

Over 1,200 health professionals and 24 health organisations call for NHS to provide plant-based menus in UK hospitals – following success in New York

New campaign ‘Plants First Healthcare’ highlights the health, cost saving and environmental benefits to the NHS, improving on existing menu offerings

London, UK, October 16th: On World Food Day, a new campaign, [Plants First Healthcare](#) – led by senior NHS doctors – is calling for hospitals to take action for human and planetary health by adopting a ‘plant-based by default’ approach. This campaign is supported by 24 healthcare organisations representing more than 1 million members. An [open letter](#) to support the campaign addressed to every NHS Trust and healthcare leader has been signed by the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, the British Dietetic Association (BDA) Sustainable Diets Group, the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare, Nuffield Health among many others. The campaign launches alongside the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change (UKHACC) [Food Systems Policy Report](#), which calls for the normalisation of plant-based meals within all healthcare settings.

The open letter has already gained over 1,000 signatures from a range of healthcare professionals. Amongst these are high profile doctors including Professor Tim Spector, Dame Parveen Kumar and Dr Fiona Godlee, former editor of the BMJ. This is in addition to prominent voices in climate activism such as George Monbiot and Chris Packham.

Plants First Healthcare highlights that normalising plant-based meals in hospitals could save the NHS [£74 million annually](#), while providing healthy meals for patients and helping NHS Trusts to cut their food-related emissions by up to 50%. The scheme would make plant-based meals the default, while giving patients and staff the choice to opt into meat and dairy options. New York City, in collaboration with [Greener by Default](#), has successfully implemented a [similar campaign](#), and has served over 1.2 million plant-based meals since March 2022. This has led to a 36% reduction in carbon emission, a cost saving of 59 cents per meal and a more than 90% [satisfaction rate](#). The Plants First Healthcare campaign team is now working directly with [Greener by Default](#), who offer their services for free to healthcare institutions, to help them implement a ‘plants first default’ approach to hospital menus within the UK.

There is now overwhelming evidence that shifting towards a plant-predominant food system would significantly improve national health outcomes, address health inequalities and is essential for meeting our climate and nature [targets](#). The proposed changes would help get the NHS on track to achieve its [pledge](#) of net-zero emissions by 2045. [Plants First Healthcare](#) also aligns with the priorities of Lord Darzi's recent [report](#) on the state of the NHS in England – specifically a 'Greener NHS' and the focus on ‘the power of prevention’ which has been a long-term NHS policy intention.

Dr Shireen Kassam, Campaign co-lead and Consultant Haematologist at King’s College London says, “We have a long way to go to transform both staff and patient meals in hospitals. When staff and

patients are made aware of the health and climate benefits of plant-based meals, they are supportive of incorporating more lower carbon, health promoting foods. The aim is to advance this transformation with Plants First Healthcare.”

“According to the [2023 Lancet Countdown](#) report, 70,000 deaths in the UK in 2020 were associated with insufficient intake of nutritious plant-based foods (such as fruit, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds). Hence showcasing the benefits of a plant-based diet within healthcare settings should be part of educational efforts to change dietary habits of the UK public. This would not only provide immediate cost savings to the NHS, but also give longer term healthcare benefits for patients, while drastically cutting carbon emissions.”

Plant-based hospital meals would include cost-saving ingredients such as pulses and whole grains. New York menus have incorporated these in dishes such as Moroccan Root Vegetable Tagine with Tricolor Couscous, Fiesta Black Bean Burger, and Spanish Vegetable Paella.

Hospitals are slowly moving to decarbonise their menus - 6% of the NHS carbon footprint is related to food. Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals Trust, Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust, Hampshire Hospitals and Great Ormond Street Hospital have all signed the [Cool Food Pledge](#) which commits them to reduce their food emissions by 25% by 2030. Several other hospital trusts such as Leicestershire and Rutland have committed to a ‘low carbon menu,’ and others such as Leeds Teaching Hospital NHS Trust and Queen Victoria Hospital are reducing reliance on high carbon foods such as beef and lamb. However, the pace of change is far too slow. A recent survey* of 2000 members of the public showed that 55 per cent believe changes need to be made regarding the meals provided in NHS hospitals and more than a third of respondents were supportive of plant forward menus.

Tanya Haffner, Registered Dietitian and Chair of the BDA Sustainable Diets Group says, “A plant-based diet has numerous benefits for human health, including significant reductions in the risk of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, overweight and obesity, diabetes, and certain cancers. The evidence is overwhelming. Most national guidelines already include plant-based diets as part of the prevention and treatment for these illnesses. Furthermore, plant-based diets have considerable benefits for planetary health. We need to move the dial on eating more plants at speed. As health professionals, it’s our duty to promote healthy eating and advocate for sustainable food systems to support both human health and a thriving, biodiverse planet. The BDA Sustainable Diets Group is very pleased to support this campaign.”

There are other campaigns across the public sector to transition catering towards plant-based meals. Existing successful campaigns include the following: [Plant-Based Universities](#), where students across 80 universities are campaigning to increase plant-based offerings to reduce universities contribution to climate change, [ProVeg Schools Plates programme](#), calling for more plant-based options on school menus, and the [Plant Based Treaty](#), which has been signed by six [UK councils](#) (and 27 international cities), 120,000 individuals, five Nobel laureates, various IPCC scientists and more than 3000 organisations.

A full copy of the open letter is available [here](#).

A report from the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, outlining recommendations to build an NHS and health sector fit for the future, is available [here](#).

-ENDS-

Notes to editors:

*Survey of 2,000 respondents carried out by OnePoll in May 2024, which found:

- A third of Britons would back a switch to an entirely plant-based menu in NHS hospitals
- While 79 per cent have sympathy for the NHS in its current state, 55 per cent believe something needs to change when it comes to the meals served.
- Almost two thirds (64 per cent) of respondents said hospital meals being healthy was a top priority
- Four in 10 (41 per cent) would support plant-based milks and yoghurts being served in hospitals
- Almost one third (30 per cent) said processed meats such as ham and bacon shouldn't be served to patients
- It also emerged that 32 per cent of respondents would be interested in trying an entirely plant-based diet themselves, with 31 per cent having decreased their meat intake in the last two years

About Plants First Healthcare

Plants First Healthcare is a campaign led by a coalition of NHS health professionals who are increasingly concerned about the impacts of the food system on climate change and biodiversity loss. We are committed to urgently taking action to minimise these harms through evidence-based strategies that will benefit individual, population and planetary health. The aim of the campaign is to normalise plant-based meals within healthcare settings by making plant-based food the default. This approach has already been successfully implemented in 11 city hospitals in New York City.

By making delicious, culturally appropriate plant-based options the default, NYC Health + Hospitals empowered more than half of all eligible patients to opt into the plant-based meals. They've now reduced their carbon footprint by 1/3 while maintaining very high patient satisfaction and saving approximately \$500,000 annually.

We are now working with Greener By Default to bring their groundbreaking work to healthcare in the UK.

World Food Day 2024

World Food Day 2024 is on 16 October 2024. The theme for this year's World Food Day is "Right to foods for a better life and a better future."

'Foods' stands for diversity, nutrition, affordability, and safety. A greater diversity of nutritious foods should be available in our fields, in our markets, and on our tables, for the benefit of all. Find out more about the theme [here](#).

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