

Sustainable Food – Guidance for Conference and Event Organisers

In November 2024, the University of Cambridge became a signatory to the groundbreaking Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice. The Concordat is a commitment and shared ambition to embed environmental sustainability in research practice, culture, and approach throughout the signed organisations, and collectively as a sector.

Sustainable Food Policy

The Sustainable Food Policy was launched by the University Catering Service in 2016 and updated in 2019. It outlines a number of sustainable provision and procurement practices which aim ‘to minimise the impact of catering operations on the environment, and to promote sustainable practises and consumption.’

The four main objectives of the Sustainable Food Policy are:

- 1) to eliminate the use of ruminant meat (beef and lamb) from our menus, and to reduce the consumption of other meats.
- 2) to promote the consumption of plant-based foods.
- 3) to avoid unsustainable fish.
- 4) to reduce the amount of waste that is produced.

Planning catering for events

Food requirements should always be planned carefully and efficiently to avoid unnecessary wastage. You should use the University Catering Service or one of the Preferred Suppliers who are experienced in this area.

Disposables

Avoid ordering individually packaged food/drink items and/or non-compostable disposable crockery, glassware, and cutlery. Where possible, choose china and glassware even if there is an additional charge for this. Where disposable packaging must be used, aim to use environmentally sustainable options, such as compostable disposables, which can be collected with food waste and sent to anaerobic digestion rather than going to landfill. Ensure a food waste bin is provided in this instance.

Water

It should be remembered that tap water is always a more sustainable choice than bottled water, as it significantly reduces the levels of transport and packaging waste.

Meat and Fish

Ruminant meat (beef, mutton, venison, lamb, sheep) is to be avoided. Its production has high carbon emissions and water usage and is linked to deforestation practices.

If choosing to consume meat, please ensure that it is produced to high environmental and animal welfare standards e.g. Red Tractor Assured, and is as locally sourced as possible.

If choosing fish, please ensure that it is accredited by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), and does not feature on the Marine Conservation Society “fish to avoid’ list.

Eggs and Dairy

You should aim to reduce the overall amount of dairy and eggs consumed at your event, as eggs and dairy production is associated with high levels of carbon emissions. Where consumed, ensure that eggs and dairy products conform to high environmental and animal welfare standards, accredited to Red Tractor Assured and free range where possible.

Vegan Products

Always try to choose vegan options as often as possible, because switching to plant-based diets dramatically reduces the amount of land, water, and oil resources used in food production. It is estimated that switching from high meat eater to vegan reduces a person’s greenhouse gas footprint by 60%.

To encourage staff and students to make vegan choices, we advise event organisers to present meat as an ‘opt in’ choice rather than ‘opt out’ on registration forms. Plant-based dishes should have a prominent place on all menus produced.

Plant-based foods in events and colleges should be seasonal and sourced as locally as possible. Not only will this reduce environmental impacts, it should also ensure that the produce is less expensive.

Palm Oil and Soya

The palm oil industry is linked to high rates of deforestation, habitat degradation, climate change, animal cruelty, and indigenous rights abuses. Hence, it is important to source products containing palm oil to be certified by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). While a common response is to eliminate palm oil and use other oils, this may cause more damage because palm oil is a great item with versatile uses. Hence, ensuring it is certified RSPO means other factors are limited.

The expansion of soybean plantations is also leading to deforestation, threatening biodiversity, and endangering the livelihoods of local people. To use sustainable soya products, ensure it is certified by the Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS) or ProTerra.

Fairtrade

Ensure that all products used in an event have been fairly traded throughout their supply chains. It is necessary that all tea, coffee, and sugar is to be certified Fairtrade.

Alcohol

When selecting alcohol within colleges and departments, you should always aim for 'Old World' wines from countries close to the UK, such as France and Italy. Avoid 'New World' wines from countries such as South America and Australia as the transportation of these have negative environmental impacts that can easily be mitigated by making sustainable choices.

Further Information

On the University website [Sustainable food | University Catering](#)

From Nick White, Head of University Catering