



SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION FROM 'FARM TO FORK'

Bidfood is one of the largest food wholesalers in the UK, supplying fresh, frozen, ambient food, beers, wines and spirits, and a wide range of catering essentials and equipment to more than 45,000 customers.



With the hospitality sector badly affected by COVID-19 lockdowns, Bidfood has weathered a tempestuous 18 months where demand has both plummeted and soared, often in quick succession.


Sure b2b sat down with Chief Executive Officer, Andrew Selley, to learn how in times of change, Bidfood has kept moving forward...

You believe that people are crucial to delivering large-scale business transformation. How does that belief support Bidfood's sustainability strategy?

If you try and impose behaviours and changes, our natural reaction is to resist and push back. Whereas, if you involve people in the decision-making and give them ownership, there's a far greater change they'll be engaged and help ensure initiatives are delivered.

We drive a lot down from the corporate level, but Bidfood is a decentralised organisation. We have around 30 UK sites and they largely operate as independent businesses with responsibility for their own balance sheets, environmental performance and so forth.





Each depot has at least one volunteer environmental champion, if not more depending on the size of the site. Being volunteer-based, these people are passionate about making a difference and reducing our impact on the environment. Our corporate communications also go hand in hand with local action, be that supporting community charities, trialing a new recycling initiative or driving down food waste.

At a corporate level, our ***Food for the Future*** strategy which we launched three years ago is driven by five workstreams: Leading change in food service; Managing our impacts; Empowering our people; Engaging our communities, and Offering healthier and sustainable choices.

The workstreams are sponsored by our board members and involve more than 50 of our employees from all parts of the organisation as part of their day jobs.

What is the biggest barrier to sustainable transformation?

Three words – simplicity, transparency and standardisation. All industries produce different levels of reporting, different baselines, different scopes; and people interpret those metrics in different ways. It would be great if we could standardise those metrics across industries, markets and regions.

If Bidfood won enough new work that we had to open another depot and buy additional trucks, then our total carbon footprint would increase. Yet, our CO2 per case or per pound of sales would decrease as we became more efficient.

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Much of Bidfood's carbon footprint lies within its supply chain. How are you helping suppliers to become more sustainable, and yourselves as an extension?

Collaboration is paramount. We recognise that you can manage and reduce your own environmental impact, but making meaningful change requires the support of suppliers and customers.

Crucially, we've just signed up to work with Carbon Intelligence on a science-based, net zero carbon target, which will encompass all our upstream and downstream emissions, so we will be working hard in this space for the foreseeable future. This is a big step and will impact every aspect of our value chain.

In addition to this, we have joined two WRAP-facilitated working groups that aim to harmonise carbon measurement and reporting for suppliers, and to establish a common database of embodied greenhouse gas data. This will make it easier for suppliers to report on emissions and it will drive a more level playing field as the ultimate aim is that we'll be asking the same questions to all suppliers across the food industry.

We are also collaborating with suppliers to reduce the plastic content of some of our own brand packaging through reduction or replacement with alternative materials, as well as partnering with other organisations to support the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

We're also proactively working to help mitigate the impacts of climate change. Southern Spain is a key sourcing area for UK fruit and vegetables, so we're joining other food organisations to collaboratively club fund a research project into water scarcity, to help protect food supply for the future. This is organised by WRAP and is a great example of SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals.



Our use of plastic has been under intense scrutiny in recent years. What factors do you consider when deciding on which material to use for a given application?

When deciding on what packaging a product is delivered in we have to ask how easy is it for the customer to use? Can it realistically be recycled, in ways that are accessible to the consumer? What percentage is recycled content? Can it be minimised in any way? How durable is the packaging, what protection does it offer? What's the shelf-life of the unopened product? What about once opened?

These aren't binary decisions, it's more about having to balance these different, often conflicting, factors. For example, offering a food item in single-use packaging could help reduce food waste. Yet, that would increase the amount of packaging and associated costs across that product line.

It's only after taking everything into consideration, across the end-to-end lifecycle, can we determine the optimal unit size, packaging and transportation arrangement. It's a complex, nuanced piece of work and it's continuously evolving.

Bidfood's latest Sustainability Report notes that 64% of Bidfood's Scope 1 emissions come from your trucks. What are you doing to address that?

Any large fleet operator will agree that decarbonisation of HGVs is a huge challenge. Even the UK Government's Transport Decarbonisation Update in July 2021 acknowledged that HGVs pose the toughest challenge .



[1].

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1002285/decarbonising-transport-a-better-greener-britain.pdf



Currently we have one electric vehicle at Battersea to test out its viability for us, but the amount of weight they can haul isn't sufficient, and general consensus is that electric's the solution for smaller vans and cars but not for HGVs. We're keeping a close eye on the evolution of technology and possible interim developments such as hydrogenated vegetable oil, but until the technology exists to produce hydrogen sustainably at scale and at a commercially viable cost, our focus has to be on reducing mileage and growing our fleet of Euro 6 engines.

In absolute terms, our Scope 1 emissions have decreased considerably despite business growth; between 2016 and 2019 our Scope 1 emissions decreased by 18%. I'm deliberately excluding 2020 numbers as that would give a false picture due to COVID-19.

New routing software has already brought significant efficiency gains. Delivery consolidation has also become a key focus. A caterer may have one supplier or it may have 50, depending on how they've organised their procurement. Consolidating that number down puts additional pressure on our internal supply chain movements, but doing so helps reduce food miles, vehicle emissions and, hopefully, food waste.

The hospitality sector has been hugely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and you might expect to see environmental initiatives being parked while boards focus solely on business survival. That's not been the case. If anything, we've seen ESG become more prominent in our customer conversations.

Bidfood Sustainable Development Strategy Diagram



What's going to be your big focus for the next 12 months?

We are going to be responding to the climate emergency in two key ways. Working on a robust net zero carbon commitment, and also reducing food waste, which is a largely unseen but significant contributor to climate change, not to mention a huge waste of resource across the supply chain.



For net zero, our our parent company's [Bidcorp] ambitious commitment to a 25% reduction in its carbon footprint by 2025 will be a significant milestone on the journey.

For food waste, our target is 0.15% of sales. Throughout the pandemic, that's been a real challenge of us to achieve because demand skyrocketed one month and then plummeted the next.

We had the first lockdown, the Government's 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme, a second lockdown in November, travel over the Christmas period being restricted, and schools suddenly being closed in January. Our demand versus sales was all over the place.

In our last financial year, which ended in June, our food waste was 0.41% of sales. A significant increase on prior years. So, a real focus moving forward is getting that down to our 0.15% target.

You've had more than a decade's experience at board level within Bidfood, what are you most proud of?

The fact that Bidfood is absolutely a high trust business. We don't put anything in our reporting or in the public domain that hasn't been externally verified.

You hear a lot these days about 'greenwashing', but everything that we talk about has been externally verified to ensure it's real. For us, this isn't about corporate box-ticking, this is about a company-wide movement that hopefully inspires others to make similar changes.

The Food Foundation recently published a report – *Plating Up Progress* – which analyses sustainability performance across the hospitality industry and wholesale suppliers. For the first time, they're comparing ourselves and our competitors against certain environmental parameters.

We welcome such a move in terms of helping to create a level playing field for consumers to make those informed decisions.

What has inspired your own sustainability journey?

For most people my age, born in the 1960s, the mindset around not wasting food, make do and mend, reuse and recycle, it was all just part of your upbringing. It wasn't referred to as 'being sustainable' or 'being environmentally friendly', it was called common sense. That's the bedrock, for me.

Today, those somewhat old-fashioned behaviours have returned in response to an increasingly fast-paced, disposable society.

The key question is how do we instill those values and behaviours back into society, across all ages, quickly and successfully.

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Why are you excited about being involved in Sustainable Industry '21?

Becoming more sustainable isn't just something we're excited and passionate about, it's something our customers are more excited and passionate about.

For me, the excitement comes from the challenge. Our operation is more multifaceted and complex than, say, a retail environment. We're helping to influence consumers, caterers, manufacturers, distributors, wholesalers; and by collaborating and coordinating change across that vast ecosystem, we can make a real difference. That's what makes it so exciting.

What are you most interested to learn from those in attendance?

If you believe that something isn't relevant to you because it affects an organisation that doesn't face the same challenges as you or involves a completely different sector, then you're going to miss out on invaluable insights, inspiring innovations and key learning opportunities.

I believe in having an open mind, in being a sponge. I am always fascinated to see what is happening in other sectors, other organisations, other markets, and reflecting on how their approaches or processes can be adopted in my organisation to drive meaningful change.