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**Plant-Based Meals for Climate-Friendly Catering**

13 July 2022 via Zoom video-conferencing

*(Please note this a paraphrased summary of the speakers’ contributions and not a verbatim account.)*

**Minutes of the APPG online conference** [APPG Meeting: Climate friendly catering - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKwOEGjbZiQ)

The meeting was chaired by Christina Rees MP, Chair of the APPG on Vegetarianism and Veganism, and Tim Newthorpe, Vegan Society.

**Introduction by Christina Rees MP**

* Christina introduces the spring 2022 IPCC report which highlighted the importance of plant-based food to reduce greenhouse gas emission, and calls attention to recommendations for the public sector to be leaders in this change by providing more plant-based options.
* The 2020 report by the Behavioural Insights Team, ‘Menus for Change’, similarly recommended that plant-based options should be the default choice for public events, and to remove or reduce unsustainable food from schools, government offices, hospitals, and prisons.
* Not only will this help for the climate response, but it will also tap into many other important issues including health promotion and inclusivity for clients.
* Last month, the government published its food strategy in response to the National Food Strategy for England.
* Alongside this, DEFRA held a consultation into public sector food and catering policy.

**Philip Reese-Jones, Director of Campus Services at Cardiff University (one of the departments is Catering), and chair of TUCO (The University Caterers’ Organisation)**

* TUCO, a not-for-profit, has over 700 members. It offers training, procurement, and technology support, provides research and study days, and shares best practice.
* As a sector, they employ 30,000 staff, serve 3.5m students, providing 500,000 meals per week, and have an income of £780m per year pre-pandemic.
* Although they can’t mandate their members as they are autonomous institutions, they support them to achieve their goals and encourage sustainability and meat-free options, and many university catering suppliers now offer the latest sustainable meat-free alternatives.
* The TUCO training academy recently held study tours on vegan food, and they have over 30 labelled ‘vegan-friendly’ universities.
* TUCO attended the Menus of Change conference, which detailed sustainable procurement and plant-forward strategies, and then entered a strategic partnership with Menus of Change.
* As part of TUCO’s research provision, they have been tracking global food trends for the last five years. The report showed that the plant-based diet is here to stay and not just another fad such as the Atkins diet. They have found that it’s not just about being a die-hard vegan, but being a conscientious consumer.
* Students coming in are far more knowledgeable about food than in the past. Recently, Cardiff University opened two vegan restaurants, and they are now the most popular venues on campus. The main question campus services were asked at open day was to do with their sustainability offerings.
* There are no barriers to entry for universities as it is about providing choice, education, and normalising plant-based options, which is best without the stigma of ‘vegan’ or ‘vegetarian’ options.
* The university sector is leading the public sector in plant-based change.

**Anna Taylor – Chief Independent Advisor to Henry Dimbleby on the National Food Strategy, Chair of The Food Foundation, leading the team on Nutrition**

* The initiative ‘Peas Please’ is a campaign to increase vegetable consumption through engaging businesses to help their customers eat more vegetables. This gave them important insight into where it is easy or harder to make changes, and where we need government policy to help with the agenda for everyone to eat more plant-based food.
* The ‘Peas Please’ campaign gathered over 100 businesses to take part to make pledges to increase sales of veg; together, pledges have sold 636 million extra portions of veg. Aggregating everyone’s impact through a common goal is motivating for companies.
* Examples of success stories: PWC caterers increased veg from 15%-20% within the space of a year, reduced carbon footprint by 1/5 and water by 25%. This not only helped staff, but also helped with their net-zero targets. Tesco pledged to increase the proportion of ready meals containing vegetables. At the start, only 26% of their ready meals contained one potion or more of fruit and veg. They committed to 66%, which they have nearly achieved.
* There are not major commercial disincentives to this campaign, and it can deliver results quickly.
* Good reasons to increase vegetable consumption:
  + Health: only 9% of children meet daily goals for fruit and veg consumption, and 8% meet fibre goals. This poor diet will have a serious knock-on impact on health in later life.
  + Economic reasons are also important: the Food Foundation track food prices, and over the past year, meat prices increased by 9.9% compared with 6.6% for fruit and veg.
* Skills for chefs need to be increased, and this will need investment. A key challenge is upskilling chefs and caterers to make plants taste better.
* The government responded to the National Food Strategy with a Food Strategy document, and launched a consultation on public sector procurement. This is a real opportunity to make a strong case for higher standards around plant-based foods in the public sector standards framework.
* Firstly, in the consultation document it states that there should be a mandatory standard for a portion of veg to be included with every main meal in a meal deal. We should argue for more veg, meaning less meat or meat-free.
* Secondly, in this document it is recommended for best practice that there is a plant-based option on weekly basis. We could reasonably argue this should be mandatory not best practice recommendation.
* The National Food Strategy recommended that there be a Good Food Bill to update the Eat Well Guidelines to be assessed for sustainability as well as health impact. It recommends that this should be included in a Reference Diet, which should be the benchmark for public sector procurement to be aligned – to make sure public sector is leading the way.

**Ian Middleton, Councillor, Oxfordshire County Council**

* Oxfordshire County Council have taken some bold steps towards plant-based catering.
* All internal catering by the Council is entirely plant based.
* They initially wanted to increase meat-free days for schools across Oxfordshire but this proved difficult, so they changed the plan to outreach to schools (education), and to focus direct change on internal council catering.
* The problem with schools was that many schools are not part of the council; schools had devolved powers for procurement; and they did not want to impose changes for fear of a kickback and negativity from parents. Therefore, a bottom-up process for change was preferred.
* They declared a climate change emergency as a council, and this was part of holding themselves to account and following the Food Strategy and Harvard research.
* They met negativity in press from the opposition within the council making it a political issue / culture war. They would like to focus more on the educational and outreach idea.

**Gail Witchel, Catering Operations manager, Oxford Council**

* Oxfordshire Council caters for 60 schools. They introduced a ‘climate day’ for schools, rather than a ‘plant-based day’, to get less kickback.
* They have a 3-week menu cycle and started to get feedback around week 5 or 6. Some menus needed to be tweaked and developed, and they gathered some good evidence. Since the change they are down by around 300 meals a day. They believe it is because it is framed as a climate day.
* They are working with Pro Veg to develop menus to make the plant-based food more appealing so that more children take up options.
* Prior to the changes, they had 40% of the menu vegetarian or vegan. By introducing climate day, they actually didn’t have enough meat to meet the standards for nutritional content: attaining the correct amount of protein was an issue as portion size had to be bigger.
* From their evidence, the answer has to be a plant-based option offered every day.
* In the next menu cycle, they are going to explore adding plant-based alternatives to meat meals.

**Kerry McCarthy MP**

* What is missing from the debate is the policy levers that you would use to try to get the government to act, and there is no cohesive strategy from the government.
* She has an issue with leaving the decision to eat less meat to individuals, voluntary groups, and campaigners rather than having political legislation. In other areas, the Committee on Climate Change acknowledges that it has to play the main role – e.g. fossil fuel usage and other public health issues are not left to individual choice but managed by government.
* The question how we scale action so that it becomes transformative and not reliant on goodwill of individuals.

**Collette Fox, Pro Veg**

* Pro Veg has a programme called School Plates, which is working with Oxfordshire County Council and 30 other councils.
* School food standards are outdated and holding back schools in achieving sustainable options, but the good news is that councils and caterers are pushing forward, offering plant-based food and declaring climate emergency.
* Pro Veg’s free services have seen massive increase in demand.
* Pro Veg offer support with menu reviews, running online training for caterers, which is a key part of puzzle. Although some council caterers are sceptical at the start of training sessions, at the end most people are won over. It is about creating delicious food that happens to be plant-based.
* There can be barriers from teachers and parents or catering staff, but Pro Veg are well versed in how to deal with those and how to make it successful.
* Plant-based food can be cheaper for consumers and is cheaper for providers. Additionally, plant-based food is starting to be seen as normal.

**Charlie Hudson, Humane Society International, Manager of Forward Food**

* Forward Food provides free plant-based culinary education and greenhouse gas assessments, and are part of TUCO’s academy programme.
* Example: Oxford Brookes University were one of the first to launch their sustainable food strategy, and Forward Food supported their shift towards a plant-based target. When they started their retendering process, they included their commitments in the tender to help larger catering companies have good provision, be competitive, and produce a clear roadmap to reach the targets. With Menus for Change, it is starting to become more common to include a sustainable element in part of the tendering process.
* Default Veg for internal catering is not seen in university sustainable food strategies but is something they are pushing for; there is an expectation to see growth here.
* There is a plan to encourage chefs in the Parliamentary estate to do more climate friendly catering, and he wanted to catch up with Kerry with regard to this.

*Questions and discussion*

**Ian Middleton** commented that the government should take these actions as it is a safety issue, for the safety of the planet. For example, the government will reduce the ability to buy cars burning fossil fuels etc.

**Kerry McCarthy** worries that Henry Dimbleby’s work in the National Food Strategy will be reduced to the 30 pages response by Government.

**Anna Taylor** commented that a political champion was needed. She agreed with Kerry McCarthy that there is not a joined-up strategy between environment/health wins. However, the public consultations for Henry’s work showed considerable public appetite for government interventions around junk food, but much less appetite for intervention on meat. Therefore, policy intervention might not be an effective lever on meat, and softer signals should be taken by government to avoid a backlash against reducing eating meat and to indicate direction of travel. The space for government intervention on food has if anything shrunk in recent times.

Is cost an issue when reworking menus?

**Collette:** Meat and fish costs are rising faster than plant-based alternatives. Pro Veg show how to make popular dishes using cheap plant-based ingredients like soya mince or lentils.

What are vegan-friendly universities?

**Philip Rees-Jones:** The reference to vegan-friendly was a survey made by PETA. Menus for Change is an initiative between Stanford and Culinary Institute of America. TUCO started a strategic partnership to get more universities involved in their 24 principles, which represent an ethos for the whole food cycle.

Question related to eating disorders.

**Philip Rees-Jones**: If they can be identified, they would be supported.

**Gail Witchell:** If anyone has an allergy, this is taken seriously, but there is a difference between an eating disorder and not liking a particular food.

**Ian Middleton:** Medical need for meat or dairy? If meat and sometimes dairy is excluded from a menu it is more accepted for religious reasons so people can eat together.

Question about tendering for small enterprises

**Gail Witchell**: Oxfordshire Council have a main national supplier; for smaller companies and entry levels, the barrier is whether they can deliver at the right time and price. What often happens is the smaller enterprises tap into the national suppliers and then the Council requests it for a ‘nominated line’ (a commitment to an amount of stock for a certain amount of time).

**Philip Rees-Jones**: TUCO have many procurement frameworks that their members purchase off, but the tendering process can be off-putting and bureaucratic. This can be a barrier for entry into this market for micro-enterprises, and TUCO are looking into it as an organisation to make the process easier.

**About the APPG on Vegetarianism and Veganism**

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Vegetarianism and Veganism (VegAPPG) was formed in December 2016. The VegAPPG is chaired by Christina Rees MP and brings together MPs, Peers, and third sector organisations from across the political spectrum to debate, discuss, and campaign on the key issues that vegetarians and vegans face.