

# How to set up a food co-op or buying group in a school



## What is a food co-op or buying group?

Food co-ops and buying groups are groups of people who regularly buy food together. They can be made up of a handful of people, or a much larger group. By pooling their buying power and ordering food in bulk, direct from suppliers, they can buy good food at a more affordable price.

Please note: the terms food co-op and buying group are used interchangeably as they both work in similar ways.

## Why set up a school food co-op or buying group?

A school buying group makes fresh, local, ethically-produced food more accessible to its members, and supports local farmers by providing them with a local, regular and reliable outlet. A school food co-op can also support other programmes such as Healthy Schools, Eco Schools and Food For Life.

- **Fresh, local, organic produce** – Buying produce direct from a local farmer or wholesaler means that you can source produce that is fresher and grown using organic production methods, which avoid the use of pesticides and herbicides.
- **Affordable** – Buying in bulk direct from a supplier means you can get good food at an affordable price.
- **Health** – Providing affordable fresh produce can encourage pupils, parents and teachers to eat more healthily and enable them to have fresher produce.
- **Convenience** – A weekly collection at the school can provide a convenient shopping outlet for pupils, staff and parents, who are already going to be there anyway.
- **Support local producers** – Small scale farmers and growers find it hard to compete with supermarkets. A buying group can provide them with a reliable and local market place.
- **Educational** – Pupils can run food co-ops as business enterprises and can help schools meet national curriculum requirements. Food co-ops also provide an opportunity for children and parents to learn more about healthy eating and where their food comes from. Visits to the farm could also be arranged.
- **Good for the environment** – Buying produce direct from local suppliers means fewer food miles and often less packaging.

## How to make it work

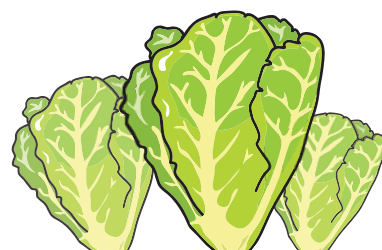
**People** - First you need to decide who is going to run your food co-op or buying group. In a school the main options are for it to be run by the pupils, parents or staff, or it could be a combination of all three. They can also be run by other community food projects e.g. mobile shops that already drop off at schools in the local area.

Crispin School in Street; Buckland St Mary village school, and Greenfylde School in Ilminster all in Somerset each have food co-ops which are run by the pupils. At Buckland the children do everything, including placing orders and managing the bank account, providing them with valuable skills and experience. Food co-ops in schools that are run by parents or staff miss out on this learning opportunity, although those run by parents may require less support from teachers.

You may want to have one key contact or food co-op organiser, but it is also good to ensure that you have enough volunteers to cover for them, and also rotate the role so that all the work does not fall onto one person. The key contact is responsible for placing orders, receiving invoices, making payments, whilst also resolving any issues following delivery, for example, missing or extra items. To ensure reliability this is often a member of staff. However ideally, a food co-op would have at least three or four volunteers, either pupils or parents, who can all take on different tasks, including:

- Receiving goods delivery and checking quality.
- Packing bags or dividing up orders.
- Selling produce at a stall.
- Taking orders from food co-op members for the following week.
- Collecting money from members.

**Planning** – It is a good idea to set up a steering group, to work out who is going to do what and when. This could be done as part of an existing group focusing on food initiatives such as a School Nutrition Action Group. As part of the initial planning process it is good to do a survey to find out whether this is something parents and pupils actually want and whether they are interested in getting involved. You can use the survey to ask questions to help you decide what to sell and when. You could also try to find out if any other community food projects are already running in your local area, as you may be able to link up with them and perhaps share suppliers.



**Produce** – You need to determine what food you are going to buy, how you are going to sell it, and where you are going to get it from. You can run a food co-op stall where everything is sold by weight, or ask customers to pre-order items, such as veg bags or meat packs.

If you are interested in fresh local produce then you will need to find out what farmers and suppliers there are in your local area. You could try searching local food directories, talking to stallholders at farmers' markets nearby; or contacting existing organic veg box scheme operators, to find out if they would be willing to do a bulk delivery. The Soil Association can help you to locate a local organic supplier.

Food co-ops and buying groups often buy dried goods, such as nuts or pasta from a wholefood wholesaler. There are a number of wholefood suppliers around the country who deliver to buying groups – see [www.sustainweb.org/foodcoopstoolkit/wholefoodsuppliers](http://www.sustainweb.org/foodcoopstoolkit/wholefoodsuppliers)

If you have a food growing project or orchard at the school you could also sell some of your own produce. If you want to sell bread the Real Bread Campaign could help you to find a local baker of Real Bread.

You will need to find a supplier who is willing to deliver to the school at a convenient time and will also provide the range of produce you need.

If the school has in-house catering you may be able to work with the same suppliers who deliver fresh produce to the kitchen.

**Premises** – You will need to commandeer some space to store and distribute orders when they arrive. It's a good idea to position this in a fairly public area, to attract interest and encourage more people to join. You could run a stall outside in good weather. If you have a lot of customers and supply a wide range of produce you may need a large area, such as the school hall to separate out and pack all the orders. Some food co-ops use school halls on a Saturday to do this. You'll also need somewhere with good access, preferably on the ground floor, possibly a storage area, and also hand washing facilities e.g. at a nearby toilet or kitchen.

**Practical resources** – Depending on how you decide to run your food co-op and what you are selling, you may need some extra equipment; such as weighing scales, a fridge, storage boxes or a trolley to transport deliveries. However if you opt to sign up for an existing box scheme then you probably won't need anything extra, so this is a good option if you only have limited funding.

**Procedures and pricing** – The most successful food co-ops have simple procedures for dealing with orders and payments. You can ask everyone to place their

orders by a particular time every week or to order a month in advance. You can take orders using an e-mail group or website, but a simple printed order form will do just as well. You'll need to have procedures for dealing with orders that are not collected and for returning boxes. Also don't forget to decide what to do during the school holidays!

Food co-ops are usually run on a not-for-profit basis. However you may want to add a small mark-up, to provide some income to cover costs, like buying paper bags, or replacing equipment. Or you might want to use it to raise funds for the PTA, or other school activities. Some veg box schemes actually offer a commission to schools, as delivering several boxes to one place saves delivery costs.

**Promotion** – Although schools have a huge number of potential customers, it is often quite hard to recruit people who are used to shopping at a supermarket. It is a good idea to produce leaflets promoting the benefits of your group and ask the school secretary if they can distribute the leaflets to every parent in the school. You may also have to provide some sort of introductory offer to entice people to sign up. Having pupils involved in running the scheme and using it as a way to raise funds for the school or other causes may encourage more parents to get involved.

**Policies and principles** - Some school buying groups have an informal arrangement about how they organise themselves, but others adopt a more formal structure, such as a co-operative. However you may not need to do this if the school is directly involved in helping to run it.

**Permits and licences** – All food co-ops that meet more than once a month need to register with their local environmental health department. Schools that do their own catering would already be registered as a food premises. But you may still need to register separately if you are running the food co-op from a different location. You need to be particularly aware of food safety issues if you decide to supply meat or dairy products which are high risk foods. If in doubt contact your local Environmental Health Office (EHO).

**Progress** – Many school food co-ops are very successful when they first start but orders may start to tail off – particularly after the school holidays. It is therefore important to monitor your progress, and to evaluate the scheme by asking customers for their feedback. This is especially important if a customer stops ordering. It is also good to try to monitor if the food co-op or buying group helps to support other school activities, for example by promoting healthy eating.

## Case Study: Fruits Roots En Shoots

'Fruits Roots En Shoots' at Buckland St Mary Primary School in Chard in Somerset is a food co-op firmly integrated into the school, with strong support from both teachers and pupils. The scheme offers organic vegetable bags to parents and the local community. Families order and pay in advance every half term by cheque and the money is banked by the school. The school is responsible for making sure the supplier is paid on time. The pupils from years 5 and 6 sort and pack around 20 bags a week. School-grown produce is sold in addition, when in season.

The food co-op is supplied by a local organic growers' co-operative Somerset Organic Link. The school chose the 'pack your own bags' model as the produce is cheaper and this process could include a larger group of students.

Somerset Organic Link provides two options to school groups in their area - pack-your-own bags or pre-packed bags. The veg or fruit pack-your-own bags are currently priced at £4 and both contain five different varieties. 'Pack-your-own' means it is the school's responsibility to divide up the goods to



a specification provided, so the school will need weighing scales. Dividing the fruit is easier because the items are counted out in advance.

The pre-packed fruit and veg bags and boxes cost more because they are packed by the suppliers. They also

have more varieties in them. Somerset Organic Link also put a newsletter in the pre-packed bags. During the main crop potato season (August to April) they offer a 5kg bag of potatoes. All produce is organic and local wherever possible.



## Making Local Food Work

The Soil Association and Sustain are part of the Big Lottery funded 'Making Local Food Work' partnership. They can provide specialist support to help you set up your food co-op, buying group or other local food community enterprise.

- [www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk](http://www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk)

## Soil Association

To find out how we can help you set up an organic buying group in your school contact: Traci Lewis

- [tlewis@soilassociation.org](mailto:tlewis@soilassociation.org)
- 07870 268654
- [www.soilassociation.org/obg.aspx](http://www.soilassociation.org/obg.aspx)

## Sustain

To find out more about how to set up a food co-op you can visit our on-line food co-ops toolkit:

- [www.foodcoops.org](http://www.foodcoops.org)

You can also contact your regional food co-op adviser who will be able to help you set up your group

- [www.sustainweb.org/foodcoops/regional\\_advisers](http://www.sustainweb.org/foodcoops/regional_advisers)

For more food co-ops news visit:

- [www.facebook.com/foodcoops](https://www.facebook.com/foodcoops)
- 020 7837 1228
- [foodcoops@sustainweb.org](mailto:foodcoops@sustainweb.org)

## Food for Life Partnership

Join the Food for Life Partnership a network of schools and communities across England committed to transforming food culture. We offer an action framework and award scheme to help schools and their communities transform their food culture. Using practical food education, young people in your school will learn all about food - plus we help caterers to serve up fresh, local, organic and seasonal school meals.

- [www.foodforlife.org.uk](http://www.foodforlife.org.uk)

