Transforming food culture in Yorkshire’s schools and early years settings

Summary report of the co-creative Three Horizons process

October 2022
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive summary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background: Fixing our Food</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The challenge</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of schools and early years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Horizons map</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary narrative</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horizon 1 details</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horizon 3 details</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horizon 2 details</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horizon 2 map</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2 domains of strength</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2 domains of weakness</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next steps</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our food system, in Yorkshire and beyond, must transform towards a regenerative future. Schools and early years settings such as nurseries (hereafter abbreviated to ‘schools’) are a core component of regenerative food systems because they reach young people across all socio-economic groups and can influence their food choices for life.

In 2022, FixOurFood carried out a survey and workshops with a diverse range of students, practitioners and researchers involved in school food in Yorkshire. The Three Horizons practice was used to understand current challenges, desired futures, and critical actions needed to support transformation.

In our current food system, participants recognised that despite pockets of positivity, with many ongoing initiatives aimed at improving the school food system, there is on the whole a wide under-appreciation of the importance of food in schools that is threatening young people’s health and the environment. The trend-setting power of the national government is an important underpinning factor. Vicious cycles were identified related to declining funding for school meals, declining school meal quality, increasing negative perceptions of school food from students, declining school meal uptake, and declining food literacy, which reinforce a lack of care about food’s importance in school settings.

In our desired future, there is universal access to nutritious, tasty school food, promoting population and planetary health. The greater empowerment of young people in school food decision-making is particularly important for the dynamics of this future, not least because it enhances their food literacy and enjoyment.

To support transformation, it is critical to build upon existing inspiring initiatives to make whole school approaches to food central to school agendas, with greater continuity from early years. A combination of lobbying national government and inspiring school leaders is necessary to achieve a transformation. Care must be taken to avoid initiatives propping up the current system; steps to avoid this include ensuring that school food is both high-quality (nutritious and sustainable) and attractive, and ring-fencing funding for improving school food.

Domains of action with insufficient progress, that need to be urgently addressed to support transformation, include:

- overcoming the barriers in policy and resources around competing priorities in leadership (including national government) to move positive initiatives from the sidestream into the mainstream;
- making school food standards (positive examples of which exist) mandatory and strongly enforced;
- taking on board the voices of young people, parents and families in school food decision-making;
- overcoming the combined disruptive effects of the Ukraine war, COVID-19, Brexit, and the resultant cost-of-living crisis, including the breakdown of food supply chains and the prioritisation of ‘grab-and-go’ foods in place of food requiring proper cutlery and crockery;
- other domains including a lack of networks to share good practice and ideas; schools’ mitigation of food insecurity; the lack of truly transformative policy (including in relation to whole school approaches to food); and the current disjointed mechanism for allocating funding to schools for their food strategy.
The challenge

Our current food systems underpin many social and environmental crises, including food poverty, obesity, climate change, pollution and accelerating biodiversity loss.

There is increasing recognition that simply tweaking the current system (e.g. improving efficiency) is insufficient to address these crises, and that a more fundamental transformation is essential: changing values, mindsets, paradigms and narratives.

Moreover, many aspects of planetary and human health have already passed critical thresholds, so simply reducing further harm is also insufficient.

Instead, we need new regenerative food systems that ‘spiral up’ social and environmental benefits and restore human and environmental wellbeing.

A core challenge is therefore finding ways to steward transformations towards regenerative futures.

The importance of schools and early years settings

The way food is consumed in schools and early years settings such as nurseries (hereafter abbreviated to ‘schools’) is a core aspect of the wider Yorkshire food system that will need to be part of the transformation towards a more regenerative culture.

Transformation of school food culture is critical because providing healthy, tasty and sustainable food in these settings reaches children across all socio-economic groups, and offers not only nutrition, but opportunities to shape food choices and habits that can support healthy eating in the future.

Aims

This work aimed to answer the question: ‘Within schools and early years settings in Yorkshire, how can the food offering and culture be transformed so that they empower and benefit both people and our planet?’

Within this broad question, the work aimed to identify, in Yorkshire’s school food culture:

- current challenges;
- desired futures;
- critical actions needed to support transformation;
- inspirational actors and practice already existing currently in Yorkshire.

It was hoped that this work would bring out a focus on orienting change towards those needing it most; empowerment of young people as being a core part of the change; and a dual benefit for people and the planet.

The work is one of three parallel processes undertaken as part of FixOurFood, a £6M five year project funded by the UKRI Transforming Food Systems Strategic Priorities Fund, which aims to understand how to steward transformations towards a regenerative food system in Yorkshire and beyond.


Approach

A survey and series of online workshops were held in 2022 with adults working in and researching the food culture of Yorkshire’s early years and school settings, using the Three Horizons practice, to co-create strategic insights about how to support transformation. This approach is grounded in future methods and systems thinking. A separate in-person Three Horizons workshop was held with secondary school pupils who are part of FixOurFood’s Leaders for Change programme. These are pupils from schools around Yorkshire, whose voices are integral to driving food transformation within their schools and communities, and for priority setting around school food within FixOurFood.

Three Horizons was chosen for this purpose for a number of reasons:
- it is a simple yet powerful method of dealing with complexity and uncertainty in a way that fosters a sense of empowerment and hope;
- it develops the skill of conceptualising how futures emerge from the present (so-called futures consciousness);
- it explicitly distinguishes between transformative change and more reformist or conformist types of change;
- it identifies where power lies in systems;
- and it fosters empathy for different mindsets, creating a space where a diverse range of stakeholders can convene to constructively share their different perspectives.

Three Horizons centres around a framework of three overlapping ‘horizons’, each representing a pattern in the way things are done:

- **Horizon 1 (H1)** is the current failing pattern that is increasingly unfit for a changing world;
- **Horizon 3 (H3)** is the desired future pattern aligned to a changing world;
- **Horizon 2 (H2)** is the space of innovations, initiatives and actions that can potentially foster and create space for the emergence of H3. **H2+ initiatives** genuinely encourage H3, whereas **H2- initiatives** are simply captured by H1 to extend its lifespan (e.g. improvements in the efficiency of H1 processes). H2+ should be encouraged, and H2- should be avoided.

Participants explored their collective understanding in relation to:
- challenges in the current food system (H1);
- the desired future (H3); and
- the transformative action (H2) needed to get to that future, including by identifying what H1 aspects we wish to keep or amplify, e.g. as a holder of resources that can power H2 action, and what actors and practice embodying aspects of H3 already exist in the present, providing sources of hope and inspiration.

Participants also helped to identify interrelationships between the different aspects of the H2 action space, allowing us to create a systemic concept map of current and necessary action to achieve transformation.

The outcome of this process is a **collective and strategic understanding** of how actions can be more effectively cohered to support systemic transformation.

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Transforming food culture in Yorkshire’s schools and early years settings

Summary report of the co-creative Three Horizons process

Current challenges
Disruptions and innovations
The desired future

Inspirational practice in the present

Essential features to maintain

Three Horizons map
Under-appreciation of food’s importance in schools and early years is failing young people’s health and the environment.

Horizon 1
Present challenges

The importance of food in schools and early years (hereafter ‘schools’) is under-appreciated by many policy-makers, school staff and others involved in school food, leading to poorly enforced food standards, under-funded meals, and inadequate food education.

School food is therefore often unhealthy, unappealing, wasteful, and does not prioritise the environment. Portion sizes are often small, and food quality varies substantially between institutions, especially in early years. Healthier and more sustainable options are harder to access for schools, leading to increased risk of poor health in young people and health inequalities. The food environment surrounding schools (including fast food outlets) may exacerbate poor health.

School dining environments are often stressful, with insufficient time and space for enjoying meals, exacerbating negative perceptions of school food and hindering children’s engagement with food.

The wider social justice emergency of increasing food poverty and inequalities at home both exacerbates and is exacerbated by school food challenges. Children are increasingly dependent on school meals for nutrition, even as free school meal eligibility is not being extended.
Transforming food culture in Yorkshire’s schools and early years settings

Summary report of the co-creative Three Horizons process

Summary narrative

Horizon 3
Our desired future

School food is understood as integral to the wider food and education system. National and local policy mandates, clearly communicates and monitors school food standards that include evaluation of food education and support planetary and population health.

Schools have sufficient funding and resources to provide high-quality food for all. Nutritious, sustainable and appealing food is universally accessible in schools and has high take-up, reducing need for packed lunches. Universal free school meals have been extended to nurseries and across all key stages, and breakfast clubs and holiday provision have been extended to all early years families. There is no longer a focus on profit and competition between school catering companies. School food has a positive environmental impact, with seasonal, locally produced food as the norm, and minimal waste.

Students, staff and families have high levels of food literacy, building on a whole school approach to food. This starts in early years, ensuring that children are already food-literate when starting school. This encourages students’ and families’ engagement in school food decision-making and makes school food more appealing. Students learn how to eat well for life, with early years being an important stepping stone for confidence and understanding of healthy choices.

Consequently, those in school communities are healthier in body and mind. Lunchtimes in schools are relaxed and fun for all, providing opportunities to develop social skills. Schools support wider community wellbeing via food partnerships and pastoral support.
Summary narrative

Horizon 2
Supporting transformation

**Demand mandatory school food standards** that embed the importance of healthy, tasty and sustainable food via a whole school food approach. This will respond to concerns about strained healthcare and climate change, and improve access to healthy, tasty and sustainable food for all. National and local governments must empower schools to change their procurement practices.

**Getting school leadership on board is key:** engage with and support schools across Yorkshire to make whole school approaches to food central to school agendas. Encouraging policy change in schools and having a government that financially supports this transformation will raise the priority of food education in the national curriculum.

**Improve the food literacy of staff, students and families,** inspired by examples of school leadership and chefs who recognise food’s importance within education, and existing whole school approaches to food. Forge stronger partnerships between early years and schools for continuity in child food literacy. Work with catering teams to maximise their influence on students’ food choice, and raise awareness of the early years voluntary food standards. Prioritise chef training for provision of nutritious and tasty food in nurseries. Support families in learning basic cooking skills.

**Involve children and parents/carers in decision-making,** increasing their sense of autonomy over food choice and contributing to improved food literacy. Good communication is needed between staff and parents/carers in all schools.

Make whole school approaches to food central to school agendas, with greater continuity from early years.
To understand H1, participants identified challenges in the current Yorkshire early years and school food system that demonstrate its decreasing fit with wider changing conditions, and that it is under strain. The Leaders for Change identified what is currently stopping young people from having healthy and environmentally sustainable school food, and what makes them think it needs to change.

Participants identified that the importance of food in schools is under-appreciated by many policymakers, school staff and others involved in school food (e.g. catering companies and menu-writers), leading to poorly enforced food standards, under-funded meals, and inadequate food education. They described a vicious cycle of funding being reduced for schools with low school meal uptake, further hindering those schools’ ability to increase meal quality.

School food is therefore often unhealthy, unappealing, wasteful, and does not prioritise the environment. Portion sizes are often small, and differ unfairly between key stages; food quality also varies substantially between school settings. Healthier and more sustainable options are more expensive and therefore harder to access for schools, leading to increased risk of poor health in young people and health inequalities. Children with specific cultural dietary needs or allergens and intolerances may have reduced choices. Despite mandatory food standards in schools, the ethos of healthy eating in some schools is weak, with health messaging not reinforced and unhealthy treats offered as rewards. The food environment surrounding schools (including fast food outlets) may further exacerbate poor food choices.

School dining environments are often stressful, with insufficient time and space (especially outdoors) for enjoying meals, exacerbating negative perceptions of school food and hindering children’s engagement with food.

The wider social justice emergency of increasing food poverty and inequality at home both exacerbates and is exacerbated by school food challenges. Children are increasingly dependent on school meals for nutrition, even as free school meal eligibility is not being extended.

Other H1 challenges include the combined impacts of the Ukraine war, the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit: recession and inflation, further pushing school food further down on the political agenda; product shortages that encourage prioritisation of relatively non-perishable and unhealthy processed school food; and suspicion of reusable items, leading to greater plastic waste.

The Leaders for Change placed a particular emphasis on the problem of waste, especially plastic, produced by the school food system, as well as poor access to nutritional food and drink due to financial difficulties and inequalities (which the Leaders for Change reported to have a knock-on effect on students’ ability to learn).

In summary, the under-appreciation of food’s importance in schools in H1 is failing young people’s health and the environment. The trend-setting power of the national government and school leadership, which is currently failing to influence and support a systemic transformation in school food culture, is an important underpinning factor in H1. Vicious cycles were identified related to declining funding for school meals, declining school meal quality, increasing negative perceptions of school food from students, declining school meal uptake, and declining food literacy, which reinforce a lack of care about food’s importance in schools.
To understand H3, participants imagined looking around them in ten years’ time and identifying evidence that the Yorkshire school food culture has been transformed and is now able to continually evolve in line with the changing environment.

Participants envisioned that in H3, **food in schools is understood as integral to the wider food and education system**. National and local policy mandates, clearly communicates and monitors school food standards that include evaluation of food education and support planetary and population health. **Schools have sufficient funding and resources to provide high-quality food for all.** Nutritious and appealing food is universally accessible in schools and has high take-up, reducing need for packed lunches; universal free school meals have been extended to nurseries and across all key stages, and holiday/breakfast clubs have been extended to all early years families. There is no longer a focus on profit and competition between school catering companies. School food has a positive environmental impact, with seasonal, locally produced food as the norm (including fruit and vegetables grown on-site where possible), minimal waste, and support of regenerative agriculture and wider environmental restoration.

**Students, staff and families have high levels of food literacy**, building on a whole school approach to food. This starts in early years, ensuring that children are already food-literate when starting school, and school kitchens are well-equipped for food education. This encourages students’ and families’ engagement in school food decision-making and makes school food more appealing. Students learn how to eat well for life, with early years being an important stepping stone for confidence and understanding of healthy choices.

**Consequently, those in the school community are healthier in body and mind.** Lunchtimes in schools are relaxed, fun and educational for all, providing opportunities to develop social skills and creativity. Schools support wider community wellbeing via food partnerships and pastoral support, which lead to healthier food environments surrounding schools (e.g. street vendors and food advertising).

Particularly prominent in the future envisioned by the Leaders for Change were a culture of self-sufficiency and wastelessness, including zero packaging and ‘refilling’; more healthy food, food variety and menu transparency (e.g. providing nutritional information); and greater protection and regeneration of the natural world.

In summary, **H3 is characterised by universal access to nutritious, tasty food in schools, promoting population and planetary health.** Particularly important to the dynamics of H3 is greater empowerment of young people in school food decision-making, not least because it enhances their food literacy and enjoyment.
To understand H2, participants identified current initiatives, or initiatives that were needed, that could help to facilitate the transformative shift from H1 to H3. Participants also explored H2+ versus H2- initiatives, and identified domains of H2 where good progress is already being made, and domains of H2 where there is insufficient progress and/or currently a lack of action.

According to the participants, there is a need to demand mandatory food standards in schools that embed the importance of healthy and sustainable food in wider education. This will respond to concerns about strained healthcare and climate change, and improve access to healthy, tasty and sustainable food for all. National and local governments must empower schools to change their procurement practices. Moves to improve food access can draw on successful pre-existing initiatives and policies such as breakfast clubs, the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme, Universal Infant Free School Meals, and many local initiatives in Yorkshire.

Getting school leadership on board is key: schools must be engaged and supported across Yorkshire to make whole school approaches to food central to school agendas. Encouraging policy change in schools and having a government that financially supports this transformation will raise the priority of food education in the national curriculum. There should be stronger networks for sharing best practice between schools.

A focus must be improving the food literacy of staff, students and families, inspired by examples of school leadership and chefs who recognise food’s importance within education, and existing whole school approaches to food. Stronger partnerships should be forged between schools and early years for continuity in child food literacy. Catering teams should be trained to maximise their influence on students’ food choice, and raise their awareness of the early years voluntary food standards. Chef training for provision of nutritious and tasty food in nurseries should be a priority. Disadvantaged families should be supported in learning basic cooking skills.

Children and parents/carers must be involved in decision-making. This will increase their sense of autonomy over food choice and contribute to improved food literacy. Good communication is needed between staff and parents/carers in all school settings.

Initiatives are unlikely to make a positive transformative difference if certain conditions are not met. For example, initiatives to increase access to school food will have limited impact if the food itself is not attractive and high-quality; using creative techniques (e.g. fun labelling and rewards) to make school food attractive needs the food itself to be high-quality; school funding must be ring-fenced for improving school food to avoid the temptation to spend it on other things; and parents and pupils need to be motivated to change school food before they are engaged in decision-making.

The Leaders for Change emphasised the importance of ‘quick wins’ that could rapidly generate tangible positive impacts, such as introducing/encouraging reusable water bottles; better connections of communication between students and those in power, who must listen and recognise the urgency of transforming the school food system as soon as possible; and focus on improving holistic food education, e.g. during Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) lessons, such that global problems and solutions surrounding food are discussed.

In summary, key to H2 action is to make whole school approaches to food central to school agendas, with greater continuity from early years. A combination of lobbying government and inspiring school leaders is necessary for transformation.
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FixOurFood
H2 domains of strength

Domains of H2 where good progress is already being made include:

- a wide array of inspiring actions already happening in the sidestream, e.g. in particular areas of Yorkshire, such as Sheffield. These include exemplars of school food leadership, whole school food approaches, and youth voices in decision-making;
- momentum from wider political concerns that could encourage food system transformation, including the focus on population-level preventative healthcare in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, food security, climate change, and the levelling-up agenda, which has already led to the development of a mechanism for schools to report on their food strategy;
- the wide reach of existing school food standards, especially the Soil Association’s Food for Life partnerships (in which around 5000 schools are currently enrolled in England);
- other domains such as the success of the Universal Infant Free School Meals initiative, and the close relationship between schools and caterers (especially due to the adaptation necessary in the face of COVID-19).

Participants identified many innovative organisations and initiatives already active in the H2 space of school food culture, such as Sheffield City Council, Chefs in Schools, TastEd, Rethink Food, Crown Commercial Services’ dynamic procurement programme, and the Soil Association’s Food for Life programme.

H2 domains of weakness

Areas of H2 where there is insufficient progress and/or currently a lack of action include:

- overcoming the barriers in policy and resources around competing priorities in leadership (including national government) to move positive initiatives from the sidestream into the mainstream. School leadership also generally lacks a prioritisation of healthy and sustainable food due to competing demands, and there is a widening gap between schools that prioritise food and climate change and schools that do not.
- making school food standards (positive examples of which exist) mandatory and strongly enforced;
- taking on board the voices of young people, parents and families in school food decision-making. School food’s attractiveness to young people is key for the success of any food culture transformation, and parent/family influence could help to change the culture of offering unhealthy treats as rewards in classrooms;
- overcoming the combined disruptive effects of the Ukraine war, COVID-19, Brexit, and the resultant cost-of-living crisis, including the breakdown of food supply chains and the prioritisation of ‘grab-and-go’ foods in place of food requiring proper cutlery and crockery;
- other domains including a lack of networks to share good practice and ideas; schools’ mitigation of food insecurity; the lack of truly transformative policy (including in relation to whole school food approaches); and the current mechanism for allocating funding to schools for their food strategy. This latter mechanism was felt to be too disjointed, with a different system for each local authority and confusion and obfuscation surrounding what funding is allocated or available to what. The Schools Forum could potentially be a platform for addressing this issue.
We hope that the insights presented in this report will help to guide food system transformation. We are already building on the report in multiple ways. We have already undertaken rapid policy response work around the Holiday Activities and Food Programme, and undertaken research with 300 students from a range of schools to understand their priorities around food in schools. In addition, we are currently doing the following:

- working with primary schools across the region to build a network which will be unprecedented in its size and scope. This network will focus on research around whole school approaches to food. We are also working closely with around 25 schools to undertake in-depth research and provide guidance around improving the food offer and integrating food across the curriculum;

- planning research on whether children are able to buy healthy, tasty and sustainable food at school if they are receiving free school meals. This will be a citizen science project - the students themselves will be conducting the research within their schools;

- continuing to build relationships with stakeholders within food in schools, and with local and national-level policymakers.

Next steps
We are indebted to a wide range of organisations for their inspiring input into this work, including:

- Bite Back 2030
- Catering Leeds
- Chefs in Schools
- DEFRA
- Early Start Group
- Eat Smart Sheffield
- Edible York
- First Steps Nutrition
- Food for Life
- Good Food York
- Grow to School
- Healthy Living Lab, Northumbria University
- Leaders for Change
- Leeds Beckett University
- Leeds City Council
- London Early Years Foundation
- Minor, Weir & Willis Ltd
- North Yorkshire County Council
- Rethink Food
- School Food Matters
- School Food Review
- School of Food Science and Nutrition, University of Leeds
- Sheffield City Council
- Soil Association
- Springfield Agricultural
- Taste Education
- The Halifax Academy

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