



How to lead the way on the climate and nature crisis through food

A response to students calling for more sustainable food sold & served on UK campuses

This guide was initially written in response to research carried out in 2021 by SOS UK into student attitudes to sustainable food on campuses. With the urgency of the climate and nature crisis it is now being updated annually to help support universities, colleges, students' unions and students to work together to ensure food on campuses is good for the climate, good for nature and good for the health and wellbeing of students.



When it comes to climate emergencies and the nature crisis, we can't ignore food. How and what we farm, fish, eat and dispose of are some of the biggest contributors to climate change and the loss of nature.

Industrial animal farming (also known as factory or intensive farming), unsustainable fishing, plants grown in intensive monocultures and overly processed food have created an unsustainable and unequitable food system that is not only having a negative impact on the climate and nature, but also on animal welfare, farm workers, local communities and our health.

Student demand for sustainable food is clear. In our 2021 survey of over 1200 students, 78% said they would be willing to change their diet to reduce their environmental impact. This shows a substantial increase since our 2018 [survey](#) of 1500 students, when 52% said that if they knew more about the environmental impacts of food production, they would be willing to make changes to reduce their impact.

In addition, 71% of students in our 2021 survey said it was important or very important that the food available on campus at their university contributes positively to health, the environment and producers; and 73% said that if this was the case it would make them feel proud of their university.

The tertiary education sector has an opportunity to respond to student demand and create food offerings on campus where climate and nature-friendly food is the norm. Fixing the food, farming and fishing system by procuring and selling more sustainable food is one of the keyways to avert climate change and restore nature but this must be done in a holistic way that ensures equitable access to healthy and affordable food for everyone.

The climate and nature emergency

Food production methods, and their impact on both our climate and nature, vary from country to country and from farm to farm. There is just one consistency across the world: intensive farming and fishing practices are the main drivers of biodiversity loss on land and at sea, and intensive meat production is one of the main causes of food related carbon emissions.

The global food system accounts for [21-37% of greenhouse gas emissions](#) with meat and dairy being [significant contributors](#). All animal proteins have a higher carbon impact than plant proteins, and globally it is beef and lamb that contribute the most. It is widely agreed that the solution in the UK, however, is [not simply to ban beef](#) and lamb; it is to eat [less and better](#) produced meat and dairy.

Food waste is another major driver of climate change, responsible for 8–10% of global greenhouse gas emissions. If food waste were a country, it would rank third for emissions, behind only the US and China. In the UK, we waste 9.5 Mt of food each year, generating around 25 million tonnes of CO₂e—equivalent to 10 million cars, or one in three cars, on UK roads. Despite this, research shows that 70% of people in the UK believe they do not waste food.

The UK is one of the most [nature depleted](#) countries in the world. Over 70% of UK land is used for agriculture and much of it is farmed [intensively](#) for high yield above all else, creating devastating impacts on [wildlife](#) and [soil health](#). Only [a third of the UK's main fish stocks](#) are in a healthy state, worse than the global average.

Student health and wellbeing

It is commonly understood that a [healthy \(or nutritious\) diet](#) is needed for a healthy body and to help prevent diet-related noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer; but a nutritious diet is also needed for a healthy mind.

A [survey](#) of over 21,000 students from 140 UK universities revealed that 1 in 5 students have a current mental health diagnosis, and almost half had experienced a serious psychological issue for which they felt they needed professional help. Many institutions have detailed [policies](#) to help students experiencing mental ill health, but little focus is given to the links between [nutrition and mental health](#), or to how the food sold and served on campuses could not only improve physical health but also [reduce mental health illness](#) amongst students.

Antibiotic resistance directly causes 1.27 million deaths per year globally and this is predicted to increase to 10 million deaths per year by 2050 (more than cancer) if effective action is not taken. Antibiotic use on livestock farms [is recognised](#) as [contributing to the problem](#) and is often excessive on intensive farms, where animals are kept in stressful, unhygienic conditions.

'Universities have been at the heart of cultural and social change for generations and we need them now. The food on campuses should not only respect the planetary emergency identified by our esteemed academics but should be demonstrating to the world how to make planet-friendly diets the norm.'

Ruth Westcott, Campaign Manager Food for the Planet at Sustain

Eight key actions institutions can take

Food represents the intersection between the [triple challenges](#) of climate change, biodiversity loss, and poor physical/mental health. Universities, colleges, and students' unions have an opportunity to help address all these issues through the food made available to students on campuses. The following eight actions provide a guide to the breadth and depth of change that urgently needs to happen.

	Action	How to get started
1	Commit to phasing out industrially produced meat and dairy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow Eating Better's Better by Half

		<p>roadmap by purchasing and serving 50% less meat and dairy by 2030 and shifting to better produced meat and dairy for the remainder.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put antibiotic supply chain policies in place that ban farm routine use and preventative group treatments. Refer to Save Our Antibiotics and there Antibiotics Policy Toolkit for further information. <p><i>Note: Research has shown that doubling vegetarian options in cafeterias does not affect overall sales.</i></p>
2	Commit to only serving and selling demonstrably sustainable fish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Demonstrably sustainable' means <i>either indicated as 'best choice'</i> (1-2 rating) by the Marine Conservation Society or having MSC, organic, ASC, GLOBALG.A.P or BAP certification. Refer to the Marine Conservation Society's Good Fish Guide for up-to-date information on fish ratings.

3	Eliminate all avoidable food waste and compost the remainder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WRAP has numerous operational and campaign resources for hospitality and food service outlets. • Redistribute surplus food, e.g. via Too Good to Go or OLIO. • Consider catering food waste composters such as The Rocket. <p><i>Note: Composting on-site can lower waste costs and provide a regular source of free compost for your grounds/growing sites.</i></p>
4	Make seasonal, local, ethically produced, plant-based food the default option	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the Kale Yeah! Caterer's toolkit to help rebalance menus. • Aim for silver or gold Food for Life Served Here as a minimum.
5	Provide professional training for chefs and catering students on the links between climate, nature & health and the food they purchase, prepare and serve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get guidance, assessment tools, recognition, support and inspiration from the Sustainable Restaurant Association's Food Made Good community of businesses. • Ensure full understanding of the term 'Sourcing Better' and how to apply this in the workplace.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide onsite training for chefs and embed sustainable food into food service courses, using resources such as the Future Plates handbook and culinary teaching materials, and the Chefs' manifesto.
6	Provide opportunities for all students to grow food and to learn how to cook in fun and accessible settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an accessible growing site on campus if one doesn't already exist. SOS UK can help to embed sustainable food and food growing at your institution via our food growing guide • Ensure the food grown reflects the cultural diversity of students. Run an annual campaign to teach cookery skills to students. Consider external support for delivery e.g. the social enterprise, Let's cook Project. • Consider setting up a student community kitchen on campus. <p><i>Note: in an SOS UK survey the main reason students gave for not growing any of their own food was a lack of access to outside space.</i></p>

7	Explore ways to make sustainable food the more affordable option	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the price of <i>less</i> sustainable options, e.g. meat, to subsidise the cost of <i>more</i> sustainable options, e.g. plant based. • Set up (or support students to set up) veg bag schemes and wholefood buying groups. • Shorten supply chains by working directly with farmers and other food producers so they get a fair price, and students could pay a bit less.
8	Contribute to creating a better food system in the UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Join the Sustainable Food Places network to help drive positive food system change in your local area. Support their most recent campaign, Food for the Planet, and take the Planet Pledge. • Become a Real Living Wage employer. Millions of people in the UK struggle to eat enough because of inadequate/insecure incomes. • Use your buying power to support community wealth building through food, including

using smaller suppliers, buying from co-operatives and social enterprises, and creating the conditions for more equitable and sustainable food enterprises to thrive.

Note: Over 94% of businesses say becoming a Real Living Wage employer benefitted their business.

"The tertiary education sector can, and should, lead the way on food justice. Our research shows that almost three quarters of students would feel proud of their university if the food available on campus contributed positively to their health, the environment and producers. Students have the right to food that is good for them, good for the people that produce it, and that doesn't contribute to the climate or nature crisis"

Larissa Kennedy, SOS UK President

Fifteen ways students can help create change

1. Get a progressive Good Food Policy adopted by your university or college, based on the eight actions outlined above. Get in touch with your students' union or university/college sustainability team for support.
2. Choose plant-based foods that are seasonal, local or Fairtrade and/or organic wherever possible. Consider using a local veg box scheme, buying from a zero-waste shop on campus if you have one, and if not try setting up a [buying group](#) with friends to bulk-buy more affordable whole food.
3. Choose [better meat and dairy](#) (if you aren't vegetarian or vegan) that has been produced in the UK. If you do eat meat look out for organic and/or pasture-fed. Avoid processed meat products, only eat meat occasionally and change the proportion of meat-based meals to include greater vegetable content. This applies whether you're cooking at home, eating out, or buying food on the go.
4. Choose fish (if you aren't vegetarian or vegan) that is sustainable by not selecting MCS's '[Fish to avoid](#)' and opting for MCS's '[Best choice](#)' fish, [MSC](#), [ASC](#) or organic-certified fish wherever possible and only eat it occasionally. This applies whether you're cooking at home, eating out, or buying food on the go.

5. Choose to buy food from restaurants and cafes on campus that have been awarded the [Food for Life Served Here](#) bronze award as a minimum. If lots of students, ask about accreditation it may help push caterers towards acting if they haven't already.
6. Choose [Fairtrade](#) options whenever possible.
7. Avoid [overly processed food](#), drinks and snacks that are commonly sold in single-use packaging and provide little nutritious value.
8. Use [water fountains or refill stations](#) rather than buying bottled water or fizzy drinks. If these aren't available on campus, campaign for them to be installed.
9. Carry a reusable water bottle and/or coffee cup and ideally a food container in case you come across some surplus food after an event, from a friend, or when eating out. Use apps to make the most of your reusables e.g. [Refill](#) to identify local refill stations.
10. Aim to only buy the food you need and if you have surplus freeze it, give it away to someone you know, or share it via an app such as [OLIO](#). See Love Food Hate Waste's [Top 10 tips](#) to reduce food waste. You can also make the most of others' surplus (ideal to share with friends) e.g. via [Too Good to Go](#)
11. Grow some of your own food: on a [food growing site on campus](#), at your local community garden or [Community Supported Agriculture](#) farm, or just in some pots on your windowsill.
12. Buy food from local independent shops such as bakery's and butchers, or directly from producers e.g. veg box schemes or food markets, instead of going to [supermarkets](#).
13. Campaign for food justice - understand the issues that need to be addressed for a [fair food future](#), join the growing [food citizenship](#) movement, and support [a Right to Food](#).
14. Check for university investments in industrial livestock agriculture and, if they exist, start/support a campaign for [Big Livestock divestment](#) with reinvestment into regenerative agriculture that uses nature friendly farming practices.
15. Get involved in national good food campaigns such as [Good to Grow Day](#), [Food Waste Action Week](#), [Sugar Smart](#), [The Big Lunch](#), [Do it Fair](#), [Plant & Share Month](#), [Sourdough September](#) or [Open farm Sunday](#).

About SOS UK

We're a UK charity transforming education, so people protect the climate and nature.

We unite people from every background, inside and outside education, because protecting our earth matters to each and every one of us.

As educators, environmentalists, and activists, we use our expertise to get things done – from changing curriculums across the world, to making sure all school children have access to nature.

SOS UK is a member of [Sustain the alliance for better food and farming](#); a member of [Eating Better](#), the alliance accelerating action for less and better meat and dairy; a member of the [Nature Friendly Farmer Network](#), [Sustainable Farm Networks](#) and the [Conscious Food Systems Alliance](#)

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About Sustain

Sustain is a [powerful alliance of organisations](#) and communities working together for a better system of food and farming and cultivating the movement for change.

Together, **they advocate** food and agriculture policies and practices that **enhance** the health and welfare of people and animals, **improve** the working and living environment, **enrich** society and culture, and **promote** equity.

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