

(3) ACTION on Food

When considering the ‘big ticket’ impacts on your school’s carbon footprint, the school’s energy use is the most significant and probably the place to start. Other aspects of school life, however, can also offer the opportunity to make a significant impact, helping the school to move towards carbon net zero. In this Action Sheet, we are looking at changes you can make to food in school, including what you provide and what is brought into school in packed lunches.

ACTION 1 → REDUCE THE MEAT CONTENT in your school meals.

It is now commonly understood that the production of meat and dairy products for food can have a very significant environmental impact. This impact is felt in a number of ways including deforestation to provide grazing land, high levels of greenhouse gas release such as methane (cows and sheep), carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide, very intensive water usage and soil degradation leading to the release of carbon dioxide. Any steps you can take to reduce meat and dairy consumption will be positive steps in reducing the carbon footprint of your school. But what steps can you take?

1. **Put the daily Vegetarian Option FIRST on your menu.** It might seem like an insignificant change, but making the vegetarian choice more visible and ‘mainstream’ can lead to an increase in uptake by children.
2. **Introduce a weekly with a meat free day.** All schools already offer vegetarian options as standard in their daily meal plan. It is not a large step to have a day, maybe a ‘Meat Free Monday’, in which the whole menu is vegetarian. By having a conversation with your caterer, you should discover that this is an easy step to make from their perspective. But there are some other factors to consider to make this successful.

Benefits

- ✓ Reduce your school’s actual carbon footprint
- ✓ Teach pupils that every meal does not have to include meat/dairy, so leading to longer term positive impacts.
- ✓ Promote healthier diets.

Things to consider

- a. Rally support beforehand for the change with:
 - i. Pupils – they are often the most environmentally concerned and so the most likely to be supportive. For them the big question will be, “Will I like what is on offer instead?”
 - ii. Parents – possibly a more tricky audience, but with careful communication and clear reasons many parents will be won over. For most the concern will be, “Will my child be getting a healthy, filling meal?” Make sure you show that they will – you could even have opportunities for parents to come in and see and taste some of the alternatives that will be offered.
 - b. Make sure the food offered are popular options. There are many popular options which are easily made vegetarian, such as pizzas or pasta dishes. You could even get a list of possible options from your caterer and ask pupils which they would like or have a tasting event for pupils before consulting.
 - c. Keep people informed of the impact. Making the change is not enough – make sure that you regularly inform people how well it is going and the impact it is having. And, if something about it doesn’t work as well as hoped, don’t be afraid to listen and make changes. You don’t have to get it all right first time.
3. **Reasonably reduce the meat content of meals that include meat.** Changing the balance of certain recipes, such as stews or pies, by increasing the proportion of vegetables/pulses and reducing the amount of meat can also be beneficial. Having discussions with your caterers about adjusting recipes where you can could be another relatively simple way of making progress. They might be keen because meat is more expensive than veg, beans, pulses and plant based protein like tofu. However **DON’T DO THIS IN SECRET**. Parents will react badly to secret changes. If you are going to make changes in this way, sell them positively as part of the whole narrative of your environmental and health actions in school.

4. **Don't stop at just one meat free day.** One meat free day is a great place to start. It will bring many benefits and break the mental connection that every meal must contain meat. But one meat free day alone is only the first step along a necessary journey. The journal 'The Lancet' states that by 2050, each person should be eating no more than 300g of meat each week. So, when you have what a great success one meat free day be with everyone, why not build on this by adding another!

ACTION 2 **REDUCE THE AMOUNT OF DIARY in your school meals**

For very similar reasons as those above, the production of dairy products also has a high environmental impact. Due to demand, caterers are increasingly offering vegan options without dairy ingredients. Having a dialogue with your provider at finding ways to reduce the use of dairy more generally in your school meals will add to the environmental benefits of the changes you are making. Could you even aspire to introducing the occasional Vegan Day to show pupils how nice vegan meals can be?

ACTION 3 **REDUCE THE AMOUNT OF RICE in your school meals**

The environmental impact of rice production is often not well recognised. Rice is a daily staple of diets for over half the world's population, but it is also a major contributor to global warming. 2.5% of all human-induced greenhouse gas emissions are as a result of rice production. That is equivalent to all international air travel! Rice production is estimated to be responsible for 12% of total methane global emissions, mainly due to its anaerobic decomposition during its production processes. This is therefore another thing to include in your conversation with your caterer. What alternative, such as nan bread or couscous, can they offer to reduce the amount of rice consumed in school?

ACTION 4 **USE LOCALLY SOURCED & SEASONAL PRODUCE**

While you are having that conversation with your caterer, ask them about using locally sourced and seasonal produce in your school meals.

- ⚠ Food miles can contribute significantly to the carbon footprint of school food. Challenging your caterer to look for local producers from whom to source your meals can reduce the food miles of each meal and also boost the lot of local farmers and producers, which then feeds into the local economy. If you are served by a locally authority caterer, you might also want to challenge the local authority itself in the same way.
- ⚠ Expecting to be able to eat what we want, when we want, irregardless of season, is an modern attitude with major environmental consequences. Using unseasonal food usually means that it is shipped internationally from countries where it is in season or that it is produced in this country with high energy costs to create the conditions necessary (think strawberries and tomatoes).
- ⚠ Using locally sourced products, including locally sourced meat, ensures the high standards of animal welfare and production processes of UK farming. It also makes sure we are supporting and developing local farmers who have an interest in preserving the local environment for the benefit of the community.

ACTION 5 **REDUCE FOOD WASTE**

Many school leaders and catering teams already have concerns about the amount of food waste in school, particularly in the primary sector. Less waste means less food required, reducing the the environmental effect of that food and the environmental impact of dealing with the food waste. It will also, in time, reduce the cost of the catering if less is wasted. It is a perennial problem, but that doesn't prevent us looking for a solution.

Steps to take

- **Find out why** – a key step is consulting with pupils to find out the reasons for the amount of food waste. By asking, it will be possible to identify the causes and so to come up with solutions. There will also be benefits simply from pupils realising that their voice counts.

Steps to take (continued)

- **Implement identified solutions** – some might be easy, such as changing menu options. Others might not be so easy, but proper consultation requires commitment to see it through to solutions where possible.
- **Educate pupils about the environmental impact of their waste** – ideally, help pupils themselves to research and identify the significant environmental cost of large quantities of food waste. This will spur them into finding viable solutions and to self-police these.
- **Incentivise low waste** – schools have all sorts of ways of incentivising good behaviour. If low waste is a priority, then schools can find ways to build this into their incentive and reward processes.

ACTION 6 → ENCOURAGE ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY PACKED LUNCHES

For this, schools are at the mercy of their parents, but a well targeted and run promotional campaign can lead to behaviour change. As with any campaign of this kind, it won't change everyone, but every person who does change is a bonus. Useful information can be found at:

- [Green That Life - Everything You Need to Know to Pack an Eco Friendly School Lunch](#)
- [Food Print – 7 ways to pack a more sustainable packed lunch](#)
- [Lunchbox Doctor – 6 top tips for Sustainable Packed Lunches](#)

ACTION 7 → TEACH CHILDREN TO COOK

Ultimately, long term, one of the best ways to impact people's carbon emissions and waste with regards food is to teach children to cook properly from raw ingredients. It might well be the case that many schools do not, at the moment, have the facilities or expertise to do this. Teaching children to cook, however, is not just good for the environment but brings many other benefits as well. Cooking is a key life skill, can help families manage their budgets, can build self-confidence and self-esteem, can provide wonderful opportunities for building relationships and much more besides. Building the capacity for this may take some time and effort, but schools will reap the benefits when they do.