

Rebalancing Our Plates: Policy Innovations for a Good Food Cycle

Executive Summary: The Countries Leading on Plant-Based Policy

The UK government’s recently announced aim of creating a ‘Good Food Cycle’¹ presents an important opportunity to promote plant-based food production and plant-rich diets – while tackling multiple national challenges in the process. In line with the strategy’s priority outcome of supporting ‘healthier and more environmentally sustainable food sales,’ encouraging healthy plant-rich diets would contribute significantly to meeting 2050 net-zero targets, and provide substantial savings for the NHS.

Other European countries are already taking the lead with concrete policy measures aimed at rebalancing their mix of animal- and plant-based food sales and consumption. This briefing summarises some of these approaches.

Four impactful policy measures for protein diversification

<p>1. Update dietary guidelines to reflect health and sustainability impacts</p> <p>Set clear guidelines so that everyone can align on dietary goals for the future.</p>	<p>Germany’s updated national dietary guidelines recommend upper limits on meat consumption in line with the EAT-Lancet Planetary Health Diet and strongly encourage an increase in plant-based food consumption.</p> 
<p>2. Institute protein-diversification reporting for large food businesses</p> <p>Help food retailers to play their part in creating positive food environments.</p>	<p>In the Netherlands, almost all major super-markets publicly report their split of animal versus plant-based proteins on an annual basis. The goal is a 50:50 split between plant-based and animal-based foods, with progress monitored by the government.</p> 
<p>3. Mobilise public-sector catering</p> <p>Make food in schools, hospitals, and other settings healthier for everyone.</p>	<p>Spain’s new Royal Decree on school catering ensures that plant-based foods now play a prominent role in schools and makes mandatory provision for plant-based meals for those that want them.</p> 
<p>4. Develop a national Plant-Based Action Plan</p> <p>Create a strategy to help realise the benefits of growing the plant-based sector.</p>	<p>Denmark’s Action Plan for Plant-based Foods provides a comprehensive framework for boosting the plant-based economy from farm to fork. This includes increasing demand, supporting R&D, and strengthening the value chain.</p> 

An ever greater number of countries are implementing these and similar measures in order to increase the production and consumption of plant-rich foods. Given the current focus on a National Food Strategy for the UK, it’s time for the government to adopt such policies, building on business leadership and the growing public demand for healthier and more sustainable diets.



Introduction

- The UK's National Food Strategy presents a **generational opportunity to fix our broken food system**.
- A sound plan for dietary change is a critical element of what needs to be achieved. In order to meet national goals relating to **health, food security, and the environment**, we need to increase the contribution of plant-based foods in our diet, and eat less meat and dairy.
- In the UK, we currently eat more than **twice as much meat** as the global average, and **twice as much** as recommended by the Eat Lancet Commission's Planetary Health Diet.²

Why we need to act now

HEALTH

- Excessive meat consumption is linked to **major diseases that are putting a growing burden on the NHS**. These include cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and cancer.³ Processed meat has been classified by the World Health Organization as a **Group 1 carcinogen**.⁴
- The latest National Diet and Nutrition Survey found that just **4% of adults eat enough fibre** and that only **27% are getting the recommended five portions a day** of fruit and vegetables, with children faring even worse.⁵ Shifting our diets towards **greater consumption of plant-based foods** is a vital part of the solution.

ENVIRONMENT

- In order to meet the **UK's Net Zero commitments**, the Committee on Climate Change has stated that we need to reduce meat consumption by 25% by 2040 and by 35% by 2050, thereby cutting emissions and freeing up land for nature.⁶
- Meat and dairy account for 46% of the UK's diet-related **greenhouse gas emissions**,⁷ half of the country's methane emissions,⁸ and a significant proportion of the eutrophication that is **degrading the UK's waterways**.⁹

ECONOMY AND FOOD SECURITY

- In a world that is facing increasing geopolitical shocks, shifting protein sources away from **resource-intensive and import-dependent animal-based products** will boost the resilience of the UK's food supply.¹⁰
- Growing the UK's plant-based economy could generate up to **£6.8bn annually, along with 25,000 jobs** by 2035. It is for reasons such as these that the UK government is already investing in projects like the National Alternative Protein Innovation Centre.¹¹

Government leadership is needed to catalyse change across the food sector

A shift towards plant-rich eating – with its many benefits – is being made feasible and actionable with **concrete policy measures** that are being adopted across Europe. As the government's Good Food Cycle policy paper acknowledges, our food consumption is heavily shaped by our food environments, which, in general, promote unhealthy and unsustainable choices. By improving food environments through policy levers, we can move towards diets that are healthier for both people and the planet.

People want to eat better

Research shows that citizens also want to make these changes, with over half of UK consumers stating that they would like to eat healthier and more sustainable diets – including reducing their meat and dairy intake.¹² Over 60% of consumers say that they would support policies that help people to reduce their meat consumption.¹³ Data from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey supports this, with meat consumption in the UK declining 18% between 2008 and 2019.¹⁴



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Policy asks and international case studies



1. Update the UK's Eatwell guide in order to provide more specific guidance on diets that are both healthy and sustainable

- The current **Eatwell dietary guidelines** are outdated, not sufficiently specific, and don't take sustainability aspects into account. The guidelines are important and have a large influence on consumption habits. Both public and private institutions use them as a key reference point for what good diets look like, so it's critical that they are brought into line with international best practice.
- Eatwell needs to give clearer guidance on:
 - A diet that is not only healthy **but also sustainable**.
 - Specific **upper limits on meat consumption** in line with the Planetary Health Diet.
 - Promoting **plant-based protein sources**, including pulses, nuts, seeds, and whole grains, with minimum weekly consumption amounts specified.
 - Helping consumers to make informed, health-promoting choices, including which plant-based alternatives – such as tofu, soya yoghurt, and mycoprotein – can contribute to a healthy and sustainable diet.
- This cost-effective intervention has the potential to generate ripple effects across companies and institutions, with **significant NHS savings** due to improved health outcomes.

Learning from other countries



Growing momentum for updated guidance across Europe

Several European countries are now adopting improved national dietary guidelines that are consistent with sustainability principles, and emphasising a better balance of plant-based and animal-based foods.

- The **Nordic Nutrition Recommendations**, covering eight separate countries and territories, state that, for health reasons, red-meat consumption should be limited to 350 grams a week, while if environmental reasons are taken into account, the figure should be considerably lower. The guidelines also state that white meat consumption should not be increased to compensate for reduced red meat intake.
- The **German dietary guideline** were updated in 2024, inspired by the Planetary Health Diet model. Weekly recommendations for meat consumption have been lowered to a maximum of 300g, and the weekly recommendations for dairy reduced to a maximum of two portions. The consumption of plant-based proteins is actively supported.
- Following the example of other European countries, **Belgium** has just released its updated Food-Based Dietary Guidelines, which include a 300 gram-per-week limit for red meat, and recommend that consumption of processed meat be as low as possible. The guidelines state that legumes should be eaten several times a week and that at least 250 grams of fruit and 300 grams of vegetables should be consumed daily.

2. Mandatory food-sales reporting for food businesses to include protein split

- Food businesses, and particularly retailers and foodservice companies, are already taking action and increasing the ratio of plant-based to animal-based food they sell (also known as the 'protein split'). **Nine out of 10 major UK retailers** already voluntarily measure their protein sales split.¹⁵
- However, as long as this remains voluntary, measurement is likely to be inconsistent, since most companies do not report publicly, and there is potential for such efforts to lapse. Work by the **Food Data Transparency Partnership** has failed to make sufficient progress on this topic.
- UK supermarkets have collectively made over 600 promises and pledges over the last 10 years, but evidence of follow-through is limited.¹⁶ **Retailers themselves are now requesting mandatory reporting** as a way to increase sector-level accountability.¹⁷
- Making disclosure of the protein split a mandatory industry metric for all large food businesses will **level the playing field**, and ensure that the sector can move forward in a unified manner in order to meet social goals.

Learning from other countries



The Netherlands: a standardised, sector-wide protein shift ambition supported by government

In the Netherlands, 85% of the food-retail sector measures and publicly discloses the sales split between protein sold from plant- vs animal- based sources. This split is supported and monitored by the national government via a publicly available dashboard.

- All major supermarkets monitor their protein split, with the results published annually and civil society supporting the initiative.
- The Dutch government has provided leadership by setting a clear (but not mandatory) policy goal of achieving a 50:50 plant:animal split by 2030, up from the current ratio of 43:57.
- The Dutch Health Council has examined the consequences of going further and aiming for a 60:40 split, and concluded that it would be beneficial for most Dutch people's health, while significantly reducing environmental impact.
- Supermarkets have voluntarily committed to aiming for the more ambitious goal of a 60:40 ratio for plant vs animal protein, in line with the Eat Lancet Planetary Health Diet.
- The Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality has adopted the Protein Tracker in its own **Supermarket Sustainability Dashboard**. The guidelines state that legumes should be eaten several times a week and that at least 250 grams of fruit and 300 grams of vegetables should be consumed daily.



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3. Use public-sector catering to demonstrate best practice and improve health outcomes

- Public-sector catering has significant **power to make change** at scale and improve diets, with 1.2 billion meals served every year in UK schools alone. The Climate Change Committee recommends that public bodies should **lead the way** in promoting and providing plant-based meals and alternative proteins.¹⁸
- However, the current **School Food Standards** are unambitious and outdated, recommending at least three portions of meat a week, with limits on the number of meat-free days and no specific guidance on plant-based protein sources.
- Government Buying Standards for food and catering** services also need to be reviewed in order to strengthen the plant-forward approach, and should be made mandatory across all public sector organisations, including schools.
- There is a **huge opportunity** to use schools to promote a healthy and fibre-rich 'veg default' or 'plant-first' approach. Studies show that if high quality, plant-rich meals are given prominence, **consumers will choose them**, with corresponding health and environmental benefits. Research suggests that adopting this approach in hospitals could save the NHS £54m annually.¹⁹

Learning from other countries



Tackling health inequalities through plant-rich meals in Spanish schools

Spain has updated its school food rules in order to reflect its National Dietary guidelines. Key to this is serving more plant based foods and less meat and unhealthy foods such as processed snacks, sugar-sweetened beverages, pizzas, and fried foods.

- The new legislation ensures that school meals guarantee greater overall provision of fruit and vegetables as well as plant-based proteins such as legumes.
- This is in line with recommendations from the Spanish Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition (AESAN) and the World Health Organization. AESAN recommends at least two-to-four servings of legumes a week.
- The new Royal Decree on healthy and sustainable school cafeterias also ensures the availability of 100% plant-based options in all schools, across both the state and private sectors.
- Historically, nearly 40% of Spanish schools serve only two or fewer portions of fresh vegetables per week. The Spanish government is hoping that the new approach will help to tackle Spain's rising obesity rates and reduce inequality by guaranteeing good food, irrespective of socio-economic class.
- The Minister in charge emphasised "a fairer model, which cares not only for children's rights, but also for the environment and the strategic sectors of our economy."²⁰



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4. Develop a national Plant-Based Action Plan in order to stimulate and support sectoral growth



- Given the health, environmental, economic, and food-security benefits of rebalancing diets in favour of plants, a **national strategy** for the promotion of plant-based foods provides a blueprint for moving forward.
- Following leadership by Denmark in creating their National Plant-Based Action Plan in 2023, there is now **momentum across Europe and beyond**. More than 130 organisations have come together to call for an **EU-wide action plan** by 2026.
- Plant-Based Action Plans take a farm-to-fork approach, **strengthening the entire agri-food chain from farmers to consumers**, and allow for goal setting and coordination by government departments, the private sector, and civil society.
- By working simultaneously on diverse measures such as education, public procurement, farmer programmes, and investment in R&D, Plant-Based Action Plans are aimed at harnessing the growth of the plant-based sector and increasing consumer demand in order to create **tangible benefits** for people, the environment, and the economy.

Learning from other countries



Denmark's pioneering Plant-Based Action Plan, backed by agriculture, industry and government

- The Danish Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries published the Plant-Based Action Plan in 2023, providing a comprehensive cross-government blueprint for growing the country's plant-based sector.
- The plan includes:
 - Stimulating demand through public procurement and school meals, including meat-free days and 100% plant-based options, as well as chef training, updated dietary guidelines, public awareness, and behavioural change.
 - Strengthening the value chain by providing support for farmers to grow high-quality legumes and vegetables for human consumption, supporting research into growing and manufacturing, and fostering knowledge exchange.
 - Promoting exports as a way to build Denmark's profile internationally through diplomacy and soft power.
 - Dedicated investment funding, through the *Plantefonden* plant-based food grant, with 1 billion DKK (about 135 million Euros) allocated until 2030 to support growers, SMEs, start-ups, education, and research. Thus far, 71 projects have been funded.
- Partners, including the Danish Food and Drink Federation, the Danish Agriculture and Food Council, and the Danish Chamber of Commerce, are now collaborating and helping to support other countries to adopt similar measures.²¹

Conclusion

Policy leadership for a healthy and sustainable future

Major UK policy goals on health and the environment will be impossible to achieve without taking actions to improve our national diets. The good news is that other countries are increasingly showing what is possible with bold and pragmatic leadership by national government, in collaboration with the private sector and civil society. The UK has access to a rapidly growing list of international policies to inspire similar leadership at home. The government's coordinated approach to a new National Food Strategy is a welcome start, and an opportunity that needs to be seized upon to build an ambitious approach to rebalancing and boosting the vital contribution of plants to our food system.

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ProVeg UK is part of ProVeg International, a food awareness organisation with a vision for a world where everyone can choose delicious and healthy food that is good for all humans, animals, and our planet.

ProVeg has received the United Nations' Momentum for Change Award and works closely with key UN food and environment agencies. We have observer status with the UNFCCC, the IPCC, and the CBD, special consultative status with ECOSOC, and are accredited for UNEA.

*Find out more about our **School Plates programme**, which has already supported 8,000 schools to deliver 47 million healthy and climate-friendly plant rich meals for children.*

