

HEADTEACHER

UPDATE

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The school with sustainable food at the heart of its Climate Action Plan

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It is World Food Day on October 16 and East Bridgford St Peter's Primary School is leading the way in creating sustainable school meals that both engage pupils and help reduce climate impact. Jo Pettifer explains



Food first: Sarah Plumb, catering manager at East Bridgford St Peter's CE Primary, is leading the way with the school's sustainable meals, creating healthy and locally sourced meals. The school recently won Bronze in the ProVeg School Plates Awards (Image: Jon Spaul/Ashden)

Eat better: East Bridgford St Peter's Primary in Nottinghamshire has put sustainable school food at the heart of its strategy to reduce carbon emissions – and that includes the popular salad bar - *Jon Spaull/Ashden*
October 16 is World Food Day and many schools use this as a moment to teach pupils about healthy eating and sustainable food and farming. East Bridgford St Peter's CE Primary School in Nottinghamshire has long been known for its innovative approach to school meals – it was once nicknamed the original “Jamie Oliver school”. Today, it continues to lead the way, winning awards for its commitment to sustainability and nutritious food.

Through my work as a climate action advisor at charity Let's Go Zero, I have supported the school to create its climate action plan – [something the Department for Education wants all schools to have in place by the end of 2025](#). I was particularly impressed with the school's long-running attention to healthy food, local sourcing, and excellent communications with pupils, teachers and parents.

Headteacher Richard Tomlinson told me: “Our motto in the food hall is 'Eat Better, Do Better'. We're not just fueling bodies but shaping lifelong values.”

Food was chosen as the starting point for the school's sustainability journey because of its impact on health, climate and culture.



Catering manager Sarah Plumb, inspired by former school cook Jeanette Orrey (author of *The Dinner Lady*), has worked at the school for more than 20 years and has "carried on and expanded where Jeanette left off".

All meals are cooked fresh on site – about 220 a day. In her time, Sarah has already served around 800,000 meals and is on track to reach the one million mark within the next three years.

In 2024, the school began working with myself as their climate action advisor. I supported the school including with energy audits, staff training and in their work to embed sustainability into the curriculum. The school's action plan now addresses food, energy and waste, and the results so far have been impressive.

Richard added that the support from Let's Go Zero has given them a "360-degree view" that has helped them to "think differently".

The challenge

Like many schools, St Peter's faced rising food prices and energy bills while trying to maintain high-quality, freshly prepared meals. Sourcing sustainable ingredients without increasing costs was a major challenge. Sarah continued: "Schools are having to foot the increase in costs from suppliers. Many use dynamic pricing, which doesn't help us – sometimes it's cheaper to shop in supermarkets. We've cut costs by half this year by constantly comparing suppliers."

The team also wanted to cut food waste without limiting choice. Despite its strong food culture, portions could be too generous and uneaten food went in the bin. At the same time, dietary needs are more complex than ever: "Knowing the individual dietary needs of all our pupils is vital – and challenging," Sarah added.

Energy-use was another hurdle. The school wanted to reduce gas and electricity consumption and teach children about sustainability. Above all, Richard and Sarah wanted their food culture to inspire learning: "We're shaping habits for life – how children eat, think about waste, and care for the planet," Richard said.



Better for everyone: Lunchtime at East Bridgford St Peter's Primary, where the school motto is Eat Better, Do Better and pupils have been lobbying hard to keep the salad bar! (Image: Jon Spauell/Ashden)

Seasonal, sustainable, satisfying solutions

With support from myself and Let's Go Zero, St Peter's implemented a joined up sustainability plan centred around food but extending across the school. This included:

Fresh, local, seasonal food: All meals are cooked on site by Sarah and her team using seasonal menus that rotate every three weeks. She bakes everything on-site – even her Mrs Plumb's Famous Pizza:

"Sometimes their lunch is the only hot, nutritious meal a child will get that day," she added.

Making plant-based appealing: Vegetarian options are integrated, without being labelled. Fun names and presentation encourage children to try new things: veggie meatballs are called Power Balls; Quorn chilli is Campfire Chilli. Sarah explained: "If it looks nice, they'll want to try it. Lots of children prefer raw carrots or salad to cooked veg – so our salad bar is always there, too."

Incredibly, the pupils even lobbied to save the Salad Bar when budgets were being squeezed. Sarah and Richard were right behind them, persuading the trustees to keep it: "Lots of children prefer raw veg, and it's such an important part of giving them choice," Sarah explained. "We worked hard to save it by shopping around for the best prices rather than cutting it."

Reducing waste and costs: Better portioning, menu-planning and education have cut food waste by 20% and halved spending on food in a year. Even the food bin is part of the solution, with "eyes" and magnets to save cutlery, and prompt children to think before discarding.

Pupil engagement: Pupils give feedback on menus, dish names and lead food assemblies. Sarah's influence goes beyond school, too: former pupils have gone on to become chefs and nutritionists. "When grown-up ex-pupils stop me in the village to reminisce about my chicken and ham pie, I know we've made an impact," she said.

Energy: The audit I led with the school resulted in LEDs and energy awareness campaigns. The work is supported by the school's "RotaKids" eco-club. RotaKids clubs are based in schools and with help and support from teachers and the local Rotary club, children can gain a valuable experience in helping others and learning interesting, new things. Among their duties include monitoring classrooms, handing out certificates, and (of course) leading by example.



Green fingers: Members of the RotaKids group working in the tyre herb garden at East Bridgford St Peter's Primary School (Image: Jon Spaul/Ashden)

Significant impact

After a year, the outcomes of all this work have been significant:

- **Energy:** 8% less electricity and 10% less gas use, saving 6.55 tonnes of carbon and £2,018 on energy bills.
- **Food:** Despite inflation, food spending halved in one year thanks to smarter sourcing. Food waste dropped by about 20%.

- **Pupil impact:** About 220 children a day benefit from freshly cooked, seasonal meals – that's around 43,000 meals a year. As stated, Sarah is on track to pass one million meals served in the next three years.
- **Culture:** Pupils are proud of their role. They run energy campaigns, take part in menu-planning and even make up songs about their favourite dishes. "The staff sing the 'Pasta, Peas and Bacon' song," Sarah laughed. "Food should be fun – that's how you get children excited."

Furthermore, the school was awarded Bronze in the ProVeg School Plates awards for the work they did improving the sustainability of their menu. That's an incredibly high standard to have reached in their first year and they are aiming for silver in their next Climate Action Plan. ProVeg is a Let's Go Zero coalition partner and was instrumental in supporting the school to identify improvements after Let's Go Zero connected them with Sarah.

Sustainability and quality

The school's experience shows that sustainability and quality can work hand-in-hand. By engaging pupils and staff, being creative in the kitchen, and linking food to learning, St Peter's has delivered financial savings, lower emissions, and a stronger school community.

"This has transformed not just our meals, but our whole school culture," said Richard. Sustainability has opened doors across the curriculum and shown our pupils they can make a difference."

Sarah is bursting with pride about their progress: "I'm most proud of the whole concept – what the children have, how it looks, the variety and how they're involved.

"When I see a child asking for broccoli or telling their parents about Power Balls, I know we've done something right. Some of my Cookery Club kids have gone on to be chefs and nutritionists."

And Sarah's advice to other schools? "Be passionate – it's contagious. Food is fuel, but it's also culture and care. Sometimes this is the only hot meal a child will have that day – it should be the best we can give them."

- ***Jo Pettifer is Let's Go Zero climate action advisor for the Midlands region. Sign up free support from your own Let's Go Zero Climate Action Advisor via <https://letsgozero.org/join/>. Read previous articles from Let's Go Zero in Headteacher Update via www.headteacher-update.com/authors/lets-go-zero***