



House of Commons

Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Committee

**Public Sector
Procurement of Food:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Sixth Report of Session
2019–21**

**Third Special Report of Session 2021–
22**

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The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and associated public bodies.

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Committee staff

Ian Blair (Committee Operations Officer), Ian Bradshaw (Committee Clerk), Max Falkenberg McGillivray (Placement Student), Jonathan Finlay (Committee Specialist), Andy French (Committee Specialist), Ellie Goodchild (Committee Specialist), Tim Jarrett (Second Clerk), Emily Pritchard (Media Officer), Annabel Russell (Committee Operations Officer) and Chloe Sawyers (Committee Operations Manager).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 1119; the Committee's email address is efracom@parliament.uk.

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Third Special Report

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published its Sixth Report of Session 2019–21, [Public Sector Procurement of Food](#) (HC 469), on 21 April 2021. The Government response was received on 24 June 2021 and is appended to this report.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

The Government welcomes the report published by the EFRA Select Committee on the 21 April 2021 on *Public Sector Procurement of Food*.

We are pleased to note that the Committee’s recommendations align with our ambitions for public sector food procurement. We want the public sector to lead by example, supporting local food and farmers, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), high production standards and sustainable produce.

We will achieve this through improved collaboration and accountability across the public sector. As a first step, we will consult on more ambitious Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services (GBSF) this summer. The update will aim to deliver outcomes beyond simply the procurement of food and catering services. The GBSF standards will reflect Government priorities and the latest advice around delivering environmental, health and societal benefits. We will also engage proactively with the sector to support the implementation of the GBSF, develop a robust process for monitoring and reporting, and deliver the Future Food Framework trial.

The Committee has made a number of conclusions and recommendations. The Government has responded to the specific recommendations below.

Food procurement standards

1. A responsibility for monitoring compliance should be emphasised to or placed on existing inspection bodies, such as Ofsted (for schools) and the Care Quality Commission (for NHS Trusts), rather than creating new structures for inspection. The data should be reported to Government. Where such inspection bodies do not exist, Defra must gather data on compliance with the GBSF and the Balanced Scorecard through annual surveys, as it already does for government departments. It should publish the results of these surveys and name Departments that are not meeting the standards or fail to respond adequately to surveys. (Paragraph 17)

The Government recognises the need for a robust process to monitor adoption of the GBSF and will consider potential inspection bodies and remits as part of the GBSF consultation this summer.

Currently, Ofsted and CQC inspectors do not have the expertise to assess and report on the GBSF. In addition, adding a further role in checking compliance to the GBSF would

detract from their ability to focus on their core remits. A change to existing bodies' remits would in any case require additional resource, and as such we will also seek views on alternative forms of monitoring and enforcement.

Alternatives could include the use of new reporting requirements, clear Key Performance Indicators, and the expansion of existing tools. We publish the Greening Government Commitments report every year and will consider if we can expand the scope of reporting, to encourage compliance and best-practice sharing.

The consultation responses will inform both the updated GBSF and the Food Strategy White Paper. There is an opportunity in the White Paper to outline regulatory responsibilities in this area and the format and frequency of regular reporting on public procurement of food.

In parallel to the consultation, we will further engage with the sector to raise awareness of the GBSF, with the objective of encouraging compliance and adoption of best practice. We will extend this engagement through a series of workshops during the summer focussing on implementing and updating the GBSF.

2. The Government should make adherence to the GBSF mandatory for the public sector in England. We are supportive of proposals that the balanced scorecard should also be mandatory across the public sector, particularly for the NHS in England, but we have concerns that this may have adverse impacts on smaller suppliers who may not be able to afford the accreditation and certification required. Defra must gather evidence from Government departments and their suppliers on the effectiveness and impact of the balanced scorecard since 2014 and review whether to make the balanced scorecard mandatory. At the very least, the balanced scorecard needs to be better promoted by the Government. (Paragraph 18)

Compliance with the GBSF and the use of the balanced scorecard methodology are already mandatory for all Central Government Departments and their Executive Agencies. This includes meals for Government canteens, public prisons and the armed forces. The Government is working to align food policies for different sectors, including in NHS England hospitals where the GBSF is an embedded requirement within the Hospital Food Standards.

We appreciate that a whole-system approach is required for standards to be embedded in public sector contracts. This includes easy to understand guidance, transparency in reporting and an ethos of food being central to the public body's work and sustainability commitments. As we consult on an update to the GBSF we will therefore raise awareness of the standards and increase the usability of the document. This will include reviewing whether the Balanced Scorecard approach has been effective and should be incorporated into the GBSF to simplify the guidance for procurers and providers.

3. Where meeting UK food production and animal welfare standards in supplying overseas military and diplomatic operations would be prohibitively expensive, the Government should make exceptions on a case-by-case basis only if it is satisfied that every effort has been made to meet UK standards. In such cases, every effort should be made to meet equivalent standards. Such exceptions should not be an option for UK based public procurement and therefore the scope for them should be removed from the GBSF immediately. (Paragraph 24)

To reiterate the Committee’s findings, there is currently no evidence that exemptions are being used. The exemptions were developed to allow for very limited circumstances, and the reasons for not applying the standards must be recorded and signed off by a senior official in the organisation concerned. These requirements were set to safeguard public sector food standards and to increase the transparency of public sector procurement.

The Government recognises however that we want to lead by example, and champion our high production and animal welfare standards. The GBSF update is an opportunity to deliver on this. We will consult on the removal of these exemptions as part of the consultation.

4. The Government should review and update the GBSF to take account of new evidence, Government commitments, industry practice and consumer preferences on nutrition, animal welfare, sustainability and climate change. This should be addressed as part of the Government’s response to Part Two of the National Food Strategy by the end of the year. Thereafter, we suggest that the GBSF are actively reviewed every five years and updated if necessary. (Paragraph 29)

Whilst reflective of policy best practice at the time of development, we agree the GBSF requires updating and should evolve to reflect government priorities and latest evidence. We want our standards to showcase our great food and drink with high animal welfare, traceability, and nutritional value. We have therefore committed to a substantial update of the GBSF, with a consultation launching this summer.

Alongside ensuring our policy reflects best practice, the consultation will examine ways to promote higher take-up of local produce and make public procurement more accessible to SMEs. This update will look to enhance the emphasis on local procurement and the focus on UK strengths such as high environmental production and welfare standards.

The consultation will also seek views on how the GBSF can support the transition to more sustainably and responsibly-sourced products and services. This is in line with the Global Resource Initiative recommendation to strengthen the focus on sustainable procurement across the public sector, and with broader government policy goals such as our commitment to Net Zero by 2050.

On nutrition specifically, we committed to updating the GBSF chapter on nutritional standards following the Childhood Obesity Plan Chapter 2, published in June 2018. The new nutritional standards bring the GBSF in line with the most up to date guidance from the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition. The GBSF consultation will review further changes concerning sustainable, healthy diets.

Moving forward, we will take a proactive approach to reviewing the GBSF. The guidance will be kept under regular review, supported by ongoing engagement and feedback from the sector.

5. The public sector and its suppliers should therefore be encouraged to source primary produce from domestic producers, within current rules. The Government should review and update the GBSF to ensure that public bodies are encouraged to source local, seasonal produce. The review should also consider the benefits of setting ambitious targets for how much food should be locally and seasonally sourced, how local should be defined and how progress towards targets will be monitored. Procuring

organisations and suppliers will need guidance and support about the practicalities of how to achieve this and the Government should consult them on the most effective way to implement the updated GBSF. (Paragraph 41).

We have a manifesto commitment to encourage the public sector to ‘Buy British’ – to support our farmers and reduce environmental costs. Our vision is that local sourcing will be championed throughout the updated GBSF. This will include promoting procurement practices that support local suppliers, encouraging greater incorporation of UK seasonality and local produce into menu choices, and requiring that high food production standards are met. We will also consult on ways to simplify the GBSF to make it easier to use and strengthen guidance on fair and transparent procurement which aims to create a more level playing field, including for SMEs.

To monitor progress, we will consult on including metrics within the GBSF to assess the uptake of local, seasonal food, amongst the other standards. The data would then allow public bodies to record progress against GBSF priorities.

We agree that procuring organisations and suppliers should be supported on the practicalities of how to achieve local, sustainable and healthy sourcing. We will continue to work collaboratively with stakeholders to ensure the GBSF and accompanying guidance better supports the sector. This will include a series of workshops running alongside the consultation.

6. Given the potential for the pilot to offer lessons on how to increase access to the public sector market for smaller, local suppliers, it should be prioritised and there must not be any further delays. The Government should ensure that the delivery bodies involved are adequately resourced and supported to continue planning for the launch of the pilot in early 2022. We also request that the Government provides a written update by the end of December 2021 on the progress of the pilot, including a confirmation of the launch date. (Paragraph 55)

We welcome the Committee’s endorsement of the Future Food Framework (FFF) and look forward to progressing the pilot. The FFF supports the Government’s commitments on engaging with SMEs and enabling the public sector to buy more local food, and it is therefore an approach that we want to see succeed.

Crown Commercial Service (CCS) has conducted a review of the project plan and continues to work on tactical solutions and a longer-term strategy that may positively impact the timelines. Key procurement activities have taken place from late 2020, and current timelines for delivery of the food commercial agreements indicate a fully live capability by the end of 2022.

Whilst the final go live date has been delayed slightly beyond the June 2022 date noted during the EFRA hearings, the pilot is an exciting development and we are committed to progressing the platform as quickly as is feasible. Additional CCS resource has been brought onboard in May this year, and we hope this will expedite delivery of the commercial agreements. We will provide a written update to the Committee on the progress of the pilot by the end of December 2021.