

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: PUBLIC SECTOR FOOD PROCUREMENT

August 2025

- **The Countryside Alliance has submitted Freedom of Information requests (FOIs) which asked 19 central government departments, 215 local authorities and the British Armed Forces about their food procurement policies, seeking to discover what efforts they are making to procure more UK and local food and to monitor the origins of the food they serve.**
- **Only one government department, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), had a policy relevant to the procurement of British food. Only one other, the Department for Health and Social Care, could say what proportion of its procured food originated in the UK. The Wales Office said it encourages its external caterers to purchase UK-produced food where possible.**
- **Only 26 local authorities (12% of all those asked) were able to report data concerning what proportion of the food they procured was produced in the UK. 70 councils indicated they do not have any relevant policy associated with procuring British food, and there were 42 councils for which no response could be recorded.**
- **Scotland and Wales appear to be well ahead of other parts of the UK in local and UK food procurement by their councils, driven by their procurement frameworks and rates of participation in the Soil Association's Food for Life scheme.**
- **The findings suggest that the Labour government will struggle to honour its manifesto commitment of ensuring half of all food purchased across the public sector is locally produced or certified to higher environment standards. Without routine monitoring of levels of catering spend directed towards British food, it will not be possible to ascertain progress towards that objective. While we applaud the government's commitment to monitoring food origins, this cannot be limited to central government and must be expected of local authorities and other public bodies as well.**
- **At a time when British farmers, food producers and suppliers face economic uncertainty, they deserve to have the full support of the public sector with rigorous, traceable food procurement policies that ensure public bodies deliver on government commitments.**

Background

- **The Countryside Alliance firmly supports the supply and consumption of local and British food. We believe that emphasising local food has an important role to play in promoting sustainability within our food system. The sustainability it supports is both environmental, in reducing impacts of transporting food over distance, and economic, in retaining food-related expenditure within local areas and helping buttress their rural economies.**

- Like all public bodies, government departments and local authorities have a duty to promote sustainability in their operations. This duty and its underlying motives have, however, been hijacked in recent years by animal rights activists seeking to encourage local authorities to embrace veganism and opposition to dairy and meat.
- Campaigners associated with the ‘plant-based’ movement have been lobbying public bodies, primarily local authorities, to pass motions committing themselves to a sweeping range of actions that could be taken to include refusing planning permission for new animal agriculture facilities, running propaganda campaigns advocating veganism and taking meat and dairy off catering menus in schools, hospitals and care homes.
- The Countryside Alliance believes this movement’s exclusive focus on livestock as the “ill” in our food system is myopic and disingenuous. Campaigners maintain that livestock farming is inherently unsustainable, but to demonstrate this, they rely almost exclusively on global carbon emissions statistics. This ignores the fact that UK livestock farming operates to among the highest standards of sustainability and animal welfare in the world. British beef production, for instance, is about half as carbon-intensive as the global average.¹
- The inevitable result of a successful attack on the UK meat and livestock sector would be substitution by lower-quality imports produced to lower standards of welfare and sustainability, which in turn would stimulate more production abroad to these lower standards. It would represent a net loss to environmental sustainability and animal welfare.
- The Countryside Alliance has therefore been campaigning to encourage local authorities to pass motions committing themselves to taking steps to ensure that as much as possible of the food they procure is British and, preferably, local. To date, 11 councils across the UK have passed associated motions.

Policy context

- The previous government published its Food Strategy in June 2022, which included the following commitment:

“Public sector food should be healthier, more sustainable and provided by a diverse range of local suppliers. Locally produced food with reduced distance between farm and fork can provide societal benefits, such as creating personal connection between producers and consumers, supporting local food cultures and local economic growth, and improving traceability of food through shorter supply chains.”²

- Prior to forming the current government, the Labour Party took a similar line. Its manifesto for the 2024 General Election stated:

“Labour recognises that food security is national security. That is why we will champion British farming whilst protecting the environment. We will set a target for half of all food purchased across the public sector to be locally produced or certified to higher environmental standards.”³

¹ Committee on Climate Change, [Land use: Policies for a Net Zero UK](#), 01.20

² Defra, [Government Food Strategy](#), 13.06.22

³ Labour Party, [Manifesto 2024](#), P. 59

- In the last Parliament, Sarah Champion MP presented a Private Members' Bill, the Public Procurement (British Goods and Services) Bill, which was debated at Second Reading on 15 March 2024.⁴ One of its key objectives was to promote the public procurement of British and local food, and the Countryside Alliance, along with other organisations including the NFU and the RSPCA, formed part of the stakeholder group that helped design the Bill.
- Although the Bill did not receive government support and was unable to make progress, one outcome was a meeting of the stakeholder group with Will Quince, then MP for Colchester, who was conducting a review of public food procurement on behalf of Defra. The intervening general election meant his report had to be published independently. It made several recommendations on making the existing Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services more impactful and improving policy in other ways.⁵
- Sarah Champion MP subsequently relaunched her Bill in the current Parliament on 18 December 2024.⁶
- In his speech to the Oxford Farming Conference in January, the Defra Secretary, Steve Reed MP, committed to monitoring the origins of food served through the public sector.⁷
- In February the government published its updated National Procurement Policy Statement which read in part:

*"The Government expects the highest standards of integrity, ethical conduct and environmental sustainability in business practices from suppliers delivering public contracts. This includes the procurement of food; 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."*⁸

- On 26 June the Cabinet Office published a consultation, which runs until 05 September, on requiring public bodies to take account of the impact of their spending on British jobs and skills. The proposals would, however, only affect contracts with a value of £5 million or more.⁹
- In the context of these developments, it was therefore surprising that the government's new food strategy, published on 15 June, did not mention the public sector or procurement at any point.¹⁰ This omission was reported by the Sunday Express with commentary from the Countryside Alliance, the NFU and the Opposition. The government reiterated its commitment to the 50% target but did not explain its exclusion from the strategy.¹¹

⁴ HC Deb, 15.02.24, [v747](#)

⁵ Will Quince MP, [Independent Review into Public Sector Food Procurement](#), 05.24

⁶ Sarah Champion MP, [Sarah Champion presents her 'Buy British Bill' to Parliament](#), 18.12.24

⁷ Defra, [Steve Reed speech at the 2025 Oxford Farming Conference](#), 09.01.25

⁸ Cabinet Office, [National Procurement Policy Statement](#), 13.02.25

⁹ Cabinet Office, [Public Procurement: Growing British industry, jobs and skills - consultation on further reforms to public procurement](#), 26.06.25

¹⁰ Defra, [A UK government food strategy for England, considering the wider UK food system](#), 15.07.25

¹¹ Sunday Express, [Labour accused of new 'outright attack on rural Britain'](#), 19.07.25

- To support our campaign for more public procurement of local and British food the Countryside Alliance has sought information from central government departments, local authorities and the British Armed Forces about their food procurement policies and the extent to which they are procuring food produced in the UK.

Research methodology

- The Countryside Alliance submitted Freedom of Information requests (FOIs) which asked 19 central government departments, 151 District and County Councils in England, 32 councils in Scotland, 21 in Wales and 11 in Northern Ireland, and the British Armed Forces about their food procurement policies.
- FOIs to local authorities asked:
 - *What policies, if any, does the council have in place for the sourcing and procuring of food produced in the United Kingdom for official functions and catering outlets?*
 - *What proportion of food procured by the council in the financial year of 2023-24 was produced in the United Kingdom for: (a) official functions including, but not limited to, civic events and council meetings, and (b) catering outlets owned and/or managed by the council including, but not limited to, cafés?*
- In addition to the direct answers, we also recorded any additional comments that councils provided as contextual information.
- Responses were then subjected to qualitative data analysis by which they were categorised in various ways. Since the responses were qualitative, it was necessary to apply a degree of interpretation and approximation.
- FOIs to central government departments asked:
 - *What policies, if any, does the Department have in place for the sourcing and procuring of food produced in the United Kingdom for official functions and catering outlets?*
 - *What proportion of food procured by the Department in the financial year of 2023-24 was produced in the United Kingdom for: (a) official functions and events, and (b) catering outlets run by the Department including, but not limited to, cafés?*
- The FOI to the British Armed Forces asked:
 - *What proportion of bacon that is fed to personnel of (a) the Army, (b) the Royal Navy and (c) the Royal Air Force at locations in the UK where Service personnel are provided with food (including messes) is from pigs that were born, reared and slaughtered in the UK?*
 - *What proportion of (a) beef, (b) chicken and (c) pork (including sausages and bacon) that is fed to the personnel of (a) the Army, (b) the Royal Navy and (c) the Royal Air Force at locations in the UK where Service personnel are provided with food (including messes) is from animals that were born, reared and slaughtered in the UK?*

- This report assumes that declarations made in response to the FOIs were accurate and comprehensive. There is reason, however, to believe that this may not always have been the case. In Scotland, for instance, several local authorities indicated having no relevant policies, whereas others pointed to their use of procurement frameworks drawn up by Scotland Excel: a procurement advisory service that promotes British, Scottish and local food sourcing. External research reveals that all Scottish local authorities engage with Scotland Excel to some degree. Nevertheless, this report is primarily based on the FOI responses.

Key findings

- Substantive responses were received from 19 government departments, 172 councils across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the British Armed Forces.
- Only one central government department, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), had a policy relevant to the procurement of food of UK origin: it stated that its catering subcontractors are certified under the Food for Life scheme, under which 75% of food is freshly prepared in their kitchens and 80% is sourced from the United Kingdom. The Wales Office said that it encourages its external caterers to purchase UK-produced food where possible.
- Aside from the FCDO only one department, the Department for Health and Social Care, responded substantively to the question about what proportion of procured food was British. It stated that in the financial year of 2023-24, 72% of the food procured for the department by its catering supplier had been produced in the UK.
- The British Armed Forces said that it had no information as to the origin of the meat it procures.
- Only 26 local authorities (12% of all those asked) were able to report data concerning the proportion of council-procured food that was produced in the UK for at least one of events and catering outlets (including school canteens). 70 councils indicated they do not have any relevant policy associated with sourcing or procuring UK-produced food, and there were 42 councils for which no response could be recorded.
- Scotland and Wales appear to be well ahead of other parts of the UK in local and UK food procurement by councils. In Scotland this is driven by Scotland Excel procurement frameworks and rates of participation in the Soil Association's Food for Life scheme. In Wales the Caerphilly-led Welsh Public Sector Collaborative Food Group plays a similar role.
- Some councils maintained that they aim to source UK-produced food but were unable to detail any efforts to track the origins of their catering, or stated that the requested information was not held.

Response breakdown: central government and the Army

- The following government departments were contacted with the questions outlined above:
 - Department for Energy Security and Net Zero
 - Scotland Office
 - Department for Culture, Media and Sport

- Department for Transport
 - Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
 - Department for Business & Trade
 - Wales Office
 - Ministry of Justice
 - HM Treasury
 - Cabinet Office
 - Department for Health and Social Care
 - Northern Ireland Office
 - Attorney General Office
 - Department for Work and Pensions
 - Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
 - Home Office
 - Department for Education
 - Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
 - Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government
- Of these 19 departments, 10 said in terms that they had no policy for encouraging the procurement of food of UK origin. Other answers varied but, as set out above, only the FCDO and the Wales Office made positive statements about seeking to procure British food.
 - The Ministry of Justice stated that it held relevant information but refused to disclose it on grounds of cost, while the Home Office also cited cost issues but said it could not confirm whether it held relevant information.
 - Several departments referred to the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services. These do not explicitly include a requirement to consider food origins, but they do include objectives relating to sustainable food production, nutrition, resource efficiency and social and economic value, each of which could readily be supported by decisions to procure food of UK origin.
 - The British Army responded:

“A search for the information has now been completed within the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and I can confirm that no information in scope of your request is held. Under Section 16 of the FOIA (Advice and Assistance), you may find it helpful to know that under the terms of MODs food contracts, the procurement of all produce is the responsibility of our prime contractors. All food procured for MOD personnel must comply with the Government Buying Standards for Food (GBSF) and the MOD food quality standards. These standards comply with all UK and EU production standards, Farm Assurance or equivalent.”

Response breakdown: local authorities

- There were 42 councils for which no response could be recorded. This was for a range of reasons, including that current contact details for FOI requests could not be identified, no response was received or the request was acknowledged but not actioned further.

- The following table lists the 70 councils that responded without disclosing any relevant policy associated with sourcing or procuring UK-produced food. It includes those councils that reported they held no information in relation to that question (the logical conclusion being that they had no such policy) as well as some councils that disclosed information that did not appear to be directly relevant to the subject of food origins.

Barking and Dagenham	Hillingdon	Portsmouth City	Wolverhampton City
Bath and North East Somerset	Hounslow	Redcar and Cleveland	Angus
Bedford	Hull City	Richmond upon Thames	Dundee City
Bexley	Isle of Wight	Rotherham	East Lothian
Birmingham City	Kent County	Solihull	North Ayrshire
Blackpool	Lambeth	Somerset	North Lanarkshire
Bolton	Leeds City	South Tyneside	Renfrewshire
Bracknell Forest	Leicestershire County	Southampton City	Stirling
Brent	Lincolnshire County	Southend-on-Sea	The Highlands
Buckinghamshire	Liverpool City	Southwark	The Moray
Central Bedfordshire	Luton	Sunderland City	Bridgend County
Cheshire West and Chester	Middlesbrough	Tameside	Conwy
Cornwall	Milton Keynes	Thurrock	Powys
Coventry City	North East Lincolnshire	Tower Hamlets	Rhondda Cynon Taff
Dudley	North Tyneside	Walsall	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon
Ealing	Nottingham City	Wandsworth	Newry, Mourne and Down District
East Riding of Yorkshire	Nottinghamshire County	Warwickshire County	
Hertfordshire County	Plymouth City	Wigan	

- The following table lists the 26 councils that indicated they held some data regarding the proportion of their procured food that originated from the UK for at least one of events and catering outlets (including school canteens). The others either said they did not hold the data, responded without reference to data or did not respond to the question.

Barking and Dagenham	Kensington and Chelsea	Wirral	Moray
Bracknell Forest	Knowsley	Dumfries and Galloway	West Dunbartonshire
Buckinghamshire	Lancashire County	East Renfrewshire	Blaenau Gwent
Bury	North Yorkshire	Midlothian	Flintshire
Devon County	Stoke-on-Trent City	Orkney Islands	Swansea
Gateshead	Tower Hamlets	Shetland Islands	
Gloucestershire County	Wiltshire	The Highlands	

- The level of detail councils supplied varied widely. The reported proportions of food that originated in the UK ranged between 17% and 100%, in certain categories, of the food served at events and in catering outlets. Where categories were named, those with the highest proportions of food of UK origin were meat and dairy.
- Several reasons were given by some councils for their inability to answer this question.
 - Most did not record the origins of their catered food.
 - A significant number outsourced their food procurement to external agencies, without imposing contractual obligations to trace or record the origins of procured food.
 - Some stated they procured through a framework or consortium directed towards maximising local food procurement but did not track what proportion of their procured food originated in the UK.
 - Some councils reported that they procured a negligible quantity of food or none.
- Three councils reported operating policies that, ostensibly for sustainability reasons, promoted or exclusively required serving “plant-based” foods. These were Calderdale, Essex County and Hackney. This list may not be exhaustive, however. Other councils that have made high-profile commitments to promoting “plant-based” diets, such as Oxfordshire County and the City of Edinburgh, made no mention of these in their responses.
- Twelve councils stated that their operations required them to procure only a negligible amount of food, or none. This would place them outside the scope of this investigation, unless they made other relevant comments in their response. These appear in the following table:

Croydon	Peter City	Shropshire	Inverclyde
Haringey	Rutland County	Sutton	Torfaen
North Somerset	Sefton	West Sussex County	Belfast City

- 18 councils said that they had a policy of only procuring from UK-based or local suppliers, but they did not monitor or impose requirements regarding the origins of the foods those companies supplied:

Blackburn with Darwen	Reading	Trafford	Fermanagh and Omagh District
Cambridgeshire County	Salford City	Wakefield City	Mid and East Antrim
Leicester City	Slough	West Northamptonshire	Mid Ulster District
Manchester City	Stoke-on-Trent City	Wokingham	
Medway	Surrey County	Merthyr Tydfil	

- 25 councils answered to the effect that while they had no specific policies requiring the procurement of local or British food, their actual practice was to do so where possible:

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole	Gateshead	North Yorkshire	Wirral
Bradford City	Gloucestershire County	Sheffield City	West Dunbartonshire
Bury	Kirklees	Swindon	Flintshire
Camden City	Newcastle Upon Tyne City	Telford and Wrekin	Wrexham
Devon County	Norfolk County	Torbay	
East Sussex County	North Lincolnshire	Warrington	
	North Northamptonshire	Wiltshire	

- Two councils, Hartlepool and Sandwell, said they did not have policies directly relating to their procurement of local or British foods, but instead had policies aimed at alerting local suppliers to contracts and helping them make bids.
- Five councils said they included sustainability criteria in their procurement policies, but did not explicitly reference origin:

Bristol City	Kingston upon Thames	Gwynedd
Kensington and Chelsea	Dumfries and Galloway	

- Seven Scottish local authorities noted that they procure food through Scotland Excel frameworks, which aim to make public procurement opportunities more accessible to local producers¹². As such, several of those indicated that they did not separately track the origins of procured food, since they considered procuring through Scotland Excel as sufficient. The councils that declared they procure food through these frameworks were:

Aberdeen City	East Ayrshire	Perth and Kinross
Clackmannanshire	Falkirk	South Ayrshire

- A similar arrangement exists in Wales. Caerphilly Council leads the Welsh Public Sector Collaborative Food Group, which has put in place a procurement framework that promotes local sourcing, including by insisting on all procured milk being British and preferably Welsh, and setting a definition for food advertised as 'local'. Aside from Caerphilly, five other councils reported involvement:

Blaenau Gwent	Newport	Swansea
Neath Port Talbot	Pembrokeshire	

- Eleven local authorities indicated that they or services they operated (primarily schools) were accredited under the Food for Life scheme, an accreditation scheme managed by the Soil Association, which promotes the procurement of sustainable, local food¹³:

Brighton and Hove City	Oxfordshire County	East Renfrewshire	Orkney Islands
Knowsley	Aberdeen City	Glasgow City	Shetland Islands
Lancashire County	City of Edinburgh	Midlothian	

¹² Scotland Excel, [Scotland Excel welcomes Good Food Nation consultation analysis](#), 31.10.24

¹³ Soil Association, [Food for Life](#)

- Finally, there were fourteen councils that indicated they have operational policies of their own to encourage the procurement of British and/or local food:

Darlington	Aberdeenshire	South Lanarkshire	Ards and North Down
Merton	Argyll and Bute	City of Cardiff	Causeway Coast and Glensa
Westminster	Fife	Monmouthshire	
Worcestershire County	Scottish Borders	Antrim and Newtonabbey	

Countryside Alliance position

- These figures are concerning and point to a lack of effort on the behalf of central government and many councils to examine and consider the effects of their catering policies. At a time when British farmers, food producers and suppliers face economic uncertainty, they deserve to have the full support of the public sector with rigorous, traceable food procurement policies that ensure public bodies deliver on government commitments.
- The findings suggest that the Labour government will struggle to honour its manifesto commitment of ensuring half of all food purchased across the public sector is locally produced or certified to higher environment standards. Without routine monitoring of levels of catering spend directed towards British food, it will not be possible to ascertain progress towards that objective. While we applaud the government's commitment to monitoring food origins, this cannot be limited to central government and must be expected of local authorities and other public bodies as well.
- If the government is serious about meeting its target, clearly the departments it directly controls must take the lead. In addition to recent and further reforms to the National Procurement Policy Statement, the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services should be updated to include a specific objective of supporting British food and farming. The government could usefully consult the Will Quince report, which includes more detailed recommendations for its reform.
- Furthermore, the Cabinet Office consultation document on public procurement mentions (without inviting comment) a proposal to use procurement to "*bolster domestic resilience and protect national security*"¹⁴, citing the examples of the steel and defence sectors. The government has repeatedly stated its belief that food security is national security. The food and farming sector should therefore be included in the set of services, works or goods Ministers would, under the proposal, be empowered to designate as of vital national interest and eligible to be considered by public bodies when considering the application of the national security exemption in the Procurement Act 2023.
- Councils have the power to set precedents for the purchasing practices of their residents. That is why we have been encouraging councils around the country to sign up to our pro-farming campaign, which ensures they use their platforms to champion local produce by choosing to source local meat, dairy and plant-based products for council events.

¹⁴ Cabinet Office, [Public Procurement: Growing British industry, jobs and skills - consultation on further reforms to public procurement](#), p. 13

- One lesson from Scotland and Wales, which are performing relatively well, is that to succeed in procuring more local and British food councils do not necessarily need to go to the effort of implementing independent policies. Having access to a procurement framework that supports such sourcing can be an effective alternative. The government should consider how it can make such frameworks available to English local authorities, drawing on the Scottish and Welsh examples, most likely through the Crown Commercial Service.
- In implementing a policy of encouraging buying British, Ministers need to be clear-eyed in anticipating and preparing to confront official intransigence. One local authority explained in some detail that existing laws, specifically section 17 of the Local Government Act 1988, prevent procurers from referring to non-commercial matters including suppliers' countries of origin.
- However, such considerations – often justified as arising from WTO rules – have not prevented those councils that have done so from implementing policies encouraging local food procurement, including those in Scotland and Wales through their respective procurement frameworks and those participating in the Food for Life scheme.
- Ministers should therefore be prepared to formulate and deploy creative arguments, for instance around sustainability, animal welfare and national security, that offer rationales for supporting local and British food procurement that will be legally defensible and acceptable to officialdom.
- The Countryside Alliance calls on all local authorities to join the eleven that have already passed our landmark local food and farming motion, and for all public bodies to review their catering commitments and instate a robust food procurement policy that monitors the origins of procured food to ensure that, wherever possible, it is local or produced in the UK.

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