

Bridging the Gap

How to make school food work for children, farmers and planet



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Front cover photo:

Children in Hackney, London, enjoying organic veg in their school meals © Eleanor Church

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Executive summary

The Sustain alliance works to elevate the standard and status of food in schools and other public sector institutions to be a beacon of healthy and sustainable food, embedded in policy and practice. The alliance also strives to secure dignified access to affordable healthy and sustainably produced food for everyone.

Public sector food is one of biggest commercial levers available to government to improve citizens' diets, public health and drive climate and nature-friendly farming in the UK. It can support small and medium sized growers and farmers, widen access to healthy food and help people appreciate and value good food and the people and natural systems that produce it.

The Sustain-led Bridging the Gap programme delivered three school food pilots that were codesigned with, and run by, partners across the UK. These innovative approaches sourced fruit, veg and pulses, grown using organic methods by small and medium (SME) growers and supplied them into schools where on average 33% of children grow up in low-income households. The pilot findings highlight the benefits of widening access to organic fruit, veg and pulses for both farmers and children alike.

This report sets out key findings from Bridging the Gap's school food pilots and the next steps to unlock opportunities for British growers to supply climate and nature friendly fruit, veg and pulses to the public sector and meet the Government's manifesto commitment to source 50% local or sustainable food in public sector food procurement. Investing in this now offers a triple benefit. It will boost the horticulture sector; ensure people receive nutritious and locally grown fruit, veg and pulses in schools; and enable localised supply chains to flourish.

The problem

Supply: Low levels of organic fruit, veg and pulse production, together with supply chains that are consolidated around large enterprises that do not give good returns for small and medium British growers.

Demand: Limited drive from the public sector, due to lowest cost tendering rather than due prioritisation of social, health and environmental outcomes, together with inadequate standards and a lack of monitoring for compliance.

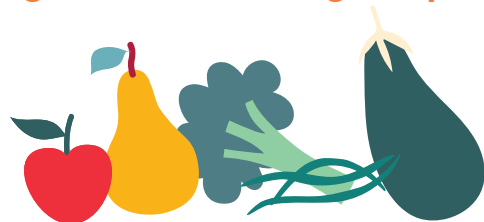
The pilots

3 school pilots in three UK nations

75,000 children in schools received organic fruit, veg or pulses

33% of those children live in low-income areas

12,400 children received educational engagement around organic produce



Key recommendations

Fix the supply: Facilitate new supply chains that work with and for small and medium growers.

Fix the missing middle: Invest in local food infrastructure to help smaller producers get produce into public sector contracts.

Fix the access: Reform public sector funding and standards to create stable markets for organic and local produce.



Sarah Green with leeks from her farm near Maldon, Essex which supplies Hackney schools via Growing Communities © Eleanor Church

Introduction

The production of good food must become mainstream and accessible to everyone if we are to build domestic resilience and overcome health, climate and nature challenges. 'Good food' is nutritious and rich in fruit, veg, pulses and wholegrain food, has lower inputs, lower greenhouse gas emissions, restores nature and supports decent livelihoods.

The Bridging the Gap programme is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, with six lead partners (in alphabetical order): Alexandra Rose Charity, Food Sense Wales, Growing Communities, Nourish NI, Nourish Scotland, and coordinated by Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming. The programme co-developed and evaluated nine pilot projects across the UK to demonstrate the most effective ways to connect low-income communities with organic fruit and veg. Three of the pilots were delivered in schools across England, Wales and Scotland. In each we encountered many of the same challenges that have previously prevented local organic fruit, veg and pulses being served up on the public plate.

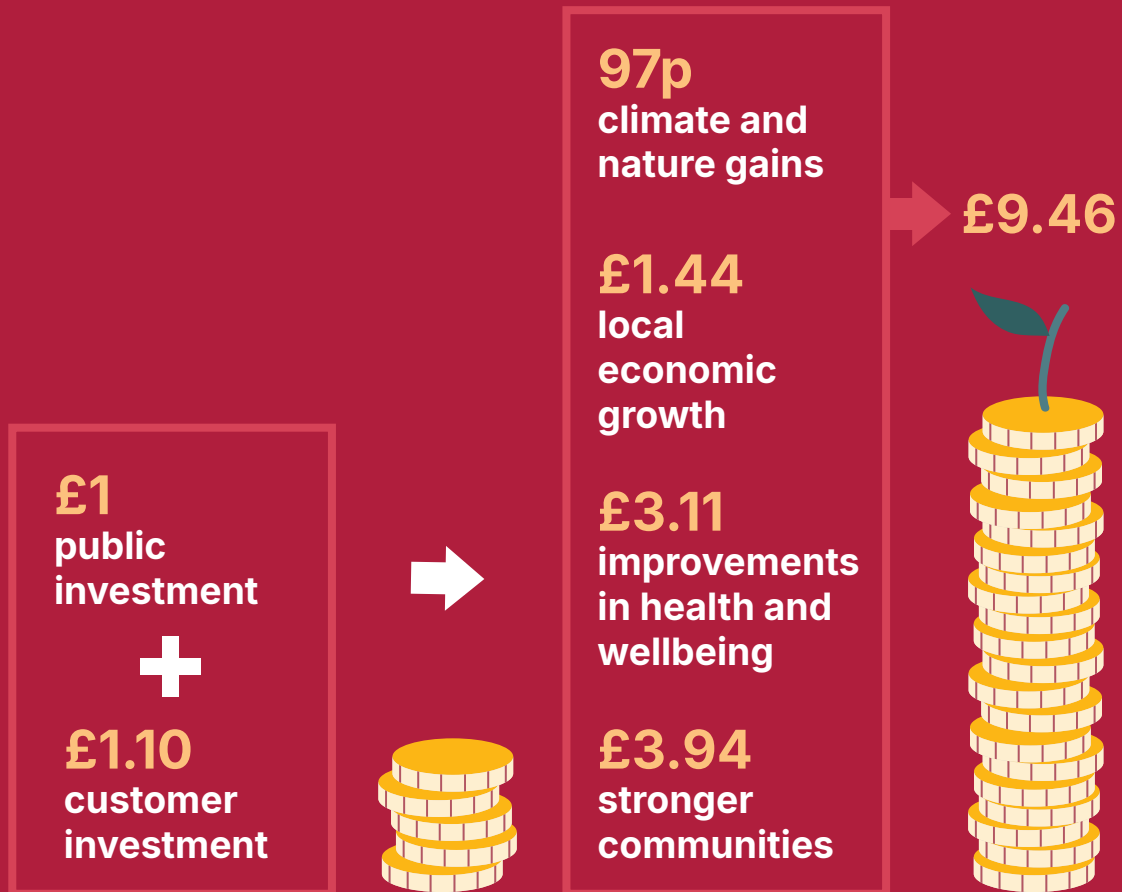
- **Supply:** Low organic fruit and veg production together with supply chains that are consolidated around large enterprises, as local food infrastructure dwindles, and do not give good returns for small and medium British growers mean that supply is limited.
- **Demand:** Limited drive from the public sector, due to lowest cost tendering – rather than due to prioritisation of social, health and environmental outcomes – together with insufficient flexibility of menus to manage seasonal supplies, inadequate quality standards, and no monitoring for compliance.

The pilot findings demonstrate that it is possible to make healthy and sustainable food accessible. Public sector food procurement can be used as an important lever to develop new markets for growers, alongside better nutritional security for children from low-income households. To achieve wider and sustained change will require support from national and local government, working with growers, traders and buyers, and people who can facilitate change at local level, such as local food partnerships.

The report concludes with recommendations to support policy makers to deliver this work across the UK Nations and in doing so meet the Government's manifesto commitment of 50% local or sustainable food in public sector contracts.

Potential return on investment in climate and nature friendly food in schools

Using economic analysis by Organic Research Centre and University of Portsmouth, we put a monetary value on these benefits, demonstrating the potential return on investment in local fruit, veg and pulse supply chains.



Sustain and partners commissioned economic modelling of the return on investment of the school pilots, completed in Autumn 2025 by University of Portsmouth and Organic Research Centre (see Annex C).

The unique role of the public sector

Public sector food is the food served up by public institutions: schools, hospitals, care homes, local authorities, the armed services and others. The procurement of public sector food is a unique policy instrument with the potential to increase access to nutritious diets and drive a vital market for climate and nature-friendly British producers. UK Government and devolved UK nation governments spend an estimated £5 billion annually on food for catering in the public sector, money already committed by HM Treasury.

International examples demonstrate how governments can use public sector food policy to drive a market for climate and nature-friendly organic produce. Policymakers in Denmark, Sweden, France, and Brazil have all shown determination, setting ambitious targets for organic and local produce to transform farmer livelihoods and create equitable access to good food. Approaches like Denmark's demonstrate how targeted public procurement can normalise organic food consumption, strengthen supply chains, and accelerate growth of the organic sector for the benefit of growers, health, climate, and nature.

International case study: Copenhagen school meals

In the early 2000s, the Danish government set ambitious targets for organic food in public kitchens, covering schools, hospitals and care homes. A flagship initiative was the Copenhagen House of Food, established in 2007 to retrain kitchen staff, redesign menus, and reduce waste. Rather than relying on higher budgets, the programme emphasised cooking from scratch, seasonal sourcing, and reducing meat consumption, which freed up resources to buy climate and nature-friendly organic ingredients. By 2015, Copenhagen had achieved 90% organic food in public meals without increasing costs, setting an international benchmark. The steady institutional demand created a reliable market for farmers and processors, giving them confidence to convert land and expand supply.

Focus on schools

For public sector food procurement to be a key driver of transformation of the food system, reform must be wider than education settings. The UK growing season means there is supply of fresh produce during the school summer holiday. Other public sector contracts need food all year (for example, hospitals and the armed forces), so a wider policy commitment would mean there are other market options for growers during this time.

This paper focusses on education settings, primarily because this is where the pilots could reach both low-income households and young people who are most affected by lack of access to affordable healthy food, and consequent inequalities in health outcomes and diet-related diseases such as obesity and Type 2 diabetes.

Education settings account for the largest share of public sector procurement spend, representing a huge opportunity for British horticulture. The Follow the Carrot report, published by Sustain in 2025, in partnership with Bremner & Co and Ampney Brook, finds that expansion of universal Free School Meals (FSM) in England would represent an opportunity worth over £600 million annually for producers and suppliers.¹

Whilst the focus of this report is school food, several Bridging the Gap findings, practical insights and policy recommendations are applicable in the wider public sector.



James Taylor, Executive Chef, serves up organic school meals at Harrington Hill School in London
© Eleanor Church

Organic school food pilot projects

Bridging the Gap partners in England, Scotland and Wales aimed to understand the opportunities for increasing access to climate and nature-friendly fruit, veg and pulses in schools by trialling a range of mechanisms in school contexts. These partners co-designed the pilot projects with catering teams and suppliers of organic fruit, veg, and pulses, and covered the price difference between their normal supply and the pilot's organic supply.

The three school food pilot projects ran for 12 months to 2 years, gathering evidence on the costs and benefits of making the transition. These are outlined below.



Organic green split peas are a regular feature on Aberdeen City school menus © Soil Association

Addressing prices

There is often an upfront added cost to buying organic fruit, veg and pulses. All Bridging the Gap school pilots operated by applying a discount of 25-35%, calculated by comparing the price of the produce being supplied to the school prior to the pilot and the price of the new organic produce. The higher price paid for organic is partly due to the commonly smaller scale of the organic farms and the added labour needed.

There is some evidence that prices will come down over time as organic supply chains scale up. As one example, Organic North, a well-established SME fresh organic wholesaler in Manchester, is supplying UK-grown organic

vegetables to the council run Bury School Catering at a price that competes favourably with non-organic.

Meanwhile longer and more complex supply chains, that have grown with the major retailers and supply chain companies, extract the largest share of profit on fruit and veg, leaving producers with just a few pence of every pound spent by customers. Under more direct and localised supply chains, producers have been shown to keep more of the profit. Thus, shorter supply chains offer an opportunity to produce to higher environmental standards and allow farmers to see a better return.²



Give Peas a Chance!:

introducing organic split peas into schools meals in Aberdeen City, Moray and Highland

Welsh Veg in Schools:

introducing organic Welsh veg into school meals across Wales

Hackney Organic School Food:

introducing organic veg into school meals in Hackney

Give Peas a Chance!

Peas have power: they are a delicious, nutritious and low-carbon protein and are suitable to be grown in the UK. With schools under pressure to cut costs while also nourishing our children well, they are an ideal ingredient for school dinners as they are an affordable protein.

Farmer Phil Swire had been growing organic peas as a cover crop at Balmakewan Farm in Aberdeenshire and selling them for animal feed. He wanted to find a way to get them into school meals.

With funding from Bridging the Gap, Soil Association Scotland formed a partnership project with Aberdeen City Catering service. The partners identified a pea processor in Lincolnshire, with support from Hodmedod's: an SME selling British pulses to retailers.

"Enjoyed making them. Have learnt easier ways of working with them. Good to see more children trying them."

Aberdeen City primary school caterer

Bridging the Gap covered the price gap between the cost of Phil's peas and what school caterers had been paying for non-organic pea grown in Canada.

In the first year the pilot was getting Scottish organic peas onto children's plates in 360 schools across Aberdeen City. In 2025, the pilot expanded to work with two more catering services in Northeast Scotland, Moray, and Highland, collectively serving up 33,000 meal a day.



Cooks in Aberdeen preparing peas for school meals © Soil Association

Project wins

Emissions reduction in recipes

Historically, traditional mince has been the most popular recipe on the menu across Aberdeen's menu cycle and is a high emission meal with 13.39g carbon per serving. The catering team reformulated the recipe to add peas and reduce mince. Analysis from Angela Tregear at University of Edinburgh reveals that reformulation reduced the emissions by 42% without reducing children's uptake and enjoyment of this meal.

Increased kitchen team confidence

The Aberdeen City Council catering team took two surveys as part of the monitoring and evaluation of this project: the first in February 2024 at the Recipe Development Day and the second in August 2024 at an online workshop.

The survey showed that there was a 24% increase in confidence of catering staff in the preparation of split peas, and 28% increase in cooking recipes using split peas across the sample after using the peas for three months.

Education opportunities for children

Aberdeen City Council enthusiastically took up Bridging the Gap's educational offer. We estimate that at least 11,677 children engaged in education resources and workshops developed by the pilot partners Royal Highland Education Trust and the Royal Northern Countryside Initiative (RNCI).

"The school lunches taste AMAZING. It sounds disgusting – "ugh, pea cookies!" – but when you actually have them, 'chef's kiss', they're amazing!"

Aberdeen City primary school pupil

Project challenges

Processing problems

Initially the pilot was sending peas to be split by a processor in Lincolnshire. Due to the small quantity (not a full lorry load) the price of this was high per unit and took weeks to be processed as the small amount was not prioritised. After a year, the plant ceased processing legumes, causing major disruption to the supply of organic pulses in the UK. Thanks to the SME Hodmedod's, the pilot started working with a plant in Lincolnshire that could get a licence to process organic produce.

The lack of processing capability in Scotland means potential local economic benefit leaves the country. The Give Peas a Chance! pilot quantified this potential benefit by developing a Local Multiplier (LM3 methodology³ developed by New Economics Foundation) that quantifies the return on investment to local economies. Currently for every £1 spent in the pilot, £1.66 is spent within Scotland. However, a third of Balmakewan Farm's business costs go towards pea processing, which was based in England as there are no pea processing plants in Scotland. If a pea processing plant were created in Scotland, this would mean that for every £1 spent, £1.96 would be recirculated into the local economy (see Annex D).

Give Peas a Chance! has highlighted how the lack of local infrastructure in the UK for processing and distribution of pulses is creating precarity and holding back commercial opportunities. More work is required to understand the feasibility of operating a processing unit in Scotland that benefits SME growers there.

Welsh Veg in Schools

Wales has a strong agricultural history, but until a few years ago it seemed impossible that Welsh organic vegetables could be served in school dinners. In 2022, Food Sense Wales partnered with wholesaler Castell Howell to change that story. Realising the benefits that growing local supply chains could bring, they co-designed a pilot to bridge the price gap and supply local, organic courgettes into the Food and Fun school holiday programme in Cardiff.

With funding from Welsh Government, Bridging the Gap and in-kind support from Castell Howell and Lantra, the project evolved into Welsh Veg in Schools, which now works with half the local authorities in Wales to get a variety of Welsh veg routinely into school meals.

Welsh Veg in Schools has received significant interest from government, the wider food sector, and the media. Encouragingly, Welsh Government financially supported the pilot between 2023 and 2025 to expand into more local authorities and develop a business model for cooperation between small growers. The Future Generations Commissioner (who oversees implementation of the Future Generations Act 2015), has publicly called for local authorities to sign up to the project, in their Future Generations Report 2025.⁴



Children at a Monmouthshire Primary School enjoying their Welsh Organic Veg © Welsh Veg in Schools

Project wins

Increase in organic land

The commitments from local authorities, which created guaranteed markets for produce and income for farmers allowed 14 growers to plant more and new crops, which contributed to a 20% increase in land used to grow vegetables in Wales compared with 2022, using nature-friendly methods of farming.

Set against a wider UK decline in vegetable production, this demonstrates how using public procurement as a tool for change can help build stronger local sustainable food systems while supplying healthy food to school children.

Abi Reader is a third-generation mixed farmer just outside Cardiff. Abi is also President of National Farmers Union (NFU) Cymru; a former NFU Cymru Wales Woman Farmer of the Year and in 2019 she was honoured by the Queen with an MBE for her services to agriculture.

Enthusied by the work of Welsh Veg in Schools, Abi decided to put two acres of land within her farm into conversion and has been growing polytunnel and field-scale crops for the first time. Her cucumbers and tomatoes successfully went into surrounding schools, through the local wholesaler, during the summer and early autumn.

Education leads to action

It was a visit to a local farm that led the children of a school in Ceredigion, Wales to call for the introduction of Welsh veg into their school meals. Having discovered that other schools were able to eat the delicious carrots from a local farm in their meals, the children of Ysgol y Dderi in Llanybi wrote to their local authority, MP and Castell Howell, to demand that they also have access to the nutritious local veg. Their campaign led

to a coordinated effort between the school leadership, local authority and Castell Howell to get Welsh carrots into their school meals.

Grower collaboration

Welsh Veg in Schools partners worked together with small growers and suppliers to ensure that the project was developing the produce needed by local authorities. A continuous feedback loop built into the project has allowed growers to evolve their growing plans over the course of the project to meet school requirements.

Small Growers Safety Standard

Farming Connect Horticulture supported growers to complete the Small Grower Supplier Standard. This process of checking for health and safety aspects was important and reassured the wholesaler that they were providing the best quality and safest veg going into schools and not risking compromising their BRC accreditation.

Project challenges

Facilitation costs

While reliable markets develop and make SME supply into the public sector the norm, facilitation is required to ensure challenges and barriers are solved. This work takes time, commitment and flexibility, which need specific food diplomacy and relationship-building skills. The partners felt that 'tech solutions' would not generate similar results.

Hackney Organic School Food

Chef James Taylor left his job working in high-end restaurants to head up two school kitchens in Hackney, a borough which has higher than London average levels of child poverty (45%)⁵ and where 2 in 5 children in year 6 are above the healthy weight⁶, with the vision of giving children equal access to a healthy diet.

He found that with cost saving approaches, such as switching out some meat-based meals for cheaper, greener pulses, he was able to start sourcing some produce from local organic wholesaler Growing Communities. The cost prevented him buying solely from this supplier particularly when buying fruit and veg throughout the entire year.

'It was one of my dreams to be able to use affordable, locally farmed organic produce in my primary schools,' says schools executive chef James Taylor.

By partnering with Bridging the Gap, organic food is in every school meal. James serves up a diverse range of high-quality, seasonal fruit and veg. He uses ingredients ranging from purple sprouting broccoli to fresh apples to juicy winter purslane and lots in between.

As a result of the pilot, all classes have visited a local farm supplying Growing Communities to see where their meals come from. Educational activities formed a significant component of the pilot. All classes, except nursery, undertook visits to Growing Communities' urban Patchwork Farms, where pupils learned about soil health, biodiversity, and organic growing. Teachers observed an improvement in pupils' understanding of where their food comes from, and in their interest in fruit and veg. Families were also engaged with whole school events such as an organic festive meal and a snacks evening.



Executive Chef James Taylor, putting organic fruit and veg on children's plates in East London © Eleanor Church

Project wins

High volume of organic, UK-grown veg on menus

25-35% of the vegetables on the menu was organic and grown in the UK, with a further 25% sourced from organic suppliers in the European Union. This is dramatically higher than the Food for Life Served Here Gold Award level, which is 15%. This pilot presents a stretch target for what is possible in practice.

Increased interest in fruit and vegetables among children

The increased engagement among children in what they are eating and where it comes from, through tangible real-world knowledge and engagement, has the potential to lead to diet shifts. This presents an opportunity not only for increasing community engagement through connection with local food systems but also for child health and development.

Farmer-focused supply chain in action

The project contributed to strengthening regional supply chains and providing stable markets for UK organic growers. This is attributable to the farmer-focussed approach Growing Communities takes:

- Operating with low margins to ensure fair prices and affordable produce.
- Never haggling on prices and maintaining transparency.
- Prioritising smaller local growers who rely most on their sales.

Every week, they distribute up to 20 tonnes of fresh organic produce, sourced directly from 25 small and medium organic farms in the UK. Many of their UK farms are within 70 miles of East London.

Zero waste

By running a pre-ordering system, they only supply the freshest produce with no waste in the system, and the majority of packaging is plastic free.

Food waste in school lunch halls was reduced by 4%, and overall supply-chain waste declined. Growing Communities' zero-waste procurement system whereby the wholesaler commits to selling all produce supplied by its farmers, eliminates farm-level waste; and only orders produce already committed to by customers, ensuring zero distribution waste.

Project challenges

Seasonal fruit and vegetables

It was a challenge for school head chef James Taylor to balance the needs of young people, growers and budgets. Added to this, the dip in availability of UK produce in Spring 2024 meant that investment from the pilot was often going to EU organic growers rather than local growers. Over time, with discussion between Growing Communities and the chef, the percentage of UK grown fruit and veg in meals increased by 49%. James sourced UK-grown purple sprouting broccoli instead of EU broccoli. However, the challenge remains that UK seasonal produce is often new and less familiar to children. Giving children the opportunity to develop new taste preferences takes time and investment.

Tight delivery schedules

Collaborating with farmer-focused supply chains requires food buyers to be flexible with restricted delivery schedules. The limited schedule gives growers time to harvest exactly what has been ordered.

Key benefits

Bridging the Gap evaluated the impact of introducing new supplies of organic produce, new supply chains, and engagement work to schools. The findings presented are the product of focus groups, interviews, observation and participant surveys, and quantitative data on production, consumption, and economic outcomes. This mixed-methods approach – which engaged local communities, farmers, and food system actors – ensures that the conclusions reflect both lived experiences and measurable impacts.

Supporting a transition to a healthy, sustainable food system delivers on five strategic goals that provide long-term social, economic and environmental benefits, as well as savings to people and to the public purse.

Traditional Mince with Organic Peas and Yorkie

Ingredients (Serves 20)

- 700g QMS Beef Steak mince
- 400g onion, diced
- 600g carrots, peeled and diced
- 300g swede, peeled and diced
- 30g beef bouillon
- 45g beef gravy granules
- 600ml water
- 500g organic dried split peas
- 600g Yorkshire puddings

Method

1. Soak peas overnight, boil until tender, rinse and drain. Leave to cool. This can be done the night before – store overnight in the fridge.
2. Brown the mince and onions, until the onions are translucent. Remove any excess fat.
3. Mix bouillon with hot water and add to beef mix with vegetables and peas. Leave to simmer for twenty minutes.
4. Add gravy granules to mince and boil for a further ten minutes, adding more water if required, until you have a tender mince and a rich gravy.
5. Serve mince topped with a Yorkshire pudding and seasonal veg.

www.soilassociation.org/GivePeasAChance

This recipe was developed by Cooks in Charge in Aberdeen City Council schools as part of the Give Peas A Chance! pilot project.

SOIL Association SCOTLAND

BRIDGING THE GAP

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

Popular pea mince recipe from Give Peas A Chance!

Local economic growth

More money circulated in local economies as growers got a fair return for their produce via the new route to market. The shortened supply chains meant that money went to local businesses rather than global supply chains. Evidence from the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD, the body that provides data, insights and advocacy for the food retail sector), shows that a shift towards using available agricultural land in the UK to produce fruit and vegetables would result in significant growth and deliver £421 million in annual value and create 20,000 jobs.⁷

Stronger communities

Teachers and young people reported greater sense of connection to their food and enthusiasm for eating fruit, vegetables and pulses. 12,400 children received educational engagement activities such as farm visits, in-class workshops and teacher resources. These activities supported young people to make links with the farmers growing their food, and school chefs and children taking pride in healthy, climate and nature-friendly food served up in school meals.

Environmental benefits

Organic certification prohibits the use of harmful chemicals, which lowers the risk of environmental pollution in soils and supports natural pest predators and pollinators to thrive, leading to a 30% improvement in biodiversity.⁸ Greenhouse gas emissions also reduce as nitrogen fertiliser production and application accounts for 52% of agricultural energy consumption for crops like wheat.⁹ Organically farmed soils also store up to 30% more carbon compared to industrially farmed soils.

The UK's Climate Change Committee and the international EAT Lancet Commission have warned that climate and nature recovery targets are unreachable without significant changes to the composition of UK diets, including reducing meat consumption, and increasing the amount of pulses, legumes and veg we eat. The Bridging the Gap pilots established new routes to market for the kinds of foods that make up the urgently needed dietary transition. The project also demonstrated the feasibility of producing to climate and nature friendly standards, by increasing intake of organic pulses and/or replacing vegetables that had been produced by non-organic methods, and packaged and transported long distances.

Access to nutritious, sustainable, and tasty meals

Despite initial concerns, uptake of school meals remained high in all school pilots. Giving children healthy and sustainable meals, rich in fruit, veg and pulses, is important to educational attainment, tackling obesity, establishing healthy eating patterns and appreciation of good food, and reducing their exposure to harmful chemicals. There is growing evidence that organic crops have lower pesticide residues, are up to 68% higher in beneficial antioxidants and are better for gut health, compared to chemically produced fruit and veg.¹⁰

Replicability, scalability, and sustainability for long-term implementation

While Bridging the Gap funding helped to de-risk the transition to new supply of organic and locally grown fruit, veg and pulses, the Give Peas a Chance! and Hackney Organic School Food pilots have reported that menu re-design and smart seasonal buying approaches have meant the supply of organic fruit, veg and pulses

can continue now that funding to subsidise the price difference has ceased.

Aberdeen City Council has confirmed they will continue to buy organic dried green peas from farmer Phil Swire as long as the suppliers are able to pick up the product. Executive Chef James Taylor in Hackney has continued to buy a smaller but significant proportion of fruit and veg from Growing Communities since the funding support ceased in July 2025. 15 Local Authorities and 25 growers are now on board with Welsh Veg in Schools. With the right planning and investment in infrastructure, around 25% of all veg in schools across Wales could be Welsh organic by 2030 providing all the benefits outlined above. As a larger collaborative effort between growers, suppliers, and local authorities across Wales, this continues to need financial investment to support this scaling effort. To date, the programme has attracted investment from the Welsh Government as well as private business.



Children visiting Phil Swire at Balmakewan farm for the Give Peas a Chance! pilot, in Aberdeenshire, Scotland
© Soil Association

Key barriers

Reliance on imports and low supply base

The UK is heavily dependent on imports of fruit and veg, with over 80% of the fruit we consume and almost 50% of the veg coming from abroad.¹¹ Extreme weather, inflation and the impact on supply chains of international conflicts over the past decade have exposed the vulnerability of UK food supply. The IGD warns that climate change will lead to significant costs for the UK if 'business as usual' continues. The largest import-related cost risk comes from Spain, a key fruit and veg sourcing region, with a predicted increase in costs of 15%.

Missing local food infrastructure

Across the food system, supply chains have become consolidated and dominated by very large food processors, manufacturers,

foodservice companies, contract caterers and retailers. Sustain and our alliance members witness that whilst there have been some improvements over recent years, such food businesses tend to use centralised and global supply chains that squeeze out local supply and rarely apply high standards in climate and nature-friendly farming and sustainable supply chains. Most also do not consistently pay fair farmgate prices, nor uphold the kind of fair dealing, supply chain and product standards that can support the accelerated transition to healthier diets and agroecological farming.

Supply chains into the public sector are particularly consolidated in England. Local food infrastructure has also declined in number and reach. Across all the UK Nations there are a limited and dwindling number of processing, aggregation, and distribution

infrastructure for organic growers to use. The outsourcing of public sector food to private contract caterers also reduces the control, flexibility and accountability that public sector institutions have over food served and how it is sourced.

Inadequate and unenforced standards

The Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services are mandatory for central government contracts, and to some extent to hospital food, but are currently only 'recommended' for school meals and are generally only 'encouraged' for the wider public sector. The School Food Standards, meanwhile, set out nutritional requirements (but not social, environmental or farming method standards) devolved to each of the nations. Monitoring for compliance is minimal or absent, meaning that the standards are effectively optional. The standards themselves are not consistent with the UK's climate change or health targets, nor commitments to support sustainable UK farming. There is no consistent commitment, little way to uphold it if there were, and lack of measurement to track progress and use public procurement to drive consistent and reliable change.

School food funding

Numerous government and public sector initiatives over the years to see social, health and environmental factors properly weighted and prioritised in procurement decisions and contracts. UK law and established practice at international, UK national and at local level supports the application of social, health and environmental standards in public sector procurement.

However, local authorities report stretched budgets, with school leaders also directly reporting budget pressures, including many schools incurring losses on providing school meals at the current funding rate. This in turn is contributing to a lowest price tendering

culture and also leading to the closure of many award-winning local authority catering services who have championed high production standards (eg Food For Life). In 2025, at least three more local authority catering services in England closed or moved to outsource Facilities Management Services: Leicestershire, Hampshire, and Plymouth CaterEd. All have cited funding pressures linked to cost of living and inflation of food, wages, energy and cost of living increases.

The shift to more schools becoming academies is also an important factor. Unlike in Scotland and Wales, where there remains a strong link between local authorities, their catering services and maintained schools, in England the process of academisation has led to outsourcing of school meal services to a range of large and medium-sized private caterers, and some schools taking their own meals back in-house. As a result, there is a fragmented food purchasing landscape overall. This means that whilst there are pockets of good practice, there is less consistency or control over public procurement of food in line with health, the environment and support for climate and nature-friendly farming.

Inaccessible contracts

Large tenders for public sector contracts can be inaccessible for small and medium sized food growers. We have also heard reports of large volume discounts for awarding large contracts, contributing to inertia.

Next steps for the pilots

The pilot initiatives supported by Bridging the Gap have either secured – or have good prospects of securing – feasibility and business development grants as they develop new local infrastructure in their regions or strengthen emerging supply chains.



Meals at Hackney schools now packed with organic veg from Growing Communities © Eleanor Church

UK policy context

Policy and legislation that govern public sector procurement is complex. While Westminster sets legislation that is relevant to public sector food, some elements of the food and farming system come under the control of the governments of the devolved nations. Procurement rules, guidance and common practice have tended to lean towards contracts being awarded narrowly on price, through compulsory competitive

tendering, rather than on a beneficial balance of financial value and public values. Contracts can be weighted to prioritise health, social and environmental outcomes, and climate and nature-friendly methods of farming and fishing. In Wales, social value in procurement contracts has greater emphasis, and in Scotland there is explicit encouragement for public institutions to buy healthy, fresh and seasonal food.

How food gets into schools

In England, there has been an expansion in private contract catering services supplying school meals. Alongside this, 80% of secondary schools are now academies and 46% of primary schools, which are autonomous decision-makers with their own priorities.¹² The expansion of contract catering companies offering low-cost tenders is appealing to schools and academies. These factors are eroding the influence local government can have over school food and how they can support local businesses, reducing flexibility, and stifling the innovation aspirations of public sector institutions. They mean the remaining council catering services compete with these companies for contracts.

Catering service delivery

England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Mix of in-house, council-run and private contract catering services.	32 council-run catering services	20, out of 22, council-run catering services.	Delivered by Education Authority Catering Service which supplies 1,030 primary schools, post-primary schools, special schools and nurseries.

School food funding

	England	London	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Funding £/meal	£2.61	£3.00	£3.33	£3.40	£3.10
Early years	Benefit related FSM	Benefit related FSM	Benefit related FSM	Benefit related FSM	Benefit related FSM
Infant	Universal Free school meals	UFSM	UFSM (first 5 years)	UFSM	
Junior	Benefit related FSM				
Secondary		Benefit related FSM	Benefit related FSM	Benefit related FSM	
College		Benefit related FSM	Benefit related FSM	Benefit related FSM	

The existing school meal rate of £2.61 in England is well below the rate in the rest of the UK nations and school food funding comes through to schools in numerous schemes and streams. These budgets are not ring-fenced, and school business managers are tasked with balancing complex budgets.

Policy recommendations

Here we outline the key opportunities for policy change to support an increase in organic fruit, veg and pulses in school food, and in the wider public sector.

Using public sector funding as a market driver for organically produced fruit, veg and pulses has been demonstrated to drive longer-term demand and security for smaller growers in the UK farming sector. It will also support an equitable shift to healthy and sustainable diets, increasing the environmental benefits and ensuring a just and inclusive transition to a nature and climate-friendly system for producing our food.

Fix the policy framework

We warmly encourage Governments of all the UK Nations to join Sustain and our alliance members and programme partners in elevating the standard and status of food in schools and other public sector institutions. The aim should be for food in early years, primary and secondary schools to become increasingly a proud beacon of healthy and sustainable food, embedded in education, policy, standards and practice.

National government(s) should mandate schools (including academy schools), local authorities, catering service providers and supply chain businesses to increase the proportion of fruit, veg, pulses, wholegrain food and plant-based meals on school menus, sourced with an increasing proportion of supply from local and organic growers. Effective measures should also be put in place to monitor and report on compliance, identify barriers and stimulate both supply and demand through local and national policy and action. This will take time, so policies and standards should be designed to drive growth, with increasing levels of ambitions over time.

This should form part of an integrated plan to support the transition of more UK farmland and food production to climate and nature-friendly horticulture; a greater emphasis on the nation's nutrition security; and concerted efforts to make healthy food accessible and affordable to everybody, especially households and children living on a lower income and at greater risk of diet-related health problems.

Fix the supply

Introduce a cross-departmental horticulture growth strategy

- Support collaboration between and with growers.
- Offer grants to new entrants and growers, alongside advice and land access, to increase the number of growers and amount of fruit and veg grown.
- Offer horticulture training to new entrants and the next generation of growers.

Integrate the horticulture growth strategy with an organic action plan

Ensuring that the increase in production minimises environmental damage, increases biodiversity, and plays its role in both meeting and driving increased demand for climate and nature-friendly food.

Introduce a collaborative layer to farming schemes – and fund actions within this – to support coordination between multiple growers.

Create a strong domestic market for UK organic and agroecological horticulture by harnessing the power of public sector procurement.

- Deliver on the government's commitment to achieving 50% of public sector food from local or sustainable sources, with a special focus on locally produced and organic fruit, vegetables and pulses, explicitly to support horticulture, health and climate and nature-friendly farming.
- Fund supply chain facilitators and kitchen support in local authorities, which have been critical to all Bridging the Gap school pilots in unlocking opportunities for growers to access catering contracts.

Fix the missing middle

Invest in and support shorter SME supply chains by creating a national or regional investment pot or grants targeting organic and agroecological supply chain SMEs.

- Grants and other forms of investment should prioritise increasing processing and aggregation capacity between farmers or at distribution level, such as washers and splitters.
- Create planning policies at local level that prioritise space and facilities for food SMEs, including values-led wholesalers and distributors.

Fix the access

Invest in supply chain facilitation roles and facilities

To ensure connection and feedback between growers, local authority procurement officers and kitchen teams so there is a good mutual understanding of seasonal UK-grown veg and school menu pressures.

Fund and incentivise public sector food procurement frameworks that support local, sustainable and British sourcing, shorten supply chains and enable participation by British producers and SMEs, such as Food for Life Served Here. This should include consideration of:

- breaking up contract tenders into smaller lots
- including sustainability, freshness and locality weightings
- flexible payment schedules.

Amend free school meals guidance to make integration of quality assured produce (organic certified fruit, vegetables and pulses) a condition of the grant.

Review and reform school food funding to reflect the true cost of delivering sustainable and nutritious meals, including food, labour, workforce and skills development, and local infrastructure.

Set ambitious environmental and health targets for organic fruit, veg and pulses in schools and public sector food settings within buying standards and school food nutrition standards specific to each nation.

Increase pulses on school menus, including where relevant, relaxing requirements to serve meat.

This will provide the drive and incentives to pursue and embed the work that the pilots have begun.

Require schools to have a food policy and food on the curriculum.

And among catering and educational staff to promote the food the children are eating, where it comes from, and the links to health, climate and nature.

Annexes

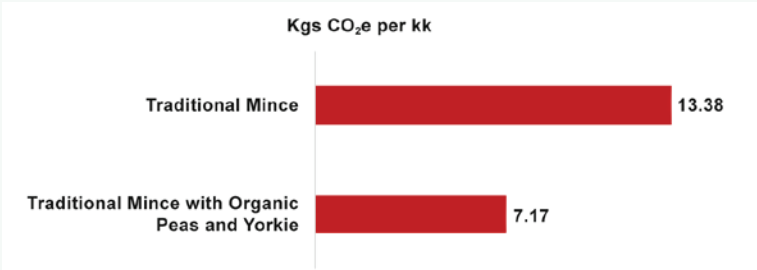
Annex A: Policy and legislation in the UK

Public sector procurement policy, regulation, and legislation		
The Procurement Act 2023	England Wales Northern Ireland	The act aims to improve how the government procures by creating a simpler and more flexible commercial system. The act aims to make public procurement accessible to new entrants such as small businesses and social enterprises, and to embed transparency.
Procurement (Wales) Regulations 2024	Wales	These regulations sit beneath the Procurement Act 2023 and provide detail on how it should be enforced in Wales with a focus on sustainability, social value, and local economic development.
Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023 (SPPP Act)	Wales	Public bodies in Wales must also consider this Act which imposes duties on contracting authorities in relation to economic, environmental, and cultural wellbeing of a local area.
The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015	Wales	Requires public bodies in Wales to consider the long-term impacts of their decisions in terms of the environment, employment, and fair working conditions.
The Environment (Wales) Act 2016	Wales	The Welsh Government has committed to try to achieve Net Zero carbon emissions by 2050. ¹³ As such all public bodies are encouraged to report annually on carbon emissions.
The Good Food Nation Act (Scotland) Published 2025	Scotland	<p>The latest plan recaps what was already in place: the Procurement Reform Act 2014, Local Food for Everyone strategy, and the existing forums (Public Sector Food Forum, Procurement Supply Group).</p> <p>“The Scottish Government recognises that public procurement plays a key role in ensuring everyone has access to healthy, fresh, seasonal food. We are using legislation and policies to maximise the impact procurement can have for public bodies and the Scottish economy.”</p>

Public sector procurement policy, regulation, and legislation		
Government Buying Standards	UK	Set by Defra. Mandatory for Whitehall, central government departments, the armed forces and related organisations; referenced in expectations for hospital food procurement; and encouraged for the wider public sector.
The Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014	England	Set out the nutritional standards for food and drink that maintained schools are required to meet.
The Healthy Eating in Schools (Nutritional Standards and Requirements) (Maintained Primary Schools) (Wales) Regulations 2025	Wales	These regulations will come into force in October 2026 and set up the nutritional standards for food and drink served in schools.
Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools (Scotland) Regulations 2020	Scotland	Set out what food and drink can, cannot or must be provided in schools.
Healthy Food for Healthy Outcomes	Wales	Public bodies in Wales must also consider this Act which imposes duties on contracting authorities in relation to economic, environmental, and cultural wellbeing of a local area.

Annex B: Case studies

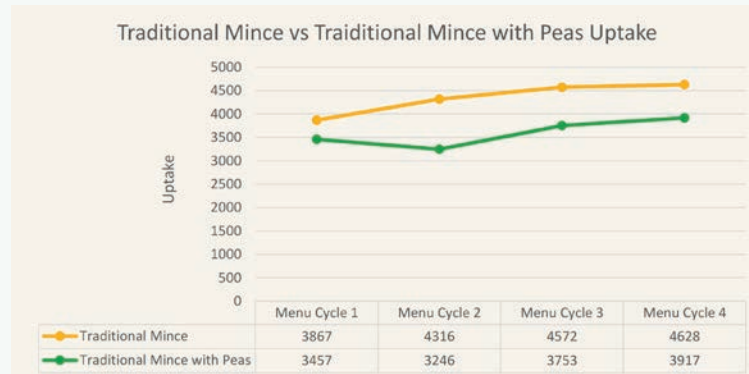
Give Peas A Chance!

Lead partner	Soil Association Scotland						
Where	Aberdeen City Council catering service Moray Council catering service Highland Council catering service						
Supply	Organic dried green peas grown at Balmakewan farm, Aberdeenshire						
Supplier(s)	TPS, which merged with Mark Murphy in early 2025 Swansons						
Volumes	<p>In total the local authorities purchased 4.3 tonnes of peas. Delivered across 320 schools, with 33,000 meals per day served up across all three local authorities.</p> <p>In Aberdeen, peas were on school menus at least once a week, where it would be one of two options on offer that day. This works out as a total of 173,011 pea dishes served in primary schools across a 12-month period (April 2024 – March 2025).</p> <p>Across all authorities we estimate the total dishes served to be 216,500, assuming an average of 20g of dried peas was used in each dish.</p>						
Return on investment	Total spend on the subsidy for the peas to bridge the gap in price for food grown to high climate and nature-friendly standards: £8,714						
Reduction in emissions on menus	<p>Give Peas a Chance! commissioned Professor of Marketing Angela Tregear at the University of Edinburgh to use the Carbon Meal Analyser Tool and compare the emissions of recipes on the menu at Aberdeen City Council's schools.</p> <p>The most popular school meal is the Traditional Mince which was reformulated as a new option of Mince with Organic Peas. Angela then compared the emissions of these recipes.</p>  <p>The chart shows a significant reduction in emissions when organic peas are used. The traditional mince recipe has an emission of 13.38 Kgs CO₂e per kg, while the reformulated mince with organic peas and Yorkie has a much lower emission of 7.17 Kgs CO₂e per kg.</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Recipe</th> <th>Kgs CO₂e per kg</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Traditional Mince</td> <td>13.38</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Traditional Mince with Organic Peas and Yorkie</td> <td>7.17</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Recipe	Kgs CO ₂ e per kg	Traditional Mince	13.38	Traditional Mince with Organic Peas and Yorkie	7.17
Recipe	Kgs CO ₂ e per kg						
Traditional Mince	13.38						
Traditional Mince with Organic Peas and Yorkie	7.17						

Reduction in emissions on menus

Both dishes have a 'very high' carbon impact. However, the recipe with peas is almost half the emissions intensity of the recipe without peas. Therefore, the substitution of a portion of the beef in the first recipe, with peas in the second recipe, is an effective way to reduce the carbon emissions of this dish.

The following charts compare the uptake of the original dish (yellow lines) to the comparable pea dishes (green lines) over a 16-week period.



The chart shows that there is not much difference between the comparable dishes. From this data we can infer that reducing emissions on a highly popular recipe by half will have a significant impact on the emissions of the overall annual menu.

Engagement with staff

The project structure ensured regular engagement with all partners including catering teams and involved a stakeholder farm visit in November 2023 attended by Aberdeen City Council catering teams.

Aberdeen City Cooks in Charge were involved in a co-design recipe development workshop in February 2024 and a caterer training session and discussion in August 2024.

Sarah Fraser, Cook-in-Charge, Stoneywood Primary School said:

"The recipe development day was really interesting to see how many other cooks had incorporated the pea into dishes...we had some children from Grey Hope School come in and they really enjoyed it."

Staff engagement was not in scope for the expansion of the pilot into Highland and Moray councils. While there are eleven recipes on menus in Aberdeen there are fewer in Moray and Highland. This suggests that investing in engagement with staff would result in more recipes and higher volumes of peas brought onto the menu.

Engagement with young people

There are 14,968 primary school pupils enrolled in Aberdeen City Council schools who will have had access to these meals.

We estimate that at least 11,677 children engaged in farm visits, classroom sessions and education resources developed by the Bridging the Gap pilot.

Welsh Veg in Schools

Lead partner	Food Sense Wales
Where	2023: Cardiff 2024: 7 local authorities 2025: 11 to 12 local authorities and 15 growers
Supply	Organic Welsh fruit and veg Most sourced veg were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carrots • Cucumbers • Broccoli
Supplier(s)	Castell Howell (founding partner) WR Bishop (2025/6) Harlech (2025/6) Dole Fishguard (2026) Dole Swansea (2026)
Volumes	50 tonnes of veg in 2025 One million portions per year
Return on investment	<p>£34,333 spent on the subsidy in 2024 to bridge the gap in price for food grown to high climate and nature-friendly standards.</p> <p>The schools got the organic veg at a 25% discount, allowing schools to pay no more than usual while farmers received a fair price for their organic produce.</p> <p>The uplift is relatively modest - equivalent to around 1.7 to 3.3p per meal, or a 0.55 to 1.1% increase on the £3 average school meal budget in Wales and delivers significant benefits.</p> <p>If scaled nationally, the model has the potential to deliver £2.2 to £4.4 million in new income to growers per half year, supporting the equivalent of 74 to 148 rural jobs.</p>
Reduction in emissions on menus	<p>If scaled nationally the pilot would cut the carbon footprint of public food by 225 to 450 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (greenhouse gas emissions). Achieved for less than 2% extra on meal costs.</p> <p>In the first phase of the pilot, Welsh Veg in Schools worked with the wholesaler Castell Howell to swap in some of the frozen vegetables, for organic Welsh veg, resulting in a reduction in carbon emissions.</p>

Reduction in emissions on menus	Welsh Veg in Schools has also assessed data from Defra showing that non-organic fresh broccoli from England, compared to Welsh organic fresh broccoli, has a three times higher greenhouse gas footprint, mainly due to fossil fuel derived fertilisers, particularly ammonium nitrate, which leads to significant N2O emissions (a potent greenhouse gas). ¹⁴
Engagement with staff	<p>Carmarthenshire County Council launched a pioneering initiative to redesign school lunch menus using local produce, aiming to promote health and wellbeing, sustainability, social value, and education. The council commissioned local not-for-profit Cegin Y Bobl to work with primary schools across Carmarthenshire in co-creating the new menus.</p> <p>This work builds on the foundations of the Future Generations Sustainability Framework, which enables catering and procurement staff to analyse and score ingredients and products, combined with the data and intelligence on what can be grown sustainably and at scale in Wales and facilitated into public sector procurement and school menus by Welsh Veg in Schools.</p>
Engagement with young people	<p>In 2024, 400 children from 14 schools visited four vegetable farms, in Monmouthshire, Carmarthenshire and the Cardiff area.</p> <p>In 2025, 140 children were involved in educational activities; school children also visited the Royal Welsh Show where Welsh Veg in Schools had a stand.</p> <p>All head teachers (400) in participating schools received information on Welsh Veg in Schools and links to resources, with very positive feedback.</p>

Hackney Organic School Food

Lead partner	Growing Communities (and its not-for-profit, farmer-focused wholesale business, Better Food Shed)		
Where	<p>Two primary schools in Hackney, London: Harrington Hill School and Sir Thomas Abney School.</p> <p>The schools run their kitchens in-house meaning their Executive Chef is responsible for procuring their food.</p>		
Supply	<p>Organic fruit and veg from UK growers and EU growers.</p> <table border="0" data-bbox="384 1809 1220 2056"> <tr> <td data-bbox="384 1809 901 2056"> <p>Top veg:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broccoli • Potatoes • Carrots • Tomatoes • Cucumbers </td> <td data-bbox="901 1809 1220 2056"> <p>Top UK veg:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potatoes – 97% • Carrots – 77% • Tomatoes – 61% • Broccoli – 37% • Cucumbers – 37% </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Top veg:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broccoli • Potatoes • Carrots • Tomatoes • Cucumbers 	<p>Top UK veg:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potatoes – 97% • Carrots – 77% • Tomatoes – 61% • Broccoli – 37% • Cucumbers – 37%
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Supplier(s)	The pilot aimed to demonstrate how organic produce could be integrated into public sector catering without exceeding standard school meal budgets. It did so by subsidising 30% of the cost of organic fruit and vegetables supplied through the Better Food Shed organic farmer-focused wholesaler (run by Growing Communities).
Volumes	68,865 meals were served across two schools. Organic produce from the UK: 51% During the pilot period, the proportion of organic produce used in school meals increased by 49% and the share of UK-sourced produce increased by 51%.
Return on investment	£6,814 spent on the subsidy to bridge the gap in price for food grown to high climate and nature-friendly standards.
Reduction in emissions on menus	The Executive Chef reduced meat on the menu by 40-50% in his time at the school. The pilot also dramatically reduced dependence on imported produce and lowered transportation emissions by using Growing Communities' electric delivery vehicles.
Engagement with staff	School leaders and kitchen teams were integral to the pilot. Engagement included a co-design workshop with kitchen staff and school leaders followed by taste sessions led by Growing Communities and Executive Chef James Taylor.
Engagement with young people	287 children received school meals per week containing organic ingredients, with approximately 41% of these pupils coming from low-income households (average across the two primary schools). All classes took part in taste education with executive chef James. All classes were offered farm trips with Growing Communities.

Annex C: Economic modelling methodology

The analysis is based on economic modelling by the University of Portsmouth and the Organic Research Centre, looking at data from the pilots alongside published literature.

The analysis monetised key benefits from the pilots, combining direct project data,

economic modelling, and survey findings.

The research team used conservative assumptions where data gaps existed, adjusted all values to 2024 GBP for consistency and incorporated displacement where appropriate. The "counterfactual" assumed no intervention (status quo).

Annex D: LM3 methodology

The project used a local multiplier methodology called LM3 which looks at three rounds of spending. Each round is added up and used to calculate a figure that shows for every £1 spent, X amount goes back into the local economy. The more money spent locally in each round increases the figure that is re-circulated in the local economy.

The ratio figure that LM3 creates compares how much initial money spent in a local area generates additional economic activity locally by adding up three rounds of local spend and then dividing it by the initial round of spending. This creates a figure where the minimum score possible is 1 (100% of money leaves the local economy) and the maximum is 3 (100% stays in the local economy). For example, if a local business spends £100, and that £100 eventually generates £300 in local spending after multiple rounds, the LM3 value would be 3.

To measure the impact of buying local organic green split peas, we are defining the local area as a 55-mile radius from Laurencekirk where Balmakewan Farm is based, spend in Scotland and any other spend outside of Scotland. Information is collected through business and personal spend surveys that breakdown spend by business location, asking respondents to specify how much is spent with local, Scottish, or out-of-Scotland businesses.

Round 1 – Local Authority Procurement Spend: The first round is the spend from the local authority with their supplier. This becomes the basis to work out how much goes into the local economy for the other rounds. For GPAC this was Aberdeen City Council's spend on peas from Balmakewan Farm.

Round 2 – Balmakewan Farm Spend: When the business pays its employees, suppliers, and contractors locally, they spend their earnings on goods and services within the area. For GPAC, Phil was surveyed to see how much money was spent with local businesses, Scottish businesses, and businesses outside of Scotland.

Round 3 – Employee Spend: Those recipients (like the employees) spend their money at other local businesses (e.g., buying groceries, paying rent). This is measured to see how they spend money locally.

Endnotes

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- 4 Welsh Government, Future Generations Report 2025, (Welsh Government, May 2025)
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- 8 Tuck, Winqvist, Mota, Ahnström, Turnbull, and Bengtsson, Land-use intensity and the effects of organic farming on biodiversity: a hierarchical meta-analysis' (Journal of applied ecology, 51(3), pp.746-755, 2014)
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Bridging the Gap

How to make school food work
for children, farmers and planet

A Sustain publication

March 2026

About Sustain

Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the living and working environment, enrich society and culture, and promote equity. It represents around 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local level.

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About Bridging the Gap

Launched in 2022 Bridging the Gap is supported by the National Lottery Community Fund. Sustain, Alexandra Rose Charity and Growing Communities working with Food Sense Wales, and Nourish Scotland are bringing together organisations united in the belief that everyone has the right to healthy and affordable food that works for the planet.

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