



When Policy Meets Preference: School Food Choices Through Policy, Environment and Pupil's at the Centre

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Dietary intakes:



No more than 5% free sugars

5% (11-18y olds); 8% (4-10y olds) meet this



No more than 11% energy saturated fat

16% (11-18y olds); 15% (4-10y olds) meet this



Fibre 25g/day or 20g/day

4% (11-18y olds); 14% (4-10y olds) meet this



5-A-day

9% meet this



Calcium (450/550; 800/1000mg)

Mainly meet – small % 11-18y olds don't

Why schools matter



10.6million

Pupils attend school

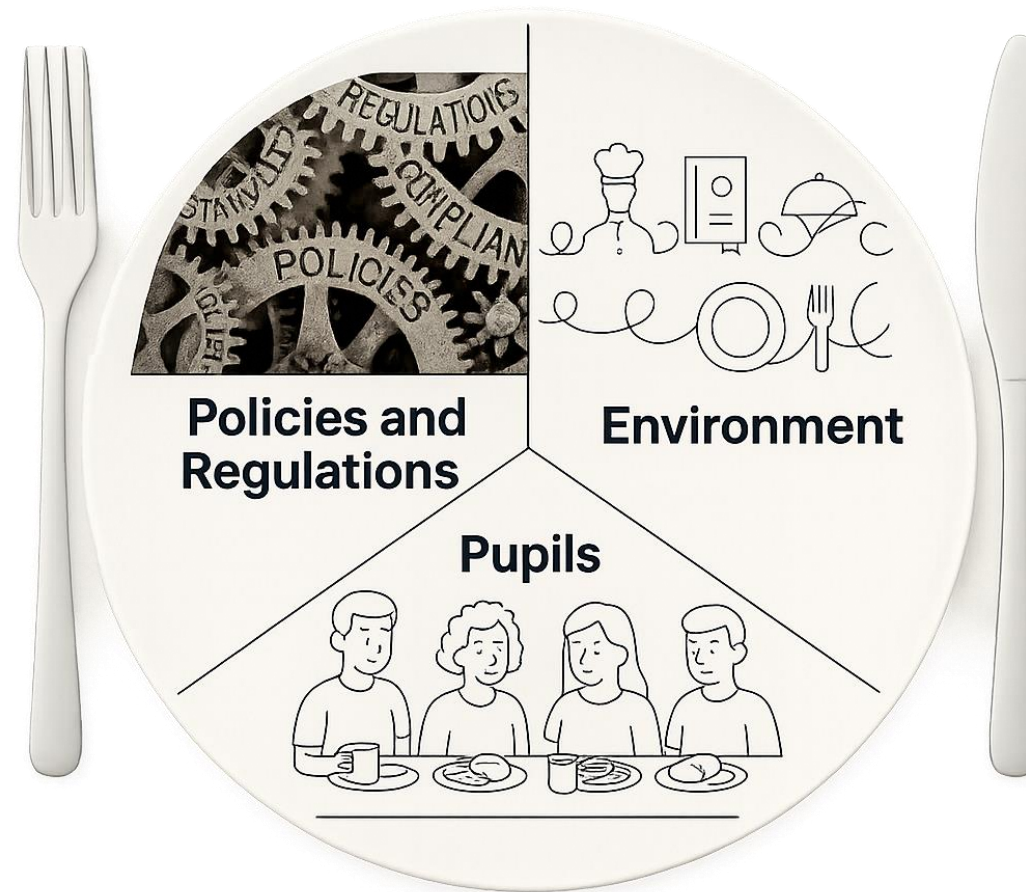
Why schools matter *cont.*



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- Around a third of pupil's dietary intake is during the school day⁽¹⁾
- Pupils from all socio-economic groups attend
- Academic performance: some evidence on positive effects of school meals; Attendance mixed findings⁽²⁾

What influences pupils' food choices?



AI: Microsoft co-pilot generated image

School Food Policy aim(s) across the UK

N Ireland¹

- ✓ Build knowledge & skills to make **healthier food choices**
- ✓ Good nutrition **prevents NCDs** (obesity, dental health)

Wales²

- ✓ Develop **healthy eating habits** & make **healthier choices**
- ✓ Access to healthier food during the school day
- ✓ Good nutrition supports **learning, performance & full potential**



Scotland³

- ✓ Establish **healthy lifelong eating habits**
- ✓ Reduce childhood **obesity, diet related inequalities**, & improve dental health
- ✓ Good diet essential for children's health & development

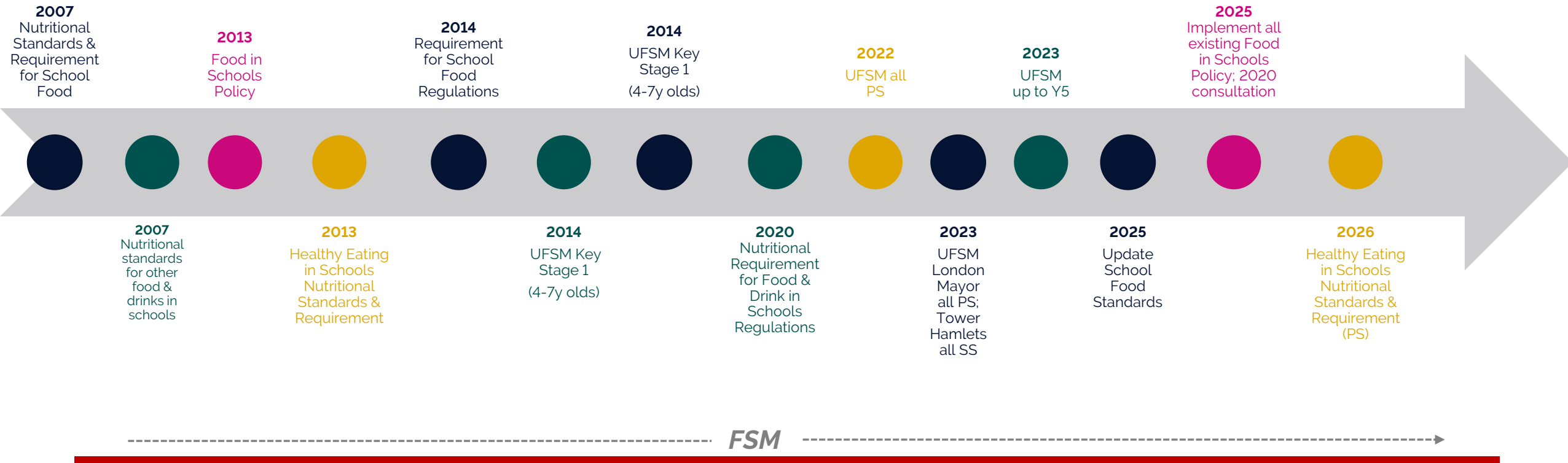
England⁴

- ✓ Develop **healthy eating habits** through enjoyable, delicious food
- ✓ **Pleasant environment** supports positive eating behaviour





¹ Public Health Agency NI: Nutritional standards for school lunches A guide for implementation; ² <https://www.gov.wales/healthy-eating-schools>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/healthy-eating-schools-guidance-2020/pages/2/>; ⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-resources-for-schools/school-food-standards-practical-guide>

School Food Policy: a UK overview



School food standards

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
|  <p>ENGLAND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Food group approach• Restrictions on foods• Permitted drinks |  <p>SCOTLAND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strict nutrient & food rules• Sugar/salt limits• Limits red/processed meat/UPFs |  <p>WALES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strict nutrient & food rules• Min & max nutrients• Drinks – water/milk (PS) |  <p>N IRELAND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Food group approach• Restrictions on foods• Permitted drinks |
|--|--|---|--|

What do these look like?

Nutritional standards for school lunches

Every lunch service must contain the stated portions from these four food groups:

- Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods;
- Fruit and vegetables;
- Milk and dairy foods;
- Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein.

Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy food

- 1) Every lunch service must contain a portion or portions of food from this group.
- 2) Rice and pasta must be offered at least once a week. In a single choice menu, rice or pasta must be served at least once a week.
- 3) Bread should be available every day in all schools.



Fruit and vegetables

- 1) No fewer than two portions of fruit and vegetables should be available per child throughout the lunch service
- 2) Of these, at least one portion should be vegetables or salad and at least one portion should be fruit (fresh, tinned in natural juice, fruit salad, fruit juice or dried fruit).
- 3) Pies, crumbles and other composite fruit dishes must contain at least one portion of fruit per serving.
- 4) Composite main course dishes must contain a minimum of half a portion of vegetables per serving, in addition to a separate serving of vegetables or salad.
- 5) In nursery and primary schools a fruit based dessert must be offered at least three times a week.
- 6) Baked beans must not be served as a vegetable more than once a week in a primary school. They must not be the only vegetable option on any day in a post-primary school.
- 7) If beans or pulses form the protein part of a main course, another vegetable must be available.

Milk and dairy foods

- 1) Every lunch service must contain a portion or portions of food from this group.
- 2) In addition to standard 1, drinking milk must be available as an option every day.
- 3) Cheese must not be served as the only vegetarian option more than twice a week.
- 4) In non vegetarian dishes cheese can be used as a topping more than twice a week.



Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein

- 1) Every lunch service must contain a portion or portions of food from this group.
- 2) In nursery and primary schools meals containing red meat must be served a minimum of twice a week and a maximum of three times a week. In post-primary schools this must be a minimum of three times a week and a maximum of four times a week.
- 3) Fish should be available at least once a week in primary schools and at least twice a week in post-primary schools.
- 4) Oily fish should be available at least once every four weeks.

Salt and condiments

- 1) Table salt should not be available within nursery or primary schools. It should not be on view in the post-primary school dining room but may be made available on request from the service counter.
- 2) Condiments should only be provided from the service counter and should be controlled by the kitchen staff.

Food and drinks high in fat and/or sugar

Fried and other high fat foods

- 1) Fried foods or other high fat products, such as chips, roast potatoes, other fried potatoes, garlic bread, or meal choices such as quiche, apple pie and vol-auvents containing pastry, may be served a maximum of twice a week.
- 2) In addition to standard 1, breadcrumb fillet of fish (oven baked) can be served once a week.
- 3) Meat or chicken products (such as burgers, sausages, chicken nuggets etc) may be served a maximum of once a week in primary schools and a maximum of twice a week in post-primary schools.
- 4) To allow choice for pupils on the days when meat or chicken products are available, schools should aim for 50% healthy meal options and they should be presented and marketed in a competitive way to other meal options. This standard does not apply to single choice menus.
- 5) There should be at least two days a week without any meat or chicken products, fried foods, foods cooked in batter, breadcrumbs or foods containing pastry. This is to encourage children to try a greater range of foods in their diets and explore new taste experiences.
- 6) When a high fat starchy food such as chips or garlic bread is served, an alternative without added fat must be available.
- 7) Lower fat desserts must be available when offering fried and other high fat foods.
- 8) The only savoury snacks available should be nuts and seeds with no added salt or sugar. Savoury crackers or breadsticks may be offered if they are served with fruit or vegetables or a dairy food.

Confectionery and other sweet foods

- 1) Confectionery, chocolate and chocolate coated products should not be available throughout the lunch time.
- 2) Cakes and biscuits can only be provided at lunch time and as part of a meal.
- 3) Cakes, biscuits and puddings made with cocoa powder should only be available a maximum of two days per week.
- 4) High fat and/or high sugar toppings used for decoration such as cream, buttercream and icing sugar should be kept to a minimum and only used if essential, eg to set fruit on top of a sponge. If used, an undecorated or healthier dessert should also be available.

Drinks

- 1) The only drinks available in school should be:
 - plain water (still or sparkling);
 - milk;
 - unsweetened fruit or veg juices;
 - yogurt or milk drinks (with less than 5% added sugar);
 - drinks made from combinations of the above (eg smoothies);
 - tea, coffee and low calorie hot chocolate.
- 2) Combination drinks must contain at least 50% milk, yogurt or fruit juice. Artificial sweeteners are only permitted in combination drinks.
- 3) Fresh drinking water, ie tap water, must be provided free every day.



14 Nutritional Standards at a glance – HIGH SCHOOL

1. FRUIT AND VEGETABLES



Lunch time must include at least **1 x 80g** fresh, tinned or frozen or **30g** dried fruit and **2 x 80g** portions of vegetables.

At all other times where food is provided **1 x 80g** fruit or vegetable or **30g** dried fruit must be made available.

2. OILY FISH

Must be provided at least **once every 3 weeks**.



3. RED AND RED PROCESSED MEAT



Across the school day no more than 230g over the week & only 130g of this 230g can be red processed.

4. SWEETENED BAKED PRODUCTS AND DESSERTS



Across the school day must meet the following – no more than 10g of total sugar, no more than 19g of fat and no more than 6g of saturated fat per portion.

5. BREAKFAST CEREAL



Across the school day must meet the following – no more than 15g of sugar, 1.1g of salt and contain at least 3g of fibre per 100g.

6. DEEP FRIED FOODS

A maximum of **3** portions can be provided in a **week**.



7. SAVOURY SNACKS



Across the school day plain crackers, oatcakes and breadsticks and any other pre-packed savoury snacks such as crisps must be a pack size no more than 25g and contain no more than 22g fat, 1.5g salt and 3g of sugar per 100g.

8. BREAD

Across the school day must contain a minimum of **3g of Fibre per 100g**.



9. SWEETENED YOGHURTS, FROMAGE FRAIS AND MILK BASED DESSERTS

The portion should be less than 175g. Less than 10g of sugar and 3g of fat per 100g.



10. PASTRY AND PASTRY PRODUCTS



Must not be provided more than **twice** a week across the school day.

11. OILS AND SPREADS

Across the school day

Spreads must not contain more than 20g of saturated fat per 100g and more than 30g per 100g of combined mono and poly and monounsaturated fat.

Oils must not contain more than 16g of saturated fat per 100g and must contain at least 55g per 100g of monounsaturated fat **OR** at least 30g per 100g of polyunsaturated fat.



12. SALT AND CONDIMENTS



Across the school day

No Salt should be provided.

Condiments can be provided when included in the menu but must be dispensed in no more than 10ml portions.

13. CONFECTIONERY

Across the school day no confectionery can be offered this includes chocolate and non-chocolate confectionery.



14. DRINKS



Across the school day only the following can be provided

- Plain water, must be freely available
- Plain semi skimmed milk
- Flavoured semi skimmed milk with no added sugars
- No added sugar lower fat drinking yoghurt
- Tea and coffee
- Sugar-free drinks (excluding high caffeine >150mg per litre)

<175g,
<10g sugar & 3g fat
per 100g

Evidence: the effect of school food-based standards (primary schools)



OPEN ACCESS Freely available online

PLOS ONE

The Impact of Food and Nutrient-Based Standards on Primary School Children's Lunch and Total Dietary Intake: A Natural Experimental Evaluation of Government Policy in England

Suzanne Spence¹, Jennifer Delve¹, Elaine Stamp¹, John N. S. Matthews², Martin White^{3,4}, Ashley J. Adamson^{1,4*}

¹Institute of Health and Society, Human Nutrition Research Centre, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom, ²School of Mathematics and Statistics, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom, ³Institute of Health and Society, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom, ⁴Fuse, UKCRC Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

Abstract

In 2005, the nutritional content of children's school lunches in England was widely criticised, leading to a major policy change in 2006. Food and nutrient-based standards were reintroduced requiring primary schools to comply by September 2008. We aimed to determine the effect of the policy on the nutritional content at lunchtime and in children's total diet. We undertook a natural experimental evaluation, analysing data from cross-sectional surveys in 12 primary schools in North East England, pre and post policy. Dietary data were collected on four consecutive days from children aged 4–7 years ($n = 385$ in 2003–4; $n = 632$ in 2008–9). We used linear mixed effect models to analyse the effects of gender, year, and lunch type on children's mean total daily intake. Both pre- and post-implementation, children who ate a school lunch consumed less...

Public Health Nutrition, 26(2), 425–436

doi:10.1017/S1368980022001355

Dietary quality of school meals and packed lunches: a national study of primary and secondary schoolchildren in the UK

Erin Haney^{1,†}, Jennie C Parnham^{1,*;†}, Kiara Chang¹, Anthony A Lavery¹, Stephanie von Hinke^{2,3}, Jonathan Pearson-Stuttard^{4,5,6}, Martin White⁷, Christopher Millett^{1,8} and Eszter P Vamos¹

¹Public Health Policy Evaluation Unit, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London W6 8RP, UK; ²School of Economics, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; ³Erasmus School of Economics, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; ⁴Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London, UK; ⁵Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, Newcastle upon-Tyne, UK; ⁶Health Analytics, Lane Clark & Peacock LLP, London, UK; ⁷MRC Epidemiology Unit, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; ⁸Public Health Research Centre & Comprehensive Health Research Center (CHRC), National School of Public Health, Lisbon, Portugal

Submitted 2 December 2021; Final revision received 3 May 2022; Accepted 21 May 2022; First published online 1 June 2022

Abstract

Objective: School lunches represent a key opportunity to improve diets and health of schoolchildren. No recent nationally representative studies have examined the nutritional differences between school meals and packed lunches in the UK. This

Health Promotion International, 2022, 37, 1–18
https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daac084

Article

OXFORD

The impact of primary school nutrition policy on the school food environment: a systematic review

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Summary

School nutrition policies that aim to address unhealthy diets have been introduced in many countries. This systematic review aimed to synthesize the international literature to determine the impact (overall and by socioeconomic position [SEPI]) of primary

Positive

Evidence cont. (secondary schools)



Public Health Nutrition: 16(6), 1037–1042

doi:10.1017/S1368980013000852

School lunches v. packed lunches: a comparison of secondary schools in England following the introduction of compulsory school food standards

Lesley Stevens, Jo Nicholas*, Lesley Wood and Michael Nelson
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Submitted 3 July 2012; Final revision received 31 January 2013; Accepted 20 February 2013; First published online 11 April 2013

Abstract

Objectives: To compare food choices and nutrient intakes of pupils taking a school lunch or a packed lunch in eighty secondary schools in England, following the introduction of the food-based and nutrient-based standards for school food.

Design: Cross-sectional data collected between October 2010 and April 2011. Pupils' lunchtime food choices were recorded over five consecutive days.

Setting: Secondary schools, England.

Subjects: A random selection of 5925 pupils having school lunches and 1805 pupils having a packed lunch in a nationally representative sample of eighty secondary schools in England.

Results: The differences in the specific types of food and drink consumed by the two groups of pupils are typical of differences between a hot and cold meal. On average, school lunches as eaten contained significantly more energy, carbohydrate, protein, fibre, vitamin A, folate, Fe and Zn than packed lunches, and 8% less Na.

Conclusions: Although neither school lunches nor packed lunches provided the

OPEN ACCESS Freely available online



Did School Food and Nutrient-Based Standards in England Impact on 11–12Y Olds Nutrient Intake at Lunchtime and in Total Diet? Repeat Cross-Sectional Study

Suzanne Spence^{1,2}, Jennifer Delve^{1,2}, Elaine Stamp^{1,2}, John N. S. Matthews³, Martin White^{1,2,4}, Ashley J. Adamson^{1,2,4*}

¹Institute of Health and Society, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, ²Human Nutrition Research Centre, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, ³School of Mathematics and Statistics, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, ⁴Fuse, UKCRC Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, Newcastle upon Tyne, England

Abstract

Introduction: In September 2009, middle and secondary schools in England were required to comply with food and nutrient-based standards for school food. We examined the impact of this policy change on children's lunchtime and total dietary intake.

Methods: We undertook repeat cross-sectional surveys in six Northumberland middle schools in 1999–2000 and 2009–10. Dietary data were collected from 11–12 y olds ($n=298$ in 1999–2000; $n=215$ in 2009–10). Children completed two consecutive 3-day food diaries, each followed by an interview. Linear mixed effect models examined the effect of year, lunch type and level of socio-economic deprivation on children's mean total dietary intake.

Results: We found both before and after the introduction of the food and nutrient-based standards children consuming a school lunch, had a lower per cent energy from saturated fat (-0.5% ; $p=0.02$), and a lower intake of sodium (-143 mg; $p=0.02$), and calcium (-81 mg; $p=0.001$) in their total diet, compared with children consuming a home-packed lunch. We found no evidence that lunch type was associated with mean energy, or absolute amounts of NSP, vitamin C and iron

Pallan et al.
International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity (2024) 21:123
https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-024-01672-w

International Journal
of Behavioral Nutrition
and Physical Activity

RESEARCH

Open Access



National school food standards in England: a cross-sectional study to explore compliance in secondary schools and impact on pupil nutritional intake

Miranda Pallan^{1*}, Marie Murphy¹, Breanna Morrison¹, Alice Sitch^{1,2}, Ashley Adamson³, Suzanne Bartington¹, Alexandra Dobell¹, Rhona Duff¹, Emma Frew¹, Tania Griffin⁴, Kiya Hurley¹, Emma Lancashire¹, Louise McLeman¹, Sandra Passmore⁵, Irina Pokhilenko¹, Maisie Rowland³, Vahid Ravaghi⁶, Suzanne Spence³ and Peymane Adab¹

Abstract

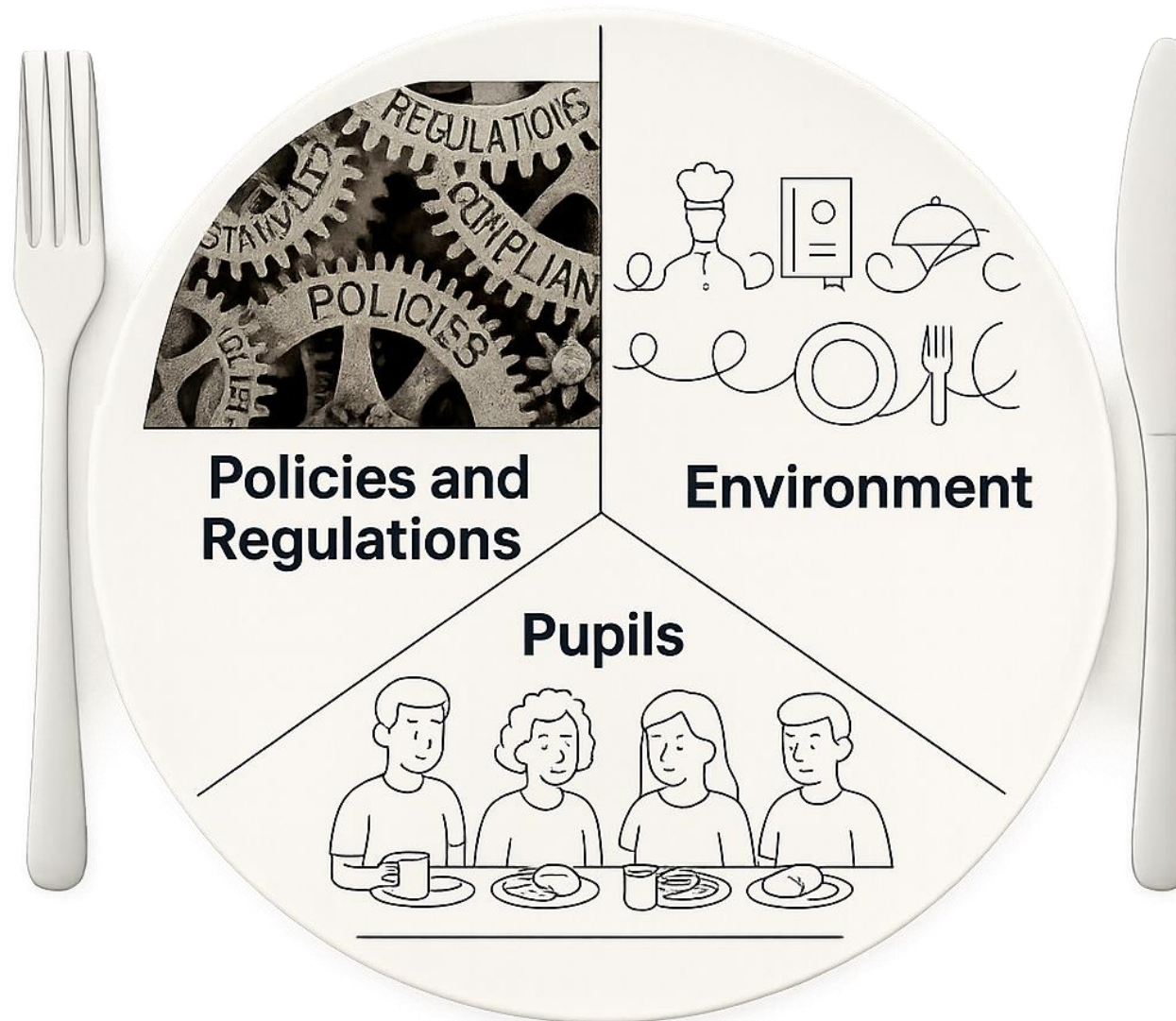
Background Many countries have introduced school food standards to improve the dietary intakes of school-aged children. England has school food standards (SFS) legislation in place but little is known about how well secondary schools comply with this. We aimed to assess compliance with the SFS legislation in English secondary schools and explore the impact of the SFS on pupils' nutritional intake.

Methods We conducted a cross-sectional study with English secondary schools from 2019 to 2022. We compared SFS compliance and pupil nutritional intake in schools mandated or not mandated to comply with the SFS legislation.

Mixed

Mixed
Compliance issues

From Newcastle. For the world.



SECONDARY SCHOOL-AGED PUPILS

AI: Microsoft co-pilot generated image

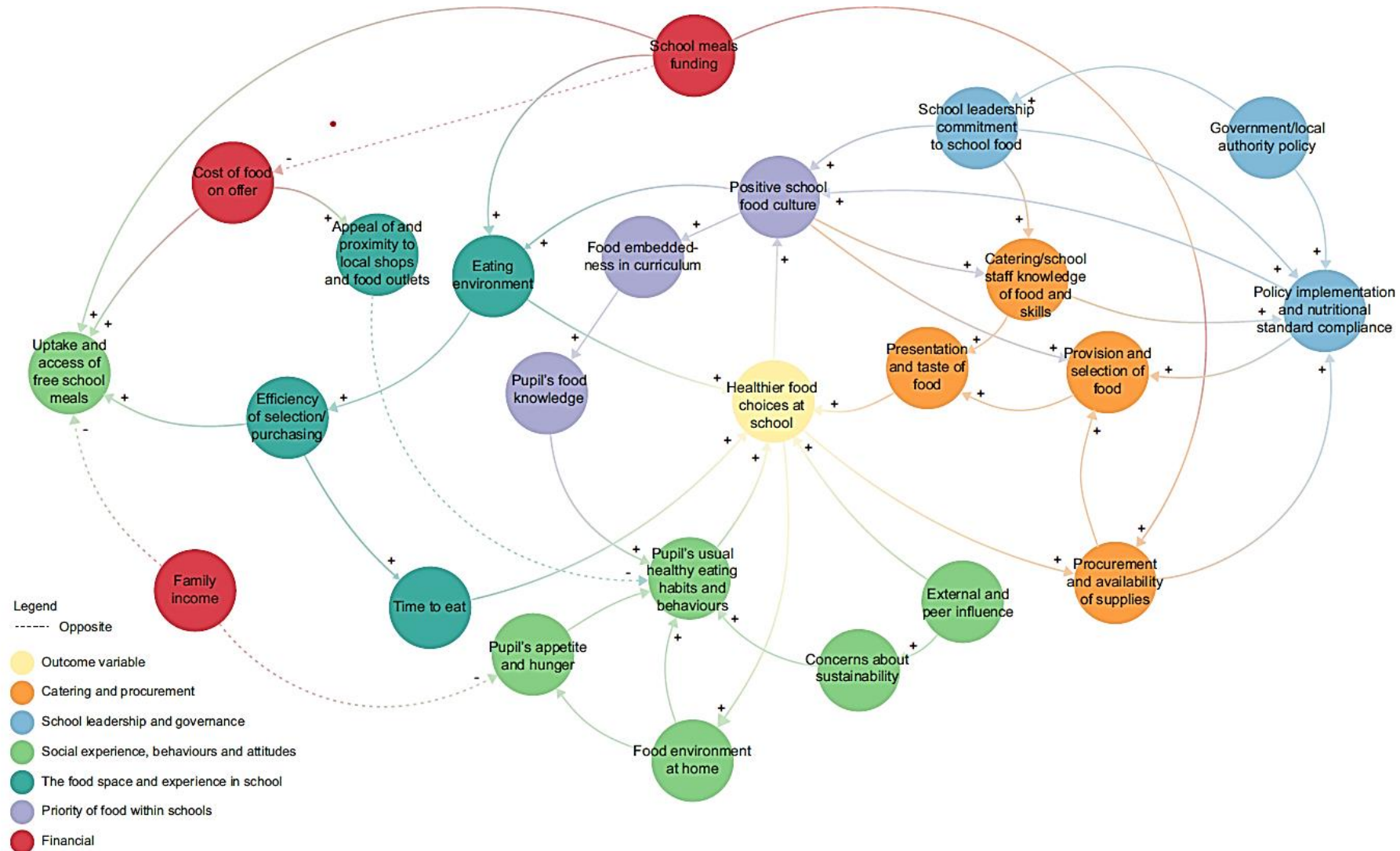
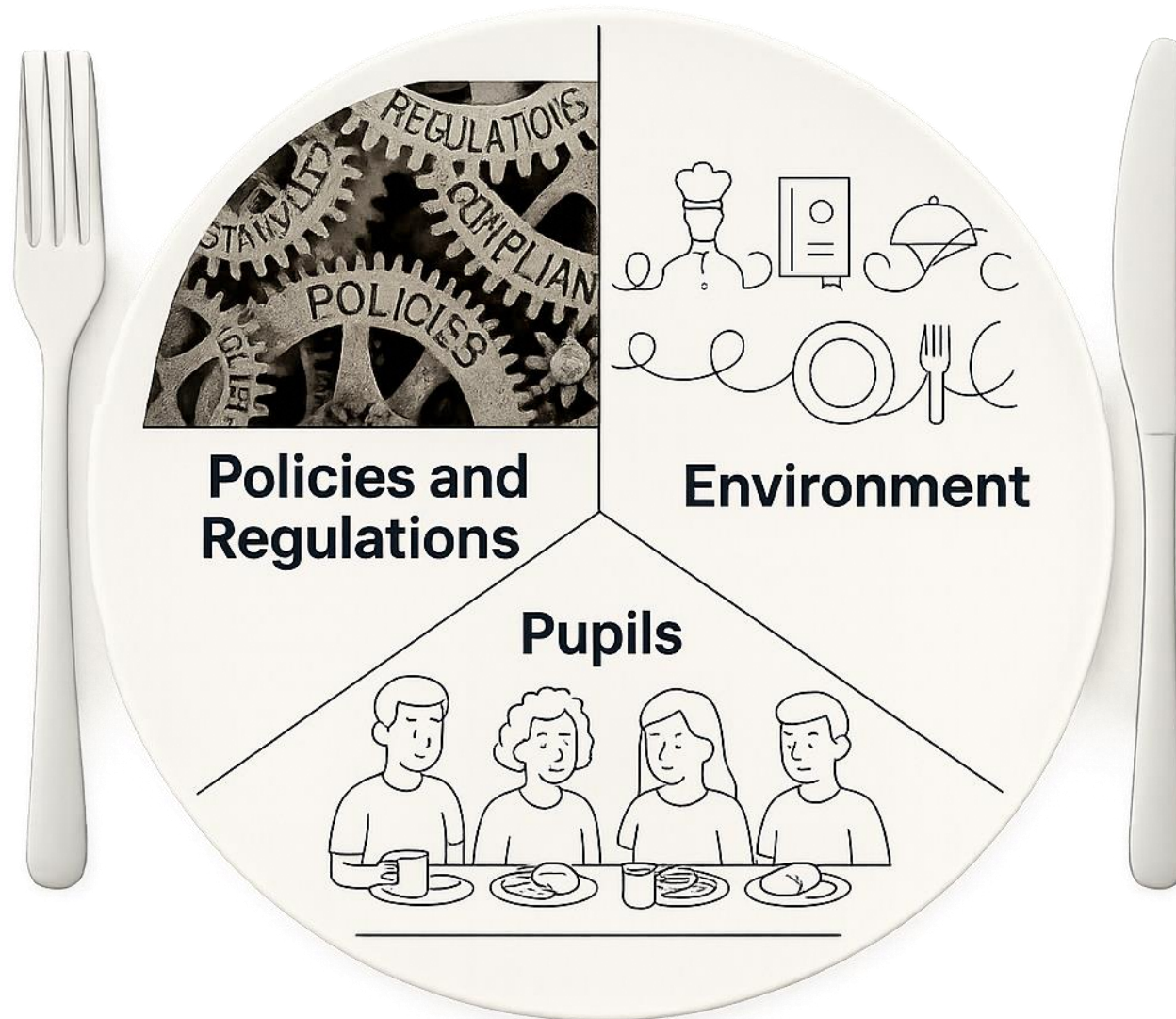


Figure 1. Systems map of factors contributing to food choice in the secondary school food system.

SECONDARY SCHOOL-AGED PUPILS






AI: Microsoft co-pilot generated image



Article

The 'Voice' of Key Stakeholders in a School Food and Drink Intervention in Two Secondary Schools in NE England: Findings from a Feasibility Study

Lorraine McSweeney ¹, Jen Bradley ¹, Ashley J. Adamson ^{1,2} and Suzanne Spence ^{1,2,*}

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Cost

'I'm only allowed to spend £2.00 a day and like if I want a meal and some fruit I've got to pay extra'

Perception

'Like with me being a younger kid I know what's healthy.. you can say, "Oh eat this instead..," but I'll be honest, we won't listen because we just think, "Oh we're young, we can do whatever we want'

Disconnect

'...it's pointless telling us to choose healthy stuff when you're putting out unhealthy stuff for us to buy..'

Opposition

'I think you drink juice anyway in your normal day. I think it's unfair if they went no juice because you're drinking juice anyway..that's not really going to make a difference...it's more the food..'

Strategies

'Lower the unhealthy stuff ... Instead of cookies one day have the fruit pots instead ..so you're like, "I might as well have something healthy since that's all there is'

**OPEN ACCESS**

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Factors that influence food choices in secondary school canteens: a qualitative study of pupil and staff perspectives

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¹Nutrition Innovation Centre for Food and Health, School of Biomedical Sciences, Ulster University, Coleraine, United Kingdom, ²Education Authority, Armagh, United Kingdom

Taste, Appearance, Time, Convenience

Price, Promotions, Value for money

Knowledge

Home

Placement

Peers



Food purchases

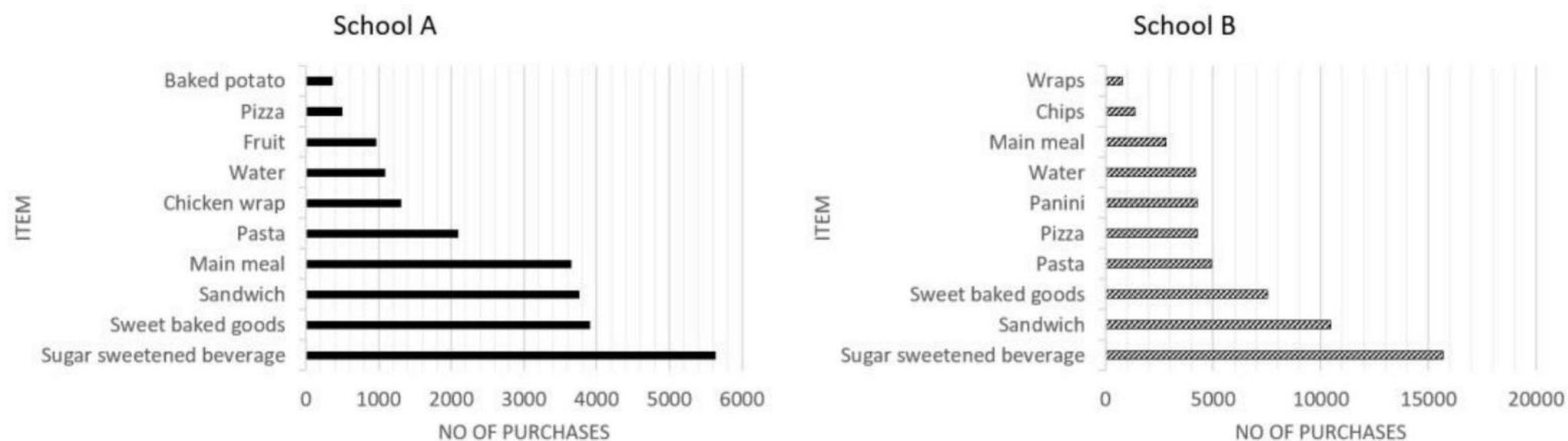
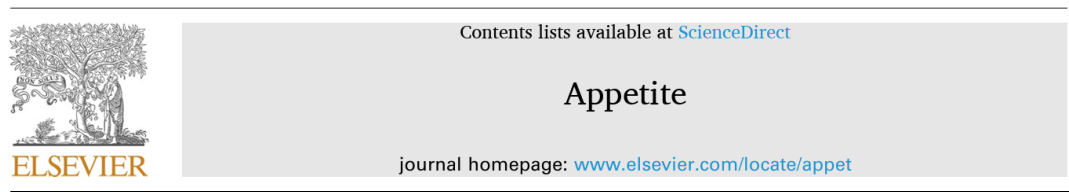



Figure 3. Top ten food and drink purchases at lunchtime by school (total sales data).

Food purchases



- Cookies & Traybakes
- Savoury snacks
- Water
- Juice based drinks

Adolescents' food choice patterns at school: A data driven approach

P. Mwithaga, M. Holmes, H. Ensaff* 

Nutritional Sciences and Epidemiology, School of Food Science and Nutrition, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK

What do these studies tell us?

- Pupil's food choices are shaped by multiple, interconnecting factors
- Everyday experiences matter – including hygiene, portion size, menus, pricing and availability *etc.*
- Good policy is critical, along with, consideration of pupil experiences



Policy + Access + Affordability + Education + ?? = Healthier Food Choices

Summary: key points

- Clear policies on what *can* and *cannot* be served
- Variation in school food (and/or nutrient) standards across the UK
- Effectiveness
 - Positives for primary school aged-pupils
 - Mixed evidence for secondary school aged-pupils
- Most evidence England; lack of comparisons
- Monitoring and compliance issues
- Multiple factors affect pupil food and drink choices
- Stakeholder engagement – including pupils



Opportunities & Gaps

Food in Schools



NEWS Menu

Family & Education | Young Reporter


Deep-fried food banned in new plans for school dinners



Hayley Clarke
Education reporter

12 April 2026 · 2601 Comments
Updated 13 April 2026 09:36 BST


Consultation until 12th June



**Northern Ireland
Food Strategy Framework**
Food at the Heart of our Society - A Prospectus for Change

Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs | An Roinn Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil agus Gnóthai Tuaithe | Department of Fairmin, Environment and Kintra Matters



**Northern Ireland
Food Strategy Framework
Action Plan 2025-2027**
Food at the Heart of our Society - A Prospectus for Change

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs | An Roinn Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil agus Gnóthai Tuaithe | Department of Fairmin, Environment and Kintra Matters

Time scale for Delivery Key: Short <12 months • Medium 1-24 months
Lead Departments will facilitate joined up working with all relevant partners

| Number | Theme | Actions | Delivery Timescale | Responsibility Lead Department |
|--------|--|---|--------------------|--|
| 3. | Food in Schools | 3.1 Implement all aspects of existing Food in Schools Policy. | Medium | DE/DoH |
| | | 3.2 Publish results and recommendations emerging from an academic research project to map out breakfast club provision across Northern Ireland. | Medium | DAERA/Co-Centre for Sustainable Food Systems |
| | | 3.3 Review and refresh existing School Milk Subsidy Scheme. | Medium | DAERA |
| | | 3.4 Pilot a Food Theme week as part of the Education Authority's School Meals Programme focusing on a whole school approach, healthy eating, food education and sustainability. | Short | DE/DoH |
| | | 3.5 Take forward actions to increase the uptake of free school meals including further simplification and streamlining of the application process. | Medium | DE |
| | | 3.6 Take forward actions to increase the numbers of pupils taking a school meal, either free or paid. | Short | DE |
| 4. | Food Interventions targeted at Children and Young People | 4.1 Engage with Children and Young People from diverse backgrounds, using existing forums where possible to inform policy making and co-design future food interventions. | Medium | DAERA |
| | | 4.2 Children's Menus - Publish literature review on effectiveness of interventions to improve nutritional offering of children's restaurant meals and develop recommendations. | Short | FSA |

| Gap | Opportunity |
|--|---|
| Policy | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inconsistent evaluation | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Embed strong evaluation at the start• Methods• Compliance – as a positive• Consultation – policy review & evidence |
| Pupils | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• engagement in policy <i>etc</i>• large-scale data | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Involve pupils - some realistic & practical suggestions• Innovative & novel methods |

Future engagement/events



16th June 10:30-12pm

Special Interest Group: School Food Systems

Topic: Universal Free School Meals and Free School Meal Provision Across the UK: Insights, Impact and Lessons Learned

Confirmed speakers include: Dr M Hawkins, Dr S Spence, Dr S Long, Dr S Mahdi and Prof J Woodside.

Format: Short presentations, followed by a discussion

<https://geniusschoolfoodnetwork.com/>

Acknowledgements

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 - Professor A Adamson
 - Dr A Roberts
 - Dr R McIntyre
- Mentorship
 - Professor J Woodside
 - Professor C Exley

Thank you for listening
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