PRACTICAL GUIDE

School Food Waste Action Plan

Five steps to less waste, healthier lunches and lower costs. Works whether you cook on site or buy your meals in.

School _____

Lead _____

Start date _____

Team _____



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How to use this plan

Work through the five steps in order, or pick the one that fits this half term. Tick off actions as you go, and fill in the sheets with your team. The audit in Step 2 gives you the baseline that everything else is measured against.

At a glance

Step	Focus	Who leads	Target half term
1	Explore the menu		
2	Audit the waste		
3	Ask pupils why		
4	Look for hidden costs		
5	Grow it, cook it, teach it		

Who to involve

- **Sustainability lead** to coordinate and report to SLT and governors
- **Catering manager or contract manager** for menus, kitchen waste and meal numbers
- **School business manager** for waste contracts and costs
- **Lunchtime staff** to weigh plate waste and observe the dining hall
- **Eco council or school council** to run surveys, monitoring and the campaign

Why start here? Food waste is visible, measurable, led by pupils and pays for itself. Schools in the Chefs in Schools 2025 programme saved more than £1,170 per 100 pupils per year.

1 Explore the menu

Goal: understand what's being served, what's left, and what your caterer can change.

- [ ] Get a copy of the full menu cycle (usually three weeks) and the portion guide
- [ ] Meet the catering manager or contract manager (in person if you can, in the kitchen)
- [ ] Ask lunchtime staff which dishes come back most often
- [ ] Note which days and dishes the kitchen runs out of, and which are cooked in bulk and binned
- [ ] Agree one menu change to trial for half a term

Questions to ask your caterer

- [ ] Do you measure food waste in our school? Can we see the figures?
- [ ] Do you separate kitchen waste (before and after cooking) from plate waste?
- [ ] Can pupils pre-order their meal in the morning or the day before?
- [ ] Can we run taster sessions before a new dish goes on the menu?
- [ ] Can portions be smaller, with seconds available?
- [ ] Can the vegetarian or plant-based option go first on the counter and be clearly labelled?
- [ ] Do you use seasonal or local produce, and could you use anything we grow?
- [ ] What are other schools on your contract doing to reduce waste?
- [ ] Do you have food waste education sessions or resources you can bring in?

Notes from the meeting

Menu change we'll trial: _____

2 Audit the waste

Goal: an honest baseline you can measure progress against, then a routine pupils can run.

The audit has three stages. Adults take a quiet baseline first, because waste drops as soon as children know it's being watched. Pupil monitors then find out which dishes are being left, and finally take over the regular checks.

You'll need: scales (kitchen scales for caddies, or luggage scales for bins), caddy liners, a jug for liquids, gloves and the sheets below.

Stage A: The quiet baseline (adults, before any announcement)

- [ ] Agree the method with the catering manager and lunchtime staff
- [ ] Don't tell pupils yet
- [ ] Weigh every day for a full menu cycle (usually three weeks), or at least two weeks
- [ ] Keep four streams separate: kitchen waste (prep, and food cooked but not served), school dinner plate waste, packed lunch waste, and fruit or snack scheme waste
- [ ] Pour drinks, milk and soup into a jug first and record them separately
- [ ] Record meals served each day and work out grams per meal
- [ ] Note the menu week and anything unusual (wet play, trips, theme days)

Kitchen staff are usually best placed to weigh kitchen waste, and lunchtime staff to weigh plate waste.

Grams per meal = plate waste (kg) × 1,000, divided by meals served.
For example, 9kg of plate waste across 150 meals is 60g per meal. For a rough comparison, WRAP found primary schools averaged about 72g of food waste per pupil per day, and secondary schools about 42g.

Baseline tally (one sheet per week)

Week: _____ Menu week: _____

Day	Meals served	Kitchen waste (kg)	Plate waste (kg)	Grams per meal	Packed lunch waste (kg)	Fruit or snack waste (kg)	Liquids (litres)	Notes
Monday								
Tuesday								
Wednesday								
Thursday								
Friday								
Total								

Stage B: Find out which dishes (pupil monitors, two or three days)

Weighing tells you how much is wasted. This tells you what. On two or three days, ideally in different menu weeks, pupil monitors score each plate by eye as it comes back. No scraping or sorting needed, just tally marks.

Quarter-plate scoring grid Date: _____

Dish	Nothing left	¼ left	½ left	¾ left	All left
Main (meat or fish)					
Main (vegetarian or plant-based)					
Vegetables or salad					
Potatoes, rice, pasta or bread					
Pudding					
Fruit					

Any dish where most tallies sit at half left or more goes on the list for your caterer conversation (Step 1) and your pupil questions (Step 3).

Stage C: Go public and keep checking (pupils)

- [ ] Launch the campaign: pupil monitors, scales in the hall, a class or year group league table
- [ ] Weigh plate waste for one week each half term, using the same method as the baseline
- [ ] Always compare grams per meal, not total kilos (total waste rises if more children take school dinners)
- [ ] Share results as meals saved (a primary meal weighs roughly 300 to 400g)
- [ ] Display the results in the dining hall

Baseline: _____ g per meal **Target:** _____ g per meal by _____

3 Ask pupils why

Goal: find the real reasons food is left, from the people leaving it.

- [ ] Run a short pupil survey (questions below) or a pupil voice session
- [ ] Ask the eco council or school council to interview pupils in the lunch queue
- [ ] Observe a lunchtime: queue length, noise, time to eat, adults sitting with pupils
- [ ] Pupils present their findings to the head and the catering team
- [ ] Agree two changes based on what pupils said

Pupil survey questions

1. How do you usually have lunch? (school dinner / packed lunch / a mix)
2. What do you most often leave on your plate?
3. Why do you leave food? (tick all that apply)
   - [ ] I don't like it
   - [ ] I don't know what it is
   - [ ] Too much on my plate
   - [ ] Not enough time to eat
   - [ ] The hall is too noisy or busy
   - [ ] I want to go and play or see my friends
   - [ ] I'm not hungry because I had a snack at break
   - [ ] Something else: _____
4. What's your favourite school meal?
5. What one thing would help you eat more of your lunch?
6. Would you like to try new foods before they go on the menu?
7. Would you like to help grow or cook food at school?

Ideas pupils often suggest: longer sitting time, a quieter hall, adults eating with pupils, tasting tables, smaller portions with seconds, clean plate rewards and class waste competitions.

Change 1 we'll make:

Change 2 we'll make:

4 Look for hidden costs

Goal: find out what waste is really costing, and where the savings are.

- [ ] Find your waste contract: who collects food waste, how often, and the cost per lift or per bin
- [ ] Check whether you're paying for more collections than you need (half-empty bins)
- [ ] Compare meals ordered or cooked with meals eaten
- [ ] Check how much fruit from snack schemes ends up in the bin
- [ ] Ask whether your contract charges per meal served, and how meal numbers are set
- [ ] Estimate the cost of plate waste (WRAP's figure is about 22p per meal served)
- [ ] Look at break-time snacks: are they filling pupils up before lunch?
- [ ] Agree with the school business manager how any savings will be used

Hidden cost checklist

Cost	Where to look	Current cost	Possible saving
Food waste collection	Waste contract / invoices		
General waste collection	Waste contract / invoices		
Meals cooked but not eaten	Kitchen records / tally		
Fruit and snack scheme waste	Tally / observation		
Staff time scraping and clearing	Lunchtime staffing		
Free school meal top-ups	Catering contract / budget		
Total			

Rule of thumb: Chefs in Schools found schools in its programme saved more than £1,170 per 100 pupils per year by tackling food waste.

5 Grow it, cook it, teach it

Goal: connect pupils to where food comes from, and build waste into everyday learning.

Growing

- [ ] Find a space: raised beds, containers, a window sill or a corner of the field
- [ ] Start with quick, easy crops: salad leaves, radishes, herbs, peas, potatoes in bags
- [ ] Ask the kitchen what they could use (herbs and salad are easiest)
- [ ] Set up composting for fruit and veg peelings, or a wormery
- [ ] Plan holiday watering (families, staff rota, or a summer crop plan)

Curriculum links

Subject	Activity idea
Maths	Weigh, record and graph waste; calculate cost and meals saved
Science	Decomposition, composting, plant life cycles, healthy diets
English	Persuasive letters to the caterer, posters, reports to governors
Geography	Seasonal food, food miles, where our food comes from
PSHE	Healthy eating, trying new foods, food poverty and fairness
DT / Food tech	Cooking with leftovers and surplus, zero-waste recipes

Review and celebrate

- [ ] Re-run the waste audit at the end of each half term
- [ ] Share results in assembly, the newsletter and with governors
- [ ] Report in meals saved, not just kilos
- [ ] Thank and reward the pupil monitors
- [ ] Add food waste to your school climate action plan

Progress tracker

Half term	Plate waste (g per meal)	Change from baseline	What we tried
Baseline			

Useful free resources

- Chefs in Schools, *Feed Bellies, Not Bins* food waste toolkit
- University of Liverpool and School Food Matters, *Food Is Not Rubbish* toolkit
- Zero Waste Scotland, food waste monitoring toolkit for schools
- WRAP, *Food waste in schools*

Want help putting this into your climate action plan?

NotYetZero supports schools with climate action plans, staff CPD and pupil workshops.

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