

# Food in schools

Progress in implementing the new school food standards

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This is the second report by Ofsted on the progress that schools are making in encouraging healthy eating and in meeting the Government's food-based and nutrient-based standards.

**Age group:** 4–18

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**Published:** June 2010

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**Reference no:** 090230

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Royal Exchange Buildings  
St Ann's Square  
Manchester  
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

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## Executive summary

In October 1999 the Government established the National Healthy Schools Programme. Interim food-based standards were established for school lunches. These were later extended to include all other food provided for pupils. In September 2008, the final food-based and nutrient-based standards for school lunches came into force in primary schools. They came into force in 2009 for secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

One aspect of the strategy has been to target a range of initiatives on 70 'spearhead' local areas which are in the bottom fifth nationally in terms of indicators of health and deprivation.<sup>1</sup> This survey focused on 39 schools in 20 of those areas: 17 primary, 16 secondary, five special schools and one pupil referral unit. The survey examined how effectively the schools were promoting healthy food choices among their pupils, and the extent to which they were meeting the mandatory final food-based and nutrient-based standards for school lunches and food-based standards for food other than lunches. It also considered how well schools related their approach to food to their work on healthy living in general.

Of the schools visited, 15 primary schools, eight secondary schools and the pupil referral unit were complying with, or close to complying with, the final food-based and nutrient-based standards for lunches: 24 of the 39 schools in total. More of the primary than the secondary schools complied with the standards for lunches, possibly because the requirements for primary schools have been in place for longer. Overall, 21 schools met the food-based standards for food other than lunches. These included 10 primary schools, eight secondary schools, two special schools and the pupil referral unit. Thirty-two of the schools had achieved National Healthy Schools Status and two were working towards the enhancement model.

The standard most often not met in primary schools was the requirement to provide a portion of fruit for every pupil eating a school lunch. In secondary schools, the standards most often not met were those restricting the provision of meat products, deep-fried foods and starchy foods cooked in fat or oil. Generally, this resulted from misinterpretation of the standards rather than deliberate non-compliance.

The most successful provision was found in the areas where the local authorities and their partners, particularly the primary health care trusts, shared a vision for improvement and had developed well-defined strategies. These were being implemented through effective inter-agency work at local level and ranged from

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<sup>1</sup> 'Spearhead' local authorities and primary care trust areas are those that are in the bottom fifth nationally for three or more of the following: male life expectancy at birth; female life expectancy at birth; cancer mortality rate in under 75s; cardiovascular disease mortality rate in under 75s; and Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004. For further information, see *Tackling health inequalities: the spearhead group of local authorities and primary care trusts*; [www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_4101455](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4101455).

authority-wide programmes to improve pupils' dental health and emotional well-being to collaborations with local sports clubs to promote more physical exercise.

The schools visited adopted a variety of approaches to extending pupils' understanding of healthy eating. These included cross-curricular topics, work within individual subjects, 'themed' days and practical experiences of handling and preparing food. Education outside the classroom also played a role. Pupils in some of the schools had the opportunity to work on local farms and allotments or with professional chefs to extend their skills and understanding.

The majority of the schools and caterers were also working hard to encourage greater take-up of meals through initiatives that included 'meal deals', being able to book tables at lunchtime to celebrate special events, free meals for new pupils and 'tasting' events for parents and the wider school community. Some of these schools had also succeeded in increasing the take-up of free school meals through sensitive advice and support for parents and carers.

Less thought, however, had been given to providing support and advice for families who were not entitled to free school meals but whose incomes were low. Discussions with some of these parents indicated that they had to budget very carefully if they were to pay for a school meal. There were instances where siblings had to take turns to have a school lunch because of the cost.

Where unhealthy packed lunches were seen in schools, this did not necessarily reflect a lack of care and interest from parents. Their circumstances sometimes made it difficult for them to make sure that packed lunches were healthy. Lack of transport meant that they were often limited to the small range of cheap food available locally, which rarely conformed to the school's whole-school food policy. If the situation is to improve, schools, families, community representatives, local authorities and retailers need to work together to establish ways of aligning commercial and health interests. Advice and school policies on packed lunches should also suggest what food to include rather than simply focus on what to avoid.

In the schools visited, most of the pupils seen had a good understanding of what constituted a balanced diet. However, it was unclear to what extent this was influencing their choices. The most significant and consistent weakness that the survey identified was the quality of schools' monitoring of the food they provided and the impact they were having on encouraging pupils to adopt healthy diets and lifestyles.

## Key findings

- Of the 39 schools visited, 15 primary schools, eight secondary schools and the pupil referral unit were fully compliant or close to complying with the final food-based and nutrient-based standards for school lunches.
- The food-based standards for food other than lunches were fully met in 21 of the 39 schools visited.
- The most successful provision resulted from effective planning by local authorities and their partners and close collaboration between schools and a range of agencies locally.
- Sixteen of the primary schools, 11 of the secondary schools and all the special schools visited had achieved National Healthy Schools status.<sup>2</sup> Two schools were working towards the Healthy Schools enhancement model.
- Almost all the schools visited had whole-school food policies which reflected varying degrees of consultation with stakeholders, monitoring and evaluation. Not all had policies on packed lunches. Where these existed, they tended to focus on what should not be included in a packed lunch rather than providing guidance on how to provide a balanced meal in a cost-effective way.
- Vegetarian options were available in all the schools visited but, in three cases, only on request. Vegetarian food was not always available as a main meal or clearly labelled.
- A major weakness in the schools visited was the lack of monitoring of provision to ensure that the school food standards were fully met. Governors were often unaware of their responsibilities in this respect.
- Most of the schools in the survey adopted a range of strategies to increase the take-up of school meals and free school meals. However, the impact of these strategies was not monitored and five of the 16 secondary schools still had systems where those entitled to free school meals could be readily identified by their peers.
- The schools in the survey used a variety of ways to develop and reinforce pupils' understanding of the relationships between diet, exercise, emotional well-being and healthy lifestyles. However, they were not able to show to what extent their pupils were putting such understanding into practice.

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<sup>2</sup> To achieve National Healthy Schools Status, schools have to meet or exceed the current DfE standards for school lunches and food other than lunch, as specified in criteria 2.7 and 2.6, respectively, of the healthy eating component. The disagreement observed between the higher number of schools awarded Healthy Schools Status and the number of schools meeting the school food standards suggests that schools require further support to enable them to meet and demonstrate compliance.

## Recommendations

Local authorities should:

- provide support and training to ensure that governors have a clear and up-to-date knowledge of their statutory responsibilities for ensuring that school food complies with the mandatory standards

Headteachers and governing bodies should:

- coordinate food provision and monitor compliance with the mandatory standards for all the food served in their schools
- consider easy ways of monitoring the food choices made by different groups and individuals
- use this information to identify what changes are needed to food provision and the choices made by pupils to encourage healthier lifestyles.

Schools should:

- work closely and sensitively with parents to develop policies on food which will be reinforced at home and which will encourage children and young people to apply their knowledge and understanding of healthy eating and healthy living to their everyday lives.

Schools, local authorities, parents and members of the business community need to work together to:

- identify ways of ensuring that more families on a low income, including those not in receipt of welfare benefits, can provide their children with healthy food at low cost.

## The standards for food in schools

1. In 2005, in response to evidence of a growing range of health and nutritional problems among young people, the Government appointed the School Meals Review Panel to recommend new standards for food in schools.<sup>3</sup> The panel proposed radical changes that were intended to:
  - help children enjoy balanced meals containing good sources of protein and starch, accompanied by plenty of vegetables, salad and fruit
  - reduce the consumption of less healthy food choices that are high in fat, salt and sugar

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<sup>3</sup> For further information, see: [www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2005\\_0052](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2005_0052).

- increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables and food containing other essential nutrients.
2. The first stage of the reforms focused on identifying interim food-based standards for school lunches.<sup>4</sup> These were introduced in September 2006 and were later extended to cover all other food provided to pupils.<sup>5</sup> In 2007, Ofsted reported on how well a sample of schools were meeting the interim food-based standards for school lunches.<sup>6</sup>
  3. Since then, the interim standards have been replaced by the final food-based and nutrient-based standards for school lunches.<sup>7</sup> Primary schools were required to meet these standards by September 2008 and secondary, special schools and pupil referral units by September 2009.
  4. Schools have been supported in meeting the standards by a range of publications from the School Food Trust. They have also had access to resources such as the *Real meals* cook book and the Licence to Cook programme.<sup>8, 9</sup>

## Compliance with the school food standards

### Final food-based standards for school lunches

5. Almost all the 39 schools visited for this survey were either fully compliant or close to complying with the final food-based standards for school lunches. Eight of the 17 primary schools visited had met the final food-based standards in full. The rest met at least nine of the 12 standards. The standard most often not met was the requirement to provide a portion of fruit for every pupil eating a school lunch.
6. Five of the 16 secondary schools were fully compliant. The other schools were making good progress towards complying and, on average, 10 of the 12 standards were met. The standards most often not met were those restricting the provision of meat products, deep-fried foods and starchy foods cooked in

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<sup>4</sup> For further information, see: [www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/resources/2007b](http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/resources/2007b).

<sup>5</sup> This includes all food provided up to 6pm, including breakfast clubs, mid-morning break services, vending machines, tuck shops and after-school snacks and meals. For further information, see: [www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/resources/2007a](http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/resources/2007a).

<sup>6</sup> *Food in schools; encouraging healthier eating* (070016), Ofsted, 2007; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070016a](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070016a).

<sup>7</sup> For further information see: [www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/nutrientbasedstandards](http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/nutrientbasedstandards).

<sup>8</sup> The cookbook, *Real meals, simple cooking that tastes great*, contains 32 classic recipes. These were chosen after the public was asked to nominate the basic dishes that every child should learn how to cook. For further information, see: [www.direct.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dg/groups/dg\\_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg\\_171715.pdf](http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_171715.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> For further information, see: [www.licencetocook.org.uk](http://www.licencetocook.org.uk).



fat or oil. Generally, this resulted from misinterpretation of the standards rather than deliberate non-compliance.

### **Nutrient-based standards for school lunches**

7. All the schools, apart from four of the secondary schools, provided evidence to show that their lunchtime menu cycle had been analysed against the nutrient-based standards for school lunches. Twelve of the primary schools had met these standards in full. Fewer of the secondary schools visited had done so, possibly because the requirement had come into force for them more recently, in September 2009. The secondary schools that did not meet the nutrient-based standards fully were generally able to describe what they had done or planned to do to work towards compliance.

### **Food-based standards for food other than lunches**

8. Twenty-one of the schools visited met the food-based standards for all food other than lunch in full. However, evidence of compliance was less commonly available for food provision at lunchtime and, in many of the schools, there was limited evidence of coordination and monitoring of the food provided by the range of outlets that operated on the school premises during the day.

### **Strategic partnerships**

9. The most successful work seen during the survey resulted from organisations working together strategically. A common feature of the spearhead authorities surveyed was the coherent, consistent and strategic emphasis that they and their partners placed on improving the health and well-being of children and young people. In the best examples, the national agenda had been carefully adapted to meet local needs.
10. One of the authorities visited had worked with the primary care trust to produce a four-year strategy. Clearly identified goals had been developed in consultation with key stakeholders. The goals were integrated into the Children and Young People's Plan and were reflected in the plans of individual services. Funding had been devolved to local learning networks and neighbourhood areas to enable them to focus together on specific needs within individual localities. There was a particular focus on the considerable role that schools play in tackling childhood obesity. An example of how this worked in practice was provided by one of the secondary schools visited in this authority.

The school operated an electronic, cashless system for school lunches. Parents who paid for meals determined the allowance for each meal and settled the bill beforehand. Students who were entitled to a free school meal also had an allowance but their parents did not pay. Through this system, the school was able to monitor the food intake of all students taking lunch and, where necessary, to discuss how they might make healthier choices. At the time of the visit, the school had identified a

number of overweight students and, through sensitive consultation with them and their families, had established an eight-week programme where 13–17-year-olds took part in a range of physical activities to improve their fitness. This was run in conjunction with the local sports centre.

The school had also established other links with the community to support its drive to improve students' health. These included a gardening project, run in conjunction with a local farm, to enable students to extend their skills and understanding in growing and preparing food.

11. As part of its health strategy, another authority had implemented a rigorous programme to tackle levels of tooth decay that were far higher than the national and regional averages. The oral health programme included annual screening of all primary pupils and focused on ensuring earlier and quicker access to preventative help. The programme was also designed to reduce the absence from school that could result from poor dental health.
12. One of the authorities visited had identified that a lack of cooking skills among parents was a problem. To address this, parent–family support workers were working intensively to teach them to prepare meals from fresh ingredients, using the *Real meals* cook book. One special school used its Let's Get Cooking club to teach pupils how to cook healthy recipes. As a result, they and their parents had been encouraged to cook together at home.
13. A more strategic approach enabled schools to have a greater impact. In one authority, for example, an outstanding secondary school had run a number of projects for several years to help students adopt healthier lifestyles. However, the senior managers were concerned that these might not be sufficiently focused or well coordinated. With the aid of the primary care trust and a local housing trust, they identified specific areas where levels of unemployment, obesity and mental health problems were high. At the time of the survey, the school had drawn up an outreach programme within one of the targeted areas. Topics in the programme included advice to parents on how to:
  - apply for free school meals
  - provide healthy food on a low budget
  - support their children in making healthy choices of food
  - ensure that their children took regular exercise.

### Agencies involved at school level

14. All the schools visited had established small-scale projects where they worked with other local agencies to promote healthy eating and healthy living. Some of these are illustrated in the following examples.

One school was part of a local authority group which had established an effective partnership with local sports clubs. Ten primary schools and five

pupil support centres had bought into a professional coaching service provided by the local rugby club. This was not only raising the profile of physical education in the schools but was also helping the pupils to become far more aware of the importance of healthy eating and exercise.

A special school with a high number of pupils with specific and complex dietary needs had enlisted the support of a paediatric dietician. As a result, all the pupils, including those who had to be tube-fed, were able to take a school lunch and to play a full part in the social interaction in the dining hall. The speech and language therapist provided advice on how different types of food could help stimulate vocal and throat movements which, in turn, would help to improve the pupils' speech.

One school was working with the Prince's Trust to provide additional support to help academically less able pupils to improve their understanding of healthy eating options. This included developing an allotment where they grew their own food.

## Leadership and management

15. In the schools visited where the approach to healthy eating and food technology was most successful, the drive often came from a member of the senior management team.

## Whole-school food policies

16. All but five of the schools visited had a whole-school food policy.<sup>10</sup> Most of those seen included:
  - specific aims and priorities for action, supported by a clear rationale
  - details of the consultation that had taken place during their development
  - information on how they were to be evaluated.
17. Only five of the primary schools and three of the secondary schools referred explicitly to packed lunches in their food policies. However, most of the other schools provided information for parents on foods not to be brought into school. This included information in newsletters and as part of meetings with new parents.

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<sup>10</sup> Sixteen of the primary schools, 11 of the secondary schools and all five of the special schools visited had gained National Healthy Schools Status, a requirement of which is to have a whole-school food policy.

18. At least four of the schools visited had policies which clarified their position on such issues as using sweets as rewards or whether pupils were allowed to bring birthday cakes to school.
19. One of the problems faced by the secondary schools visited was in developing and implementing policies relating to the sixth form. The concern to ensure that sixth formers ate healthy food had to be balanced with the students' right to make choices for themselves and to enjoy the greater freedom appropriate to their age and maturity. Children should make choices as early as possible.
20. The whole-school food policies seen had commonly been developed in consultation with staff and governors. In the best instances, in both primary and secondary schools, individual governors with a passion for ensuring that pupils received balanced meals had made a major contribution to developing and implementing an effective policy. In one of the secondary schools visited, for example, a governor had been instrumental in ensuring that all students had access to a free salad bar.
21. Eleven of the secondary schools relied on parent governors to give the views of families. Direct contact with parents was more limited, although there were schools that had worked with their parent-teacher association to develop their policies. Others had preferred to convene a forum for parents or to use questionnaires to gather a more representative range of opinions.
22. The importance of effective communication with parents was underlined by the experience of one of the primary schools where the governors had said that pupils should not bring sweets into school. The parents were vociferous in their objections and, for a time, relationships were strained. In collaboration with a local family centre, the school set up a project to help parents develop healthy eating recipes. Those who attended were very enthusiastic and were developing a better understanding of what the school was trying to achieve.
23. The main mechanism for consulting pupils in the primary schools was the school council. The quality of consultation varied, ranging from numerous opportunities for pupils to influence the choice of food on offer to very limited discussion about whether the school should adopt one menu rather than another. A minority of the pupils spoken to reported that the suggestions that they had made had been entirely ignored by the school and the caterers.
24. The secondary schools tended to have more formal mechanisms and class councils as well as school councils were consulted. In the best examples, the school cook regularly met the school council to gather views, an approach that the students very much appreciated. In other examples, external caterers consulted the students formally. In one school, a student had been appointed to taste the food on offer and to gather his peers' views on how provision could be improved. In another, students met the governors to give their views on the

catering and, in one case, students contributed to the design of the new canteen.

25. Because the pupils in one of the special schools could not communicate orally, the teaching assistants worked alongside them to help them to express their views using symbols and modifications of British sign language.

## **Policies on packed lunches**

26. The schools' food policies were undermined when pupils brought in unhealthy packed lunches. Eight of the schools had tried to combat this by developing policies on packed lunches. However, some of the headteachers spoken to were reluctant to do this because they did not think that they should tell parents what to do and did not wish to be patronising. Where consultation with families had been poor or where information had not been worded sensitively, parents saw the school as being 'interfering' and 'bossy' and reacted against the advice.
27. Many of the parents with whom inspectors held discussions said that, rather than being told what not to give their children, they wanted more guidance on how to prepare a healthy and balanced packed lunch. A common complaint among these parents was that the schools were not sufficiently sensitive to their personal circumstances and the cost of providing a healthy packed lunch. Other parents, particularly of very young children, recognised that the packed lunches they prepared did not accord with advice; however, they felt that it was more important to provide food that they knew that their children would eat rather than risk the possibility that they might eat nothing all day.

## **Promoting inclusivity**

28. Of the 39 schools visited, 36 included a daily vegetarian option in the lunchtime menu cycle. However, this option was not always available as a main meal. Vegetarian options were not always clearly labelled on the menu or at the counter and pupils sometimes had to rely on the staff to tell them which ones they were. The three schools that did not include daily vegetarian options on the menu reported that these were provided when requested.
29. Most of the schools said that they were able to cater for pupils with special dietary needs arising from, for example, allergies or coeliac disease.<sup>11</sup> In the primary schools visited, a common approach was for the school and caterer to meet the parents of children with special dietary needs to discuss options. Details of the children's dietary requirements, together with their photographs, would then be displayed next to the serving hatch to ensure that catering staff helped the pupil to make an appropriate choice. All the special schools, and several of the other schools which had pupils with special dietary needs, had a

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<sup>11</sup> Coeliac disease is an auto-immune disease where eating gluten damages the lining of the small intestine.

system to seek the support of a paediatric dietician where special diets were requested for medical reasons.

30. Schools catering for pupils with cultural or religious dietary requirements provided variations on their menus. But these were not always provided as a main meal or clearly labelled. Halal meat was provided for Muslim pupils in some of the schools visited, even though the number of pupils requiring this was small.

## Monitoring

31. A major weakness observed in the schools visited was the monitoring of their provision of food. According to the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, as amended by the Education and Inspections Act 2006, the responsibility for monitoring the policy and provision for food rests with the governing body, except in instances where the school food budget has not been delegated to the school and is retained by the local authority. Since April 2009, it has been a statutory requirement for local authorities to report on the take-up of school lunches and free schools meals for all their schools, not just those for which catering services are provided directly or contracted. Among the governors interviewed for the survey, the level of understanding of the legislative requirements varied. In most cases, it was very limited. Despite this, none of the schools visited had identified this as an area for training.
32. The governors contributed to debates on topics such as whether to provide tuck shops or what restrictions should be placed on the contents of packed lunches. In general, the governors of the primary schools tended to know what the catering experience was like because they often joined the pupils for lunch during their visits. This occurred less frequently in the secondary schools visited.
33. When asked about monitoring, the most typical response from governors was to say that they had devolved this to the headteacher or to the caterer. In many instances, the caterers conducted their own monitoring, for example through unannounced visits. In general, the challenge to external caterers from schools was not systematic or rigorous, and minutes of governors' meetings rarely made reference to any check being made on this.
34. Some of the schools visited had enlisted the support of nutritionists to monitor adherence to the standards. One of these schools did this exceptionally well, working with a range of experts and a partner school to evaluate provision, identify improvements and update training for catering staff regularly.

## Limiting factors

### Buildings

35. All the schools visited had cooking and eating facilities. In many instances, it had taken some ingenuity to convert small spaces, corridors and multi-function halls into areas where pupils and staff could eat in comfort. Some particular limitations applied to the cooking and dining facilities in two schools that had been built through the private finance initiative.<sup>12</sup> In one of the schools, the kitchen was suitable only for re-heating food. The pupils found this unappetising and it led to low take-up of meals.

### Training

36. In the schools visited, there was confusion over who was responsible for providing training for catering staff and what the scope of the training should be. In one of the secondary schools, relationships between catering staff and pupils were deteriorating. In this case, the caterer had provided the managers and the cook with training on the school food standards but the service staff had received no support in developing their interpersonal skills. As a result, the students were less likely to eat healthy school meals.

## Promoting take-up

### School meals

37. Discussions with pupils showed that there were several factors which discouraged them from taking school meals. These included:
- the price of meals
  - pressure from fellow pupils to bring packed lunches
  - parental preference
  - the lack of provision for those eating school lunches to sit with friends who preferred to bring a packed lunch
  - the time spent queuing.

The secondary school students added that the availability of alternative food outlets locally and the opportunity to leave the school site at lunch time were also disincentives to eating a school meal.

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<sup>12</sup> For further information, see: [www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2001/rp01-117.pdf](http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2001/rp01-117.pdf).



38. The schools visited adopted a range of successful strategies to try to increase the take-up of school meals. In the primary schools, these included:
- arranging induction evenings where caterers discussed the menus on offer and held taster sessions for pupils and parents
  - providing free lunches for pupils who were starting school to encourage them to take a school meal
  - sending menu leaflets home so that parents could see what was offered and discuss choices with their children
  - asking pupils to taste and give their views on new products or food from new suppliers
  - providing stickers for pupils who behaved well or inviting them to eat at the 'top table' at the end of the week
  - organising themed days on food, related for example to particular countries or science themes, during which caterers could make pupils aware of the range of food available in school and how it could help promote their health.
39. Themed days were also popular in the secondary schools visited and had proved to be very effective in encouraging more students to eat a school meal. Other approaches in the secondary schools included:
- providing 'meal deals' where students could choose a main course, pudding and/or a drink for a set price
  - providing free salads or fruit portions with the main meal
  - organising cooking events where students could extend their knowledge of how the food in school was produced and how it had been planned to be balanced and nutritious
  - displaying menus prominently in the dining room and around the school, sometimes using plasma screens
  - enabling students to book tables for special events, such as birthday celebrations.

### **Free school meals**

40. Parents do not have to pay for school lunches if they receive any of the following: Income Support; Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance; Income-related Employment and Support Allowance; Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; The Guarantee element of State Pension Credit; Child Tax Credit, provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual income (as assessed by HM Revenue & Customs) that does not exceed £16,040; Working Tax Credit during the four-week period immediately after their employment finishes or after they start to work fewer than 16 hours each week. Children who receive Income Support or Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance in their own right qualify as well. All pupils who do



not qualify for free school lunches must be charged the same amount for the same quantity of the same item.

41. Nationally, the proportions of primary and secondary pupils known to be eligible for free school meals are 17.3% and 14.2%, respectively. Eligibility is based on those entitled to claim free school meals through the criteria outlined in paragraph 40. However, the proportions who take up their entitlement are lower: 15.0% in primary schools (86.6% of those known to be eligible) and 11.1% at secondary level (78.3% of those known to be eligible). The proportions of primary pupils known to be eligible for free school meals in the authorities visited ranged from 11.0% to 40.0%. At secondary level, they ranged from 10.1% to 37.6%.<sup>13</sup>
42. The barriers that prevented families from taking up their eligibility for free school meals included:
  - uncertainty about eligibility
  - a reluctance to be identified as needing support
  - fluctuations in family status which made it difficult for families to re-apply for support when necessary
  - the complexity of the application process which some families found daunting.
43. The schools visited used a variety of strategies to encourage take-up of free school meals, including:
  - working with housing associations to identify families who were likely to be eligible and ensuring that they received the necessary information
  - setting targets to improve take-up and drawing up plans to meet them
  - arranging for members of staff who had a detailed understanding of the neighbourhood to provide sensitive advice to families about their entitlement
  - providing practical support to parents in completing forms.
44. Five of the 16 secondary schools still had systems where those entitled to free school meals could be readily identified by their peers. Only seven of the schools had introduced cashless systems. Although these can be expensive, they have the advantage of maintaining anonymity and also of providing an easy means of monitoring take-up by individuals and groups of pupils. Some of the schools were also using these data to help with monitoring the attainment and achievement of these pupils.

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<sup>13</sup> Data from DfE: *Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2010 (provisional)*; [www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000925/index.shtml](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000925/index.shtml).

## Children from families on low incomes

45. A more difficult area to tackle for the schools and authorities visited was the take-up of school meals by families whose income was low but who were above the threshold for being entitled to free school meals. Several of the schools visited had introduced breakfast clubs to ensure that pupils who had not eaten before coming to school had a meal before lessons began. These were offered free of charge, or on a subsidised basis, to potentially vulnerable pupils. However, strategies to encourage take-up of school lunches by pupils from families where the family income was low were limited.
46. Parents from these families told inspectors that they often could not afford to pay for a school lunch, especially if they had more than one child. One family, for example, had to arrange for the two children to take turns and eat a school meal on alternate weeks. Other parents complained about the lack of advice on how to produce balanced but inexpensive packed lunches. Also, little account was taken of the fact that many families whose income was low did not have transport and therefore had to rely on what was available in the immediate locality. Local shopkeepers were unlikely to stock appropriate food unless they could be convinced of the financial viability of doing so. Unhealthy packed lunches did not necessarily reflect parents' lack of commitment or cooperation but, rather, a complex set of local circumstances.
47. This points to the need for school governors, parents and local retailers to work together to tackle the problem. Within the sample of schools visited, only one had any sort of collaboration with local businesses; even then, it was limited to arranging for the local chip-shop owner to check that pupils had been given permission to come to her shop at lunchtimes.

## Curriculum

### Developing understanding of healthy eating

48. The schools visited adopted a variety of approaches to developing pupils' understanding of healthy eating. All the primary schools included references to food within individual subjects. For example, primary history lessons might include the types of food eaten by the Greeks, the Vikings or the Tudors. However, this approach required careful planning if pupils were to be able to assess whether these various diets were healthy or not. Not all schools had ensured this and, in some cases, a lack of coherence led to pupils receiving contradictory messages from different lessons.

However, there were instances of excellent planning, as in the following examples from one of the secondary schools:

A residential study visit included a day devoted to history during which the students lived on Second World War rations. Through discussion, they were helped to understand why the average national diet was healthier

then than now. They also had the opportunity to 'dig for victory' and to re-enact VE day and examine the types of food available at the time. This helped them to understand that, although oranges were scarce in 1945, people were able to obtain Vitamin C from other sources, such as rose hips and potatoes.

49. Other good examples of carefully planned subject work that reinforced messages about healthy eating were found in languages and mathematics lessons.

In a French lesson, students compared the regional variations in crêpes and identified the benefits of those that were traditionally made with buckwheat flour. In a mathematics lesson, the students were involved in a sophisticated budgeting exercise where they were required to identify the most cost-effective way of catering for gluten-free and other specialist diets. This work was challenging for pupils of all abilities.

50. Eighteen of the schools visited also used cross-curricular themes successfully to reinforce learning about healthy eating, as in the following example.

Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage had detailed 'learning journey' books which showed clearly how they returned to the theme of health and healthy eating through different topics which reinforced and extended their understanding each time. Provision for indoor and outdoor play was excellent and there were plenty of opportunities for robust physical exercise. This aspect of the school's work was very well supported by the local sports partnership which gave the children opportunities to develop their physical skills and to take part in a wide variety of competitive games.

51. In the better examples observed, the personal, social and health education programme made an important contribution to developing pupils' understanding of, and independence in, making healthy choices. Work related to the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme was also very important. In one primary school, for example, pupils across several year groups were able to explain that healthy living relates not only to physical health but also to mental health and social and spiritual well-being. In another school, pupils took part in meditation and yoga to focus their minds. In one case, work of this sort was extended with a 'Healthy Mind and Body Week' during which members of the medical services, parents and teachers gave practical demonstrations and talks about eating well and keeping healthy.
52. Education outside the classroom played an important role in developing pupils' understanding of healthy living. Inspectors found good examples in primary and secondary schools of school gardens and allotments being used to support learning. One Reception class had exploited limited space by growing tomatoes in growbags. A secondary school had a very extensive garden with raised beds

where the students grew vegetables that they then cooked or sold through the farmers' market, which was run through their Business and Enterprise specialism. Such initiatives contributed not only to pupils' understanding of healthy eating but also to their knowledge about sustainability and science.

In an inner-city primary school, the focus on food and healthy lifestyles permeated the curriculum. Visitors' attention was captured by effective displays which included helpful advice on what to include in a child's packed lunch. Lessons were planned systematically to ensure that the concepts and language associated with food and diet were developed progressively. From using simple vocabulary in the early years, pupils gradually acquired increasingly technical language so that, for example, by Year 6, they were able to make accurate reference to microbes when discussing food handling and hygiene.

A physical education and science project, which was run in conjunction with a university department, involved the pupils in investigating the relationship between food intake and energy expended. This included practical experiments using pedometers and heart monitors.

To promote good dental health, each child had been provided with a toothbrush and taught how to use it properly by the dental nurse. As part of an authority-wide screening programme, each pupil was also seen by a dentist every year and, where necessary, referred for treatment.

Excellent use was made of the school garden, not only as part of after-school activities but also within the formal curriculum. For example, two teachers helped pupils who were new to the country to make new friends by involving them in practical gardening activities. Through these, the pupils also extended their command of language, including the technical names of plants. The produce was used for cooking in school and also distributed to older people and the homeless at the harvest festival. The pupils were particularly proud of their peace garden which included a lavender patch where they could observe the wildlife and spend time reflecting.

## Teaching food technology

53. Three of the primary schools visited were at an early stage of providing appropriate accommodation for teaching food technology. Nineteen of the schools made good use of produce from their own gardens to make salads, dips, soups and fruit kebabs. There were also good examples of pupils being given the opportunity to make bread. In one class, as part of their work on celebrations, the pupils had researched what healthy ingredients could be included in a wedding cake. However, they did not see the cake being cooked because they had to work in ordinary classrooms with no specialist facilities. Dedicated food rooms, where they existed, were often cramped and could

accommodate only small numbers of pupils. As a result, opportunities for practical work were limited to a few occasions each term. However, within these limitations, teachers were working hard to provide pupils with as many practical opportunities as they could. One school had invited a professional chef to work with pupils in order to improve their knowledge of food handling and preparation and to raise the general profile of the subject.

54. Despite the Government's investment in the *Real meals* cook book and Licence to Cook initiatives, not all the schools visited were using them regularly. Eleven of the secondary schools used the *Real meals* cook book extensively to teach students how to prepare and handle fresh ingredients and cook main meals. In the best instances, students were given copies of the books so that they could develop their skills further at home. However, in two instances, the books were restricted to the teachers only; the pupils complained that they could not take them home to use.

## Impact of provision

55. Despite the wide range of initiatives being implemented, the schools visited did not monitor the impact of the interventions effectively. For example, even where schools had electronic cashless systems, very few of them used the data generated to identify what food pupils chose or the dietary trends of particular groups. They therefore missed the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of strategies to encourage healthy choices and to use this analysis to improve their planning.
56. Discussions with staff, pupils and parents identified areas where improvements had resulted from the teaching and learning that had taken place in school. For example, some parents reported that their children were far more conscious of what constituted a healthy diet and challenged other members of their families to make healthier choices. Others reported that they had been inspired to re-examine and improve their own cooking as a result of discussions with their children and after reading information that the school had provided.
57. Discussions with pupils during the survey showed that the majority had a good general understanding of what constituted a balanced diet and the advantages and disadvantages of various types and combinations of food. Many also reported that they had regular opportunities to handle and prepare food and could explain the progress of food 'from field to plate'. However, they had very limited awareness of the school food standards and did not know how these related to their own food choices.
58. It will clearly take time for the impact of the recent initiatives to be reflected because they rely as much on changes of attitude as on knowledge and understanding. They also relate to the habits that these young people adopt outside school and will develop in later life.

59. Observations in the school canteens in this survey indicated that, on the whole, food wastage was limited, which suggested that the pupils enjoyed what they were eating. However, there was no guarantee that the pupils were not selecting the same food daily. Schools and caterers encouraged pupils to select and eat fruit and vegetables by using a variety of strategies such as salad bars and including vegetables in recipes, although not all pupils took a portion of fruit and vegetables. However, it was not certain that the practical examples of healthy eating at school influenced the choices made outside school. In one primary school, for example, the pupils explained that they were now eating more chips when they were out with their friends because they could relax from the constant focus on healthy eating.

## Notes

Between September 2009 and January 2010, Her Majesty's Inspectors, accompanied by nutritionists appointed by the School Food Trust, visited 17 primary schools, 16 secondary schools, five special schools and a pupil referral unit. The schools were drawn from 20 spearhead local authorities across England.

The visits focused on the extent to which schools were meeting the final food-based and nutrient-based standards for school lunches and the food-based standards for food other than lunches; the contribution that children's services and other agencies made to improving provision for healthy eating and healthy lifestyles in schools; and the extent to which the schools supported healthier lifestyles, particularly among the most vulnerable pupils.

Each one-day visit included discussions with the headteacher, senior catering staff, groups of pupils and parents. Inspectors and nutritionists considered the food and the dining experiences available. The schools also provided information about the variety of partnership work in which they were involved.

## Further information

### Publications by Ofsted

*Food in schools: encouraging healthier eating* (070016), Ofsted, 2007;  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070016a](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070016a).

### Other publications

Statutory Instrument 2007 No. 2359. The Education (Nutritional Standards and Requirements for School Food) (England) Regulations 2007, The Stationery Office, 2007; [www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2007/uksi\\_20072359\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2007/uksi_20072359_en_1).

Statutory Instrument 2008 No. 1800. The Education (Nutritional Standards and Requirements for School Food) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2008, The Stationery Office, 2008; [www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2008/uksi\\_20081800\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2008/uksi_20081800_en_1).

## Websites

[www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk](http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk)

The School Food Trust was established by the then Department for Education and Skills in September 2005. Its remit is to transform school food and food skills, promote the education and health of children and young people and improve the quality of food in schools.

[www.letsgetcooking.org.uk/AboutLetsGetCooking](http://www.letsgetcooking.org.uk/AboutLetsGetCooking)

This is a national network of cooking clubs for children, families and their communities across England. During its first five years, Let's Get Cooking is using £20 million from the Big Lottery Fund to set up the first 5,000 clubs.

[www.licencetocook.org.uk/](http://www.licencetocook.org.uk/)

This is a national programme to support the Government's announcement that compulsory cooking lessons are to be introduced into the secondary curriculum for the first time.

[www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk)

Guidance on setting up food partnerships.

[www.nutrition.org.uk](http://www.nutrition.org.uk)

The British Nutrition Foundation provides nutritional guidance and support materials for teaching food technology and cookery.

[www.healthyschools.gov.uk](http://www.healthyschools.gov.uk).

To gain National Healthy School Status schools must meet criteria in four core themes, including healthy eating.

[www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publichealth/Healthimprovement/FiveADay/FiveADaygeneralinformation/DH\\_4002149](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publichealth/Healthimprovement/FiveADay/FiveADaygeneralinformation/DH_4002149)

The School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme is part of the 'five a day' programme to increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables. All children aged four to six years in local authority maintained infant, primary and special schools are entitled to a free piece of fruit or vegetable each school day.

[www.foodinschools.org](http://www.foodinschools.org)

The then Department for Education and Skills and the Department of Health introduced the Food in Schools programme to encourage schools to look at all

aspects of food during the day and to develop whole-school food policies. Schools can also set up local food partnerships, where secondary food specialists train and support their primary colleagues, helping them to work towards the National Healthy Schools Standard.

[www.foodstandards.gov.uk](http://www.foodstandards.gov.uk)

The Food Standards Agency works with UK education and health departments and other partners to encourage schools to adopt a whole-school approach to food and nutrition and to improve children's dietary health. It embraces food safety and food allergies as well as healthy eating.



## Annex: Schools visited

### Primary schools

Britannia Bridge Primary School  
 East Herrington Primary School  
 Hensal Primary School  
 Holy Family RC Primary School  
 Horbury St Peter's Church of England Voluntary  
 Controlled Junior School  
 Kensington Infants' School  
 Rockingham Primary School  
 Rolls Crescent Primary School  
 St Anne's Catholic Primary School  
 St Bernadette's Catholic Primary School  
 St Charles' Catholic Primary School  
 St John's CofE Primary School  
 St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School  
 Wakefield Castle Grove Infant School  
 Wakefield St Johns Church of England Voluntary Aided  
 Junior and Infant School  
 Walton-le-Dale Community Primary School  
 Wendell Park Primary School

### Local authority

Wigan  
 Sunderland  
 Wakefield  
 Oldham  
 Wakefield  
  
 Liverpool  
 Northamptonshire  
 Manchester  
 Lambeth  
 Blackpool  
 Liverpool  
 Wigan  
 Lambeth  
 Wakefield  
 Wakefield  
  
 Lancashire  
 Hammersmith and Fulham

### Secondary schools

Baines School  
 Big Wood School  
 Bydales School – A Specialist Technology College  
 Crompton House CofE School  
 Croxteth Community Comprehensive School  
 King David High School  
 Lilian Baylis Technology School  
 Matthew Humberstone Church of England School  
 Penwortham Girls' High School  
 Saddleworth School  
 Sir Thomas Wharton Community College  
 St Edmund Arrowsmith Catholic High School, Ashton-in-

### Local authority

Lancashire  
 Nottingham  
 Redcar and Cleveland  
 Oldham  
 Liverpool  
 Liverpool  
 Lambeth  
 North East Lincolnshire  
 Lancashire  
 Oldham  
 Doncaster  
 Wigan

Makerfield

St George's School – A Church of England Business and Enterprise College      Blackpool

Trinity CofE High School      Manchester

Wakefield City High School – A Specialist Maths and Computing College      Wakefield

Westborough High School      Kirklees

**Special schools**

Highfield School

Horizon School

Moatbridge School

Westlands School

Wren Spinney Community Special School

**Local authority**

Knowsley

Hackney

Greenwich

Stockton-on-Tees

Northamptonshire

**Pupil referral unit**

Primary Pupil Referral Unit

**Local authority**

Hammersmith and Fulham