

Environment and Green Investment Committee
11 July 2024

Item 4: Petitions and Public Questions

	Questioner	Question / Comment
1.	Darren Green, local resident	<p>I would like to start by highlighting three facts.</p> <p>First, the natural world is in crisis. Although this summer in the UK has been mild, global temperatures continue to break records. 2023 was the warmest year since global records began in 1850. It seems likely that 2024 will be hotter still. This continued increase in global temperature is already threatening ecosystems and human populations.</p> <p>The second fact is that Cambridgeshire Council recognises the urgency of this crisis in their Climate Strategy Plan. In that plan the council declares its intention to show local leadership to tackle the climate crisis in Cambridgeshire.</p> <p>The third fact I would like to highlight is that the food and drink we consume is a huge part of the environmental picture. According to the United Nations, around a third of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions is linked to food. Of this, food that comes from animals has an especially large impact. As the BBC puts it: “Even the most climate-friendly meat options still produce more greenhouse gases than vegetarian protein sources, like beans or nuts.” According to research by the University of Oxford, changing what we eat is one of the biggest ways we can reduce our impact on the planet.</p> <p>With these facts in mind, I would like to ask the committee to consider recommending that the council adopt a 100% plant-based internal catering policy in line with their Climate Strategy Plan.</p> <p>I recognise that the council probably does not provide much internal catering, but this is still a really important message to send about the direction that institutions need to take towards a just and sustainable food system. The National Food Strategy published in 2021 recommends a transition</p>

		<p>towards more plant-based eating and it is, in my opinion, important that the council leads by example on this. If the council committed to fully plant-based catering for its own food, this would send a powerful message to other institutions.</p> <p>Other councils in the country have already made this step. As you may be aware, a plant-based motion was passed by Cambridge City in 2022. Earlier this summer, the Cabinet of Calderdale Council in West Yorkshire recommended a plant-based food policy for its internal catering. The Council leader there talked about the decision as one of collective responsibility for the future.</p> <p>I think a commitment to plant-based catering would be an important act of leadership by the council and urge this committee to recommend such a move.</p>
	<p>Respondent</p> <p>Councillor Lorna Dupre, Chair, Environment and Green Investment Committee</p>	<p>Response</p> <p>Cambridgeshire County Council declared a climate and environment emergency in 2019. The Climate Change and Environment Strategy sets out how we are responding to that declaration.</p> <p>Whilst the Council recognises the contribution diet plays in greenhouse gas emissions and embodied carbon, alongside wider environmental issues, very little catering is provided for council staff or at council events and so this has not, to date, been the major focus of action by the Council. However, we have provided details of the measures we are taking below.</p> <p>Catering</p> <p>Where the Council does provide catering facilities for the public at some of its sites such as the Grafham Water Centre or Community Centres it is balancing the Council's environmental objectives with being able to meet the range of dietary requirements and differing needs of our service users, ensuring nutritious meals are provided.</p> <p>For example, Grafham Water Centre is reducing the amount of meat used by implementing Meat Free Mondays to the weekly catering for school visits and implementing new composting approaches for any kitchen waste.</p> <p>Furthermore, at the March Community Centre, a cafe called Hot Pots is operated. This is supported by a grant through the Fenland Learning Disability Team to provide employment opportunities for individuals with learning difficulties and autism, who volunteer to work to gain work skills and confidence. The cafe offers meat free salads, jacket potatoes, paninis and toasties as vegetarian options.</p>

Schools

Larger scale catering at schools is a responsibility for individual schools. However, many schools are shifting towards more plant-based foods. The Council encourages and supports local schools to follow the [School Food Standards](#), of which nutrition and sustainability are a key focus. For example, the standards recommend that “all children have a meat-free day each week, using alternatives such as pulses, soya mince, tofu and mycoprotein-based meat substitute”. These standards also link to the [sustainable procurement](#) of school food.

Public Health

In addition, the Council’s Public Health team support in providing advice and information in relation to diet.

The NHS, central Government and organisations such as The British Nutrition Foundation and The British Dietetic Association all support moving towards more plant-based eating (in line with the Eatwell Guide), and promote the health benefits linked to this, however none of them specifically recommend veganism. Whilst all organisations agree that a vegan diet can meet nutritional requirements, they also say that to do so the diet needs to be very carefully planned; especially for children.

The general advice is to continue promoting the existing healthy eating guidelines as detailed in The Eatwell Guide which would not only support good health but also have environmental benefits as set out below:

- According to the [Carbon Trust analysis](#), the Eatwell Guide shows an appreciably lower environmental impact than the current UK diet.
- A [UK study](#) found that following the Eatwell Guide’s recommendations more closely would lower the greenhouse gas emissions of current adult diets by 30%, and reduce water use by 4%, as well as reducing mortality risk by up to 7%.

The Eatwell Guide describes a diet that is rich in foods from plants, but can also include some meat, dairy, fish and eggs. At a population level, currently [less than 1%](#) of people are achieving all of the Eatwell Guide recommendations (British Nutrition Foundation).

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Health and Wellbeing board are currently producing a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) on healthy places which will include recommendations on access to healthier food.

Waste

Beyond food choices and looking to the broader food system, food waste is another challenge which has a significant impact on carbon emissions. The amount of food waste in the average household bin in Cambridgeshire in 2021 was 33.8% of the black bag waste, significantly contributing towards the carbon footprint of its disposal – currently c.58,000tCO₂e emissions as of 2022/23.

As the Waste Disposal Authority, the Council continues, along with the whole [Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Waste Partnership \(RECAP\)](#), to support the public to reduce that figure through home composting where possible and to prepare for the forthcoming kerbside food collection service when it becomes available from 2026.

The Council also provides some information on how food choices and waste contribute to the climate crisis and actions residents can take: <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/climate-change-energy-and-environment/how-you-can-take-action/sustainable-food-and-shopping>.

Future Action Plan

Thank you for meeting Sheryl French and Emily Bolton on 16 July 2024 for a wider discussion on food policy.

As discussed, the Council undertakes an annual review and progress report on the delivery of the Climate Change and Environment Strategy. The current action plan does not include an action on food policy. As the annual reporting cycle will occur in October this year, there is an opportunity to propose the inclusion of a new action in the plan on scoping a food policy for Council catering. If accepted, options for internal catering will be scoped to cover any recommendations coming from the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, follow the Eatwell Guide, consider local sustainable food systems and our climate ambitions.