

Enabling sustainable protein choice through public procurement policy



Imprint

Title	Enabling sustainable protein choice through public procurement policy
Authors	Arlind Xhelili Collaborating Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production (CSCP)
Project title	LIKE-A-PRO. From niche to mainstream – alternative proteins for everybody and everywhere
Citation	Xhelili, Arlind (2026). Enabling sustainable protein choice through public procurement policy. LIKE-A-PRO project. Wuppertal 2026.
Design	soweit / Studio für Übergänge www.soweit.studio
Photo credits	Photo page 8 by Ella Olsson on Pexels



**Funded by
the European Union**

This project is funded by the European Union under Grant Agreement No. 101083961.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

1. Introduction

Across Europe, food systems are under growing pressure to deliver diets that are healthy, affordable, culturally acceptable, and environmentally sustainable. Protein consumption sits at the centre of this challenge. Conventional animal-based products continue to be central in many everyday diets, while alternative protein (AP) products remain comparatively less visible, less familiar, and, in many settings, less accessible. The LIKE-A-PRO findings show that many consumers are open to alternative proteins, but that openness does not automatically translate into uptake. Food choices are shaped not only by information or personal intention, but also by habits, price, availability, convenience, social norms, taste expectations, trust, and the design of food environments.

Public procurement is not only a purchasing tool – it is a market-shaping tool.

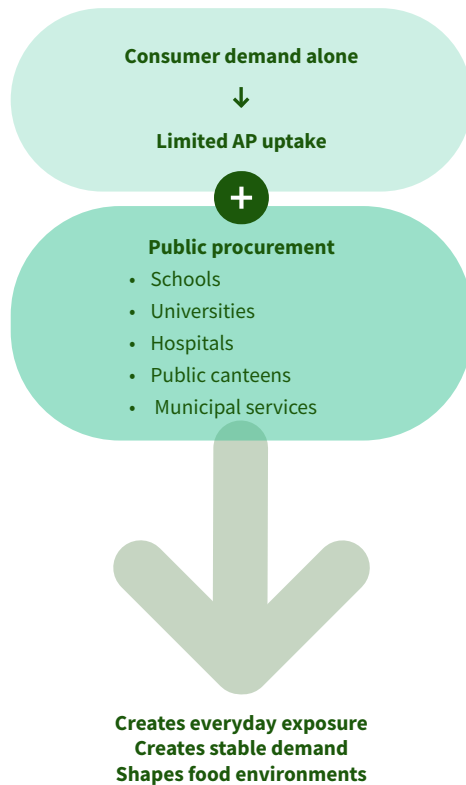
This governance mechanism focuses on the role of policy action and sustainable public procurement in creating the conditions for APs to move from niche to mainstream. Public authorities have several levers at their disposal. They can set standards, create incentives, fund innovation, shape procurement rules, support public awareness, and influence the food offered in schools, universities, hospitals, public administrations, municipal canteens, and other publicly funded institutions. These levers are particularly important because they can change the food environment itself, rather than placing responsibility only on individual consumers.

The need for policy action is especially clear when considering the barriers that currently limit the uptake of alternative protein products. Consumers often find AP products difficult to recognise, difficult to locate, or insufficiently integrated into everyday food environments. They may perceive them as too expensive, too processed, unfamiliar, poorly aligned with local food cultures, or relevant only to vegans and vegetarians. At the same time, consumers also identify several conditions that could support acceptance: better availability, lower or equal prices compared with conventional products, appealing taste and texture, clear information, transparent labelling, and positive social norms.

The “elephant in the room” is price. AP products are often perceived as more expensive than conventional protein options, and in many cases they are. This limits consumer uptake and makes public caterers cautious, especially in settings where food budgets are already under pressure. However, price should not be treated as a reason for inaction. Public procurement can help address affordability by aggregating demand, creating predictable markets, supporting scale-up, encouraging price parity in tenders, and reducing the risk for suppliers and caterers. In other words, procurement is not only a purchasing tool; it can also be a market-shaping tool.

Policy action, however, must be carefully designed. The LIKE-A-PRO findings show that measures perceived as abrupt, coercive, unfair, culturally insensitive, or insufficiently transparent can trigger resistance. Participants recognised the potential benefits of limiting unsustainable and unhealthy food options, particularly for

Why matters public procurement?



public health, environmental sustainability, and the normalisation of alternative proteins. Yet they also expressed strong concerns about personal freedom, economic disruption, impacts on traditional producers, and top-down interventions that tell people what they can or cannot eat. The strongest support emerged for approaches that are gradual, transparent, educational, and accompanied by credible, affordable, and appealing alternatives.

For this reason, the purpose of this governance mechanism is not to recommend a simplistic replacement of conventional proteins, nor to promote restrictive action detached from consumer realities. Rather, it proposes a balanced approach: public authorities can gradually reduce the dominance of unsustainable and unhealthy food products while simultaneously using public procurement to make healthier and more sustainable protein choices more available, affordable, trusted, and appealing. In practice, this means moving away from a policy logic based only on consumer information and towards a governance approach that reshapes the conditions under which food choices are made.

2. What is in this governance mechanism?

This governance mechanism provides recommendations for policymakers, public procurement authorities, municipalities, institutional caterers, and other actors involved in shaping public food provision. It is intended as a practical guide for translating consumer insights and behavioural evidence into policy and procurement decisions.

The document focuses on how policy can support the uptake of APs through sustainable public procurement and related measures. It considers how public institutions can lead by example, how procurement criteria can support healthier and more sustainable meals, and how AP product friendly procurement policies can be introduced without undermining consumer trust or perceived autonomy.

The mechanism also addresses the practical conditions that need to be in place for policy action to work. These include affordability, product and meal quality, staff capacity, supplier readiness, transparent communication, consumer engagement, and monitoring. The aim is not to prescribe one fixed model for all European countries or regions. Food cultures, procurement systems, public budgets, market maturity, and institutional capacities differ substantially. Instead, the mechanism offers a flexible framework that can be adapted to different governance levels and public food settings.

At its core, the mechanism argues that effective policy action should combine structural change with consumer-sensitive implementation. Public procurement

should not simply add AP products to existing menus as a marginal option. It should support a broader redesign of public food environments so that sustainable protein choices become normal, attractive, affordable, and easy to choose.

3. How was this governance mechanism developed?

The recommendations were developed by bringing together evidence from several LIKE-A-PRO activities. The Living Labs, implemented across 11 European countries¹, provided insights into how consumers perceive APs, what motivates or prevents uptake, and how people respond to different types of interventions. These findings were organised through the COM-B model², which understands behaviour as the result of capability, opportunity, and motivation, and through the Consumer Choice Framework³, which distinguishes between choice editing, choice expansion, choice environment, and beyond choice interventions.

The Living Labs showed that consumers see potential benefits in APs, including health, environmental sustainability, animal welfare, innovation, and future food security. However, they also highlighted persistent barriers. These include limited knowledge, lack of cooking skills, uncertainty about nutrition and processing, concerns about taste and texture, high perceived prices, limited availability, cultural attachment to meat, and scepticism towards interventions that appear to restrict freedom of choice. In relation to choice editing, participants often recognised the potential public health and sustainability benefits of limiting less sustainable options, but strongly preferred gradual, transparent, and non-coercive approaches that provide credible alternatives and sufficient time to adapt.

The behavioural intervention pilots added practical evidence on how food environment changes can work in real settings. The choice-editing pilot⁴ in a university canteen showed that altering availability can influence immediate meal selection. During the intervention weeks, approximately 71% of respondents reported eating

1 Xhelili, A., Wiegard, J., & Schüürmann, J. (2025). LIKE-A-PRO's Living Labs. Consumer Insights Dataset. LIKE-A-PRO project. Wuppertal, 2025.

2 Michie, S., van Stralen, M. M., & West, R. (2011). The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterizing and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Science*, 6(1), 42. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42>

3 Xhelili, A., & Nicolau, M. (2021). From intention to action: Multi-stakeholder recommendations for making sustainable food consumption a reality. Wuppertal. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5337036>

4 Xhelili, A., Schüürmann, J., Strube, R., Ziavras, S., Perrea, T., Chrysochou, P., Nystrand, B., Bye, I., Nystad, R., Vázquez-Araújo, L., Romeo-Arroyo, E., Vertriest, L., Willems, M., van der Waard, S. (2026). Driving Change with LIKE-A-PRO: Results and Lessons from Behavioural Intervention Pilots. LIKE-A-PRO project. Wuppertal, 2026.

Consumer acceptance was stronger for gradual, transparent and affordable approaches than for abrupt or restrictive measures.

at the canteen and over half of those canteen users selected a plant-based option. At the same time, 30.7% reported eating elsewhere because of the intervention, and 42.9% felt moderately or strongly restricted. These findings highlight a central governance lesson: structural interventions can influence behaviour, but their legitimacy and durability depend on perceived autonomy, communication, product appeal, and gradual implementation.

The LIKE-A-PRO stakeholder briefs⁵ developed on the basis of a literature review provide further guidance. The policy-maker brief, for example, emphasises the need to facilitate accessibility, support innovation and scale-up, promote labelling schemes, educate and train consumers, and continuously monitor and evaluate progress. It also stresses that APs should become available across everyday food environments, including retail outlets, restaurants, and canteens, while remaining accessible across socio-economic groups.

The specific contribution of this governance mechanism lies in its focus on enabling regulation and procurement design. Many discussions on sustainable diets remain either too general, focusing on awareness raising, or too ambitious, calling for rapid restrictions that are difficult to implement politically and socially. This mechanism proposes a middle route: public authorities can progressively limit the prevalence of unsustainable and unhealthy food products in publicly funded meals, while using procurement policy to create stable demand for alternative proteins and other sustainable protein sources. The approach is not to tell consumers what they must eat, but to make the public food environment more aligned with health, sustainability, affordability, and consumer acceptance.

Most of the insights informing this governance mechanism are drawn from LIKE-A-PRO project outputs, including the Living Lab findings, behavioural intervention pilot results, and stakeholder briefs. These sources are referenced in the form of footnotes throughout the document.

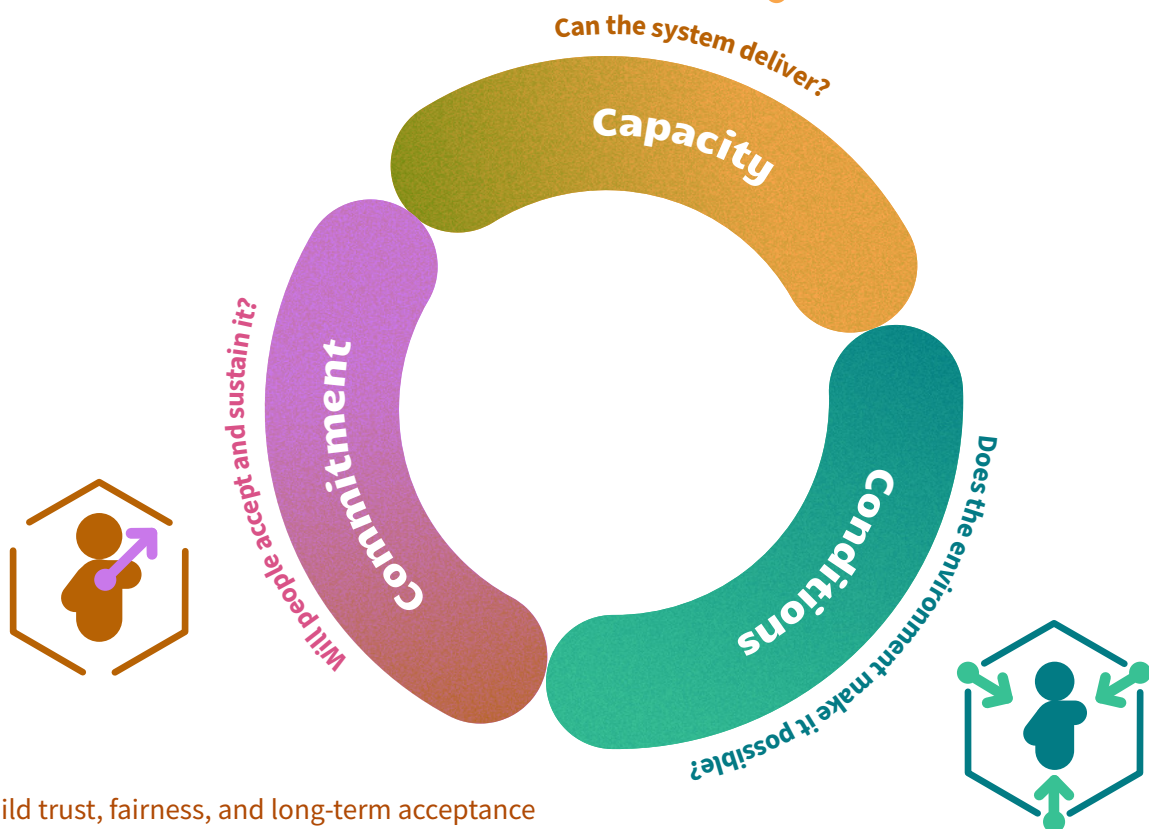
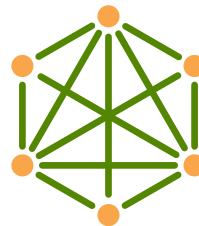
5 Xhelili et al. (2024) Acceptance of Alternative Proteins Among European Consumers. Policymaker, Industry, CSOs and Academia Briefs.

4. Modalities for policy action and public procurement



Three levers for sustainable protein procurement

- Equip public food systems to deliver AP products / meals well
- Set quality and nutrition standards for AP products / meals
- Train procurement officers, caterers, and frontline staff
- Support supplier readiness and practical procurement tools



- Build trust, fairness, and long-term acceptance
- Communicate and educate clearly, credibly, and non-judgementally
- Protect fairness, dietary inclusion, and perceived choice
- Monitor uptake, satisfaction, equity, supplier readiness, and unintended effects

- Make AP meals available, affordable, appealing, and normal in public food settings
- Set progressive sustainable protein procurement targets
- Rebalance menus gradually without framing the change as restriction
- Use price parity, aggregated purchasing, and reliable supply conditions

4.1 Establish progressive sustainable protein targets in public procurement



Public procurement can be one of the most powerful levers for mainstreaming alternative proteins because it affects meals served in everyday institutional settings. Schools, universities, hospitals, public offices, prisons, care homes, and municipal canteens reach large and diverse populations. When these settings offer appealing alternative protein meals regularly, they can help normalise new dietary patterns and create stable demand for suppliers.

Public authorities should introduce progressive sustainable protein targets for publicly funded food services. These targets should not be framed only as product quotas, but as meal-quality objectives. A public institution could, for example, be required to provide at least one attractive plant-based or alternative-protein meal every day, gradually increase the share of sustainable protein dishes over time, or ensure that a defined percentage of total protein procurement comes from sources meeting health and sustainability criteria.

The targets should be phased. A first phase could focus on guaranteeing the availability and quality of AP meals. A second phase could increase their visibility and integration into main menus. A third phase could introduce more ambitious targets for the share of meals selected or served. This sequencing matters because the mere availability of AP products does not guarantee uptake. Procurement should therefore move beyond purchasing inputs and focus on actual consumption, meal satisfaction, affordability, and nutritional adequacy.

Targets should also be context-sensitive. A school meal programme, a hospital catering service, and a university canteen have different users, nutritional requirements, budgets, and operational constraints. The targets should therefore define common minimum standards while allowing local adaptation.

4.2 Rebalance menus gradually without framing the measure as restriction



Public food environments can reduce the dominance of less sustainable or unhealthy options without presenting the change as a ban or restriction. The practical aim is to rebalance menus over time. This can be done by reducing the frequency, portion size, or prominence of the least sustainable options, while increasing the quality, visibility, and appeal of alternative protein meals.

This recommendation takes inspiration from the idea of choice editing, but avoids relying on the terminology directly because it can sound technical or restrictive. In practice, the approach is about menu rebalancing. Public institutions can begin by offering more plant-forward dishes, placing them within the main menu rather than in a separate section, in-

roducing meat-reduced days, reducing the number of high-impact meat options on certain days, or making AP meals the most visible option while keeping other options available.

The key is that consumers should experience the change as an improvement in the food offer, not as a loss. This means that AP meals must be attractive, filling, familiar enough to try, and priced fairly. Communication should focus on variety, taste, quality, health, sustainability, and discovery. It should avoid telling people what they should stop eating. Messages such as “new protein-rich meals,” “seasonal plant-forward dishes,” “fresh menu options,” or “try something new today” are more likely to be accepted than messages that emphasise removal or restriction.

Gradual menu rebalancing

Move towards more balanced public food environments

Support familiarity and acceptance over time

Increase the quality, visibility, and appeal of sustainable protein meals

Reduce the frequency or prominence of less sustainable options



Public authorities should also require institutions to monitor unintended effects. If consumers respond by eating elsewhere, purchasing less sustainable food outside the canteen, or expressing strong dissatisfaction, the pace or design of the rebalancing may need adjustment. The objective is not to achieve change at any cost, but to build public food environments where sustainable choices become normal and accepted.

4.3 Make affordability a central procurement condition



Price is one of the most consistent barriers to the uptake of alternative proteins. If AP meals are more expensive than conventional alternatives, they risk being perceived as premium, niche, or inaccessible. This is particularly problematic in public food settings, where equity and inclusion should be central.

Public procurement should therefore require affordability and, where possible, price parity. AP meals should be priced at the same level as, or below, comparable conventional meals. Public authorities can support this through aggregated purchasing, framework contracts, subsidies for sustainable meals, or menu pricing strategies that make healthier and more sustainable options financially attractive. Where budgets allow, introductory pricing or vouchers can be used to encourage trial, especially in settings where consumers are unfamiliar with AP dishes.

Affordability should not be achieved by compromising quality. Low-cost AP meals that are poorly prepared or nutritionally weak can damage consumer trust. Pro-

curement criteria should therefore combine price requirements with standards for taste, nutrition, ingredient quality, and preparation.

4.4 Define minimum quality and nutrition standards for AP meals



A procurement policy that increases AP availability without ensuring product and meal quality may fail to generate lasting change. Consumers repeatedly identify taste, texture, familiarity, and perceived healthiness as decisive factors. Public authorities should therefore develop minimum standards for AP meals served in public institutions.

These standards should cover nutritional balance, protein content, fibre, salt, saturated fat, allergens, and the inclusion of relevant micronutrients where needed. They should also consider preparation quality, culinary fit, and sensory appeal. Public caterers should be encouraged to develop dishes that fit local food cultures rather than relying only on unfamiliar substitutes. Lentils, beans, peas, mushrooms, fermented ingredients, and other AP sources can be integrated into soups, stews, pasta dishes, wraps, spreads, burgers, salads, sauces, and school-friendly meals.

Quality standards should be supported by tasting and feedback before large-scale roll-out. Where possible, public institutions should test new dishes with users, adapt recipes, and build a rotating menu of well-accepted options. This is especially important in schools, hospitals, and care settings, where nutrition, acceptability, and trust are particularly sensitive.

4.5 Invest in training for public caterers and procurement officers



Successful implementation depends not only on policy targets, but also on the people who translate them into meals. Public procurement officers need criteria and tools to purchase sustainable proteins effectively. Chefs and catering staff need practical skills to prepare AP meals that consumers want to eat. Frontline staff need confidence to answer basic questions about ingredients, allergens, preparation, and taste.

Public authorities should therefore include capacity building as part of procurement reform. Training should cover sustainable protein sourcing, menu planning, recipe development, sensory quality, allergen management, nutrition, cost control, and communication with consumers. Training should be hands-on and adapted to the realities of institutional kitchens, including budget limits, staffing levels, storage capacity, and time pressure.

The main challenges were behavioural and cultural rather than logistical.

The LIKE-A-PRO choice-editing pilot suggests that staff familiarity can grow through direct involvement. Operational stakeholders reported that implementation was smoother than expected, that reduced-meat weeks did not disrupt pro-

curement, preparation, storage, or service, and that costs were stable or slightly lower due to reduced meat purchasing. The main challenges were behavioural and cultural rather than logistical.

4.6 Support supplier development and sustainable AP markets



Public procurement can help create demand, but demand must be matched by reliable supply. Many public caterers require stable volumes, predictable prices, food safety compliance, allergen information, and products that can be prepared efficiently at scale. Smaller AP producers may need support to meet these requirements.

Policy action should therefore include supplier development. Public authorities can support innovation, scale-up, and market access for AP producers that meet sustainability, health, and affordability criteria. This can include research and development funding, pilot procurement calls, innovation partnerships, support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and collaboration between producers, public caterers, and research institutions.

Local and regional sourcing should be considered where feasible and legally appropriate. Consumer insights suggest that local origin can increase trust and cultural acceptance, especially where AP products are otherwise perceived as unfamiliar, foreign, or overly processed. However, local sourcing should not be treated as automatically sustainable. Procurement should balance locality with environmental performance, nutritional value, affordability, supply reliability, and compliance with public procurement rules.

4.7 Combine procurement reform with education and communication



Procurement changes are more likely to be accepted when consumers understand them. Education and communication should therefore be integrated into policy action from the beginning. This does not mean relying on information alone, but ensuring that structural changes are accompanied by clear, credible, and non-moralising explanations.

In public canteens, communication can explain the introduction of AP meals, highlight taste and quality, provide simple information about ingredients, and show how the meal contributes to health and sustainability goals. In schools, procurement reform can be linked to food literacy, cooking education, and sustainability curricula. In hospitals and care settings, communication should focus on nutrition, safety, and wellbeing. In universities and workplaces, campaigns can emphasise variety, convenience, climate relevance, and everyday practicality.

The language used matters. Messages should avoid suggesting that consumers are being forced to change. More effective language emphasises trying, discovering, adding, and enjoying. It should also avoid positioning AP meals only as vegan or vegetarian options, as this can make them seem irrelevant to flexitarians, omnivores, and curious consumers.

4.8 Protect fairness and manage transition risks



Policy action that limits unsustainable and unhealthy products can have wider social and economic effects. Consumer insights show concerns about impacts on farmers, traditional producers, rural livelihoods, low-income households, and people with specific dietary needs. These concerns should not be dismissed. They should be integrated into transition planning.

Public authorities should avoid policies that simply increase the price of conventional proteins without safeguards, as this may disproportionately affect lower-income consumers. Where fiscal measures are considered, they should be paired with affordability measures for healthier and more sustainable alternatives. Support should also be provided for farmers and producers who wish to diversify into sustainable protein value chains or might be impacted by the transition.

Fairness also requires attention to dietary needs. Public procurement must ensure that AP meals are safe and suitable for people with allergies, intolerances, religious dietary requirements, medical conditions, and different age-related nutritional needs. Clear allergen information and meal alternatives are essential.

4.9 Establish monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems



Sustainable public procurement should be treated as a learning process. Public authorities should monitor both implementation and outcomes, using indicators that capture behavioural, operational, nutritional, economic, and social dimensions.

Relevant indicators include the number and share of AP meals offered, the number and share selected, consumer satisfaction, perceived freedom of choice, plate waste, price parity, nutritional quality, supplier performance, staff feedback, complaints, repeat uptake, and displacement behaviour. Institutions should also assess whether changes are reaching different user groups equitably.

Monitoring should not be used only for accountability; it should support adaptation. If AP meals are not selected, authorities should examine whether the issue is

taste, price, placement, familiarity, communication, portion size, or cultural fit. If consumers feel restricted, institutions may need to slow implementation, improve communication, or increase variety. If suppliers struggle, procurement criteria may need adjustment or additional capacity-building support.

5. Suggested implementation pathway

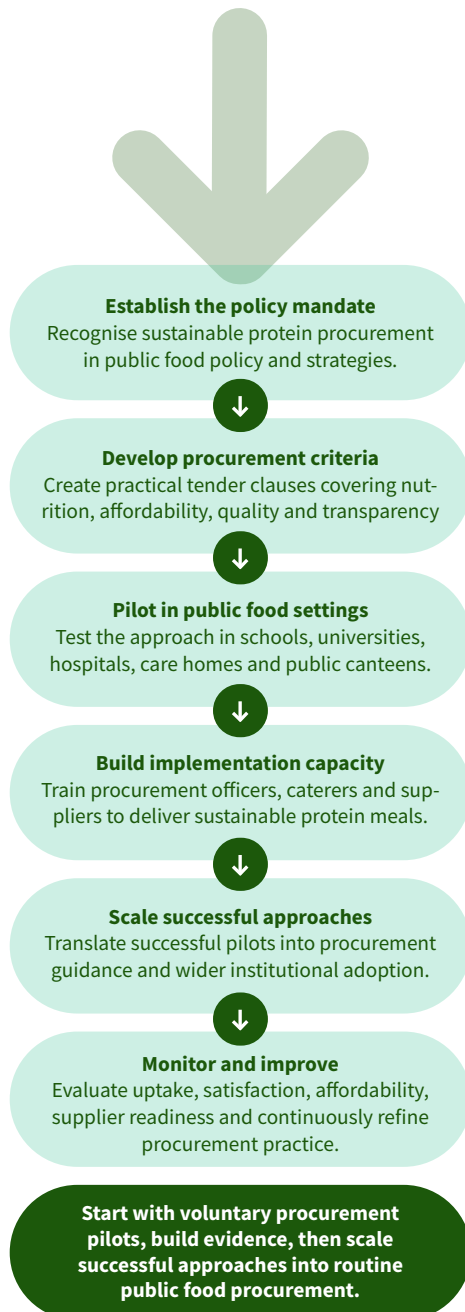
The most feasible pathway is a staged governance model that begins with voluntary criteria and model procurement clauses, and can gradually move towards stronger requirements for publicly funded food services where evidence, capacity, and market readiness allow.

The first stage is to create an enabling policy mandate. Public authorities should formally recognise sustainable protein procurement as part of health, sustainability, and food system policy. At EU level, this could mean explicitly integrating sustainable protein criteria into Green Public Procurement (GPP)⁶ and Sustainable Public Procurement guidance for food and catering services⁷. At national level, governments could include sustainable protein procurement (SPP) in national food strategies, public health strategies, climate plans, or school food policies. This stage is essential because procurement officers often need legal and political clarity before adding new sustainability requirements to tenders.

The second stage is to develop model procurement criteria. Public authorities should provide standard clauses that can be used by municipalities and institutions. These clauses could cover the regular availability of sustainable protein meals, price parity, nutritional standards, menu integration, ingredient transparency, staff training, user feedback, and monitoring. Model clauses reduce administrative burden and make it easier for smaller municipalities or institutions to act.

The third stage is to test the criteria through public procurement pilots. These pilots should not be framed as isolated innovation projects, but as preparation for wider policy adoption. They should test what works in different settings, such as schools, universities, hospitals, public offices, and care homes. Pilots should evaluate not only uptake, but also

From policy to practice



6 Boyano, A., Espinosa, N., Rodriguez Quintero, R., Neto, B., Gama Caldas, M., Wolf, O., & Rüdener, I. (2019). EU GPP criteria for Food procurement, Catering services and Vending Machines. Publications Office of the European Union.

7 Garcia Herrero, L., De Laurentiis, V., Cristobal Garcia, J., Sala, S., & Sanyé-Mengual, E. (2026). Criteria for Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) for Food, Food Services, and Vending Machines. European Commission, Joint Research Centre.

affordability, operational feasibility, supplier readiness, consumer satisfaction, and perceived autonomy.

The fourth stage is to move from voluntary uptake to stronger policy requirements. Once criteria have been tested and refined, national or regional authorities can make some requirements mandatory in publicly funded food services. This does not mean that every institution must follow the same menu. Rather, it means that every publicly funded food service should meet minimum standards for sustainable protein availability, affordability, nutrition, and transparency. More ambitious criteria can remain voluntary or be rewarded through funding, recognition schemes, or procurement scoring.

The fifth stage is to embed monitoring and public reporting. Public authorities should require institutions to report on practical indicators such as AP meal availability, price parity, uptake, satisfaction, plate waste, supplier performance, and equity. Reporting should be simple enough to be feasible but consistent enough to support learning across institutions. The goal is not to overburden public caterers, but to create a feedback loop that allows procurement policy to improve over time.

Within this pathway, public authorities carry the main responsibility. They create the mandate, define criteria, provide funding and training, and ensure accountability. Other actors play supplementary roles. Caterers translate criteria into meals and menus. Suppliers provide products and information that meet procurement needs. Researchers help evaluate outcomes. Civil society organisations and consumer groups support engagement, transparency, and trust. Schools, hospitals, universities, and other institutions adapt the approach to their users and collect feedback. This division of roles keeps the governance mechanism focused: the policy and procurement system leads, while other actors enable implementation.

6. Distilled summary and practice-oriented indicators

Availability alone is not enough—affordability, quality, trust, and practical fit strongly influence uptake.

This governance mechanism proposes a practical route for public authorities to promote alternative proteins through procurement without relying on bans or unrealistic market disruption. Its central idea is to use public purchasing power to make sustainable protein meals more available, affordable, attractive, and trusted in everyday public food settings.

The mechanism builds on what the EU is already doing in adjacent areas, including Green Public Procurement (see footnote 6), sustainable public procurement criteria for food and catering services (see footnote 7), and school food-related programmes⁸. The next step is to make sustainable proteins and alternative pro-

⁸ European Commission. EU School Scheme explained. Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development.

teins more explicit within these frameworks. This can be done through voluntary criteria first, followed by national or regional translation into procurement rules, public food standards, and eventually minimum requirements for publicly funded meals.

In practice, public authorities should focus on several priorities. They should create an enabling policy mandate for sustainable protein procurement and translate it into model tender criteria that municipalities and institutions can use directly. They should address price through aggregation, price parity requirements, subsidies, and market development. They should rebalance menus gradually, avoiding language that suggests restriction or coercion. They should define quality, nutrition, and transparency standards so that AP meals are trusted and appealing. They should invest in staff capacity and supplier readiness, because procurement targets can only work if institutions and markets can deliver. Finally, they should test approaches in public food settings and monitor implementation using indicators that are realistic for public institutions.

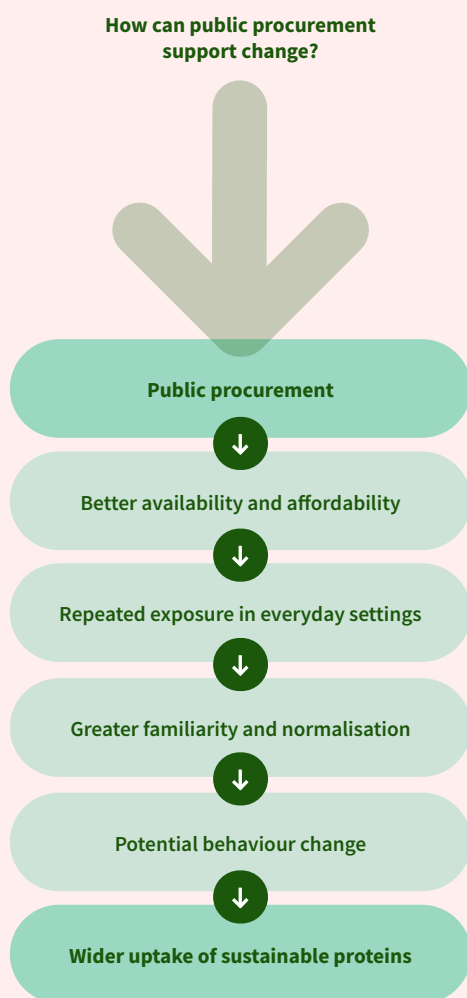
Practice-oriented indicators for monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of sustainable public procurement for alternative proteins

POLICY OBJECTIVE	PRACTICAL INDICATOR	WHY IT MATTERS
Make sustainable protein procurement visible in policy	Sustainable protein criteria included in national, regional, or municipal procurement guidance	Shows whether the issue has moved from project level to policy level
Support public buyers	Number of model tender clauses or procurement templates available for food services	Reduces administrative burden and makes implementation easier
Increase availability	Share of publicly funded food services offering at least one AP or plant-forward meal daily	Measures whether consumers encounter AP meals in everyday settings
Avoid niche positioning	Share of AP meals integrated into the main menu rather than separated as vegan/vegetarian-only options	Tracks whether APs are being normalised
Address price	Price difference between AP meals and comparable conventional meals	Directly monitors the main affordability barrier
Use public procurement to shape markets	Number or share of contracts including sustainable protein criteria, price parity clauses, or supplier transparency requirements	Shows whether procurement is being used as a market-shaping tool
Protect quality	Consumer satisfaction score for AP meals, combined with plate waste data	Prevents procurement from prioritising availability over actual acceptability
Protect nutrition	Share of AP meals meeting agreed nutrition criteria for protein, fibre, salt, saturated fat, and allergens	Ensures that sustainability does not come at the expense of health
Protect dietary inclusion	Share of AP meals with clear allergen information and suitable alternatives for dietary, religious, medical, or age related needs	Ensures procurement changes remain safe, inclusive and appropriate for different users
Monitor acceptance	Share of users reporting that they still feel they have meaningful choice	Helps avoid backlash and perceived coercion
Support transparent communication	Share of participating institutions providing clear consumer facing information on why AP meals are offered, what they contain, and how feedback is used	Helps build trust and reduce perceptions of coercion
Monitor unintended effects	Reported displacement, such as users eating elsewhere because of menu changes	Captures whether behaviour is shifting or simply moving outside the institution
Build capacity	Number of procurement officers, chefs, and catering staff trained in sustainable protein procurement and preparation	Measures whether institutions are practically equipped to implement change
Support suppliers	Number of suppliers able to meet sustainable protein procurement criteria, including SMEs where relevant	Tracks market readiness
Manage transition risks	Evidence of support measures or supplier diversification opportunities for producers affected by sustainable protein procurement	Helps ensure the transition is not perceived as punitive or one sided
Ensure equity	Availability and uptake of AP meals across different institution types and regions	Ensures that implementation does not remain limited to well-resourced urban settings
Support EU alignment	Use of EU GPP, JRC sustainable public procurement criteria, or national equivalents in tenders (see footnotes 6-7)	Connects local implementation to current EU policy tools



7. Conclusion and way forward

Policy action and sustainable public procurement can play a decisive role in making alternative proteins more visible, accessible, affordable, and trusted. However, the transition will only be successful if it is designed around real consumer behaviour and real institutional conditions. The LIKE-A-PRO evidence shows that consumers may recognise the benefits of limiting unsustainable and unhealthy options, but their acceptance depends strongly on how such changes are introduced.



The way forward is therefore a balanced governance approach: gradual rather than abrupt, enabling rather than coercive, transparent rather than opaque, and quality-driven rather than quota-driven. Public procurement should not simply add AP products to menus. It should help build food environments in which sustainable protein choices are appealing, normal, affordable, and nutritionally sound.

By combining progressive procurement targets, careful choice editing, affordability measures, staff training, supplier development, communication, and continuous monitoring, public authorities can support a protein transition that benefits consumers, institutions, markets, and the environment. In doing so, they can help move alternative proteins from the margins of the food system into everyday public meals, while preserving trust, fairness, and consumer autonomy.

This mechanism's specific contribution is to position procurement as a feasible regulatory pathway. Public authorities do not need to wait for perfect consumer demand or fully mature markets before acting. They can create demand, reduce uncertainty, support suppliers, and make AP meals more familiar through the meals they already fund and regulate. At the same

time, they should avoid overpromising. Procurement alone will not transform protein consumption, and price, taste, supply readiness, and cultural acceptance remain real constraints.

A realistic way forward is to begin with enabling policy frameworks and voluntary criteria, translate them into model tender clauses, test them through public food settings, and then move gradually towards stronger procurement requirements where evidence and capacity allow. In this way, public authorities can limit the dominance of unsustainable and unhealthy food products not through abrupt prohibition, but through a steady rebalancing of publicly funded food environments. This offers a practical, socially sensitive, and politically feasible route for moving alternative proteins from the margins of the food system into everyday public meals.

