outlets, box collection points, plant-based cafés and social eating (e.g. food halls).

10. Allocate land for regenerative agriculture

In the medium-long term, the possibility of shifting land use and production modes around Sheffield could be explored to move towards regenerative agriculture. This could be with a view to insourcing food production, such as through anchor institutions sourcing from farms on Council-owned land.⁶⁵ Around Sheffield, it was suggested that the hundreds of acres of Council-owned land could be used for horticulture. This could be accompanied by advocacy efforts to encourage reforms to farming payments, to take advantage of post-Brexit opportunities to funnel public subsidy towards smaller, regenerative producers instead of large landowners. First steps in this intervention would be an investigation of the extent to which the land around Sheffield is appropriate for models of regenerative agriculture e.g. a mixed model of production using animals and horticulture. Later on, difficult questions are likely to arise around whether such production could or should match current market prices which don't account for social, environmental and health costs/externalities.

Long term

These are ideas which did not emerge from the research process itself but are under discussion by members of the Sheffield Food Partnership. The current conditions of food markets and anchor procurement practices may not favour their implementation now but in the longer term they could support public procurement of more sustainable, local and healthy food.

11. Review school catering commissioning

School food provision in Sheffield is widely seen as working well in terms of the standards adhered to. However, the findings presented here about the limited extent of local food purchasing suggest that opportunities to meet broader social and economic objectives are being missed. The government's objectives around procurement from SMEs, insourcing and local sourcing of public sector food (see

⁶⁵ See also: Abundance. (2024). Food Systems in Common. [Link](#).

“current government policy” section above) provide a supportive policy environment for a review of school catering commissioning with full consideration of options from in-house provision to creating/supporting the establishment of a new social enterprise or joint venture to deliver the service.

This would require further research into feasibility to ensure that any new approach would deliver more healthy, sustainable and local food to children. Work would have to start soon, as the current plan is for a new contract to be in place by summer 2026 after an extensive tender process in 2025. The incumbent has held multiple iterations of the school meals contract since 2011.

Successful cases studies of in-house provision include the Lancashire Catering Service, a local authority owned and operated catering organisation.⁶⁶ It services over 530 individual primary and secondary schools as well as care and residential homes across Lancashire. 100% of suppliers are classed as being local, either being in Lancashire or a neighbouring region to Lancashire. 75% of food purchased is produced in the UK.⁶⁷ In Dorset, Local Food Links is a community owned social enterprise providing freshly prepared meals daily to over 50 schools and nurseries from three hub kitchens in Bridport, Blandford and Weymouth.⁶⁸

12. Support the development of a producer consortium and food hub(s)

Building on the collaboration between suppliers outlined above, a more developed producer consortium would aim to increase sales of sustainable, healthy food through co-operation between local producers, strengthening their ability to market direct to anchor institutions in Sheffield. It could be supported by initiatives to acquire land for sustainable farming and to develop the workforce, to provide technical support for growers, and by the creation of a delivery service. A key objective would be to ensure that the largest part of value added would accrue to producers rather than wholesalers as at present.

Online sales systems or “e-hubs” could be initially used by the consortium, linked to a map of sub-regional producers.⁶⁹ In order to aggregate supplies for marketing and delivery, the consortium could eventually acquire one or more physical hubs equipped with storage space, chilled and frozen, processing areas and equipment, drawing on the experience and facilities of local initiatives. The hubs might also offer training facilities and community retail and eating spaces. It has been suggested that the hubs and their physical infrastructure could be funded through a small surcharge on orders and deliveries.

⁶⁶ Lancashire.gov.uk. (accessed 2025). About Lancashire Catering Services. [Link](#).

⁶⁷ Lancashire.gov.uk. (accessed 2025). Procurement. [Link](#).

⁶⁸ See localfoodlinks.org.uk for more information.

⁶⁹ E.g. Ooooby, E-Foods/Freshmarket, etc.

Issues with food hubs which would need to be overcome

Many of the obstacles to food hubs, particularly in the context of direct to consumer supply, have been highlighted in other publications.⁷⁰ The constraints for public procurement are likely to be greater since wholesale prices tend to be 30-40% lower than retail/direct to consumer channels. Centralised hubs add an extra stage (and margin) to an already long supply chain, with the risk that they could incentivise further consolidation – to the detriment of small suppliers. There is a risk of duplication since other actors in the supply chain already serve a similar function – e.g. wholesalers – so a market niche would have to be clearly identified in any business plan.

Besides viability, another key obstacle is that local supply is not strong enough currently. This is based on our survey and interview findings as well as reports on the state of the sector: a recent survey found that 49% of UK growers feared they could go out of business in the next year.⁷¹ A hub could solve the food availability obstacle by sourcing regionally, but then is no longer rooted and ends up acting more like a wholesaler – many of which already exist. It would be necessary to build local supply by ensuring conditions were supportive: land available, produce grown, market conditions favourable.

The products to focus on would have to be clarified. Meat is not produced locally at scale currently. For horticulture, it's uncertain that enough land is available, unlike the US where the food hubs concept originated. Furthermore, small scale horticulture producers need to sell direct to consumers to recoup their high capital and labour costs. It's unclear that a hub would be able to pay the prices required to ensure viability in current market conditions. Sustainability is also an issue – the extra food miles to bring goods from producers to the hub, and then from the hub to buyers, would have to be outweighed by carbon savings elsewhere.

Governance and funding arrangements would need careful consideration. For instance, what would happen if the consortium/hub couldn't fulfil a contractual agreement? How would the risk of penalties be managed and the risk of further supply chain consolidation minimised? Any hub would likely be reliant on grant funding initially, or even indefinitely. Significant capital investment is required for establishing and operating a hub, so there is a need to identify a funding source/mechanism early on, supported by a detailed proposal/grant application with a strong financial model.

Practically speaking there would be a need to identify lead producer organisations with capacity to drive a consortium forward. However, when the idea of a food hub was introduced by the researchers to test the concept, some leading local producers expressed scepticism which would have to be overcome locally to ensure key stakeholders were supportive.

⁷⁰ Guzman and Reynolds. (2019). Food Hubs in the UK: Where are we and what next? [Link](#).

⁷¹ Kennedy, S. (2023). Half of UK fruit and veg farmers fear closure due to supermarket buying behaviour. [Link](#).

13. Establish a buyer consortium of anchor institutions

Going further than collaborating through SheffFood, a formal consortium of anchor institution buyers and caterers in Sheffield could provide a more structured forum for co-operation to shift spending from large national wholesalers to local producers. The consortium would organise contracting to facilitate access by smaller producers or groups of producers and to maximise their value added share, e.g. through a bespoke not-for-profit dynamic purchasing system. The consortium's work could be led by a coordinator answerable to the body's members and funded by subscription in proportion to each member's spend.

The operating principle would include working closely with groupings of local producers (e.g. in a producer consortium, as outlined above) and enabling access for producers to frameworks (e.g. TUCO) and the NHS supply chain or new purchasing arrangements. The producer and buyer consortia could together promote co-operation between caterers and producers, organising "meet the buyer/seller" events and managing logistics to meet the varied needs of, for example, schools and hospitals. Eventually, one scenario could be a single main central production site for all anchor institutions, delivering out to finishing kitchens in each site. This would be achieved alongside long term ambitions to reduce reliance on national suppliers for logistics, transport, ingredient preparation and kitchen infrastructure.

Challenges for this intervention which would need to be overcome include the current strong incentives of NHS trusts to procure through NHS Supply Chain. Also, there would need to be clear leaders among Sheffield's anchor institutions to found the consortium as a "coalition of the willing", but this would require commitments of capacity and resource from already stretched procurement and catering departments.



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