

Feeding Our Future – State of the Nations

NORTHERN IRELAND

How much veg do children and young people in Northern Ireland eat?

Average number of vegetable portions eaten by region and age group for 2012-2019¹²:

	Northern Ireland
Secondary school (11-16 years)	1.4
Primary school (5-10 years)	1.0

School food in Northern Ireland is ...

... organised by the **Education Authority** responsible for the day-to-day operations in grant-aided schools, with the exception of voluntary grammar schools and grant-maintained integrated schools, where the responsibility lies with the Trustees/Boards of Governors.

... served to **162,600 students** across the nation, representing **52.3% of pupils** as per school meal census day. The school meals uptake for 2020/21 is 7.2 percentage points lower than the previous year³.

... consumed with great variation between school types: Nursery schools have the highest uptake at 91.0%, followed by special schools with 66.0% and secondary schools with 57.2%. Grammar schools and primary/preparatory schools have lower levels of uptake with 50.8% and 49.5% respectively⁴.

Provision of Free School Meals (FSM) in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, 97,631 pupils in grant-aided schools – including nurseries - are entitled to free school meals, representing **28.4% of pupils**, which is the same as the previous year. The uptake level for FSM by entitled pupils is 74.9%, 5.6 percentage points lower than the previous year. Uptake of FSM is highest in nursery schools at 82.5%, followed by primary and preparatory departments (77.1%) and special schools (74.4%) with secondary (non-grammar) and grammar schools seeing the lowest uptake at 72.2% and 70.3% respectively⁵.

The current Programme for Government commits the Department of Education to raise participation rates and improve performance and educational attainment, particularly for those in our most deprived communities.

Vegetables served in Northern Irish schools

Vegetable provision in Northern Irish schools must be in line with the nutritional standards for school lunches⁶ and in the portion sizes and serving suggestions recommended within the implementation guidance⁷. The current standards stipulate the following:

- No fewer than two portions of fruit and vegetables should be available per child throughout the lunch service.
- 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).
- Pies, casseroles, stews and other 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.

The Education Authority reports that cooked vegetables are always available with a hot main meal lunch option as well as side salad provision. All post-primary schools and many primary schools have salad bars for pupils to choose a variety of vegetables as a meal accompaniment. Soups are also available daily in post-primaries and regularly in primary school provision. Seasonality of vegetables as well as meal compatibility are also considered whilst menu planning⁸.

Many schools in Northern Ireland run their own initiatives to increase fruit and vegetable consumption outside of the school lunch service. The Public Health Agency of Northern Ireland provide resources to pre-schools and primary schools with guidance on suitable snacks and drinks for the morning break, whether provided by the school or brought from home, promoting fruit and vegetable consumption as a suitable morning snack⁹.

With support from *safefood*, the Education Authority catering service trialled the **Veg Power campaign in 41 schools from May to June 2021**. An evaluation has been funded to explore attitudes and claimed behaviour in response to the campaign and vegetables.

Setting new standards in Northern Ireland

The current nutritional standards for school lunches and for other food and drinks in schools came into effect in September 2007 and August 2008. In light of emerging evidence regarding the importance of consuming fruit and vegetables and dietary fibre, the current nutritional guidance is due to be updated to ensure that the food served to grant-aided schools is up-to-date with government guidance on healthy eating. Work on the standards update was paused due to the pandemic and has recently restarted with a view to a **phased implementation from September 2021 with full implementation by September 2022**, subject to the necessary funding and approvals¹⁰. The draft update to the nutritional standards for school food consultation document proposes the following:

- No fewer than **three portions of fruit and vegetables** must be available per child throughout the lunch service.
- Of these, at least **two portions should be vegetables or salad**, and at least one portion should be fruit.
- Pies, casseroles, stews and other composite main course dishes **must contain 40g of vegetables per serving**, in addition to two separate portions of vegetables or salad.

Furthermore, food standards applying to vending machines, tuck shops, breakfast clubs, after school clubs and at breaktimes¹¹ stipulate that a variety of fruit and vegetables should be available in all school food outlets. This could include fresh, dried**, frozen, tinned and juiced products.

**Dried fruit has a higher concentration of sugars. Therefore, in terms of dental health, it is not regarded as a suitable snack between meals. It is best taken as part of a meal.

Making healthy choices easier in schools

Research demonstrates that children who are obese or overweight are more at risk of being obese as adults and of developing a range of related health problems. From 2005/06 to 2011/12 the percentage of Year 8 children in Northern Ireland who are overweight or obese has increased from 27% to 31%¹².

With over 166,000 children eating school meals each day schools clearly play an important role in ensuring that children are provided with nutritious food. The nutritional standards for school meals will continue to play a vitally important role in this regard as compliance with the standards means that the vast majority of meals offered to pupils are freshly cooked using fresh, traceable local produce. They constitute a key mandatory element of the overarching school food policy '*Healthy Food for Healthy Outcomes*' which advocates a 'whole school approach' to all food provided in school and developing knowledge and skill in relation to healthy eating and lifestyles¹³.

With the aim to support children and young people in the development of knowledge and skills for healthy eating, the primary and post-primary curriculum now provide opportunities for young people to gain the necessary skills in this regard¹⁴.

Targeting obesity, dental decay and unhealthy choices

The school food standards in Northern Ireland aim to promote a healthy diet among children in response to current public health challenges¹⁵:

- Childhood obesity is increasing: Nearly a quarter (22%) of all children starting primary school are being classed as overweight or obese. Recent studies that measured children's weight and height at home and in primary school suggested that this figure remains steady with age and is likely to increase rather than decrease.
- Dental decay in children continues to be a significant public health problem: Three fifths (61%) of five-year-olds show signs of dental decay compared to the UK average of 43%. The main cause of tooth decay is related to the frequency and amount of sugars consumed in both foods and drinks.
- A survey that looked at children's eating patterns indicated that nearly three quarters (73%) of children had biscuits daily with half of all children eating confectionery (47%) and savoury snacks such as crisps (52%) at least once a day. **Only 1 in 10 children (11%) achieved the target of five portions of fruit and vegetables a day with one fifth (20%) not having any fruit or vegetables on a regular basis.**

These concerns led the Ministerial Group on Public Health to establish the Fit Futures Task Force which published a report in 2006 setting out a clear vision with six priorities for action including supporting healthy early years and creating healthy schools¹⁶.

School Growing - "Sow, Grow, Munch" in Northern Ireland

Building on the legacy of the Year of Food and Drink 2016 and a project between the Hastings Hotels Group, Jilly Dougan (edible gardener) and 5 local schools in 2016, *Sow, Grow, Munch*¹⁷ encourages children to grow fruit and vegetables and explore where food comes from while promoting healthy eating. The project aims to raise awareness among young people and teaching staff at schools and colleges about the importance of food and healthy eating and highlights the breadth of career opportunities offered in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Sow, Grow, Munch connects children of all ages and their parents with the concept of growing food, where food comes from, the importance of buying local produce, and how to cook “from scratch”. That way, it aims to contribute towards addressing the broader issues of obesity, overconsumption of junk food, general health and importance of outdoor activity.

The *Sow, Grow, Munch* resource is a monthly overview and guide to growing for schools and pupils at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, available to all teachers on the schools intranet. For each month of the academic year, it includes classroom activities aligned to the curriculum and video diaries and practical tips for growing.

Sustainability in Northern Irish schools – a commitment to Eco-Schools

All schools in Northern Ireland are registered on the international Eco-Schools programme¹⁸. Eco-Schools is an environmental education programme, which is implemented across the world with sixty-seven countries currently signed up to share the same methodology and concept for improving the environment through education and action¹⁹. In Northern Ireland, the Eco-Schools programme is operated by Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, an environmental charity, with support of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and local councils. Northern Ireland currently ranks sixth out of all sixty-seven participating countries for the awards held by the schools across the nation.

As part of their Eco-Schools action plans, schools in Northern Ireland have been looking at the issue of food waste. Students are sensitised about the environmental impact of throwing food away and they learn about the 3R's of Reducing, Reusing and Recycling food waste. Eco-Schools classroom resources also include material on healthy eating and the value of food²⁰.

Beyond the school gates

The school environment can have a significant influence on the health behaviours of children and young people and, in particular, their food choices. The departments responsible for school food recognise that, while schools have the leading role in the Food in Schools Policy, this is within the context that:

- Parents, and those with parental responsibility, are the primary influencers of, and have ultimate responsibility for, the eating habits of their children.
- Children, and particularly young people, have the right to make informed choices in regard to the food they eat.
- For many children the food they eat has implications beyond its nutritional content. This may be because of disability, medical conditions or allergies or for religious and cultural reasons.

There is currently no policy regulating food outlets around schools in Northern Ireland.

¹ It is worth noting that the sample sizes for children in Scotland and Wales are smaller than for England and Northern Ireland.

² NDNS, years 5-11 combined, 2012-2019. Waves were combined to increase sample sizes.

³ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/37857/1/School%20Meals%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202020-21%20statistical%20bulletin%20%28redacted%29.pdf>

⁴ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/37857/1/School%20Meals%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202020-21%20statistical%20bulletin%20%28redacted%29.pdf>

⁵ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/37857/1/School%20Meals%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202020-21%20statistical%20bulletin%20%28redacted%29.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/education/Draft%20Updated%20Nutritional%20Standards.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/nutritional-standards-guidance>

⁸ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-meals-2021-statistical-bulletin-29-april-2021>

⁹ <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications?keys=school+food>

¹⁰ <http://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/nutritional-standards>

¹¹ <https://www.educationni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/education/Draft%20Updated%20Nutritional%20Standards.pdf>

¹² <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-meals-2021-statistical-bulletin-29-april-2021>

¹³ <http://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/healthy-food-healthy-outcomes>

¹⁴ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-meals-2021-statistical-bulletin-29-april-2021>

¹⁵ https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/Nutritional%20Standards%20other%20food%20drinks%20single%2009_10_0.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/fit-futures>

¹⁷ https://www.eefni.org.uk/cmsfiles/Sow_Grow-Munch.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.eco-schoolsni.org/cgi-bin/generic?instanceID=3>

¹⁹ <https://www.eco-schoolsni.org/cgi-bin/generic?instanceID=1>

²⁰ <https://www.eco-schoolsni.org/cgi-bin/publications?instanceID=1&do=publications&selectedTag=%%>