



## Reducing carbon emissions from school meals

### Small changes for a big impact

By John Figgins, Head of Catering Services



As a major contributor to climate change, food service is one area that schools can focus on to help deliver on carbon reduction. Providing well over 20,000 meals a day across the County, our contracted Council services make up many of the meals served in schools. Other schools organise their own meal provision, preparing many thousands of meals a day, and may be interested to know how they can be more sustainable, reducing carbon in their meal service and potentially realising cost savings.

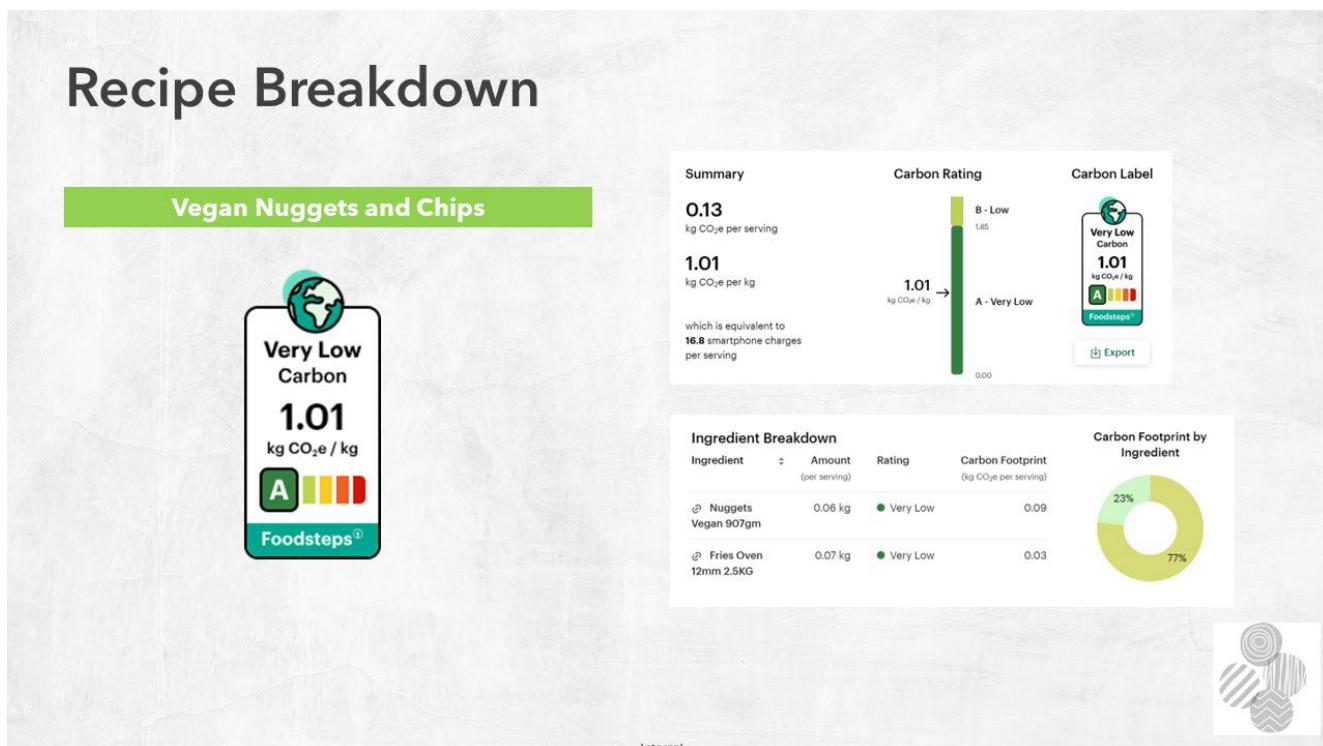
Schools play a significant part in guiding the next generation towards more sustainable behaviours and habits, so it's crucial that school menus reflect this shift, safeguarding our children's futures and equipping them with the knowledge they need to make more informed choices. There are already some well recognised ways to reduce carbon emissions, resource use, and often associated costs, across a school meal catering service, such as:

- Introduce a no disposables policy (sustainable disposables is an option, but these can be expensive and still have an impact) – this can be challenging and may not be possible in all schools, due to logistics, but where it is possible, good savings can be made
- Adopt an energy saving policy, encouraging caterers to follow basic energy saving principles such as:
  - Reporting any defects on equipment immediately
  - Ensuring taps are not left running and are well maintained
  - Filling sinks with the recommended measured amount of detergent
  - Filling up dishwasher trays before commencing a wash cycle
  - Selecting the correct size pan, reducing pans to simmer when boiling point is reached and keeping lids on
  - Filling ovens and steamers to maximise energy use
  - Minimising the frequency of opening refrigerators and freezers
  - Turning off equipment immediately after use
  - Switching off lights when not required
- Have a proactive annual servicing regime that keeps equipment running efficiently, prolongs its lifecycle and results in less operational down time
- Consider seasons and provenance when planning menus to benefit from foods at their best and most plentiful, minimise food miles and potentially reduce costs
- Adhere to minimum order volumes where possible to minimise deliveries and delivery charges
- Combine food, consumables and chemicals supplies into one delivery
- Consider how you can minimise and manage food waste, including introducing a preorder system – even manual systems can help to reduce food waste and costs
- Encourage children to eat more of their lunches, provide help and support at tables, and consider not letting children out early to play if their meal is half eaten



The Council has embarked on more innovative work recently, to highlight the carbon emissions linked to packaging waste, energy use, food waste and plant-based meals. Food waste is [estimated to contribute 8-10% of total man-made carbon emissions](#). If food waste were a country, it would be the world's third largest emitter after China and the USA. So, reducing food waste from school meals is an important area for schools to address.

Eating more plant-based meals, with less and better meat can help cut greenhouse gas emissions, conserve water and reduce deforestation as well. At a national level, the [Climate Change Committee](#) has recommended a 20% reduction in meat and dairy by 2030 and a 35% reduction for meat by 2050, eating better meat and plant-based alternatives, as part of delivering the UK's target of being net zero by 2050.



For our main primary school meals contract we worked with our provider, Chartwells, who partnered with [Food Steps](#), to crunch the carbon emissions data (pictured above) for every dish prepared and served, ranking them in a traffic light system. This has enabled us to add easy to understand carbon labels to our menus, enabling children, parents, and schools to identify which low-carbon dishes are available each day. Where appropriate, we are also reformulating dishes to reduce carbon emissions without compromising on nutrition and flavour.

By making these improvements to our menus, we are helping children and their families to gain a better understanding of the impact that food choices have on the environment, enabling them to make healthy and sustainable choices. Our menus remain aligned with the government's mandatory School Food Standards, which require meat to be served, and we remain committed to supporting British farmers. We were the first local authority in the country to calculate carbon emissions for school meals, and the approach is this is now being replicated in other parts of the country.



For our special schools meals service, we worked on a similar project with [ProVeg UK](#), which is a non-profit organisation working with local authorities and school caterers to increase the health and sustainability of school food. We achieved a ProVeg School Plates Bronze award for our special school meals service, at no cost to the service, through making some small environmentally beneficial changes to our menus, including:

- Introducing a plant-rich day (meat-free and fish-free day)
- Rebalancing menus – balancing and positioning of dishes
- Descriptive and positive language
- Blending plants into dishes (building familiarity)

The approach is an effective way to make menus more environmentally focused, and offer choice to children, without costing the earth. Throughout the project we focused on small changes that make a big difference, bring immediate benefit, and promote positive conversations around carbon reduction and food.

Schools organising their own catering are encouraged look into how ProVeg UK could help them too. There are also lots of free food-focused resources available on [Sustainability Support for Schools](#) that can help you to improve the sustainability of school meals. And West Sussex schools also have free access to a wide range of [food-focused resources](#) via the Wastebuster Schools Waste and Climate Education Programme.