

Food is not rubbish!

Tackling food waste in UK primary schools via collaboration and codesign

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Background

Food on our plates reflects the land, water, and other resources needed to produce it, and each dish leaves a unique environmental footprint. Unfortunately, when that food ends up wasted, it undermines our broader sustainability goals.

From April 2025, the Environment Act 2021 requires workplaces in England, including schools, to separate food waste, dry recycling and residual waste. Schools producing over 5kg of food waste per week must arrange separate collection, which may increase costs.

Reducing food waste is therefore timely, helping schools meet legal requirements and sustainability goals, while also supporting children's health by encouraging them to eat nutritious food.

The Food is Not Rubbish project aimed to synthesise evidence and generate insights to support schools with implementing strategies and interventions to reduce food waste at lunchtimes.



Methods

- 1 Semi-structured interviews with school staff and stakeholders (N=19) explored perspectives on reducing food waste.
- 2 Codesign sessions with pupils (N=32, aged 6–11 years) used a **dotmocracy** exercise to generate and prioritise ideas. Ten potential interventions were identified, and pupils voted with dot stickers for those they felt would work best in their school.

Results

Interviews

Key themes included the need for tailored, multi-component approaches:

“A suite of interventions is needed, what works for one school will not work for every school.”

Simple changes to presentation and portions were seen as practical levers:

“Cut apples into slices, oranges peeled, bananas cut in half.”

Food waste education should sit within a whole-school approach:

“Food waste shouldn't be just another thing that's been added into teaching.”

Limited time and staffing at lunchtime are key barriers:

“The ideal would be a properly staffed dining room with a longer lunch hour.”

Dotmocracy findings

The most popular interventions from the pupils' perspective were as follows:

- 1 **Food on the menu:** Tasters of food with small paper cups or spoons.
- 2 **At the counter:** Increased choice over side portions and portion sizes.
- 3 **The dining room:** Golden table reward. Teachers or parents invited to eat with children. More time available to eat meals.



Conclusions and next steps

- Findings highlight logistic challenges experienced by schools regarding tackling food waste but also opportunities for action.
- Schools may benefit from a suite of interventions that can be customised to suit individual needs.
- Children were keen for greater choice at lunchtime, for example with choosing side portions, serving sizes, and for more taster opportunities.
- Actively engaging pupils could foster ownership and potentially support beneficial effects on waste-reduction efforts in the future.



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