



The Food  
Foundation



**POLICY BRIEFING**

# How the quality of school food can be improved to increase uptake

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# The opportunity to transform school food

School food is one of the greatest untapped opportunities in children's health and wellbeing policy. Every single school day, millions of children sit down to eat together - a captive moment to nourish growing bodies, build good habits, and show young people that healthy food can be delicious. Yet too often, that opportunity is squandered.

The consequences are stark. Tooth decay is the **leading cause** of hospital admissions for children aged 6-10. **One in five** children starts secondary school with obesity. Rates of type 2 diabetes in children **are rising**. These are not inevitable - they are the result of an environment that has consistently failed to prioritise children's health. And school food is a big part of that environment.

The Government has committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity and raising the healthiest generation of children ever. Getting there requires bold action on the things that shape children's health from the earliest age. Few levers are more powerful than what we feed them at school. Children eat a third of their daily food there. The social experience of eating with friends, trying new things, and developing a relationship with food that lasts a lifetime - all of that happens in school dining halls up and down

the country, every day. That is an extraordinary opportunity. It deserves to be treated like one.

The upcoming revision of the School Food Standards is a critical moment to get this right. The Standards need to reflect the latest evidence on nutrition, be matched with real support for schools to deliver, and - critically - be shaped by the views of the young people who actually eat the food. Their voices should matter the most here - and they are not the obstacle to better school food. They are the argument for it.

Parents are on board too. **Polling from Chefs in Schools** found that 96% of parents say it's important that school meals are fresh and nutritious. The demand is there - from children, from parents, and from the schools that have already shown it works.

This briefing brings together two powerful bodies of evidence to make that case. First, the experiences and voices of young people themselves - what they are currently being served, why it matters to them, and what they want to change. Second, case studies from schools across the country that have already transformed what they serve - going further and faster on healthy food than current standards require. The result of these changes has been more children eating school meals, not fewer. Across every school studied, making food healthier increased uptake - in some cases from as low as 28% to as high as 90%. Better food is more popular food. We also take a deep dive on beans as this is an area where there is huge potential to make school food healthier and more sustainable. Lastly, the briefing sets out key recommendations for improving the School Food Standards and making sure they are implemented well in practice.



## Pokesdown Primary School

HOW THEY MADE SCHOOL FOOD BETTER:

- ✓ Used fresh, locally sourced, seasonal ingredients
- ✓ Students eat in the classroom, setting it up like a restaurant themselves
- ✓ Dishes served individually rather than cafeteria-style
- ✓ Chef (Russ) now delivers training to nearby schools to help them move from reheating frozen food to cooking fresh

IMPACT ON UPTAKE OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS:

**28% → 90%** (+62 percentage points)

KEY LEARNINGS:

- \* Combination of well-cooked food, quality ingredients, and dining setting/experience drives uptake
- \* Leadership from skilled, passionate kitchen staff is crucial
- \* Care given to the dining experience matters as much as the food itself

SOURCE: [CHEFS IN SCHOOLS](#) AND [JAMIE OLIVER'S GOOD SCHOOL FOOD AWARDS](#)

“ Good school food isn't just about nutrition; it's a message to every student that their health and wellbeing matter. When meals are balanced and genuinely appealing, students are more likely to eat well, think clearly, and feel cared for. Every child deserves to sit down to a meal that nourishes them and tells them they're worth investing in.”

Emmanuela, Food Ambassador and school student, aged 17



## Ingol Community Primary School

HOW THEY MADE SCHOOL FOOD BETTER:

- ✓ Brought catering in-house
- ✓ Made meals healthier
- ✓ Banned junk food and sugary drinks from lunchboxes
- ✓ Included school-grown ingredients in menus
- ✓ Got feedback on preferences from pupils

IMPACT ON UPTAKE:

**57% → 83%** (+26 percentage points)

KEY LEARNINGS:

- \* Including children in menu design and incorporating their preferences is essential for uptake
- \* Removing less healthy alternatives to encourage trying the healthier options

SOURCE: [JAMIE OLIVER'S GOOD SCHOOL FOOD AWARDS](#)

## Richmond Primary Schools

### HOW THEY MADE SCHOOL FOOD BETTER:

- ✓ Moved from frozen meals transported from Wales and reheated on-site to freshly cooked on-site
- ✓ Used more sustainably sourced ingredients with high animal welfare standards
- ✓ Made offerings more varied and nutritious using seasonally available ingredients
- ✓ Rewrote and strengthened the school meals contract with more detailed specifications
- ✓ Improved kitchen and dining facilities
- ✓ Provided support for catering staff
- ✓ Enhanced food education

### IMPACT ON UPTAKE:

**26% → 52%** (+26 percentage points), while price per meal **fell by 38p**

### KEY LEARNINGS:

- \* Contract specifications matter - detailed, precise contracts leave little room for poor quality
- \* Students recognised the shift from frozen to fresh, the variety, and the opportunity to try different foods
- \* Atmosphere and hygiene of dining area is very important, particularly being able to sit with friends who have packed lunches
- \* Relationship between children and kitchen staff is key to their enjoyment of school meals

SOURCE: SCHOOL FOOD MATTERS

## Example school food transformation



SOURCE: SCHOOL FOOD MATTERS

“In my experience, school food depends heavily on the day and what part of the line you are on (the back or the front). If you arrive at the canteen a little bit early, you would be at the top of the line and get a full meal (eg. chips, vegetables and some kind of meat). However, if you are at the end of the line, you would probably get something like chips. So, recently me and my friends have started to ask our teachers to let us go early for lunch.

Additionally, some days even if you were early, all the meals would just be equally unappetising and unnourishing. I have seen this have a tremendous impact on us: my peers wasting more food and

being hungry for the rest of the day. Some of my friends have even resorted to skipping school meals and just eating junk like sweets and biscuits. Hence, the canteen has a very bad reputation in my school. Many of my friends (including me) are jealous of other schools who have more variety and rich meals.

For me, personally a school meal is something comforting and rich in variety. It has to have various different elements and nutrients, not just chips.”

Mithesh, Food Ambassador and school student, aged 16



## A London School (Mixed Primary & Secondary)

### HOW THEY MADE SCHOOL FOOD BETTER:

- ✓ Transformed from almost entirely ultra-processed food served in disposable polystyrene containers to entirely vegetarian menu made from scratch
- ✓ Upskilled kitchen team
- ✓ Improved kitchen layout and equipment for batch cooking
- ✓ Developed new menus with smarter prep time scheduling
- ✓ Introduced free salad bar after the till (speeding up service and emphasizing it's free)

- ✓ Introduced broader range of cuisines at school's request
- ✓ Delivered talks and lessons about ingredients to engage students
- ✓ Conducted parental outreach including newsletters and tasting events

### IMPACT ON SCHOOL LUNCH UPTAKE:

Lunch uptake has increased following transformation

### KEY LEARNINGS:

- \* Empowering kitchen staff is essential for continued impact, for instance fresh focaccia still being made 2.5 years on
- \* Student engagement through education about ingredients works
- \* If you make the food taste good, kids will eat it
- \* Careful and deliberate introduction of new ingredients and dishes is important
- \* Parental engagement and transparency helps

SOURCE: CHEFS IN SCHOOLS

## Example school food transformation



SOURCE: CHEFS IN SCHOOLS

**“** Having good, nutritious school food makes a real difference to how we feel and perform in lessons. When meals are balanced, warm and properly cooked, like a really tasty and filling lasagna, bean-based dishes and vegetables, it helps us concentrate and feel energised, which therefore supports high levels of quality learning and real progress throughout the day.

*It makes me feel really disheartened and concerned knowing that some children don't have access to good school food, because every child deserves meals that help them learn and thrive.”*

Rushda, Food Ambassador and school student, aged 17

## London Academy (Secondary)

### HOW THEY MADE SCHOOL FOOD BETTER:

- ✓ Worked with Chefs in Schools to improve their offering
- ✓ Rebuilt in-house food service with expanded kitchen team (not just one head chef)
- ✓ Improved dining experience
- ✓ Created simple, quality menus with fewer but better items, which were co-created with students
- ✓ Most food now cooked from scratch

### IMPACT ON UPTAKE:

Lunch uptake increased (break uptake decreased), waste decreased, improved financial picture despite more expensive ingredients

### KEY LEARNINGS:

- \* Engaging dining staff creates happier, more engaged teams who take more care in food prep, resulting in tastier food
- \* Positive atmosphere around school food, making it a core part of school culture and life, drives uptake
- \* Getting pupil feedback on menu items helps uptake
- \* Better quality ingredients with less waste can improve finances
- \* Care given to the dining experience matters as much as the food itself

SOURCE: [CHEFS IN SCHOOLS](#)

## Key ingredients for success

Common themes are clearly apparent in these case studies that can be drawn on by other schools looking to improve school food while maintaining uptake of school meals:

### Quality ingredients, freshly prepared

Every single success story moved from frozen/processed to fresh/scratch-cooked

### Student involvement

Menu design input, taste tests, education about ingredients

### Improved dining experience

Not just food quality but atmosphere, service speed, relationship with staff

### Staff empowerment

Skilled, engaged kitchen teams



## Deep dive on BEANS

Beans, pulses and other legumes are cheap, nutritious, versatile, acceptable to a wide range of different cultures, and - when cooked well - delicious. Increasing their presence in school food would deliver real nutritional benefits, support sustainability goals, and reduce costs for caterers.

Beans are also an excellent source of fibre: just 120g per day (around one and a half portions) can go a substantial way towards meeting childrens' daily fibre requirements, **something only 4% of adults and children currently manage**. They are also high in protein, giving them the potential to replace some of the processed meat that children currently overconsume which is greatly needed given processed

meat has been **strongly linked** to greater risk of chronic diseases like bowel cancer. Despite these benefits, beans remain underused in school kitchens, in part because of a persistent assumption that children won't eat them.

The case studies below show what happens when schools and caterers do exactly that - introducing beans and pulses carefully, cooking them well, involving children in the process, and giving kitchen staff the confidence and skills to work with them. Campaigns like Veg Power's **The Big Bean Boost** can also help encourage children to eat more beans in schools by providing resources.



## Give Peas a Chance – Aberdeen

Aberdeen City Council schools (2024-2025), with Moray Council and Highland Council joining in 2025

HOW THEY INTRODUCED MORE BEANS:

- ✓ Introduced Scottish organic dried split peas into school meals, subsidised to match the price of previously purchased non-local, non-organic pulses
- ✓ Built a new supply chain from field to plate
- ✓ Held a recipe development day with caterers
- ✓ Tweaked recipes throughout the trial based on pupil feedback, resulting in 11 recipes across primary and secondary menus
- ✓ Ran educational activities alongside the food introduction

UPTAKE:

**173,011** pea-based dishes served in Aberdeen City Council primary schools between April 2024 and March 2025, across 60 schools

KEY LEARNINGS:

- \* Caterers adjusted recipes in response to pupil uptake of the meals and purchasing volumes exceeded expectations
- \* Education alongside new ingredients matters
- \* The project revealed gaps in local supply chains that, if filled, could allow the model to scale
- \* They used a mixed approach to peas recipes (some recipes incorporated peas into familiar favourites (such as substituting mince; some used a blended approach to get kids familiar with the taste e.g. muffins containing split peas; and some were upfront about the beans e.g. sweet potato and split pea curry)

SOURCE: SOIL ASSOCIATION

“ Growing up in a school where there were almost no healthy options in our canteen really shaped the way I viewed food growing up. Rather than going for the small box of miserable looking salad, pushed aside in the back of the fridge, I chose to eat what looked more appealing, which was traditionally the tomato pizza and a flapjack. Was it the healthiest thing I could eat at lunch? No. But was it all that was on offer that would fill me up? Was it what my friends ate? Yes.

Something that I always had growing up was a curry made of kidney beans. We'd usually have it with rice or chupati - this was one of my favourites! Mum would sometimes make falafels too. Not only are they a good meat substitution for protein but their tasty and you can eat them with almost anything. Mum also makes a delicious butter bean pasta using lots of different beans and veg, all blended in it so my siblings don't see! ”

Hussnain, Food Ambassador and school student, 16

## BeanMeals – Leicester Schools

Six schools in Leicester City and Leicestershire County (February–July 2023)

HOW THEY INTRODUCED MORE BEANS:

- ✓ Introduced two varieties of UK-grown dried beans (Godiva and Capulet) via local authority caterers
- ✓ Developed classroom curriculum materials alongside the food introduction
- ✓ Trained teachers, midday supervisors and school cooks in cooking with beans and linking to curriculum
- ✓ Used a BeanMeals engagement officer to build pupil excitement around trying unfamiliar foods

KEY LEARNINGS:

- \* Working with staff across the whole school, not just kitchen staff, made a difference
- \* Giving everyone (staff and pupils) a sense of ownership and ability to provide feedback helped
- \* Focused training gave cooks the confidence to cook with dried beans and to talk about them enthusiastically to children
- \* The project was only possible by bypassing usual public sector supply chains - worth noting as a structural barrier for scaling

SOURCE: [BEANSMEALS](#)

## Full of Beans – Birmingham

Holiday clubs across Birmingham, targeting children in the most deprived communities at risk of food insecurity (2023 onwards)

HOW THEY INTRODUCED MORE BEANS:

- ✓ Ran growing sessions (children planted sugar snap peas)
- ✓ Ran tasting sessions with sensory exploration of four types of pulses (chickpeas, kidney beans, butter beans, lentils)
- ✓ Ran cooking sessions using simple recipes to build familiarity and confidence
- ✓ Improved the programme each year based on learnings - notably improving how the pulses were prepared and presented

KEY LEARNINGS:

- \* How beans are presented is crucial - served cold or described as “vegetarian/vegan” was off-putting; served hot with interesting flavours they went down much better
- \* Children are often unfamiliar with beans as an ingredient but familiar with dishes that contain them (dal, rice and peas) - meeting them where they are works better than starting from scratch
- \* Framing and description matters as much as the food itself

SOURCE: [BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL](#)

## Carryduff Primary School, Northern Ireland

Belfast, Northern Ireland (October - December 2024)

### HOW THEY INTRODUCED MORE BEANS:

- ✓ Substituted 25% of the meat content in two dishes with a combination of plant-based protein, beans and lentils (the “blending technique”)
- ✓ The recipe tweaks were unannounced to evaluate the children’s reaction to the new texture profile
- ✓ The updated recipe retained the familiar taste and texture with enriched nutritional benefit

### IMPACT ON UPTAKE:

**83% → 86%** (+3 percentage points) - meal uptake was high to begin with, and increased further when the pilot’s successes were shared (modest but notable given the updated recipe was not originally emphasised)

### KEY LEARNINGS:

- \* Significant nutritional improvements (saturated fat down 20%, fibre up nearly 90%) can be made with no detectable change in taste or texture
- \* Children didn’t notice - staff closely observed and concluded the dishes were enjoyed as normal
- \* This suggests a “stealth health” approach may be a useful tool alongside introducing other dishes using different approaches

SOURCE: PROVEG

“ We all enjoy something sweet from time to time, but what we eat consistently has a direct impact on behaviour, concentration and long-term health. In my experience, school food often includes fizzy drinks, sweets and oily options such as pizza, baguettes and chips, even during morning break. When healthier meals are unaffordable or unappealing, students either skip meals or rely on quick sugary and caffeinated alternatives before exams, which affects focus and performance. A truly nutritious school meal should be affordable, balanced and filling, with whole grains, vegetables and protein, including beans, so that every student is properly fueled to learn and succeed.”

Yusuf, Food Ambassador and school student, aged 17



“ I think that loaded taco chips with beans is an amazing dish to keep at schools, not only because it’s a balanced, fibre-rich meal but also because I think students would love it. We do have taco chips at school, but with just such a small modification (adding beans), I think students can benefit from it so much.”

Nausheen, Food Ambassador and school student, age 15



### The Bigger Picture on Beans

Taken together, these case studies make a consistent argument: Children will eat beans and pulses when they are well prepared, introduced thoughtfully, and served in familiar formats. The barriers are less about children’s preferences and more about how beans are cooked and presented, and whether kitchen staff are confident and supported to work with them.

# What needs to happen?

The current standards were written in 2014 and no longer reflect what we know about healthy, sustainable diets. A decade of nutritional research, real-world experience from schools that have transformed their food, and the voices of young people themselves all point in the same direction: the bar needs to be raised, and raised significantly.

## Updates needed to the School Food Standards:

- Increase vegetable and fibre requirements.** Children in England are not eating nearly enough vegetables. Updated standards should require two or more portions of vegetables with every meal - bringing England in line with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - and ensure that even grab-and-go options like sandwiches include a vegetable portion.
- Limit free sugars in desserts.** Rather than blanket bans on specific foods, standards should set a clear upper limit on free sugars in desserts, limit the number of made desserts served each week, and encourage fruit and unsweetened yoghurt on other days.
- Restrict unhealthy snack options.** Too many schools currently offer pizza, paninis and burgers as everyday snack options. Standards should limit these, with snacks restricted to fruit, vegetables, plain crackers and breadsticks.
- Make schools water (or milk) only.** Sugary and sweetened drinks have no place in schools. Every school should be water and milk only, with fresh drinking water available to all pupils at all times and adequate funding provided to maintain water fountains and ensure access in dining areas.
- Remove the requirement to serve meat three days a week.** This would allow schools to buy less but British meat, introduce more plant-based proteins, and serve more pulses and vegetables - benefiting children's health, school budgets and the environment.
- Increase the use of beans and pulses.** Beans and pulses are cheap, nutritious and - when cooked well - delicious. Updated standards should actively encourage their use as a protein source, supported by training and guidance for kitchen staff on how to cook with them confidently and well.

## Getting implementation right:

- The standards must work for every child.** Updated standards should include guidance on cultural inclusion and sustainability, and consider the specific needs of breakfast clubs and SEND schools. Caterers should receive clear guidance on how to seek regular feedback from pupils and parents to ensure meals are inclusive and appropriate.
- Cooks and caterers must be supported to deliver.** New standards without support will not work. Catering teams must be consulted on how the standards are written, given clear guidance on implementation, and offered the same opportunities for professional development as other school staff.
- A whole school approach to food must underpin everything.** Good school food is not just about what's on the plate - it's about a culture where nutrition, food education and the dining experience are valued across the whole school community, with young people actively involved in shaping what they eat.
- Introduce a comprehensive monitoring system.** School Food Standards are only effective if they are implemented in practice. The current lack of monitoring means that compliance is variable, creating a postcode lottery for children. Introducing an effective monitoring system will ensure that these legal standards are upheld.

## ABOUT THE FOOD FOUNDATION



The Food Foundation is an independent charity working to address challenges in the food system in the interests of the UK public. Working at the interface between academia and policymakers (parliamentarians, civil servants, local authorities, business leaders) we use a wide range of approaches to make change happen including events, publications, media stories, social media campaigns and multi-stakeholder partnerships. We also receive extensive direct input from the public to ensure their lived experience is reflected in our policy proposals. We collaborate with many partners on a range of different thematic areas, liaising with academics to generate evidence and campaigners who can drive change. We are independent of all political parties and businesses, and are not limited by a single issue or special interest.

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