

QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 11

Question from Dr Charlotte Houltram

Good evening, my name is Charlotte Houltram, I'm a doctor, and I've worked within the NHS for 15 years as an anaesthetist and intensivist.

Almost one year ago, I came here to ask this council to demonstrate its commitment to its climate responsibilities, by ensuring food provided for council events is plant-based. Since then, city councils in Exeter, Oxford, Norwich and Winchester have joined Cambridge ensuring that their own catering is as climate friendly as possible. Despite receiving a positive response to my question last year, I'm not aware that Lancaster City Council has made any progress on this.

In the UK, we eat twice the global average of meat. As a doctor, I see the consequences of this every single day with obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol type 2 diabetes, gallstones, diverticulitis, heart attacks strokes and cancers to name just a few related conditions. Chronic disease due to poor diet has become the primary driver of ill health in Britain and I've watched this accelerate exponentially during my relatively brief career. 95% of us don't meet minimum recommended fibre intake for example. We need to eat more plants!

There are so many different ways the council could show leadership on dietary change. Ensuring that food and drink provided at council events is plant-based by default basis is a great start, showing that - as community leaders - you're willing to play your part. (Plant-based by default basis means that anyone who strongly prefers to have an option containing meat and dairy can request this in advance (as vegans have to do now). It's a way of flipping the norm, helping to normalise plant-based eating and showing that neither have to be the centrepiece of every meal, while keeping all options available to everyone.) It's an incredibly small ask, which will have a big impact.

We know that the public is increasingly aware of the impact of their diets, & more and more people are trying to cut the amount of meat & dairy they consume, but there are many barriers standing in their way. Increasing plant-based options enables people to make healthier, more sustainable choices. I understand there are cafes in Lancaster City Centre for which this council is responsible. I've looked at the menus, which contain some plant-based options, but we can, and must, do more. A truly climate aware council would be continually improving and increasing the number of plant-based options, ensuring they are appealing and nutritious, and are appropriately placed and advertised on the menu.

A climate aware council would ensure that eating more plant-based is a central focus of the climate section of its website, and that this is also part of literature distributed to residents. A climate aware council would have billboards around the city encouraging people to eat more plant-based! (as Manchester has done)

There are many, many ways that, as a local authority, you can encourage, support and enable people to make healthier, more sustainable food choices ... my question is, what will this council do?

Question from Mr Pete Bailey

I would introduce myself Pete Bailey, retired nurse, and Lancaster resident. My question is concerning a proposal which has been raised, that Lancaster joins the ranks of other councils in the UK who have committed to encouraging plant based options at council functions.

Council will understand that as a society we cannot meet our climate obligations without making huge changes in the way we live. It must also be clear that the impact of some the changes we absolutely must make to ensure any possibility of sustainability will not be politically popular.

This is the dilemma you face: To follow through on the 2019 declaration of climate emergency with meaningful but unpopular policies, or shirk your responsibilities for the sake of not rocking the boat. Going plant based, is the single easiest adopted change which can reduce planetary impact dramatically. Producers must be supported to ensure a fair and just transition without major adverse economic impact.

The most common objection I'm hearing from councillors when a plant based council declaration is proposed is that people must be allowed freedom choose. A proposal to make council meetings plant based is not, however, about telling people what to do, it's about the council showing responsible leadership and demonstrating practical action on the climate situation - something it has already committed to.

We all know how change is often resisted at first. Change around smoking in shared spaces was bitterly resisted, and there too, freedom of choice was often cited. But public attitudes have undergone a 180 degree shift, and that only because some authorities took initiative despite that resistance. The first initiatives were not in fact dictatorial, just bold. Only later, after attitudes had changed and resistance melted, did enforcement via legislation seal the deal.

Council could easily lead the way by improving & increasing plant-based options in council-run public venues. Only when caterers make options available can people exercise real choice.

Will this council ensure that food and drink provided at council events is the most climate friendly, that is to say plant based? Will council take these steps to support and facilitate residents in making healthier and more sustainable diet choices?

The Leader replied:

To respond to some of your points:

Health.

Whilst we make careful caveats about highly processed meat substitutes, it is well known that increasing our consumption of plant-based foods is good for our health and well-being. We recognise Dr Houltram's expertise and acknowledge too that chronic illness in relation to poor diet comes with both a human cost, and a financial cost to our strained public health service. It is important to note that whilst the City Council, as a district council, doesn't have a health

remit, we work closely with partners in the County Council, NHS and voluntary sector and will always be glad to promote healthy eating and diet where the opportunity arises.

Climate.

The rearing of cattle in particular has an extraordinary impact on our environment, including deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions and water pollution. Cattle are also extremely resource intensive, with each head of cattle consuming thousands of litres of fresh water and tonnes of feed, which can include grain and other materials suitable to human consumption. As Mr Bailey notes, livestock farmers need to be supported via a just transition into a world where far less meat and dairy are consumed. It is important that we remember the difficulties our farming communities face, the long traditions they honour and the important role that UK farming plays in reducing the carbon impacts from importing food. It is worth remembering too that the practice of importing fruit and veg out of season from across the globe also has a significant carbon footprint.

The Council's catering offer.

As you have noted, we as a council cater for events and operate a small but excellent collection of cafes, such as the Printroom, Williamson's Park and Salt Ayre Leisure Centre. In each case we provide Vegan and plant-based options as part of our core offer. These options are not relegated to special 'asks' to make of our chefs, but are available with 50% of the menu vegetarian and 30% vegan as standard. Ms Brownwood advises us that plant-based is the future and that our society is trending toward ever greater consumption of plant-based food. We welcome that trend, and regularly monitor the uptake of plant-based options to ensure that our commercial operation is viable and effective in catering to the preferences and requirements of our customers. As demand increases the customer should expect that the range of options will expand.

Wider issues

All of those asking questions today have challenged us to consider the important role that food plays in our ambition to tackle climate change.

I would say to you that we are very much alive to that issue, and have been for some time, particularly following on from the recommendations of the Citizen's Jury. I would also note that the climate emergency is one of several crises that our district is facing, and other challenges include food poverty, the use of food banks and the cost of living crisis. We don't have the luxury of meeting only one of these crises at a time, and indeed they are often complex and interconnected issues. As a Council we look for ways that our actions can simultaneously step us toward, for example, tackling climate change, and striving toward food justice.

Our food related efforts to meet the climate emergency therefore include but go beyond considering our in-house catering. For example, our Climate Emergency Local Plan Review includes amendments to existing policies which encourage developers to provide opportunities for local food growing space. We also recognise how important local plant-based food production is to sustainability and affordability, to that end the Council provides funding or partnership support to local organisations such as LESS and the Food Poverty Alliance. On a recent tour of our Council depot at White Lund I saw first-hand how some of the enormous greenhouses which were formerly used as a nursery to grow our bedding plants are now being used by Food Futures sustainable food network. This is now a place where food is grown and training is provided to people to replicate the work elsewhere.

On our Cabinet, Cllr Joanne Ainscough has recently accepted the Environmental Services portfolio. She will be bringing her MSc in Sustainable Food and Natural Resources to bear when she undertakes a review of how the Council's allotments are managed. This will once again feed in to both meeting the climate emergency and promoting food justice through community food projects.

Ultimately what is needed is a firm concept for a 'Sustainable North Lancashire Plate'. An understanding that locally grown, seasonal produce, is the cornerstone of a healthy, socially responsible and environmentally sustainable diet.

Dr Houltram thanked the Leader for his comprehensive reply and asked a supplementary question:

The theme of your reply is that you are already doing a lot. The implication might be that you are doing enough. So my supplementary question is could you do more?

The Leader responded:

I think the answer to that has to be yes. And I would hope that what you heard wasn't just that we're doing a lot and that's enough. I hope that what I tried to communicate was that we're doing a lot because we have a lot to do and we continue to push forward and strive to do better. I hope that was the spirit of my communication to you.

Mr Bailey thanked the Leader for his answers and asked if the text could be forwarded to them both. He offered to assist if any Councillor wished to get in touch with him (via the Senior Manager, Democratic Support and Elections).