

Government must strengthen school and hospital food standards so that catering companies don't feed the antibiotic crisis

- *Public sector caterers should publish antibiotic policies and adopt transparent procurement strategies*
- *Alliance calls for robust government standards on public procurement to ensure higher antibiotic standards for school and hospital food suppliers*

With children well into their new school year, a first of its kind report [1] by the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics finds that inadequate Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering, and weak or non-existent antibiotic policies from the UK's ten leading catering companies, are failing to control antibiotic use in the production of meat, dairy, fish and eggs served in many schools, universities, colleges, and healthcare establishments.

Antibiotic resistance is a growing global problem, caused by the overuse of antibiotics in humans and animals. Each year about 7,600 deaths [2] in the UK and 1.27 million worldwide [3] are caused by antibiotic resistance.

Despite the scale of the problem, the report '[Catering companies – feeding the antibiotic crisis?](#)' finds that catering companies are failing to guard against antibiotic overuse in their supply chains.

Five companies, apetito, ISS, Newrest, OCS, and WSH, have no publicly available antibiotic policy. The other five companies, Aramark, CH&CO, Compass Group, Elior and Sodexo, do have antibiotic policies, but none of them currently prohibit the routine use of antibiotics or collect any data on antibiotic use in their supply chains.

Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services, which establish minimum standards for catering in public-sector organisations, also make no mention of the need for responsible antibiotic use. These standards are currently being reviewed and a government response to a consultation will be published later this year. Unfortunately, the government's proposals for new standards, published last year, still make no mention of any antibiotic standards.

Cóilín Nunan of the Alliance said: "We know that resistant bacteria can be transmitted to people on food, so there is really no excuse for catering companies having such poor policies. All caterers should source food produced without routine antibiotic use and make more effort to source animal foods from farming systems that have higher levels of animal health and welfare. The Government needs to introduce antibiotic standards for public procurement urgently, backed up by effective monitoring and enforcement. The Government says that it aims to deliver higher quality meals to hospitals and schools, but unless it takes action on antibiotic use, it will be failing to protect the health of patients and children."

The UK contract-catering industry is big business, with a market value of £4.4 billion, and is

involved in serving some of the most vulnerable people in society, including young people. Nine out of ten of the companies supply educational establishments (eight in the UK) and nine supply healthcare establishments (eight in the UK).

Consultant Microbiologist, Dr Giuditta Sanna [4] said: "I am shocked to learn that while my colleagues and I are dealing with patients with untreatable life-threatening infections and are making so much effort to limit our own use of antibiotics, the catering companies that provide NHS and school meals are doing such a poor job of controlling antibiotic use in their supply chains. They should not be permitting routine antibiotic use in food-producing animals, just to compensate for the unhygienic conditions in which many of these animals are kept."

Intensive Care Consultant and Founder of the UK Sepsis Trust, Dr Ron Daniels [5] said: "Sepsis already claims more lives worldwide than cancer: if we can't treat simple infections because of antibiotic resistance then tens of millions more people will die each year, meaning that antibiotic resistance is a more immediate threat to our species than climate change. Addressing this demands action from all stakeholders, with the wasteful use of antibiotics for routine prevention in intensive farming an infuriatingly low-hanging fruit".

The companies surveyed supply food to NHS hospitals, schools, colleges and universities, and to Government departments and the military. They also cater for large-scale events such as Twickenham, Wimbledon, the Royal Opera House, and Royal Botanic Gardens (Kew Gardens), and at venues like Olympia London, QEII Centre, the O2 arena, London Zoo, and Edinburgh Castle. Some also supply staff canteens or high-street brands like Costa, Subway and M&S.

British farm antibiotic use has been reduced by 55% since 2014 [6], following voluntary action by farmers, vets and supermarkets. A campaign by the Alliance and initiatives like the Business Benchmark on Farm Animal Welfare ([BBFAW](#)), have helped encourage the UK's ten leading supermarkets to all adopt antibiotic policies which ban routine preventative use in their own-brand UK produce.

However, the Alliance's research into catering companies has found their antibiotic policies are lagging well behind those of UK supermarkets. The key findings of the report are:

- Five companies, apetito, ISS, Newrest, OCS, and WSH, have no publicly available antibiotic policy.
- Five companies, Aramark, CH&CO, Compass Group, Elior and Sodexo, do have antibiotic policies, however all of them currently permit antibiotics to be used routinely.
- None of the companies collect any data on antibiotic use in their supply chain.
- Just three catering companies, Aramark, CH&CO and Compass Group, state in their antibiotic policy that they intend to end routine preventative antibiotic use, and only CH&CO declares that this will be achieved by 2024.
- Elior is the only catering company whose policy restricts the use of antibiotics that the World Health Organization has classified as "highest-priority critically important in human medicine".
- One of the companies, ISS, recently secured a catering contract with Defra (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), despite having no antibiotic policy.

Ends

NOTES TO EDITOR

1. ['Catering companies – feeding the antibiotic crisis?'](#)
2. [UK Biological Security Strategy, 2023.](#)

3. Antimicrobial Resistance Collaborators, 2022. Global burden of bacterial antimicrobial resistance in 2019: a systematic analysis, [The Lancet](#)
4. Dr Giuditta Sanna is a consultant microbiologist dealing with antibiotic resistance daily. Until recently, Dr Sanna was the antimicrobial stewardship lead in the trust where she works.
5. Dr Ron Daniels is a consultant in intensive care based in Birmingham. He is the Founder and CEO of The UK Sepsis Trust and has worked closely with the NHS to ensure that patients with suspected sepsis receive rapid and appropriate antibiotics.
6. Veterinary Medicines Directorate, 2022. [Veterinary Antimicrobial Resistance and Sales Surveillance 2021](#)
7. [The Alliance to Save our Antibiotics](#) is an alliance of health, medical, civil society and animal welfare groups campaigning to stop the overuse of antibiotics in animal farming. It was founded by [Compassion in World Farming](#), [the Soil Association](#) and [Sustain](#) in 2009. Our vision is a world in which human and animal health and well-being are protected by food and farming systems that do not rely on routine antibiotic use.

Compassion in World Farming was founded in 1967 by a British dairy farmer who became horrified at the development of intensive factory farming. Today, Compassion is a global movement dedicated to ending factory farming and achieving humane and sustainable food. With headquarters in the UK, we have offices across Europe, in the US, China and South Africa.

The Soil Association was founded in 1946 by farmers, scientists, doctors and nutritionists to promote the connection between the health of the soil, food, animals, people and the environment. Today the Soil Association is the UK's leading membership charity campaigning for healthy, humane and sustainable food, farming and land use. Its Chief Executive is Helen Browning, and Chair of Trustees is Martin Nye.

Sustain is the UK's alliance for better food and farming. We work with over 110 national organisations as alliance members; more as associates and trade bodies; and hundreds more at regional and local level, to achieve transformative changes in policy and practice, for a better food and farming system.

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation aims to improve our natural world, secure a fairer future and strengthen the bonds in communities in the UK. We unlock change by contributing everything we can alongside people and organisations with brilliant ideas who share our goals. The Foundation is one of the largest independent grant-makers in the UK. In 2022, we provided £36.2m in grant funding towards a wide range of work in support of our aims. We also have a £45 million allocation to social investments for organisations with the aim of creating social impact. www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk

To arrange an interview please contact: Cólín Nunan ASOA Scientific Advisor on 07422 556 772 email: cnunan@saveourantibiotics.eu or ASOA Campaign Coordinator Jane Tredgett on 07387 261951 email: jtredgett@saveourantibiotics.eu

For further information please contact Siobhan Murphy at Compassion in World Farming on media.team@ciwf.org or call 01483 521 615.