

North East Derbyshire District Council

Review by the Environment Scrutiny Committee into becoming a 100% Plant-Based Council in the procurement and provision of food.

Briefing Note for Cabinet

INTRODUCTION

Environment Scrutiny Committee was asked to look at this issue at the Council meeting on Monday 29 January 2024. At that meeting Council considered a motion moved and seconded by Councillor F Adlington Stringer and Councillor H Wetherall which called on the Council, in line with its Climate Change Strategy, to commit to:

1. Ensuring food and drink provided at all Council meetings and events is 100% plant-based.
2. Prioritising plant-based menu options wherever the Council has influence, for example in leisure centres.
3. Promoting and encouraging plant-based eating to residents through methods such as public awareness campaigns and the removal of meat and dairy advertising.

The Minutes of the Council meeting and recording of Council's discussion on the motion can be accessed through the following link: [Agenda for Council on Monday, 29th January, 2024, 2.00 pm - North East Derbyshire District Council \(ne-derbyshire.gov.uk\)](#).

What became clear at the Council meeting was that the motion raised very significant issues. Some members were concerned that a blanket ban on non-vegan food and drink at Council meetings and events might go too far, by removing the right not to eat plant-based food. Other Members felt that providing plant-based options would be a good idea, which should be explored further. Council also reflected on whether it would be appropriate for the Local Authority to actively encourage plant-based or vegan eating, without first understanding what impact that this might have in terms of overall public health and the health of specific people.

Council accepted that these issues could not be resolved at the meeting. With this in mind an amendment to the motion was agreed so that the Environment Scrutiny Committee should be asked to consider the three proposed commitments, assess their advantages and disadvantages and, finally, to make any recommendations for action which the Committee thought would be appropriate.

THE REVIEW & KEY FINDINGS

The Environment Scrutiny Committee complied with this request from Council at its meeting on Monday 19 February 2024. The Committee did this, in effect, by carrying out a 'Spotlight' review on the subject.

During the discussion some Members of the Committee felt that there was an untapped demand for vegan and vegetarian options, and that making the shift to plant-based food would benefit the health of residents and help reduce the carbon footprint of the food eaten in the District.

Other Members reiterated the concerns raised at the earlier Council meeting about whether the Local Authority should use its position to prevent people from eating meat, eggs, or dairy products. They questioned whether this would be a healthy diet and whether it would have a lesser carbon footprint than seeking to source a whole array of locally produced food, including meat and dairy products.

It was in this context that the Committee interviewed the Centre Manager and Duty Officer, both from Dronfield Leisure Centre. The officers gave an overview of the provision currently offered to customers, as well as details on previously trialled food initiatives and levels of demand.

In particular, they explained that the Leisure Centres currently offer low-fat options and also that some of the butter used in the sandwiches was plant-based. However, what food they offered was demand led. To date, there had not been a great deal of demand for vegan food. Despite this, plant-based options were still made available, often in response to specific requests from customers. A café user at the Dronfield Leisure Centre had, for example, asked for an oat milk substitute, which the café now provided for them.

Some Committee Members supported this customer focused approach to the provision of plant-based food to those who wanted it at the Leisure Centres, while still providing non vegan food for those who did not. Similarly, they felt that this choice-led approach should also apply to the limited number of events when the Council directly provides food to its Members and visitors.

They did not think it appropriate, therefore, that the Council prioritise plant-based menu options in the Leisure Centres. Apart from the practical contractual issues that would have to be addressed to procure this food from the existing suppliers, there would be a real danger that to do so might result in food being un-sold and wasted – as had occurred in other places which had tried this approach.

The Committee recognised that over time demand for vegan, plant-based food might increase and that if it did, the Council would have to respond to any changes. Members supported the introduction of regular surveys at the Council's Leisure Centres in order measure just how the demand for specific food and in particular, plant-based food, had changed, so that an evidence-based response could be developed.

Finally, the Committee as a whole did not feel that it could reach a conclusion about whether a vegan or plant-based diet was healthier than an omnivorous diet or was less carbon intensive than locally sourced meat and dairy food production. In this context, they did not request that the Council should actively seek to remove meat and dairy advertising either from its own properties or within the District as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Given the discussions at the Environment Scrutiny Committee they agreed to make specific recommendations to Cabinet. These are:

1. That, as part of the annual Leisure survey, measure the demand specific foodstuffs, and in particular for plant-based vegan food.
2. That the findings of the surveys be assessed and responded to by the leisure team in consultation with the Portfolio Holder i.e. Do we need a new approach as a consequence of growing public demand for vegan food, and if so, what should it be?
3. That the outcome of this survey work be shared with the Environment Scrutiny Committee as appropriate, and that the Committee be informed of and consulted on any proposed changes.

Joe Hayden
Senior Scrutiny Officer