

The Buckinghamshire 'School Food Partnership' Programme

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Background

[BiteBack2030](#) are a "youth activist movement" challenging the food system. They prioritise young people's voices and support secondary school students to advocate for themselves, to change their 'school food culture' and the wider food system. BiteBack developed and led a pilot programme called the 'School Food Partnership' (SFP) with eight secondary schools in Buckinghamshire (academic year 2023/24; Appendix A). Some aspects of this programme were designed in collaboration with [School Food Matters](#), a charity providing food education and training in schools, to improve children's access to healthy and sustainable school meals.

BiteBack piloted the SFP programme to determine if this model of delivery is feasible, adaptable and/or sustainable for future work with secondary schools. This brief report addresses the following key questions: (a) What changes occurred in schools and when?; (b) Who or what is driving the change within schools?; (c) What are the main barriers or challenges for schools?; and (d) What are schools' views of the SFP programme?

The School Food Partnership Programme

The SFP programme brings together existing initiatives and training already available from various organisations into one programme of support for secondary schools. Using a 'whole school approach', the aim is to better support schools to make and students to advocate for improvements to their school food environment, including meals, and develop a written school food policy. The SFP programme includes the following components:

- (1) **School Food and Wellbeing Leads (SFL):** appointed by each school to lead and coordinate the programme. BiteBack provided mandatory training and a fixed grant as remuneration for the SFL staff costs. The number of SFL in each school ranged from one to three (see Appendix B).
- (2) **Project Delivery:** involved a BiteBack assembly to introduce the SFP programme, followed by five whole year group sessions (50 minutes) for Key Stage 3 students during Autumn term.
- (3) **School Food Audit:** reviewing the existing 'whole school food culture', including food provision, using a self-report toolkit provided by School Food Matters and with support from Project Officers (detailed below).
- (4) **School Food Champions Club:** weekly extracurricular sessions developed by BiteBack, with a group of dedicated students over the Spring and Summer terms. The purpose was to engage and encourage students to think about their school food system and provide the tools for change, followed by a student-led 'social action project' to put this into practice by making positive changes within their school.
- (5) **Capacity Building Offers:** bespoke package of training and materials from various partner organisations, working with adults in the school community to support improvements to 'whole school food culture'. Schools could select which support to receive (up to a fixed value). Offers included education and training for chefs, growing and cooking masterclass, food lesson resource pack (Key Stage 3), training on food safety/curriculum and governors' training for monitoring school food.

- (6) **School Food Policy:** written by SFL, the policy brings together the various elements of the programme while involving the relevant stakeholders from across the school community (e.g. students, catering staff, senior leadership, governors). A policy template was provided (by School Food Matters), alongside guidance and support from Project Officers. The template ensured each policy covered the necessary detail (e.g. monitoring of school food standards), while allowing schools to address the specific issues relevant to them.
- (7) **Project Officer:** allocated to each school (the authors LH and AD, on behalf of School food Matters) to support the SFL throughout, including meeting at specific points to discuss and advise on progress, challenges and ideas. They also visited each school (in-person) at least once to better understand the 'school food culture', meet relevant stakeholders and support the SFL with the audit.

School Food Audit

As part of the pilot, BiteBack worked with School Food Matters to co-develop a self-report 'School Food Audit' toolkit, to enable schools to carry out a review of their school food environment. This was based on an existing model, whereby School Food Matters independently conduct the audit for schools. The audit aims to help schools engage the wider school community to identify areas that require improvement. Schools were provided with template documents to complete each of the elements, as follows:

- **Online School Surveys:** to identify views and concerns about the school food environment with (i) staff; (ii) students; and (iii) parents. The data were analysed and presented to each school by the Project Officer.
- **Purposeful Discussion:** about the school food environment, including monitoring of food standards, food offered, cost, rules and potential challenges. SFL completed five summary templates with the following people: (i) SFL; (ii) member(s) of senior leadership; (iii) catering staff; (iv) students; and (v) parents.
- **Observations and Photos:** of the school food environment and meals, including at (i) breakfast and afterschool club (if applicable); (ii) breaktime; (iii) lunchtime; and (iv) other relevant information such as menu displays, dining areas. SFL also completed a week-long overview of the school food served across a full day.

School Context

The SFP programme was carried out with eight Buckinghamshire secondary schools (two with selective admissions). Three schools were single-academy trusts and five were part of multi-academy trusts (four from the same trust). Data for the 2023/24 academic year show that 12.3 percent of students attending state-funded secondary schools in Buckinghamshire are eligible for free school meals (FSM), compared to 24.1 percent across England. Appendix B presents a summary description of each school's catering staff, food provision and canteen style, including the proportion of students eligible for FSM.

Changes, Drivers and Challenges

During the SFP, school made changes to their food provision, canteen environment and curriculum, with further plans being implemented in the new academic year. These include changing the food offered, cost and affordability, more efficient queuing systems, availability of menus and introducing live music. A summary of the changes made by each school can be found in table 2 below.

While the contexts differed across schools, there were apparent and consistent conditions or drivers of change. Notably, the number and seniority of SFL involved, findings from school food audit and the enthusiasm of SLT, headteachers, catering staff and students.

Table 1: Summary of changes made to schools' food provision, curriculum and environment

	Food Provision and Curriculum	Food Environment
School 1	Students asked for a snack bar with fruit boxes, yoghurt and salad. They also asked for vegetables and herbs to be added to the pasta dishes. Food items such as pizza have been removed from the menu and replaced with healthier options. A new menu will be implemented in the new academic year.	Introduced staggered lunchbreaks which has reduced queuing and created a calmer atmosphere in the canteen. From September, menus will be displayed in all classrooms.
School 2	A 'healthy meal deal' and more vegetables have been introduced (led by students). Lots of ideas for next academic year, including improving affordability of meals, 'lunch club' cooking classes and incorporating SFP training into curriculum/teaching.	They have plans to improve the queuing system and layout of the canteen. The aim is to encourage more students to eat at a table, rather than walking around the school with food. Lunchtimes will also be extended to allow for activities. The SFP work will feed into the school council and the food policy will be on the website.
School 3	No significant changes due to unforeseen circumstances. Some discussion in relation to food and drink available for sixth form students and compliance with food standards.	Unfortunately, the SFL could not access the documents and went on maternity leave during the programme.
School 4	In the new academic year, introducing a new menu with meal deals, increased variety of food, healthier options and meat-free days. Also planning to start cooking classes.	Cheaper food options will be promoted and more prominent on displays. Also started an allotment and organised a sunflower growing competition.
School 5	Looked at FSM uptake and whether students eligible are using their allowance or not (will continue in the new academic year). Also worked with catering company to ensure tariffs are affordable and inclusive for all students. School having to subsidise FSM allowance due to increased food costs. Plan to look at requirements and accessibility for students with food allergies.	Started work to improve kitchen facilities to increase capacity. Introduced a new queuing system in the canteen to reduce congestion. Published menus online and made them more prominent in/around the canteen. Now have a governor responsible for monitoring school food.
School 6	Working with the food allergens team at the catering company to improve food labelling. Meal deal now with free salad or fruit, instead of dessert. Cookie and cake portions have also been reduced in size.	Opened the 'Hatch' to provide additional place for students to get food and reduce queuing times. Will continue to monitor with champions club in the new academic year. Now have a governor responsible for monitoring school food. All menus are now on the school website.
School 7	No significant changes due to unforeseen circumstances and change of job role during the programme.	Changed the queuing system and displayed menus in more prominent places around the canteen.
School 8	Introduced a 'Hydration Station' with fresh water as an alternative to carbonated or fizzy drinks. Healthier food items now highlighted on the menu in the canteen. Plans to bring in food education to teach students what is healthy.	Queuing system redesigned and till areas reorganised for a quicker and more efficient process. Introduced 'Musical Lunches' on Friday with live music organised by the music teacher (students sing and dance along). Calmer atmosphere has also led to more staff eating lunch in the canteen.

School Food Lead and Senior Leadership Team

It was very clear that one SFL was not adequate for the workload involved in the SFP programme. Schools with two or three SFL found the activities more manageable but still difficult to coordinate or find time to meet. The seniority and/or experience of the SFL was also a significant factor. For example, teaching assistants found it more difficult to navigate competing interests or influence any change, eventually becoming unable to progress. Comparatively, facilities managers had much more scope to implement change because it was within their remit. Those with subject backgrounds related to food, or with the support of food teachers, were able to make more use of the resources and training provided via the capacity building offers. They could more easily recognise areas of the food curriculum that were lacking or where resources could be integrated.

The support of the SLT and headteacher was a major factor in being able to drive change. Those with passionate and invested headteachers and/or direct support or guidance from members of the SLT were much more successful. Those without the necessary support became despondent and felt their efforts were wasted, as they didn't see any longevity; it became a 'tick box exercise'.

School Catering Staff and Head Chef

The ongoing recruitment crisis of school meals workers was very evident. Most schools had some turnover with their catering staff during the programme, especially the head chef. For instance, one school stated that they had five temporary head chefs in just one term until they were able to hire someone permanent. This caused delays and made it difficult for SFL to develop relationships or coordinate changes with the school kitchen. Other schools with longstanding chefs who were unenthusiastic or resistant to change also had difficulties. It was common for these chefs to use the students as a reason not to change: "The kids won't like that. They won't eat fruit." Conversely, the SFL in schools with newly appointed and/or enthusiastic chefs who were keen to engage with students' ideas found it much easier to progress. This was especially the case where chefs had previously worked in other parts of the food and hospitality sector (e.g. restaurants).

Student Engagement

The SFL and SLT were pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm of students involved in the programme. Adults had to learn to step back and let students lead to a certain extent. This was challenging for some SFL as it is not the usual way their schools operate. The confusion and workloads involved with running the school food champions club was also overwhelming at times (see below, p. 5) but most SFL recognised the significance and impact the sessions and overall engagement with students has had. Not only for the students' confidence and personal development, but also the importance of the student voice in being able to drive change within the school: "It's one thing teachers saying it. It's another when students are asking."

The School Food Audit and Other Components

It's worth noting that School Food Matters typically carry out school food audits. But for the SFP programme, schools conducted their own audits with some support from Project Officers. With the various elements of the audit, the SFL thought it required a lot of work and attention but they also found aspects of it helpful. In particular, the findings from the online surveys helped them to focus on what changes could or should be implemented. It identified some key issues they were previously unaware of and highlighted some unexpected student views and contradictions. For example, in one school, the teaching staff thought that their communication methods were effective when informing students but the survey showed this wasn't the case. Most SFL also used the survey as a starting point for the students' social action projects and some clubs carried out additional similar surveys too.

The process of creating a school food policy required more time than anticipated (Appendix A). While SFL found the policy template very useful, they also felt "blindsided" and "overwhelmed" by the enormity of the task. The template and guidance were introduced to schools in February 2024, and as discussed below, receiving resources

'as and when' creates additional challenges. This was at the same time SFL were starting the club sessions with students, meaning additional pressures and unexpected workloads.

Bureaucratic "red tape" led to further delays. A few schools chose not to call the document a "policy" because it would require additional stages of formal agreements (and work). However, they still understood the value and importance of the policy. The SFL also explained how the template questions and having to consolidate everything into one document served as a useful reflective activity. They had to think about aspects of school food they hadn't previously considered or thought relevant. Some schools said they will use their school food policy when tendering for new catering contracts, to signify what they expect in relation to school food provision.

For the capacity building offers, SFL said they liked that they could choose based on the specific needs of their school. They also thought that the training sessions and materials were useful, especially the food curriculum materials, governor training and food safety. In some cases, this led to permanent changes within the school: "It was really good and both food teachers learnt a lot of things. They've been doing it [teaching] for ages but they still learnt so much and have made some changes in the food classroom."

Implementing the SFP Programme: Planning, Workload and Complexity

Throughout, Project Officers asked the SFL about implementing the SFP programme. While experiences varied, there were consistent themes that emerged, in particular, planning, workload and programme complexity.

The appointment and training of SFL was expected to take place before the end of the academic year (2022/23), followed by the BiteBack assemblies, group sessions, school food audit and champions club starting in September 2023 (see Appendix A). However, unforeseen circumstances caused delays. The February half term and Easter break led to further delays, with some components taking longer than anticipated. Ofsted inspections and the summer exam period created additional pressures. SFL suggested that the programme should be reorganised to reduce workloads during or finish before the exam period.

SFL stated that the anticipated timelines, planning and workload involved for each of the various components had not been clearly communicated to them. Further, they did not receive all of the necessary resources and information at the start of the programme. These were provided 'as and when', which made it more challenging for SFL to plan around other workloads. Some of the club sessions required additional materials to be purchased.

One SFL suggested that an alternative (or in addition) to the Google Drive was to provide a 'kit' with hard copies of a programme plan, checklists and necessary resources, "like a Gusto box". Other SFL also liked this or made similar suggestions. Providing all of the resources and information prior to the start of the academic year would enable the SFL to manage workloads and plan the assemblies, group sessions and club alongside other teaching and student activities for the whole academic year:

"If I had been able to do it like a lessons plan it would have been much better but I would have had to prepare that in advance. Having all the sessions well before would have been better but I only got access after we delivered the school wide assemblies and group sessions."

With multiple components, some running in parallel or dependent on others, the lack of clear information, resources and planning created complexity. Most SFL commented that it was only at the end that they understood how all the components were supposed to come together: "it took a while to wrap my head around all the components". Knowing what they know now, some stated that they would do the programme again, but differently. For instance, it wasn't immediately clear that the BiteBack group sessions were a separate component from the school food champions club:

"[The SFP programme] wasn't what we were told it would be and it has been much more with things added on all the time. The initial meeting [before it started] was very clear and concise with what to do, but more and more layers were added. Whether it was because new ideas have come up or not."

'Capacity building offers' were also a "grey area" for some, specifically, how much of their fixed grant was used. Unfortunately, some workshops required a minimum number of participants, meaning some requests were

unfulfilled. The schools had varied access to resources, and an alternative suggestion was to allow them to use this funding for the changes they wanted to implement in their school. For example, the cost of moving or buying new fixtures or for printing posters and menus. Reimbursement of teaching cover and travel costs to attend the celebration event (see below) would also be a welcome addition.

While some SFL managed to use the Google Drive to access/upload materials, others were unable to, creating further workload, pressure and confusion. It should be anticipated that schools and SFL will have a diversity of IT skills and constraints. To equalise access, several options should be provided, including delivery of electronic materials on a USB memory stick.

Skills and Confidence

At the end of the SFP programme, the SFL and school food champions clubs from each school were invited to attend a ‘celebration event’ and give a presentation about the work they had done. This took place in a manor house with a special sit-down lunch. The SFL were very positive about the event and the impact it had on the students. This type of venue and meal was a new experience for most students, who are used to walking around while eating lunch, and they were able to try new and different foods (which they liked). The opportunity for students to share their hard work with others (including during school assemblies) also had a significant impact on their confidence: “Some kids are really shy but they managed to do the presentation. They’re really proud of what they’ve done.”

The event was a useful opportunity for schools to see what they have each been working towards. By comparing with other schools, some SFL gained a new perspective of their own school meal provision, food environment and available resources. On reflection, SFL would have liked more opportunities to meet together throughout the programme (face-to-face or remotely) to share ideas and feel less isolated.

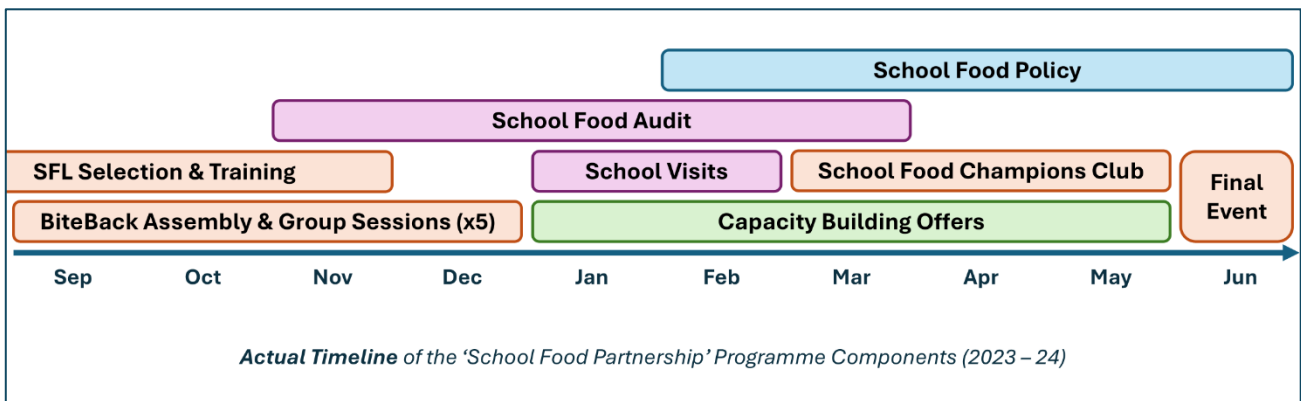
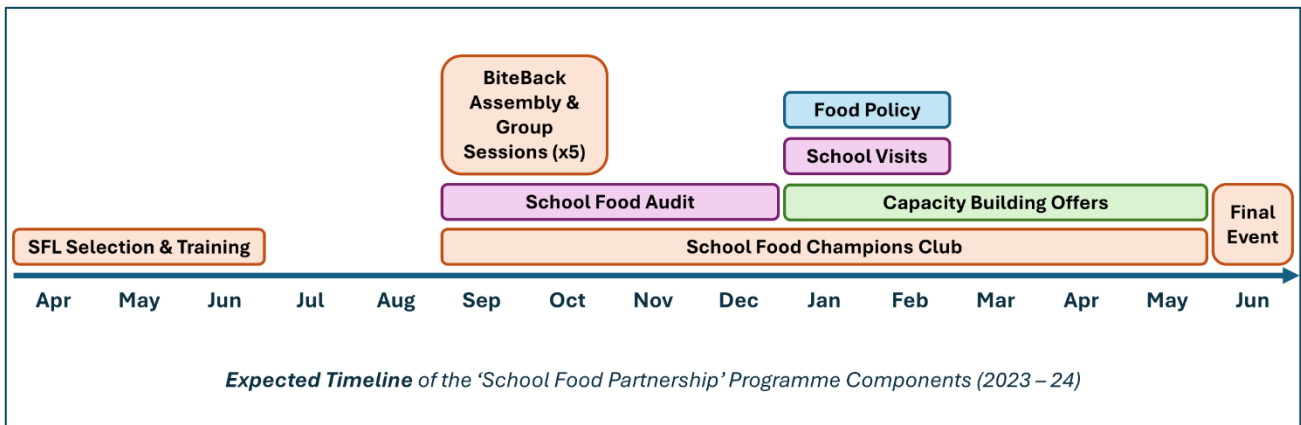
Beyond the school food environment and despite the challenges described, taking part in the SFP programme has been a beneficial experience for most schools, even if they wouldn’t take part again. It has given them a different perspective and highlighted issues or solutions they were previously unaware of. In particular, it has encouraged students’ confidence and improved their skills, as they have had to engage with other students, staff members, discuss ideas, compromise and work together:

“I’m really proud of myself and to be part of a change. You don’t always get to be part of that and see the impact. All the time spent is reflected and people notice. [...] It’s helped with the students’ confidence and they’ve learnt a lot of skills taking part – presenting, talking to people, talking in front of people.”

Practical Recommendations for School Food Interventions

- Where possible, limit the amount of work required by the schools and allocate a dedicated Project Officer (or equivalent) to provide support and complete tasks and activities. Reimburse costs for time and materials.
- Provide clear and concise information about tasks, materials and timelines at the earliest stage to enable schools to plan these alongside other teaching and student activities for the whole academic year.
- Take academic timetables (half terms, Easter break) into account when designing tasks, activities and workloads. Especially, reduce or limit tasks and activities during the summer exam period.
- Offer different options or methods for delivering information and resources to ensure equality of access across all schools and staff (e.g. electronically via USB, online, hard copies).

Appendix A: The SFP Programme Timeline (Expected and Actual)



Appendix B: Summary of School Catering Staff, Food Environment and Provision

	FSM ¹	SFL ²	School Catering Staff	Food Provision and Canteen
School 1	10 – 19%	Two SFL but one long-term sick during the SFP	Employed by the school with chef on long-term sick leave (no cover provided)	All vegetarian food cooked in the school kitchen but struggling to cook fresh and relying on readymade due to chef sickness
School 2	10 – 19%	Two SFL (one food tech), both 20 years' experience	Employed by catering company with new chef keen to improve menu/ uptake	Offer range of hot meals, takeaway items, desserts and meal deals with packed lunches eaten in designated areas only
School 3	10 – 19%	One SFL but went on maternity leave (SLT completed policy)	Employed by catering company with chef reluctant to try new things or change	Lunch service staggered and canteen divided by year group with separate service outside main canteen for year 11 Sixth form have separate café offering fizzy drinks and confectionary; open most of day
School 4	>19%	One SFL supported by SLT member	Employed by catering company with new chef keen to improve menu	Offer range of hot/cold food at breaktime with a hot meal service from the canteen and takeaway service from the kiosk at lunch
School 5	<10%	Three SFL (food tech and facilities)	Employed by catering company with dedicated chef	Cold food 'café' in same canteen but separate from 'restaurant style' hot meals and takeaway service (incl. sushi and free soup) with sixth form café access all day
School 6	<10%	Two SFL (one food tech)	Employed by catering company with new chef keen to improve menu	Recently refurbished canteen, with cake and salad bars, offering hot meals and takeaway service.
School 7	10 – 19%	One SFL (teaching assistant)	Employed by catering company with chef reluctant to try new things or change	Offer range of hot/cold food at break with hot meals and takeaway service at lunch from same canteen Provide hot meals for nearby primary school
School 8	>19%	One SFL supported by SLT member	Employed by catering company with new chef keen to improve menu	Offer range of hot/cold food at break with hot meals and takeaway service at lunch from same canteen Canteen was under refurbishment

¹ **FSM:** Free School Meals eligibility (percentage presented as range to prevent identification of individual schools)

² **SFL:** School Food (and Wellbeing) Leads for the School Food Partnership