# Concerns rise over food waste in South Wales Universal Free School Meals programme



Concerns are mounting regarding the staggering levels of food waste reported by kitchen staff in schools across South Wales, as highlighted by recent discussions surrounding the region's Universal Primary Free School Meals programme. The total expenditure on this initiative hovers close to £100 million, leading to calls for improved monitoring systems to identify inefficiencies and optimise financial resources.

As the Conservative party weighs in on the matter, they applaud aspects of the ongoing consultation, particularly the emphasis on appropriate portion sizes that cater to students of varying ages. Natasha Asghar, the Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Education, articulated the need for a balance between nutritional goals and practical implementation. “While we welcome the consultation on healthy food options and appropriate portion sizes, we recognise the need to balance nutritional aspirations with practicality,” she stated. The concern is that overly restrictive meals may exacerbate the problem of fussy eating and leave some children hungry.

The financial implications are significant, as Asghar pointed out, questioning the value of taxpayer money being wasted in conjunction with the complaints about food that ends up in bins at the end of lunch periods. She underscored the urgency for a sustainable and efficient financial solution, insisting that the current approach by the Labour, Plaid Cymru, and Liberal Democrats could be tantamount to "throwing taxpayers' money in the bin."

Equally important is the broader conversation about how schools can effectively tackle food waste while fostering healthy eating behaviours among students. Innovative approaches have emerged, such as the 'Bocs Bwyd Llandeilo' scheme, which exemplifies community-driven efforts to reduce food waste and promote food literacy. This project collects surplus food from local businesses and uses it in school cooking lessons, thus providing valuable learning experiences for students while simultaneously addressing economic barriers for families. Lynne Williams, a leader in this initiative, emphasised the role of these efforts in developing food literacy, which encourages not just students but the entire community to engage with food responsibly.

Technological solutions also present a promising avenue for combating food wastage in schools. Cashless catering systems and pre-order technologies, like those provided by Fusion Online, enable students to select their meals in advance, allowing kitchens to prepare precise portions based on actual demand. Such systems can provide insightful data which informs menu planning and inventory management, reducing the likelihood of over-catering and ensuring that children receive meals that appeal to them.

In fact, the annual cost of food waste in UK schools is staggering, estimated at approximately £250 million. Implementing these cashless systems not only minimises food waste but can also result in significant savings for schools. With functionalities including tracking meal popularity, these systems also allow for more informed decisions about menu items, further curbing waste.

Apart from technology, schools can embrace other strategies to enhance waste management. The “offer versus serve” model, which permits students to decline parts of a meal, can be beneficial. Initiatives such as share tables, where unopened food items can be returned for redistribution, also offer practical solutions for reducing waste while fostering a sense of community responsibility.

Looking at international practices, schools in the United States employ a variety of strategies with similar aims. For example, introducing longer lunch times, scheduling recess before meals, and encouraging donation of intact food items to local charities are all methods shown to effectively minimise food waste while also educating children about food conservation.

The focus on reducing food waste within the education sector aligns with a broader commitment to sustainability and responsible resource management. The challenge remains to harmonise the goals of health and well-being for children with the economic realities and practicalities of school meal programmes. It is imperative that stakeholders come together to explore balanced approaches that meet these dual aims effectively.

### Reference Map

* Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25178793.concerns-staggering-food-waste-free-school-meals/?ref=rss)
* Paragraph 2: [[1]](https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25178793.concerns-staggering-food-waste-free-school-meals/?ref=rss)
* Paragraph 3: [[1]](https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25178793.concerns-staggering-food-waste-free-school-meals/?ref=rss)
* Paragraph 4: [[2]](https://www.herald.wales/national-news/education/free-school-meals-programme-helps-fight-food-waste-with-innovative-new-scheme/)
* Paragraph 5: [[2]](https://www.herald.wales/national-news/education/free-school-meals-programme-helps-fight-food-waste-with-innovative-new-scheme/)
* Paragraph 6: [[3]](https://www.crbcunninghams.co.uk/news/how-technology-can-help-schools-and-caterers-reduce-food-waste), [[4]](https://www.iris.co.uk/blog/education/reduce-food-waste-in-schools-with-cashless-catering/)
* Paragraph 7: [[4]](https://www.iris.co.uk/blog/education/reduce-food-waste-in-schools-with-cashless-catering/)
* Paragraph 8: [[5]](https://www.usda.gov/foodlossandwaste/schools), [[6]](https://www.cde.ca.gov/LS/NU/SN/platewaste.asp), [[7]](https://fft.ed.sc.gov/office-of-health-and-nutrition/reducing-food-waste/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25178793.concerns-staggering-food-waste-free-school-meals/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.herald.wales/national-news/education/free-school-meals-programme-helps-fight-food-waste-with-innovative-new-scheme/> - The Welsh Government's rollout of Universal Primary Free School Meals alongside the Curriculum for Wales has helped a school's community develop healthy habits and fight food waste. Llandeilo Primary School launched the 'Bocs Bwyd Llandeilo' scheme—a community project that collects surplus food from local businesses and community donations, aiming to remove economic barriers for parents. The produce is used in school cooking lessons, eliminating the need for families to purchase ingredients, while helping cut down on food waste. Lynne Williams, who leads the cookery initiative at the school, emphasized the importance of developing pupils' and the wider community's 'Food Literacy' through planting, learning about, growing, harvesting, and cooking the foods they grow.
3. <https://www.crbcunninghams.co.uk/news/how-technology-can-help-schools-and-caterers-reduce-food-waste> - Technology can play a critical role in helping schools and caterers reduce food waste. Cashless catering and pre-order technology, such as Fusion Online, allow students to pre-order their meals, enabling catering staff to prepare appropriate quantities and reducing over-catering. This system also provides valuable data insights to inform menu planning and stock ordering, ensuring that students receive the food they want and minimizing waste. Additionally, cashless systems can reduce queue times, encouraging students to enjoy their meals without feeling rushed, further contributing to reduced food waste.
4. <https://www.iris.co.uk/blog/education/reduce-food-waste-in-schools-with-cashless-catering/> - Food waste is costing UK schools approximately £250 million annually. Implementing cashless catering systems, like FasTrak, allows students to pre-order meals, enabling catering staff to prepare appropriate quantities and reducing over-catering. This approach helps ensure that children receive the food they want, minimizes waste, and can lead to significant savings for schools. The system also provides reporting features that allow schools to monitor popular and unpopular meals, aiding in better menu planning and further reducing food waste.
5. <https://www.usda.gov/foodlossandwaste/schools> - K-12 schools have a special role in reducing, recovering, and recycling food waste on their premises and educating the next generation about the importance of food conservation. Strategies include offering the 'offer versus serve' option, which allows students to decline some components of a reimbursable meal, and creating share tables where students can return whole and unopened food items for others to take. Additionally, schools can donate uneaten, intact items to eligible local food banks or charitable organizations, further reducing waste and supporting the community.
6. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/LS/NU/SN/platewaste.asp> - In the United States, food loss and waste account for about 30 percent of the food supply at retail and consumer levels. Schools can implement strategies to reduce plate waste, such as obtaining feedback on new menu items, providing more choices, and serving foods with familiar flavors. Additionally, scheduling recess before lunch can help students have more time to eat, reducing plate waste. Schools can also offer share tables and donate intact items to eligible local food banks or charitable organizations to further reduce waste.
7. <https://fft.ed.sc.gov/office-of-health-and-nutrition/reducing-food-waste/> - Schools have opportunities to reduce food loss across their nutrition programs by implementing strategies recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and EPA. These strategies include using the 'Offer Versus Serve' menu option, scheduling recess before lunch to reduce plate waste, extending lunch periods from 20 to 30 minutes, introducing share tables, completing production records for better meal planning, promoting waste-free lunches, considering donation, setting up composting programs, integrating Smarter Lunchrooms tips, ordering fresh produce deliveries at shorter intervals, maintaining a First In, First Out (FIFO) system of inventory rotation, using a Just in Time (JIT) system of inventory and ordering, and repurposing leftover or unsold food that is still safe to eat.