Flintshire School Meals Project
2013-2015

Flintshire County Council and Organic Centre Wales

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Better Organic Business Links – Gwell Cysylltiadau Busnes Organig


Opportunity to promote sustainability

The BOBL project gives the organic sector in Wales a unique opportunity to:

- Develop new, emerging and existing markets for organic produce.
- Innovate in farming, processing and product development.
- Promote sustainable practices on farms, in abattoirs, in cutting rooms and kitchens and along the food chain.
- Raise market awareness among producers and increase sales across the range of outlets.

Tackling all parts of the supply chain

The BOBL project is working in partnership with a range of specialist providers to deliver these opportunities by focusing on:

1. Driving innovation through trials and research.
2. Supporting market development opportunities such as agri-tourism and supply chain efficiency programmes.
3. Disseminating up to date market intelligence, by commissioning detailed, focused consumer attitude surveys.
4. Addressing key structural problems within the sector, such as imbalances in organic horticulture supply and demand, and the availability of organic pullets.
5. Cross cutting issues: Sustainable Food Communities and Secure Alternative Markets.
6. Running an integrated communications campaign to help the sector deliver clear messages about the benefits of organic food and farming.

By strengthening the sector at all points along the supply chain, the project aims to leave a legacy of a more robust, responsive and sustainable organic industry in Wales.

The project is funded under the Rural Development Plan for Wales 2007-2014, which in turn is funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

For further information on the project please see: http://www.organiccentrewales.org.uk/business-bobl.php and http://boblproject.org.uk

Cover picture: Mold Food Festival carrier bag design by Ben Bartlett, Ysgol Mynydd Isa, Flintshire. With thanks to Carolyn Poole.
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**Executive Summary**

During 2013-2015 Organic Centre Wales worked with the Flintshire Schools Meals service and a number of local partners to see how the school meal experience could be enhanced by educational activities of various sorts, following the inspiration of the English programme Food for Life.

School meals play a crucial role in developing whole-school food education, which includes healthy eating, cookery, gardening, and knowledge of the local food system, as well as activities delivered through the formal curriculum, and general wellbeing. The school meals service also has great potential to play a role in promoting rural regeneration, both directly through its procurement policy and also indirectly by linking to educational activities such as farmers’ markets. Finally, schools have a role to play in disseminating food skills such as cookery and gardening to the local community, as well as building social cohesion and so mitigating the effects of poverty.

Here we describe a range of activities that were carried out over a two-year period, including training for school cooks, farm visits, gardening support and schoolyard farmers markets. For the most part these were offered to schools on a first come, first served basis, and no one school benefited from all the activities on offer. No attempt was made therefore to study the synergy between activities, or what might be achieved if a single school was able to participate in all of them, and an obvious next step might be to focus all efforts on just a few target schools in order to see what can be achieved.

We also suggest some future directions in which this work could be developed to achieve wider benefits for improving public health, building communities, alleviating poverty and regenerating rural economies.
1 Introduction

Organic Centre Wales approached Flintshire School Meals service in 2013 to see how extra educational activities could be used to support the work the Council was already doing to promote its use of the Food for Life Catering Mark. Flintshire is still the only local authority in Wales to hold the certification for its in-house meals service and we wanted to see how activities such as farm visits could build on that to increase children’s awareness of where food comes from, encourage healthy eating and ultimately increase school meals uptake.

Children’s experience of food is central to their health, social relationships and links to the wider world. It is therefore vital that they are given high quality food in school, that the dining room culture makes eating a pleasant experience, and that they learn something of where the food comes from. School meals, classroom work and practical activities such as gardening and farm visits play an important role in developing an understanding of food which will serve them for the rest of their lives, and help to create a sustainable food system in the future.

Our starting point was to invite Jeanette Orrey, pioneering school cook from Nottinghamshire and one of the founders of the acclaimed English school meals programme Food for Life (www.foodforlife.org) to deliver training to a group of school cooks. Following that, a series of educational activities were offered to schools in the county, including farm visits, community engagement events with school gardens, school farmers markets and a pop-up restaurant. In addition, OCW worked with Council initiatives, delivering food mapping workshops to support a local food school meal led by Taste of Flintshire.

This project ran alongside and worked closely with the Council’s work on Appetite for Life, which included parents’ evenings, a recipe booklet, activities at the Mold Food Festival and the local food school meal.

2 Food for Life Catering Mark and healthy eating in Flintshire

The Food for Life Catering Mark (see http://www.sacert.org/catering) is an award given by the Soil Association to both public and private caterers in recognition of the steps they are taking to serve healthy, unprocessed food from sustainable sources, and to educate their customers at the same time. It is available at Bronze, Silver and Gold levels and is held by many Welsh universities and some other institutions. The Council is the only one in Wales to hold a Bronze Food for Life Catering Mark for its in-house school meals service, which involves 68 primary schools and 13 high schools. They see it as improving the food they serve by using fresh ingredients (where possible) which are free from undesirable additives and trans fats, better for animal welfare, and comply with Welsh nutrition standards. They think it increases uptake (and therefore the profitability of the service) and helps them in communication with pupils, parents and staff.

The Council already places great emphasis on healthy eating. Events that the council organized during the period of the project, and more generally, include:
• Parents evenings to promote school meals (ongoing each school year)
• Taster events with the children to get them trying new foods with their peers (ongoing each school year)
• School Meals recipe booklet showcasing 10 school meals for the local community (September 2014)
• Cooking Bus hired by Flintshire School Meals to promote healthy eating and school meals at the Mold Food Festival (September 2014)
• School Meals Competition invited pupils across the county to design a well-balanced school meal that will feature on the menu 15/16 (2015)
• Healthy packed lunch competition (2015)
• Locally sourced theme day lunch in support of the Taste of Flintshire Project (Sept 2014)
• Supporting National Theme Days (Fish and Chips) (2015)

3 Training for cooks

School cooks play a central role in the school meals service, not just because they cook the food, but because of the opportunity they have to influence school food policy. It was a school cook, Jeanette Orrey MBE, who pioneered such a role at her own primary school in Nottinghamshire from 2000 onwards and was a driving force behind the Soil Association’s Food for Life programme, and so an important part of the Flintshire programme was to give cooks the skills and confidence to be food educators in their own schools. We invited Jeanette to deliver a two-day training course for school cooks at Ysgol Broughton in the spring of 2014. This included practical sessions, a meal with guests from the county and beyond, and discussions of the role of the school cook in promoting healthy eating.

The course was very well received by the cooks, who found that it gave them fresh inspiration for their work. It helped them with practical kitchen skills (they are still using some of the recipes introduced at the training event) and also with talking to the pupils and teachers who are their customers. It showed the significance of their role not just as providers of food in schools but also as educators, and empowered them to take a more active lead. Further courses with Jeanette were provided for all primary school cooks by the Council.
A school visit to a farm is a memorable educational experience that can support work in food education, geography and many other areas of the curriculum, besides providing an ‘outdoor classroom’ which provides a range of experiences that benefit all pupils, and particularly those who may not respond so well in the classroom. They can be difficult to arrange because many teachers are unfamiliar with the implications of a farm visit, and many farmers are uncertain of the requirement of school children, but resources are available to overcome these difficulties and bring the two worlds together, with inspiring results.

Three schools attended visits to Rhug Organic Farm near Corwen, a large enterprise that already has good provision for visitors, with a café, toilets, shop and trailer. The schools were: Mynydd Isa (Language resources unit, 16 pupils of mixed ages), Bryn Gwalia, Year 2 pupils; and St David’s RC School. Pupils were given a trailer tour of the farm, took part in a demonstration of burger making, saw the bison area and took part in some indoor craft activities. The schools were very appreciative of this opportunity and there were requests from a further five schools wanting to take part.
5 School gardens

Growing food in schools is a rewarding way to teach children about food production, thus supporting healthy eating, and an even supply of produce directly to the canteen, especially herbs. We investigated different ways of helping schools to make more of their gardens.

Grants of £700 were offered to three schools to improve their school gardens in 2014. The schools that responded were Ysgol Gwynedd in Flint, Ysgol Mynydd Isa Infants school in Mold, and Ysgol Abermorddu. The first two schools spent the funding on raised beds. The third requested a teacher training session on gardening and the curriculum, delivered by the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens.

As it emerged that schools benefit very much from outside help in developing their gardens (Ysgol Mynydd Isa for instance works with their retired caretaker who is a gardener, and Ysgol Gwynedd wanted to work with their local allotment society) we then commissioned Garden Organic, a charity that has many years of experience in supporting school gardens, to run community engagement events in Ysgol Gwynedd and Ysgol Broughton.

Garden Organic visited both schools in order to identify the current level of volunteer engagement, skills and knowledge, and to determine each school’s long term plan for volunteer involvement and help them design an action plan to achieve this. They then ran a bespoke engagement day at each school in February and March 2015, where teachers, parents, grandparents and other members of the local community were invited for a day of practical activities, training and discussion. This included seasonal growing, cropping plans, enterprise logistics, horticultural skills and developing a volunteering plan for the school.

They also included small group discussions on the benefits and challenges of growing in school, and on the roles and expectations of teachers, pupils and volunteers. This enabled the participants to connect over a shared purpose and develop confidence in what they were doing, laying foundations for future work. From the school side, a classroom assistant said: “Just to thank you so much for yesterday, talking with the parents they have loved every minute and can’t wait to help in our school. A big thank you again – Zoë”
Volunteers found that the event gave them more confidence to get involved. One of them said: “I nearly didn’t come this morning, as I didn’t think it was for me and now I am so glad I did.”

Following the event, Ysgol Gwynedd have set up a gardening club and are holding gardening sessions every Wednesday for volunteers to develop their confidence, skills and knowledge. They plan to organize more Family Fun Friday activities around growing and healthy eating, and have identified some areas where they could grow more fruit that would be accessible to parents to harvest. Some of the volunteers are going to start their own growing areas at home, showing the two-way benefits of community engagement with schools.

Ysgol Broughton plan to set up a volunteer rota for regular tasks. They are also going to start compost monitor training for Year 5s, and a volunteer will help them construct the compost bay. They will make a cropping plan and start selling produce at a regular stand, while continuing to develop their growing areas.

Case studies of the events, together with a leaflet commissioned from Garden Organic to support volunteers at schools, are available at www.organiccentrewales.org.uk/schools-gardens.php.

6 School farmers markets

A school farmers market is an effective way to teach pupils about their local food system and to involve them in the practical activities that need to be undertaken when setting up and running a market within school. The Mid Wales Food and Land Trust, who have pioneered the concept, were funded to deliver markets in five Flintshire schools (Ysgol Rhoshelyg, Ysgol Gwenffrwd, Ysgol Bro Carmel, Ysgol y Terrig, Treuddyn and Glanrafon County Primary) in 2010-11, and as part of the present project, OCW commissioned the Trust to revisit these schools, find out whether they had held further markets (three of them had), and make recommendations for future work. Their report is available here: www.organiccentrewales.org.uk/schools-meals.php.

For each school, the Trust held an initial visit to inform staff about the project and to explain curriculum links and the project resources available, then ran a structured formal educational session to work with the group or groups of pupils who would be planning and running the market, and finally attended the market itself to ensure the smooth running of it and to evaluate its success. Activities carried out with the pupils, and supported by written materials, included:
• Splitting the learners into ‘task groups’ each with its own jobs to complete, such as a marketing team, a finance team, an administration team, a procurement team, a manufacturing team, a design team etc.
• Writing to organisers of the local town/village market to explain about their own market and invite a representative into the school to discuss the project.
• Writing to the local papers to advertise the market within the local area.
• Developing a survey to use with customers at the market to enable the group to evaluate the success of their activity.
• Choosing and producing a product to sell on the school market stall.
• Working out the costs of producing their product and responsibility for collecting money.
• A range of other activities to promote the work of local farmers and food producers, introduce learners to enterprise with a social/community focus and stimulate enthusiasm for local food and the countryside which produces it.

The markets were all successful and appreciated by the schools and producers alike. They stimulated interest in further projects, and as one teacher said: “We built some good relationships with some of the producers whilst the project was running and would like to have visited them. It didn’t happen. We would have welcomed help in organising this”. The Trust’s experience is that many schools go on to organize regular markets, typically one or two a year, while others do not continue with the work, citing a tightly packed curriculum and lack of time as problems. This pattern was borne out in Flintshire too, with three of the five schools holding a further one or two markets, and only one expressing a commitment to regular events (one every two years).

7 Local food school meal

Many people instinctively respond to the idea that we should eat more food from our local area, for a range of reasons: to support the local economy, to reduce food miles and therefore carbon emissions, to raise awareness of local culture and seasonality, and to build links with local businesses.

In September 2014 the school meals service in conjunction with Taste of Flintshire, a Council-backed initiative to ‘increase the accessibility and visibility of locally produced food and drink in the wonderful county of Flintshire’ worked with local suppliers to serve a lunch made up entirely of local ingredients, to over 1000 pupils in the Holywell cluster. Flintshire, in common with the rest of Wales, does not gear its food production to the requirements of local caterers and is short on fruit and vegetables, so this event required considerable advance planning.

Jane Clough, Taste of Flintshire co-ordinator, said: "Some of our suppliers are producing in large quantities and for them this has been relatively easy, but others grow on a smaller scale and have been growing produce specifically for this meal." Minera-based Mountain Produce in Minera had been growing basil and the Hawarden Estate planted an extra two long rows of courgettes back in May.
Laura England, Appetite for Life Coordinator at Flintshire Council said: "Once we decided on the menu, I was surprised at how easy it was to source the ingredients locally. The school cooks have really welcomed the whole concept of using local produce and cooking from scratch and are looking forward to serving it as this month's special themed meal."

Recipe sheets and information on the producers were given to the children to take home for their parents to re-create the meal. To support the event, OCW delivered food mapping workshops at Bryngarth, Pen-y-Ffordd and St Winefride’s primary schools, helping pupils to find the producers on a large aerial photograph and discussing other forms of local food production, such as allotments and school gardens.

8 Mold Food Festival

The Focus on Food Cooking bus is a mobile kitchen that visits schools and events to provide cookery sessions for young people. The school meals service commissioned the bus to attend the Festival in September 2014 and host the live final of its ‘Come and Cook’ competition. Children from across the county were invited to submit their own recipe designs for the competition, which was aimed at raising awareness of the nutritious balance of school meals and promoting local produce. Over the weekend Flintshire School Meals Service welcomed pupils and children to take part in age related cooking sessions on the cooking bus with the aim of encouraging children to be confident cooks and raise awareness of Flintshire School Meals.

Meanwhile, the Healthy Schools team at the Council ran a competition for schools to design the Festival’s official carrier bag, on the theme of local food. The winning design, by Ben Bartlett of Ysgol Mynydd Isa, is on the cover of the present report.
Another innovative concept developed by the Mid Wales Food and Land Trust to connect schools with local producers is the ‘pop-up restaurant’. This is a one-off partnership between a school and a local professional chef, who together create and serve a meal from fresh, locally sourced ingredients. OCW commissioned the Mid Wales Food and Land Trust to deliver two pop-up restaurants for primary schools although only one school took up the offer, Wood Memorial Primary School at Saltney.

The Trust’s project officer worked closely with the school to help them develop their project ideas, and followed the Council’s suggestion of using the school cook Maxine Graham...
herself as the chef. During an initial educational visit pupils were encouraged to consider the planning, marketing, financial and logistical aspects of setting up their community restaurant and record their ideas using a business plan which remained with the school and could provide a blueprint for further repeats of the project with other classes as they pass up through the school. Local businesses donated food, and the event was held on 18 June 2015. It involved 44 pupils who helped out the kitchen, set the scene and waited on tables, and was much appreciated by the 42 guests.

The menu, which fitted in with the school’s Fish and Chips theme, was a three-course meal: Dipper Tentacle or Two, Ocean Pie and Chips Ahoy, and Trifle under the Sea.

10  Next steps

We have described here a number of activities held to support school meals in Flintshire. These came from various providers and funding streams, working to different timetables, and were not planned as a coordinated whole. Here we suggest some steps that might be taken in future in order to realize the potential of primary schools to support healthy eating, community engagement, rural regeneration and a range of other benefits, using the school meals service as the focal point.

10.1 Support for the school meals service

The Council identified the following factors which would help them improve the school meals service.

1. Training for Dining Room Assistants. The Dining room assistants (DRAs) are the ‘front of house’ for the school meals service, and have a strong influence on how children respond to it. They can for instance encourage children to try new foods, help them use knives and forks, and talk to them about their meal, providing a friendly atmosphere in which to enjoy it. However, as they are employed directly by the school, the Council has no input in training. This is a situation they would like to change.
2. **Engagement with head teachers.** Having the full support of head teachers would be a major step in realizing the potential of school meals to improve healthy eating and understanding of food. This might perhaps be done by showing them the benefits that can be gained from a strong school meals service linked to a whole school approach, including activities such as cookery clubs, gardening, community involvement and farm visits. The evaluation of the English programme Food for Life (Orme et al., 2011) showed that such an approach, which brings together different areas of school life and releases energy and creativity, can increase pupil attainment as well as supporting healthy eating for children and their parents.

3. **Engagement with parents.** The Council would like to be in closer touch with parents, beyond the parents’ evenings that some of them attend. They are considering an e-mail or text service to update them on developments. They also think that promotional work is necessary to remove the stigma around school meals and increase uptake.

4. **Support for cooks** Professional development for cooks, the front line in school food, could be very helpful. This could include having flexibility to move them around between schools, so that they can experience other environments, and bigger or smaller kitchens. Farm visits might be another useful input, and many would benefit from modernised kitchen equipment.

**10.2 Procuring quality local food**

The local food school demonstrated the enthusiasm there is among producers and the public alike for serving the best possible food to school children, and the importance of this has been well described by Prof Kevin Morgan in a recent paper to the Senedd, Good Food for All (Morgan, 2015). However, there are many obstacles to doing this on a regular basis. These include the increased cost (real and perceived), and the small and irregular supply of many products.

More fundamentally, Welsh agriculture and horticulture are not geared to supplying the home market with a balanced diet. However, there is increasing interest among Welsh producers in selling to the public sector, and growth in uptake of the Food for Life Catering Mark, so there are possibilities here for the future. The benefits go beyond serving good food to children, and include a general strengthening of the local food culture and regeneration of the rural economy, as the public sector is a significant market.

**10.3 School gardens**

There is much potential here for further development, and especially integration with school meals, the curriculum and the local community. A report from OCW (Morris and Powell, 2015) identifies some of the possibilities for developing school (and college) gardens, and some key ways in which they may be supported. In particular, there is scope here for providing indirect assistance to communities in areas of deprivation, through involving parents and other volunteers in the school and spreading growing and possibly also cooking skills. Such activities go some way towards improving the diets of the poorest,
and in rebuilding community links, two of the key messages of the Feeding Britain report (All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom, 2014).

Of note in this context is Garden Organic’s Master Gardeners scheme (see http://mastergardeners.org.uk/) which trains volunteers to share gardening skills in their local schools, day care centres, prisons and so on, with significant social and environmental benefits.

10.4 Local producer links

Connecting schools with local food producers is an important part of learning where food comes from, as well as making links with the business and the community. Producers and processors are often keen to share their knowledge with young people, as well as to expand their own markets. School farmers markets, pop up restaurants, school visits to farms and food businesses, farmer visits into school – all these have a role to play not just in food education but also rural regeneration and building local food culture.

Some of these activities, such as the farmers markets, are self-financing while others, such as farm visits, may have significant costs in the shape of bus hire and possibly a fee to the farmer. All of them require the school to develop a working relationship with one or more producers, and can lead on to a vast array of educational possibilities, covering science, geography, business, careers, and oral and literacy skills. More information is available at www.face-online.org.uk and www.face-cymru.org.uk, and see Mid Wales Food and Land Trust (2014).

10.5 Conclusion

Providing high quality food to children, and equipping them with food skills for life, is of the utmost importance, and school meals have a key role to play in this. Our project has explored the many ways in which school food can be developed and suggests some ways forward. While very many worthwhile projects are already running in schools in Flintshire as in the rest of Wales, it seems reasonable to expect that much more benefit would be realized if these efforts were coordinated and supported with leadership at the highest level, from head teachers, education advisers and council executives.

Food is not just a commodity, or even a basic physical need. It is the means of building family and community links, and it connects us with each other and with the natural world. When children experience food in this way – as a source of enjoyment, as a product of the soil, as an item of trade between people, as a part of their history and culture – they are receiving an education in values, and this of the greatest importance for our society (Wynne-Jones et al., 2015).

The proposed new curriculum for Wales sets out four aims for learners: they are to be ambitious and capable, enterprising and creative, ethical and informed, and healthy and confident (Donaldson, 2010). Food has a key role in all four areas, one way and another, and many agencies will have to pull together to ensure that school food is the best it can be.
11 Further reading


