About me

Sustain runs a number of projects and campaigns which aim to improve the health and sustainability of the food system. For more information, please visit www.sustainweb.org.

I have been at Sustain since February 2009 and, since this time, have run two campaigns to improve public sector food in England. The Good Food for Our Money campaign (http://www.sustainweb.org/goodfoodforourmoney/), and now the Campaign for Better Hospital Food (www.hospitalfood.org.uk).

What and why?

Public sector food has a crucial role to play in improving the food system because:

- The UK Government spends a huge amount of money (£2 billion each year) on food served in public institutions.
- Often a small number of people are responsible for buying a massive amount of food. If you can change the way they buy food, you can make a big difference.
- Public sector food is purchased with taxpayers’ money so should lead by example.
- Public sector food in England is not very good, and much of it is therefore wasted. For example, in England one in every ten hospital meals are thrown in the bin without having even been touched.

Since 2009 we have called for all public sector food, and now hospital food specifically, to meet mandatory standards:

- Environmental standards e.g. more organic food.
- Nutritional standards e.g. food low in saturated fat and salt.
- Ethical standards e.g. food which meets higher animal welfare standards, or is fairly traded.

Obstacles

We have faced, and continue to face, a number of obstacles. The most significant are:

1. **Better public sector food is seen to be unaffordable**

Some food which is more sustainable does cost more, but buyers should consider that (a) some sustainable food costs LESS e.g. sustainably certified white fish is cheaper than unsustainable cod, (b) buying better food creates long-term savings and financial benefits e.g. by tackling diet-related ill health and investing in farming jobs, and (c) better food is less likely to result in costly waste.

2. **EU procurement laws seen to be prohibitive**

Public sector food buyers and caterers in England mistakenly believe that EU procurement laws prevent public institutions buying sustainable food. This is because they often equate ‘sustainable’ with ‘local’.

3. **Localism**
EU procurement laws are all the more important because the UK Government is committed to ‘localism’ and therefore refuses to use its powers to improve food served in ‘devolved’ public institutions like hospitals.

Successes

In England, the Government has introduced ‘Government Buying Standards’ (GBS) for food served in ‘central government’, which includes government departments and prisons and account for 1/3 of food served in the public sector (http://sd.defra.gov.uk/2011/06/new-government-buying-standards-for-food-and-catering/).

While most of these standards are weak, they are mandatory. The fish criteria in GBS is very strong and means that one in every three pounds spent on fish in the public sector is now guaranteed to be sustainable.

Since we started campaigning in 2009, hospital food in Wales and Scotland now has to meet mandatory nutritional standards.

What’s next?

We’re now campaigning for mandatory hospital food standards in England. If you would like more information then please do contact me at alex@sustainweb.org and 0044 207 837 1228, or by visiting www.hospitalfood.org.uk.