



Northern Ireland Audit Office

Promoting Good Nutrition through Healthy School Meals

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Northern Ireland Audit Office

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland

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Promoting Good Nutrition through Healthy School Meals

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Comptroller and Auditor General

Northern Ireland Audit Office
16 March 2011

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Abbreviations

BELB	Belfast Education and Library Board
DHSSPS	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
NASS	Home Office National Asylum Support Service
NEELB	North Eastern Education and Library Board
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
PwC	PricewaterhouseCoopers
SELB	Southern Education and Library Board
SEELB	South Eastern Education and Library Board
SNAG	School Nutrition Action Group
WELB	Western Education and Library Board

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Are all schools now complying with the nutritional standards?

1. Northern Ireland faces a complex challenge in addressing recent trends in children's health and eating habits. Statistics show that around one in five boys and one in four girls are overweight or obese in their first year of primary school. Encouraging the development of good eating habits in young people is a classic case of investing-to-save. It is estimated that, over the next 20 years, the costs of obesity in Northern Ireland will be £14.2 million in lost productivity, £90 million to the Department of Health, Social Services, and Public Safety (DHSSPS) in treating obesity related disease and a total lifetime economic cost through obesity related deaths of £340 million.
2. In 2009-10, the Department of Education (Department) funded spending by the Education and Library Boards of over £36 million on school meals. Healthy school meals on their own clearly cannot tackle obesity and other diet-related health problems in children. However, school meals do make a vital contribution to the dietary intake of school children in Northern Ireland. If healthy eating habits can be developed at an early stage they are more likely to be followed in later life.
3. Following concerns about the quality of children's diets and the content of school meals, compulsory nutritional standards were introduced in September 2005. In broad terms, the standards try to ensure that children eat a wide variety of foods which provide plenty of energy and the nutrients they need for proper growth and development. The standards do not ban any particular foods but limit the frequency with which high fat foods are served.
4. Since 2005, schools have made significant progress in meeting the Department's nutrition requirements although additional improvement is still needed in terms of the extent to which menus are balanced. At the same time, the continued existence of unhealthy food in vending machines and tuck shops in some schools is at odds with the healthy eating message being delivered by school meals services.
5. More needs to be done, too, in ensuring that all schools are fully compliant with the nutritional standards. Where a school is not adhering to the nutritional standards it should provide an action plan detailing how, and by when, it plans to address its deficiencies in complying with the standards and also record the outcomes of these actions. It is essential that all schools fully comply with the nutritional standards if school children are to get the full benefits of the move to healthier school meals.
6. It is essential that the training delivered to catering staff provides them with the appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to make them more proficient in menu planning so that the school meals supplied adhere as closely as possible to the standards. While the Department has adopted a phased approach to training on nutritional standards, it is important that it and the

Boards give priority to the development of initiatives for Principals, teachers and school governors which highlight the important role these groups can play in promoting healthy eating in schools and in encouraging the uptake of school meals.

7. Changing ingrained habits and tastes involves more than just a focus on ingredients. What is needed is a whole school approach, where every opportunity is taken to make children knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the food that they eat. Schools must be encouraged to review the links between teaching and learning on healthy eating in the curriculum and food provision so that they can take the necessary steps to develop mechanisms which deliver a whole school approach.
8. Despite identifying some excellent examples of links between teaching and learning in the classroom and food provision in the dining room, at present there is no single mechanism for sharing good practice in healthy eating across schools which can be accessed by teachers, catering staff, school governors and parents. In conjunction with DHSSPS and the Public Health Agency, the Department is currently considering the development of a website to support its Food in Schools policy. An easily accessible, informative website would be an ideal central resource and the report encourages the Department to fully consider the benefits which could be realised through such a valuable facility.

Improving the uptake of healthy school meals

9. Uptake of school meals is a key issue – there is little point in having healthy school meals if no one is eating them. Just over half of all pupils in Northern Ireland’s 1,200 schools eat school lunches on a regular basis. While the number of pupils taking school meals decreased by over 3 per cent between 2003 and 2008, uptake increased in 2009 for the first time in a number of years.
10. Another feature of school meal provision is that a significant proportion of pupils who are registered as entitled to free school meals do not actually take the meals. In 2009-10, approximately 58,000 pupils (18 per cent) were registered as entitled to free school meals. However, only around 78 per cent of those pupils registered actually took up this entitlement, meaning that some 12,700 pupils are missing out on a free school meal to which they are entitled. Moreover, other estimates indicate that as many as a further 8,000 children across Northern Ireland may be missing out on their entitlement to free school meals due to lack of registration.
11. In May 2008, the Western Board, in partnership with Advice NI, launched an initiative aimed at targeting low income families who are unaware of their entitlement or indeed the value of claiming their entitlement to free school meals. It is crucially important that the other

Executive Summary

- Boards liaise with the Western Board and Advice NI to gauge how successful the initiative is in addressing low levels of free school meals uptake and that they use it as an exemplar in developing a similar approach among their own schools.
12. Improvement in nutritional standards of meals will only lead to improvement in children's eating habits and health if there is increased uptake of these meals. In turn, uptake of meals can be influenced by factors such as the price charged and the overall dining experience. In terms of price, the Department told us that every time the price of school meals increased, uptake dropped; the larger the price increase, the larger the decrease in uptake. Following a price increase and the associated decrease in uptake, the uptake would increase again; however, it never fully recovered. In preparation for convergence to the Education and Skills Authority the Boards are working towards harmonisation of prices.
 13. The importance of the school meals service was reflected in the fact that the Department initially subsidised the cost of the school meal. The Department told us that this subsidy was totally removed in April 2000 in order to maximise the amount of resources available for direct classroom use. Therefore, the current arrangements for the provision of school meals require that the charge for any meal shall be sufficient to recover the full cost of production. However, we found that a subsidy is still in place and this has been calculated at £2.7 million in 2008-09 across the Boards.
 14. Queuing is recognised as a key factor in improving the school meal experience. As a result, many schools have tried to cut down on delays in buying food: for instance, by increasing the availability of service points; providing additional payment points; and staggering lunchtimes. In addition, the use of cashless systems can be used to speed up the queuing and buying process. Schools should aim to provide a positive dining experience for pupils with a particular focus on managing queue lengths, the décor and atmosphere of the dining facilities.
 15. It is important that, not only are the pupils encouraged into the dining room, but also that they are encouraged to make nutritionally "healthy choices". A key way in which to encourage this is through the use of marketing. The marketing of school meals needs to be coordinated and driven by the Department to ensure that: clear and consistent messages are provided at regional and local levels; duplication of effort is avoided and the exchange of good practice is maximised. It is also imperative that this strategy is linked to specific performance indicators and targets to ensure that its success can be measured and revisions made where necessary.
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16. If schools are to play their full part in improving the wider health agenda, it is important that hard evidence is obtained to show the extent to which they are exerting a positive influence on children's food choices. Towards this end, it is essential that the Department produces quantitative indicators and sets challenging but realistic targets for the increase in uptake of the healthier school meals at the earliest opportunity.

Part One:
Introduction and Background

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Part One: Introduction and Background

Why good nutrition is important

- 1.1 Northern Ireland faces a complex challenge in addressing recent trends in children's health and eating habits. According to analysis by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), levels of obesity in children living in Northern Ireland are increasing year on year and around one in five boys and one in four girls are overweight or obese in Primary one¹. The *Young Hearts* study of 12 and 15 year olds living in Northern Ireland² also reported that levels of overweight and obesity have increased by over a quarter in ten years. The number of obese or overweight children in Britain aged between 2 and 15 has also risen to 30 per cent in recent years³. In January 2009 we reported on levels of obesity and Type 2 diabetes in Northern Ireland⁴ and the report highlighted that the incidence of Type 2 diabetes – closely associated with obesity – is forecast to increase to 5.3 per cent of the Northern Ireland population by 2015.
- 1.2 It is estimated that, if no change is effected in obesity levels, the costs of obesity to Northern Ireland over the next twenty years would be £14.2 million in lost productivity, £90 million to DHSSPS in treating obesity related disease and a total lifetime economic cost through obesity related deaths of £340 million⁵. Healthy eating patterns, i.e. those that are rich in fruit, vegetables and starchy foods
- and low in fat and sugar, help to protect against the main diet-related diseases such as obesity, dental decay, heart disease and cancers.
- 1.3 Healthy school meals on their own clearly cannot tackle obesity and other diet-related health problems in children. A number of other factors are involved including the level of physical activity, parental influence, the effectiveness of health promotion initiatives, the influence of advertising and the ready availability of fast food. However, school meals do make a vital contribution to the dietary intake of school children in Northern Ireland. As well as providing children with at least one nutritious meal in the day school meals services can, together with a healthy eating ethos in schools, help to encourage a healthier approach generally to eating and thereby influence the food choices made at home and outside school. If healthy eating habits can be developed at an early stage they are more likely to be followed in later life.
- 1.4 There can also be positive educational benefits from adopting healthier eating patterns. A recent study by the School Food Trust in England found that a healthy diet has a direct impact on a child's ability to study, with children who eat a healthy lunch being more focussed and better able to learn⁶. In addition, an evaluation of the Jamie Oliver "*Feed me better*" campaign in England reported that healthy school meals did improve

1 Fit Futures; Report on food, activity and young people, DHSSPS, January 2006.

2 Ten year trends for fatness in Northern Irish adolescents: the Young Hearts Projects, repeat cross-sectional Study, Watkins, Murray et al. *International Journal of Obesity*; 29, 579-585, 2005.

3 Health Survey for England 2007, Healthy Lifestyles: knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, The Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 16 December 2008.

4 Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes in Northern Ireland, NIA 73/08/09, 14 January 2009.

5 Guidelines for the Management of Obesity in Secondary Care, Clinical Resource Efficiency Support Team NI, June 2005.

6 Long and Short-term Benefits of Healthy School Food across the School Day, School Food Trust, 2008.

educational outcomes, particularly in English and Science, and improved absenteeism⁷.

2006-07 for the implementation of compulsory nutritional standards for school meals (paragraph 2.11).

Funding the school meals service

1.5 The Department provides funding to each Education and Library Board (the Board), Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools in line with its obligation to fund free school meal provision, in line with the statutory obligations. Figure 1 shows the funding provided by the Department for the school meals service, over the five years to 2009-10. These figures do not include the additional funding of approximately £3 million each year which has been made available to Boards since

The take up of school meals had shown a slight downward trend in recent years

1.6 Just over half of all pupils in Northern Ireland's 1,200 schools eat school lunches on a regular basis (52.5 per cent in 2009). As Figure 2 shows, the number of pupils taking school meals has decreased by over 3 per cent between 2003 and 2008 but in 2009 uptake increased for the first time in a number of years. In comparison, uptake in England fell by 5 per cent in the year following the introduction of the nutritional standards⁸ and overall uptake in Northern Ireland still

Figure 1: School Meals Expenditure funded by the Department

	2005-06 £'000	2006-07 £'000	2007-08 £'000	2008-09 £'000	2009-10 £'000
Belfast Board	5,227	5,507	5,715	5,394	5,944
North Eastern Board	5,592	6,814	6,060	6,523	7,438
South Eastern Board	4,259	4,259	3,839	3,407	3,889
Southern Board	6,038	6,152	6,604	6,677	7,578
Western Board	6,606	6,436	6,744	7,272	7,738
TOTAL FOR BOARDS	27,722	29,168	28,962	29,273	32,587
Grant Maintained Integrated	1,409	1,447	1,497	1,627	1,164
Voluntary Grammar	2,265	2,370	2,444	2,461	2,501
OVERALL TOTAL	31,396	32,985	32,903	33,361	36,252

Source: Department

7 Healthy School Meals and Educational Outcomes, Institute for Social and Economic Research, January 2009.

8 Second Annual Survey of Take-up of School Meals in England, School Food Trust, September 2007.

Part One: Introduction and Background

Figure 2: Number of pupils taking school meals as a percentage of pupils present

	Oct-03 %	Oct-04 %	Oct-05 %	Oct-06 %	Oct-07 %	Oct-08 %	Oct-09 %
Belfast Board	50.8	51.5	49.2	51.2	48.9	48.3	50.4
North Eastern Board	48.8	47.7	45.1	43.7	43.3	44.2	44.5
South Eastern Board	46.8	44.8	41.7	40.9	39.8	38.9	41.4
Southern Board	61.1	60.7	59.7	59.2	58.7	57.0	58.2
Western Board	66.4	65.7	63.4	62.3	61.2	62.2	63.9
Voluntary Grammar	53.7	54.7	54.5	55.2	55.2	54.7	55.2
Grant Maintained Integrated	62.3	60.0	54.5	57.5	58.7	57.6	59.3
OVERALL PERCENTAGE	54.9	54.4	52.4	52.3	51.6	51.2	52.5

Source: Department

remains higher than that in both England and Scotland.

- 1.7 School meals services are not provided with a captive clientele. Pupils and parents at primary schools can choose the alternative of packed lunches, while at post-primary schools, pupils can not only choose packed lunches but can, in many cases, also leave the school grounds and buy food at local shops and take-aways. In order to maintain or ideally increase uptake, school meals services therefore have to recognise that they are operating in a competitive market. Pupils and parents are consumers whose needs and wants have to be met in order to win and keep their custom. However, unlike other consumers, pupils and their parents are being offered a service within an educational environment and they can be directed, indeed expect to be directed, towards particular choices. The challenge

for school meals services, therefore, is how to encourage pupils to choose to eat the healthy school meals rather than the alternative options which may be of much less nutritional value.

The introduction of compulsory nutritional standards for school meals

- 1.8 Concern about the quality of children's dietary intake and their school lunch choices led the Department to introduce compulsory nutritional standards for school lunches in September 2005 with a final roll out to all schools by Autumn 2006, with a number of subsequent updates. The standards, which were originally set out in the Department's *Catering for Healthier Lifestyles* document⁹ in 2001, outline the requirements that school caterers must follow when preparing school meals. In broad terms the standards try to ensure

⁹ Catering for Healthier Lifestyles, Compulsory Nutritional Standards for School Meals, A Consultation Document, Department of Education, December 2001.

that children eat a wide variety of foods which provide plenty of energy and the nutrients they need for proper growth and development. The standards do not ban any particular foods but limit the *frequency* with which some are served. While some foods are only permitted to be served on a specific number of occasions in a week, the more nutritional foods are required to be served more frequently. The standards include limiting high fat foods to twice a week, offering rice and pasta at least once a week, offering at least one type of vegetable/salad every day and serving more fruit and fruit based desserts. The standards also provide advice on healthier cooking methods, particularly in relation to reducing fat and salt.

- 1.9 In addition to the nutritional standards for school lunches, there are now also nutritional standards for other food and drinks in schools which apply to food and drinks sold or served in schools through vending machines, tuck shops, breakfast clubs, after school clubs and at break times. This means that items such as crisps, sweets, chocolate, cereal bars and fizzy or sugary drinks should no longer be provided. These standards for other food and drinks came fully into effect from April 2008. Therefore, all food and drink provided or sold in grant aided nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools should now meet the new standards. A number of schools use private sector providers for their school meals services and these firms are also required to adhere to the new standards. A copy of the latest version of the standards can

be found at Appendix 1. The Boards and schools have developed menus which seek to comply with the nutritional standards and a sample menu for a cash cafeteria is included at Appendix 2.

- 1.10 As part of the process of introducing nutritional standards, the Department has provided funding for a Catering Adviser, five Nutritional Standards Coordinators in the Boards and two Nutritional Associate posts within the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). The Catering Adviser role, funded until March 2009, was to provide professional advice to the Department and to Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools on all aspects of the school meals service. The Nutritional Standards Coordinators role has been to provide training and practical support to catering staff and schools (where invited) in implementing and complying with the nutritional standards. The Nutritional Associate role is to monitor and evaluate the implementation of both sets of nutritional standards and the approaches schools are taking to the promotion of healthy eating. In conjunction with DHSSPS, the Department also provides funding for a Food in Schools Coordinator, a dietician based at the Health Promotion Agency¹⁰ whose role is to support the initiatives of the *School Food: Top Marks* programme. The Nutritional Associates and Food in Schools Coordinator are presently funded until March 2011. The Department will be considering the continued funding of these posts in 2011-12 and beyond as part of the Spending Review.

10 As from 1 April 2009 all Health Promotion Agency responsibilities have been transferred to the Public Health Agency.

Part One: Introduction and Background

1.11 The *School Food: Top Marks* programme was launched in 2009 and supersedes *Catering for Healthier Lifestyles*. It is a joint venture between the Department, DHSSPS, the Health Promotion Agency and the Food Standards Agency. The *School Food: Top Marks* programme recognises the important role of schools in contributing to childhood nutrition and the development of the knowledge and skills necessary to make healthier food choices. Under this new programme, the nutritional standards for school lunches and other food and drinks in schools¹¹ have been updated to take account of developments in nutrition and healthy eating. A key resource in assisting schools to implement the standards and develop a whole school approach to healthy eating, entitled *School Food: The Essential Guide*, was launched in March 2009 as part of the programme. This guide contains a series of practical guidance booklets designed to help schools improve pupils' nutrition and implement healthier eating and drinking practices throughout the school day.

1.12 It is recognised that introducing these changes to the food and drinks available in schools has been challenging from the outset. We commend the hard work of the employing authorities and catering staff which has resulted in significant improvements in the quality and nutritional value of school meals. However, whilst considerable steps have been taken, further improvements must be made to ensure that all schools are fully compliant

with the standards and that children are encouraged to make healthy eating choices.

Scope of NIAO review

1.13 Serving nutritious lunches is only the first step in promoting a healthy school food environment. Pupils must also be encouraged to choose to eat the nutritious meals which are provided. Against this background, our study examined four inter-related issues:

- how well the Department and schools are meeting the new nutritional requirements;
- the barriers faced by the Department and schools in serving nutritious food and encouraging pupils to make healthy eating choices;
- the progress made in developing a whole school approach to healthy eating; and
- the adequacy of the measures put in place to increase the uptake of school meals, including free school meals.

11 Nutritional standards for school lunches – A guide for implementation and Nutritional standards for other food and drinks in schools – A guide for implementation, Health Promotion Agency, February 2009.

Part Two:

Are all schools now complying with the Nutritional Standards?

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Part Two: Are all schools now complying with the Nutritional Standards?

Schools are moving towards meeting the nutritional standards but improvements are needed

- 2.1 The Department's ETI is responsible for evaluating and monitoring the implementation of nutritional standards for all food and drinks in all schools. Between January 2007 and May 2009 a team of two Nutritional Associates, appointed by ETI, visited a total of 244 schools to inspect what progress was being made against the standards. They looked at the whole school approach to promoting healthy eating in the school, not just the extent to which the school meals and other food and drinks in schools meet with the standards.
- 2.2 During their visits the Nutritional Associates discuss the individual circumstances within each school with the Principal, the Catering Supervisor, the Health Education Coordinator¹², the Head of Home Economics (where appropriate) and pupils. They then provide an oral report to the Principal outlining the strengths of the school's current approach and making recommendations for improvements in the future. The inspection findings are also shared with the relevant Board's Catering Manager, for follow up where necessary, while the published inspection report on the school includes a paragraph outlining the Nutritional Associate's overall evaluation and assessment of the school's commitment to healthy eating and physical activity.

Summary of inspection findings of the Nutritional Associates

- 2.3 Between January and June 2007, 71 schools were inspected by the Nutritional Associates¹³. They found that a majority of schools (50-74 per cent) were making good, or very good, progress in the implementation of the nutritional standards and in promoting healthy eating. The Boards and school catering staff had worked hard to develop appropriate menus which met the standards.
- 2.4 In the period from September 2007 to May 2009 the Nutritional Associates visited a total of 173 schools¹⁴. They found that a majority of schools (50-74 per cent) continued to demonstrate that good, or very good, progress was being made. In a minority of schools (10-29 per cent) this practice was found to be outstanding. The Nutritional Associates identified a number of key strengths in the provision for healthy eating but they also identified a number of areas where further improvement is needed. These included menu planning concerns (see paragraph 2.13) and the need for better coordination of a whole school approach to healthy eating amongst all key stakeholders (see paragraph 2.22).
- 2.5 From September 2008, the Nutritional Associates extended their inspection to include other food and drinks in schools, although it should be noted that the Department currently has no legislative basis to enforce compliance

12 It is considered good practice to have a member of staff who has responsibility for coordinating the school's healthy eating and physical activity programme. The actual title may vary from school to school. In a rural school, this could be the Principal.

13 Progress made in the implementation of Catering for Healthier Lifestyles and general approaches to promoting healthy eating in schools in Northern Ireland, Education and Training Inspectorate, November 2007.

14 Evaluation of the progress made in the implementation of the food-based nutritional standards (School Food: Top Marks) and general approaches to promoting healthy eating in schools in Northern Ireland, Education and Training Inspectorate, January 2010.

with the nutritional standards for other food in schools. Whilst the majority of schools inspected were found to be making outstanding or very good progress in implementing the nutritional standards, a number of inconsistencies were identified in the extent to which a whole school approach to healthy eating was implemented. While the majority of schools met the standards for school meals at lunch time, a significant minority did not meet the standards for other food and drinks in schools. For example, some schools did not have easy access to free, fresh drinking water, some were offering non-compliant drinks in vending machines, a majority (50-74 per cent) continued to sell confectionery and crisps in tuck shops and not all breakfast clubs or after school clubs were complying with the standards. One example of the difficulties faced is shown at Case Study 'A'.

Recent research confirms that there is still some way to go

2.6 Whilst recent research¹⁵ reported that the vast majority of staff surveyed indicated that positive progress had been made

in implementing the standards, only two thirds of Principals considered their school lunch service was fully compliant with the regulations and only 41 per cent stated that their school was fully compliant with the nutritional standards for other food and drinks in schools.

2.7 Since 2005, schools across Northern Ireland have made significant progress in meeting the Department's nutrition requirements. Additional improvement, however, is still needed to ensure that all schools are fully compliant with the standards: in particular, the Nutritional Associates have highlighted ongoing concerns relating to what foods can be served together and the extent to which menus are balanced. Moreover, pupils at many schools still have access to a variety of food and beverages from vending machines and tuck shops that is of little nutritional value – for example, high in fat, sodium, and/or added sugars, but low in nutrients such as vitamins or minerals. The continued existence of unhealthy food in vending machines and tuck shops in some schools is at odds with the healthy eating message being delivered by school meals services. Such conflicting messages

Case Study 'A'

During one of the NIAO school visits we were advised by the Kitchen Supervisor that chocolate had been removed from the vending machines but had since been allowed to return. In an effort to offer healthy alternatives she has opened 'shops' (selling sandwiches, yoghurts, grapes and milkshakes) next to the vending machines at break and lunch times. The vending machines have a direct impact on the 'shop' sales e.g. daily takings are around £130 when the vending machines are closed but this falls to £90 with vending available.

Part Two: Are all schools now complying with the Nutritional Standards?

should be avoided. We support the Nutritional Associates' view that there is a need for stronger links between the catering staff and school leadership teams to ensure that pupils receive consistent messages throughout the school day.

More needs to be done to help enforce the standards

- 2.8 Whilst school visits are carried out by the Nutritional Associates and the Nutritional Standards Coordinators, these visits are all pre-arranged and are also likely to be infrequent, given that there are in the region of 1,200 schools in Northern Ireland. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that this arrangement is taken advantage of by some schools which continue to sell non-compliant food and drinks but do not carry out this practice on notified inspection days. Indeed, recent research reported that it was generally acknowledged by the Nutritional Standards Coordinators that *"...the monitoring of nutritional standards in schools is largely ineffective"*¹⁶ and they went on to quote examples where schools have restocked their tuck shops and vending machines the day after an inspection.
- 2.9 Despite the Department having the legislative base¹⁷ to enforce nutritional standards on school lunches, there are no sanctions for schools that do not comply with the standards. Instead, where breaches are identified the Nutritional Associates and Nutritional Standards

Coordinators inform and enable the school to amend menu planning in order to comply with the standards. Recent research¹⁸ has reported that Catering Managers and Nutritional Standards Coordinators have all called for greater monitoring of the implementation of the nutritional standards within schools and stronger sanctions against schools which contravene the standards.

- 2.10 More needs to be done to ensure that all schools are fully compliant with the nutritional standards. Pupils and parents should be confident that the school meals provided across all schools are of an equal quality and nutritional value. We recommend that the Department gives consideration to the type of measures which would be appropriate where there is a persistent failure to comply with the standards and also explores the possibility of introducing unannounced visits by the Nutritional Associates and Nutritional Standards Coordinators. Where a school is not adhering to the nutritional standards they should be asked to provide evidence that they are working towards compliance in a systematic way. The schools should provide an action plan detailing how, and by when, they plan to address their deficiencies in complying with the standards and also record the outcomes of these actions. It is essential that all schools fully comply with the nutritional standards if school children in Northern Ireland are to get the full benefits of the move to healthier school meals. In the recent Health Promotion Agency research the Nutritional Standards Coordinators

16 Research on Nutrition in Schools, Health Promotion Agency, December 2008.

17 Under Articles 58 and 59 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986.

18 Research on Nutrition in Schools, Health Promotion Agency, December 2008.

made a number of suggestions to encourage schools to fully comply with the standards including a Healthy Eating Award scheme or a scoring system such as “scores on the doors” based on factors such as environment, vending and uptake. Such initiatives could act as motivators to schools to ensure they are fully adhering to, and monitoring their compliance with the nutritional standards.

Additional funding has been provided for implementing the nutritional standards

2.11 In 2008-09, additional funding of £3.148 million (Figure 3) was made available to Boards for the implementation of nutritional standards in Northern Ireland. The total additional funding for 2009-10 was £3.233 million. This additional funding covers the employment of the Nutritional Standards Coordinators; an increase in the food allowance to a required minimum (paragraph 2.12);

the purchase of minor equipment (such as blenders and panini makers); staff training; and the marketing of the school meals service.

2.12 The Department has allocated additional nutritional standards funding to ensure that the food content value of school meals is a minimum of 50 pence in nursery, primary and special schools; and a minimum of 60 pence in post-primary schools. Many school Catering Supervisors, however, have experienced difficulties in meeting the requirements of the standards within the budget available. On top of the general inflationary increase in food costs, it appears to be the requirement to provide bread, fruit and milk as well as the main meal which is increasing the food costs beyond 50 pence and 60 pence. In addition, the cost of buying the fresh fruit and vegetables to blend into the main meal and dessert has increased food costs.

Figure 3: Nutritional Standards Funding Allocation – 2008-09

BOARD	Food Costs £'000	Nutritional Standards Coordinators £'000	Training, Equipment, Marketing and Staff Costs £'000	TOTAL £'000
Belfast	359	34	58	451
North Eastern	424	34	107	565
South Eastern	400	34	80	514
Southern	602	34	107	743
Western	747	34	94	875
TOTAL	2,532	170	446	3,148

Source: Department

Part Two: Are all schools now complying with the Nutritional Standards?

It is essential that catering staff are fully trained

2.13 One of the functions of Nutritional Standards Coordinators has been to facilitate the training of school catering staff. Training is essential to ensure that catering staff have the necessary skills and knowledge to confidently produce healthy school meals and influence the approaches to healthy eating throughout the schools. We found that the nutritional standards training programme has been implemented at a varying pace across the five Boards and the findings of the Nutritional Associates suggest that there are still some staff with an inadequate understanding of the nutritional standards. Although all school Catering Supervisors and Cooks have been trained, the inspections carried out by the Nutritional Associates (paragraph 2.1) have consistently drawn attention to the menu planning difficulties experienced by some school Catering Supervisors. The Nutritional Associates have identified some uncertainty among Catering Supervisors as to which foods can be served together, for example, deep-fried foods or other high fat foods being served too frequently; lower fat desserts not always being available on days when high fat foods are served; and keeping the use of high fat or sugar toppings to a minimum.

2.14 It is essential that the Boards/Nutritional Standards Coordinators ensure that the training delivered to catering staff provides them with the appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding necessary

to make them more proficient in menu planning so that the school meals supplied adhere as closely as possible to the standards. We agree with the Nutritional Associates recommendation that the employing authorities should continue to ensure that all Catering Supervisors receive updates to their nutrition training and that priority be given to those Catering Assistants within dining centres who are still to be trained.

An overall Food in Schools policy should have been in place earlier

2.15 In order to ensure that a coherent approach to healthier eating is adopted within schools there is a need to develop an overall policy towards food. In August 2004, the Ministerial Group on Public Health established a cross departmental taskforce *"Fit Futures: Focus on Food, Activity and Young People"* in response to concerns about the rising levels of overweight and obesity in children and young people. In January 2006, this taskforce made recommendations to the Ministerial group on priorities for action to address childhood obesity. In response to these recommendations¹⁹, the Department, in conjunction with DHSSPS, was tasked with publishing an overarching Healthy Schools policy by December 2007 to deliver the objective of all schools becoming healthy schools within ten years. Having robust food in schools and active schools plans were to be a core criterion for a healthy school. The Department was also tasked with publishing a Food in Schools policy which

19 *Fit Futures: Focus on Food, Activity and Young People*, Response from the Ministerial Group on Public Health including consultation on *Fit Futures Implementation Plan*, January 2007.

details government objectives and the key plans for delivery. To date, neither of these policies is in place. Development of the Healthy Schools policy has been postponed until 2011-12 and a draft Food in Schools policy was issued for public consultation in September 2009. The draft Food in Schools policy sets out the Department's overall aims and objectives in relation to food in schools, describes the range of strategies needed to deliver improved nutrition for school children and highlights the important role which schools can play in developing the knowledge, experiences and skills that can enable children to make healthy food choices, now and in the future²⁰.

2.16 In our view, these overarching policies should have been in place before the nutritional standards were introduced in order to set out the strategies to be followed and to place the nutritional standards within the overall policy context. This delay in introducing overarching policies has meant that certain aspects of the Department's recent consultation with stakeholders on the draft Food in Schools policy dealt with matters for which either the need had already been established or which were already in place. For example, the consultation response questionnaire sought views on whether it was necessary to have a Food in Schools policy despite the need for such a policy having already been recognised in Fit Futures and the Department being tasked with its publication in 2007 (see paragraph 2.15). Views were also sought on whether the stakeholders agreed with a whole school approach

to food and nutrition and the application of the standards on a consistent basis throughout all aspects of the school. This was in spite of the importance of a whole school approach having already been recognised by ETI in 2007 and also the fact that the nutritional standards have actually applied to all food and drinks provided or sold in schools since April 2008. Whilst we consider that the draft Food in Schools policy is a valuable document for all stakeholders, we would question the timeliness of such a consultation exercise. However, in order to ensure consistency in the understanding of, and the approach to, nutrition across all schools in Northern Ireland, we would now urge the Department to make sure that any further delay in producing the final Food in Schools policy is minimised.

It is important to develop a whole school approach to good nutrition

2.17 The Department has recognised that schools can make a very significant contribution to children's and young people's health, both through the taught curriculum as well as the wider school environment²¹. Moreover, the recent independent research into school meals²² found that all key stakeholders believe that the success of schools implementing the nutritional standards should be based upon a whole school approach to nutrition - a collective approach based on inputs from teaching staff, catering staff, parents and pupils.

20 Food in Schools Policy – Draft for consultation, Department of Education, September 2009.

21 Catering for Healthier Lifestyles, Compulsory Nutritional Standards for School Meals, A Consultation Document, Department of Education, December 2001.

22 Research on Nutrition in Schools, Health Promotion Agency, December 2008.

Part Two: Are all schools now complying with the Nutritional Standards?

2.18 In reality there can be a spectrum in terms of the degree to which a whole school approach to good nutrition exists within all schools. For instance, it can be accorded low priority in some schools where there is a lack of staff capacity, other priorities or a lack of interest or commitment on the part of the school Principal. Towards the other end of the scale there are schools that are very committed to involving a wide range of stakeholders in the process. We found that where there was active support from the Principal, this was one of the key factors in the successful implementation of the nutritional standards and the development of a whole school approach - see Case Study 'B'.

2.19 Despite the importance of a whole school approach to the success of the implementation of the nutritional standards, there has been limited training on nutritional standards and healthier eating for Principals, teaching staff or school governors. The support and involvement of all stakeholders is vitally important to the success of the nutritional standards and in increasing uptake levels. The Department told us

that it has adopted a phased approach to training and the School Governor Handbook²³ was published in December 2010. During the course of this report, workshops have been held for Principals/senior management teams and Home Economics teachers. We recommend that the Department and the Boards give priority to the continued development of such initiatives, ensuring that they highlight the important role these groups can play in promoting healthy eating in schools and in encouraging the uptake of school meals.

We found some good practice examples of a whole school approach in operation

2.20 During our school visits we identified several examples of good practice in promoting the catering service and the whole school approach. These included the active participation by school catering staff in school open nights and other events attended by parents e.g. Christmas concerts, school plays and prize giving ceremonies. The school meals service has also been promoted to pupils through a number of whole school initiatives such

Case Study 'B'

During an NIAO school visit the Catering Supervisor expressed her concern that the school meals service was isolated from the rest of the school and received little support from the Principal. Following a change of Principal, the school Catering Supervisor noted a vast improvement in support from the new Principal. Menus are now regularly sent home to parents via the monthly school bulletin and the canteen provides the catering for staff training days. As a result of this increased awareness and support, uptake of both paying and free school meals has increased significantly.

as art competitions to design posters to promote “five a day” and a balanced diet which were then displayed in the canteen; awards being given out in the school assembly for various achievements including good behaviour in the canteen and willingness to try new foods; and pupils who bought consistently healthy food choices for a week or month were

rewarded, for example, with the use of leisure facilities.

- 2.21 Our school visits yielded an excellent example of links between teaching and learning in the classroom and food provision in the dining room – see Case Study ‘C’.

Case Study ‘C’

We visited a large Voluntary Grammar school which has a School Nutrition Action Group (SNAG). The Group includes a representative from the Home Economics Department, the Physical Education Department, the Catering Supervisor and two pupil representatives. The Group meets formally once every six weeks and focuses on a different topic in each of the campaigns e.g. the heart, smoking, diabetes, osteoporosis, allergy awareness. Newsletters are produced for pupils and parents.

The Catering Supervisor works closely with other members of staff in the school and there is constant communication with the Home Economics Department. There is a proactive approach throughout the school with all teachers being aware of the drive for healthy eating and enforcing this throughout the school day. As part of the whole school approach letters are sent out by the Principal advising parents of the local initiatives within the school, along with copies of canteen price lists, newsletters and leaflets. The commitment to healthy eating and physical well being is reflected in the School Development Plan.

Other examples of the whole school approach adopted in the school include:

- Healthy picnics in the summer;
- Pupils have prepared healthy salads in Home Economics classes which were then copied by the kitchen staff and served in the canteen - the pupils are more likely to try the dishes if they are already familiar with them;
- The school has a Health Promotion Week for Year 8 pupils under the new curriculum;
- There is a comment box in the dining room and many of the suggestions are tried out and implemented;
- The Home Economics and Art Departments liaised to develop an art project showing a plate with a balanced diet; and
- All staff in the school have received training in promoting health by the Head of Home Economics on school exceptional closure days.

Part Two: Are all schools now complying with the Nutritional Standards?

Each school should have a whole school food policy in place

2.22 A whole school food policy, developed at individual school level, can be a key factor in improving the health and wellbeing of the school community. Such a policy should ideally be set within the context of the overarching policy for food and drinks across all schools in Northern Ireland (see paragraph 2.16) and tailored to the individual circumstances of each school. This policy can form the basis for the day to day delivery of a whole school approach to food and nutrition issues specific to each school. The policy should aim to equip pupils to make informed choices about food and ensure coherence, clarity and consistency between the taught curriculum and the food and drink available in schools. By incorporating the whole school food policy into the School Development Plan this can help ensure continued commitment and action. Both the draft Food in Schools policy and *School Food: The Essential Guide* provide useful templates for schools to use in the development of a whole school food policy. The Nutritional Associates have reported that most schools in Northern Ireland currently have relevant policies in place to guide and support the development of whole school healthy eating programmes. However, the Nutritional Associates have also reported that there is a need for more consistent and effective monitoring and evaluation of these programmes and policies as this is not good enough in the majority of schools²⁴.

2.23 We acknowledge that the Department and the Boards have taken steps to promote partnership approaches to healthy eating in schools. However, in view of the Nutritional Associates findings, we recommend that all schools are encouraged to review their current practice in establishing links between teaching and learning on healthy eating in the curriculum and food provision in the school. Schools need to ensure that they take the necessary steps to develop mechanisms which deliver a whole school approach. It is important that, in drawing up whole school healthy eating policies, there should be full consultation with teaching and non-teaching staff, school cooks/caterers, pupils, parents, governors and representatives from the employing authorities. In particular, we would commend the setting up of SNAGs (see Case Study 'C'). It is also essential that these policies should be properly monitored and evaluated by the schools on a regular basis to keep targets and priorities relevant and up to date.

2.24 The use of SNAGs is only one example of a number of valuable localised initiatives which have emerged during this process. Where good progress has been made in the implementation of the nutritional standards and general approaches to healthy eating, the Nutritional Associates have recommended that *"there is a need to ensure that commitments to sustaining the good policies, practices and lessons learned are encouraged, supported and widely disseminated across schools in Northern Ireland"*²⁵. The recent independent research has also stated

24 Evaluation of the progress made in the implementation of the food-based nutritional standards (School Food: Top Marks) and general approaches to promoting healthy eating in Northern Ireland, Education and Training Inspectorate, January 2010.

25 Progress made in the Implementation of Catering for Healthier Lifestyles and general approaches to promoting healthy eating in schools in NI, Education and Training Inspectorate, November 2007.

that *"a coordinated approach, using examples of best practice can lead to standardisation of approach between schools and education and library board areas"*²⁶.

2.25 Case Study 'C' at paragraph 2.21 shows what can be done when the various departments in a school work together. Currently good practice is shared through the various working groups, such as the School Meals Nutritional Standards Working Group (superseded by the Nutritional Standards Sub-Group of the Food in Schools Forum in November 2009), and examples can also be found on websites such as the Food Standards Agency and the School Food Trust. However, at present there is no single mechanism for the sharing of good practice and current developments across schools in Northern Ireland, which can be accessed by teachers, catering staff, school governors and parents. In order to assist schools to take full advantage of the good practice examples which are available, consideration should be given to setting up a central resource which would contain all relevant guidance and also act as a forum for the sharing of ideas and good practice examples. Such a facility would also provide a central point for information on all existing, and

any new, healthy-eating initiatives. The Department told us that, in conjunction with DHSSPS and the Public Health Agency, it is considering (subject to resources) the development of a website to support the Food in Schools policy. In our view, an easily accessible, informative website would be an ideal central resource and we would encourage the Department to fully consider the benefits which could be realised through such a valuable facility.

Part Three:
Improving the Uptake of Healthy School Meals

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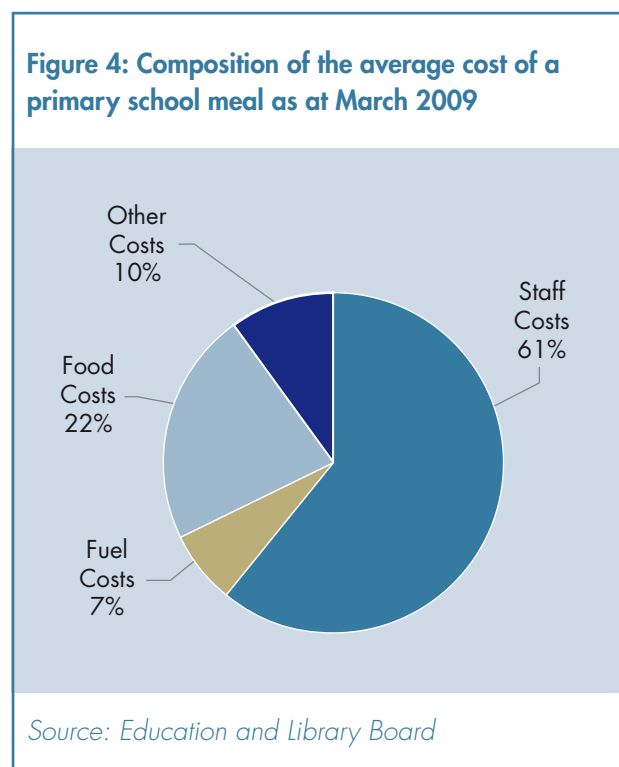
A number of factors influence uptake levels

- 3.1 The challenge in preparing healthy school meals lies in meeting the nutritional standards while also ensuring that they are competitively priced and appealing enough to pupils to choose and eat. As noted at paragraph 1.6, 52.5 per cent of pupils take school meals. Increasing the numbers of children taking a school meal is the key in helping to cover the overheads associated with fresh food preparation and thereby keeping down the overall cost of meals for pupils.
- 3.2 Free school meals pilot projects in Scotland²⁷ have indicated that there may be a ceiling effect when it comes to the uptake of school meals in that some children will never take a school meal due to personal preferences and tastes. However, a review by the School Food Trust²⁸ found that for many pupils the uptake of healthy school meals (including free school meals) can be influenced by a number of factors such as the effectiveness of marketing, the price charged and the overall dining experience e.g. the ambience of the dining facility, the option of sitting with friends, the choice and quality of meals, presentation and customer service. The review also found that a key recommendation for increasing uptake was more effective queue and time management to ensure that pupils have sufficient time to eat their lunch and participate in other lunchtime activities.

The impact of price on the uptake of school meals

- 3.3 Figure 4 shows the various costs involved in producing a primary school meal as at March 2009. Staff costs are by far the biggest element and make up 61 per cent of the average production cost of a meal with the food cost amounting to 22 per cent, after the inclusion of the additional nutritional standards funding provided to bring the food content up to prescribed levels.

Figure 4: Composition of the average cost of a primary school meal as at March 2009



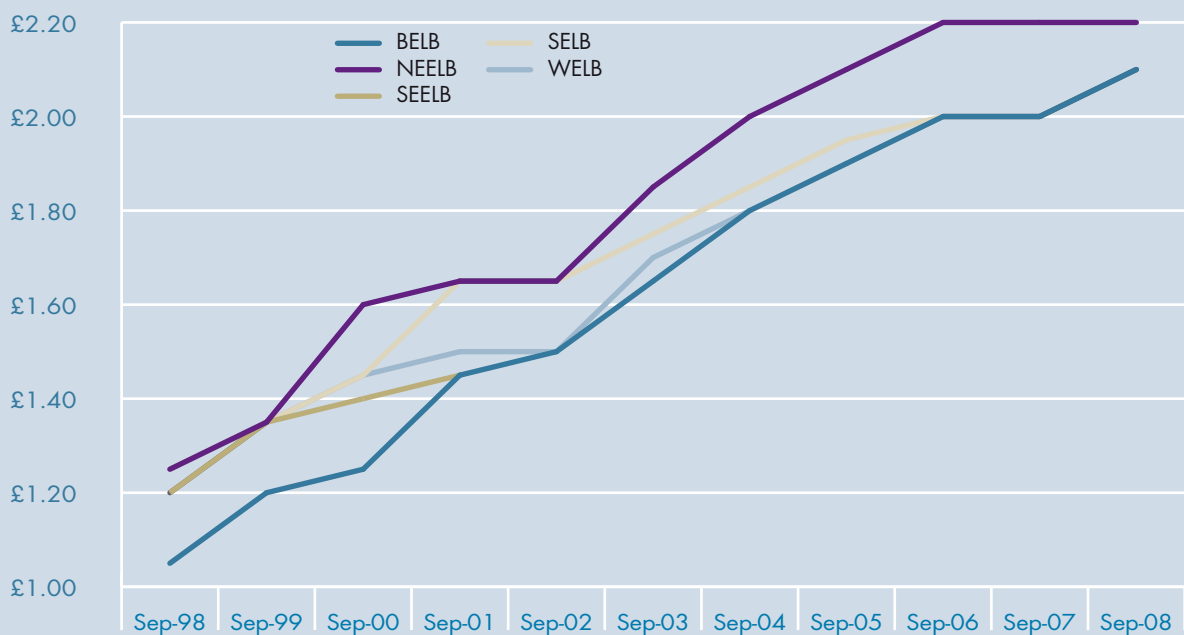
27 Evaluation of the Free School Meals Trial for P1 to P3 Pupils, The Scottish Government, 2008.

28 Please Sir? Can we have some more? - lessons from Free School Meal Initiatives, School Food Trust, January 2009.

3.4 The prices charged for a school meal are set by the individual Boards and have varied over the years as shown in Figures 5 and 6. Over the past ten years the average price of a school meal in Northern Ireland has increased by 78 per cent²⁹. Over the same period food prices have risen by 29.7 per cent³⁰. A number of other factors have impacted on the increasing price of school meals including job evaluation costs³¹, increased fuel costs and declining pupil numbers.

While there are now standard prices charged for school meals across Northern Ireland (see paragraph 3.12), there are wide variations between school kitchens in the cost of producing a school meal. For example, the gross unit cost of producing a school meal in one Board in 2008-09 ranged from £1.68 to £6.63. These variations are mainly explained by differences in scale and indicate the efficiencies in unit costs which can be achieved by larger kitchens. With staff

Figure 5: The price of a primary school meal in Northern Ireland



Source: Department

29 Based on the average price charged each year across the five Education and Library Boards from 1 September 1998 - 1 September 2008.

30 Farming and food brief, DEFRA, September 2008.

31 Job evaluation is a mechanism for measuring the value of individual jobs in order to allocate salary grades and establish a fair salary structure within an organisation. In June 2007, NIAO reported on the Department of Education's management of a job evaluation scheme which had been undertaken in the Education and Library Boards. This was the subject of a hearing at the Assembly's Public Accounts Committee in November 2007.

- Job Evaluation in the Education and Library Boards, NIAO, NIA 60, June 2007

- Job Evaluation in the Education and Library Boards, NI Assembly PAC, 18/07/08R, January 2008

Part Three: Improving the Uptake of Healthy School Meals

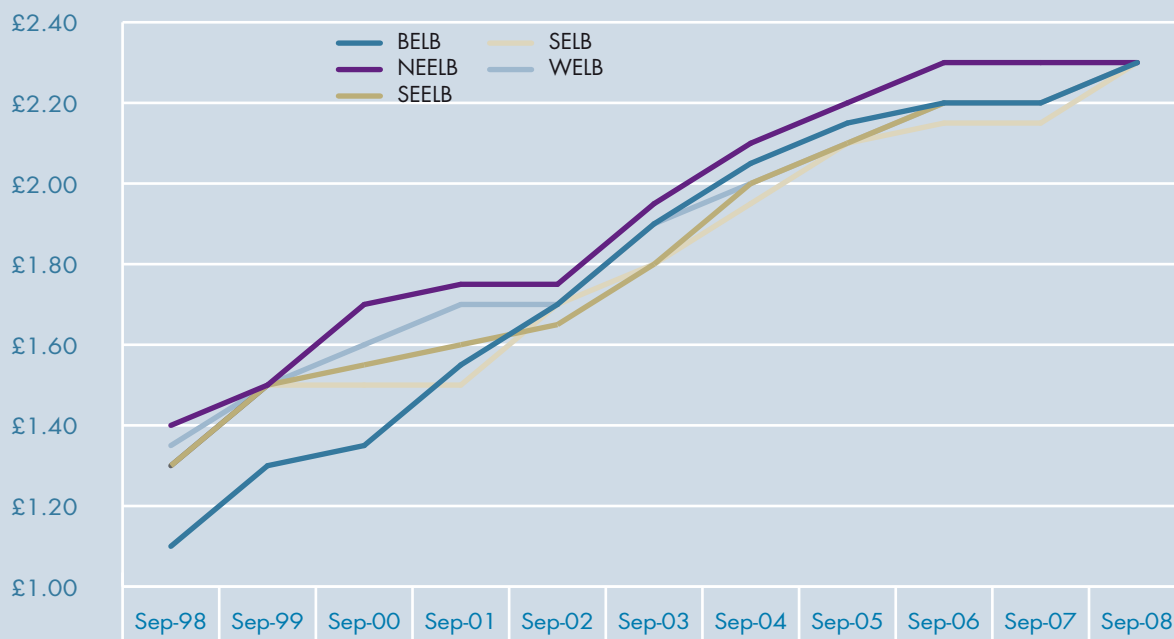
costs representing by far the biggest component of the cost of producing school meals, it is important that a tight grip is maintained over this area, including the use of staffing ratios and the setting of standard food preparation times, in order to ensure that the price of school meals remains at an affordable level.

3.5 As shown in Figure 7, school meals in Northern Ireland are relatively expensive compared with those in both England and Scotland. The School Food Trust identified that in 2008-09 the average price of school meals in English primary

schools was £1.77 and £1.88 in post-primaries³². In the same period in Scotland the average price of a primary school meal was £1.59 and £1.68 in post-primary schools³³. In contrast, prices in Northern Ireland were £2.20 for primary meals (maximum charge) and £2.30 for post-primary meals. In both England and Scotland, a number of local education authorities subsidise the cost of producing school meals so as to limit increases in prices being passed on to pupils and parents.

3.6 The importance of the school meals service was reflected in the fact that the

Figure 6: The price of a post-primary school meal in Northern Ireland

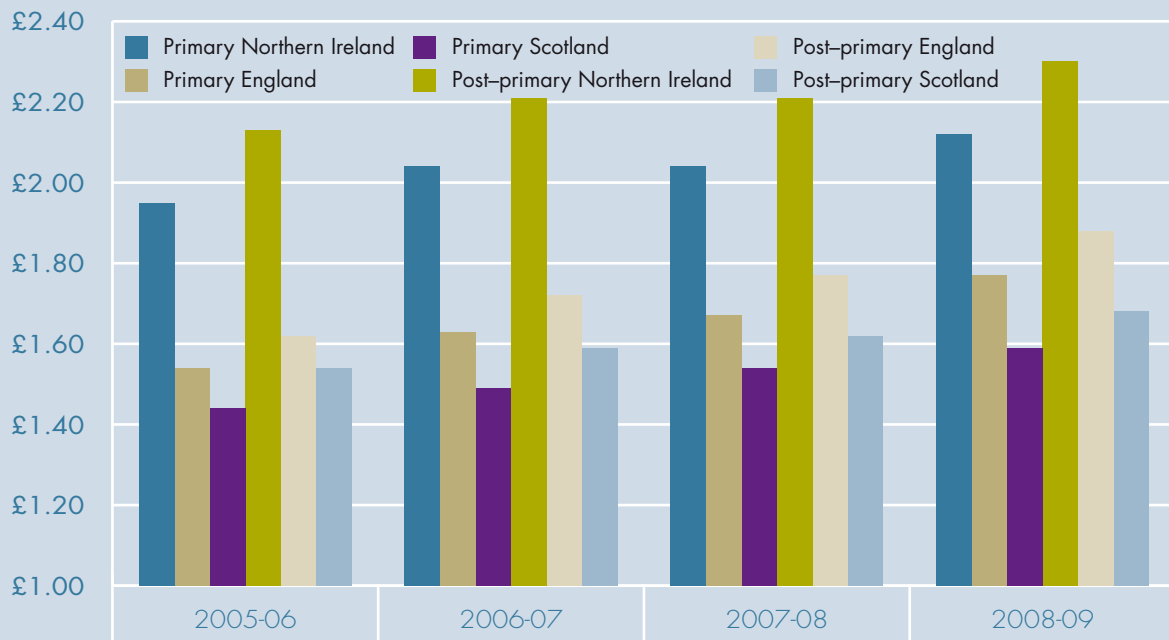


Source: Department

Note: The prices shown above are those for a traditional two course meal

32 Fourth annual survey of take-up of school meals in England, School Food Trust, October 2009.

33 School Meals in Scotland, The Scottish Government, June 2009.

Figure 7: Comparison of average school meal prices in Northern Ireland, England and Scotland

Source: NIAO analysis of available data

Department initially subsidised the cost of the school meal. The subsidy, which initially covered all overhead costs and 20 per cent of labour costs in primary schools and 10 per cent of labour costs in post-primary schools, was totally removed in April 2000 in order to maximise the amount of resources available for direct classroom use.

- 3.7 Arrangements in place currently, therefore, require that the charge for any meal shall be sufficient to recover the full cost of production. However, on the basis of figures provided by the Department we found that the total average cost of

producing a meal exceeded the price charged; suggesting that a subsidy is still in place. This has been calculated at £2.7 million across the Boards during 2008-09.

- 3.8 The Department told us that this situation had developed due to a misalignment between the Arrangements for providing school meals and the Departmental funding arrangements for free school meal provision. Free school meals are required to be funded in their entirety by the Department and the Department is of the view that a fixed level of expenditure will be incurred irrespective of whether or

Part Three: Improving the Uptake of Healthy School Meals

not pupils pay for their meals. As such the Department is of the view that the charge levied to paying pupils is not required to recover the full cost of production. This is contrary to the Arrangements for providing school meals which specifically require that the price charged is sufficient to recover the full cost of production.

3.9 Whilst the continued subsidisation of the school meals service for paying pupils limits the amount of resources which could be directed towards other Board services this must be balanced against the importance of pupils receiving at least one nutritionally balanced meal during the school day and the potential impact of increasing the price of school meals. To realign the price of school meals to reflect the full cost of providing this service and, by implication, to transfer the price differential to paying pupils would represent a significant financial strain on families and, thus, lead to a decline in uptake levels and erode the wider public benefits of nutritional standards. In this regard, full cost recovery may have to be the benchmark against which the actual performance of the service will be reviewed, monitored and controlled on a regular basis over the longer term. The Department has confirmed that it will re-examine arrangements, including the objective of full cost recovery, against which future performance can be assessed.

3.10 Recent research³⁴ found that whilst many staff, parents and pupils believe that the cost of school meals is about right or good value for money, there were significant numbers who felt that school meals were too expensive. Indeed, four in ten parents cited cost as a reason why their child does not take a school meal. Cost was even more of an issue for those parents with more than one child at school. In addition, 48 per cent of post-primary pupils surveyed were of the opinion that cheaper school meals would encourage greater use of the school meals service. The research findings do, however, also suggest that the picture is more complex than cost alone.

3.11 While the uptake of school meals has remained fairly static, despite the price increases and unfavourable price comparisons with England and Scotland, the Department told us that the uptake of school meals is sensitive to price change. It found that every time the price of school meals increased, uptake dropped; the larger the price increase, the larger the decrease in uptake. Following a price increase and the associated decrease in uptake, the uptake would increase again; however, it never fully recovered.

3.12 In preparation for convergence to the Education and Skills Authority³⁵ the Boards are working towards harmonisation of prices. As can be seen from Figures 5 and 6 the Boards, with the exception of the NEELB, have been charging the same price for a primary school meal since

³⁴ Research on Nutrition in Schools, Health Promotion Agency, December 2008.

³⁵ When the Education and Skills Authority comes into operation it will take over the functions currently carried out by the five Boards (including the Regional Training Unit), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, the Staff Commission, the Youth Council for NI. It will also be responsible for the front line support currently undertaken by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

September 2006³⁶ and all five Boards are now charging the same price for a post-primary traditional school meal.

Improving the lunchtime experience for pupils can influence uptake levels

3.13 We note the view of the Nutritional Associates³⁷ that an important element of a pupil's lunchtime experience is the overall quality of the environment and ethos of the canteen facilities. In addition, the recent Health Promotion Agency research³⁸ found that the overwhelming majority of Principals, teachers and school governors are of the opinion that you can influence the uptake of school meals by improving the meal experience for pupils. The research also found that, whilst most pupils said they liked their school canteen/dining hall, only just over half of Principals (56 per cent) thought that the practical aspects of their dining facilities were sufficient for providing school meals. A number of Catering Managers also told us they felt that work was required to make dining halls/canteens more attractive to pupils but that the funding was not available. During their school visits the Nutritional Associates identified a number of strengths in the approaches taken by schools to promote a positive lunchtime experience, some of which can be implemented at minimal cost. These include having pleasant, well trained staff, the provision of background music and allowing pupils who eat packed lunches to sit with their friends who are taking school meals.

3.14 An important factor in improving the lunchtime experience and thereby encouraging pupils to buy school meals is to reduce the queuing and serving time for food. Eating food is just one activity that has to be fitted into the lunch break. When post-primary pupils were asked what would encourage them to eat school meals, the top factor listed was shorter queues. Many schools have recognised the importance of the time-factor to pupils by trying to cut down on the delays in buying food at the counters: for instance, by increasing the availability of service points; providing additional payment points; and staggering lunchtimes. In addition, the use of cashless systems can be used to speed up the queuing and buying process. We recommend that individual schools review their arrangements and consider the improvements which could be made to ensure that the time available for lunch is optimised.

There is a need to improve the uptake of free school meals

3.15 Within the school meals system, the provision of free school meals to those children who qualify is particularly important as it helps to ensure that some of the most vulnerable children in society have access to at least one healthy, nutritious meal during the school day. For a pupil to be eligible for a free meal, the family must meet the entitlement criteria detailed at Appendix 3 and also register with the relevant Board. In June 2009 the

36 Since September 2010, all Boards have been charging the same price for a primary school meal.

37 Evaluation of the progress made in the implementation of the food-based nutritional standards (School Food: Top Marks) and general approaches to promoting healthy eating in schools in Northern Ireland, Education and Training Inspectorate, January 2010.

38 Research on Nutrition in Schools, Health Promotion Agency, December 2008.

Part Three: Improving the Uptake of Healthy School Meals

Department, in conjunction with DHSSPS, extended the eligibility criteria for free school meals to include those pupils a school believes to be “children in need”. From the start of the 2010-11 school year the eligibility criteria for free school meals has been further extended to include full-time nursery and primary school children whose parents are in receipt of Working Tax Credit and have an annual taxable income which does not exceed £16,190 (in 2010-11). The new criterion has been introduced on a phased basis with nursery, Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 pupils eligible from September 2010.

3.16 Not all pupils who are registered as entitled to free school meals actually take the meals. According to statistics from the Department³⁹ in 2009-10, approximately 58,000 pupils (18 per cent) were registered as entitled to free school meals. However, only around 78 per cent of those pupils registered actually took up this entitlement, meaning that some 12,700 pupils are missing out on a free school meal to which they are entitled. Moreover, other estimates⁴⁰ indicate that as many as a further 8,000 children across Northern Ireland may be missing out on their entitlement to free school meals due to lack of registration. This means that many low income families could be incurring unnecessary significant expenditure towards the cost of school meals. Encouraging a greater registration for entitlement to free school meals is also financially beneficial to schools as there is additional funding for a school of, on average, £436 per entitled child⁴¹.

3.17 In addition to the factors previously mentioned as influencing uptake generally, a key barrier which is unique to inhibiting the uptake of free school meals is the fear of stigmatisation. Research by the Child Poverty Action Group found that one third of children and two-fifths of parents indicated that embarrassment or fear of being teased is a key factor preventing children taking up their free school meals⁴². In terms of overcoming this barrier, one approach that has been adopted by many schools to minimise the identification of pupils having free meals is the use of cashless systems.

3.18 Cashless systems generally involve the use of electronic cards instead of meal tickets so that pupils in receipt of free school meals are treated in the same way as those paying for their meal. These systems can have other benefits as illustrated in the example of a large post-primary school in the Belfast area where a cashless system was installed when the canteen facilities were refurbished in 2001. As well as an increase of 20 per cent in the uptake of free school meals there was a reduction in bullying and quicker throughput of queues. However, these types of systems can be expensive to introduce. We noted, however, the example of a small primary school, where the funding was not available for a cashless system, and school meals tickets were removed to eliminate any differentiation associated with the receipt of free school meals⁴³. More recently a number of schools have introduced a school lunch biometric system where pupils simply place a

39 Northern Ireland School Census Data 2009-10, Department of Education, October 2009.

40 Free School Meals Uptake Targeted in Pilot Initiative between Western Education and Library Board and Advice NI, Western Education and Library board, Press Release, 4 June 2008.

41 Free School Meals Uptake Targeted in Pilot Initiative between Western Education and Library Board and Advice NI, Western Education and Library Board, Press Release, 4 June 2008.

42 Please Sir? Can we have some more? - lessons from Free School Meal Initiatives, School Food Trust, January 2009.

forefinger on a small fingerprint reader in the canteen.

- 3.19 Locally, Boards and schools need to work in a focussed and coordinated way in order to tackle the various barriers which hinder the uptake of school meals. At school level, this should involve using tools such as questionnaires and focus groups to establish the specific nature of the problem and then to use the results of this to decide on and develop an action plan. Schools should aim to provide a positive dining experience for pupils with a particular focus on managing queue lengths, the décor and atmosphere of the dining facilities. Practical advice and guidance on implementing such initiatives is readily available in *School Food: The Essential Guide*. On the specific question of free school meals, processes maximising anonymity for pupils should be explored as a priority by schools.

An initiative was launched to target families who fail to register for free school meals

- 3.20 Given the potential link between child poverty and a failure to apply for free school meals entitlement, the Western Board, in partnership with Advice NI, launched an initiative in May 2008 aimed at targeting low income families who are unaware of their entitlement or indeed the value of claiming their entitlement. The anticipated outcomes of the initiative are to increase the uptake of free school meals amongst eligible school children across Western Board schools. The range of measures
- being implemented to achieve this include booklets to draw attention to the availability of free school meals with the eligibility criteria and details of the application process, the promotion of free school meals at Principal conference days, developing a single application form for both free school meals and the clothing allowance, promotional literature issued to schools prior to the beginning of the new academic year and proactive use of the media to promote awareness of entitlement. Other options for promotion include having open forums where families may freely discuss issues around free school meals without fear of being stigmatised and developing easy access, online application processes.
- 3.21 In our view, the initiative implemented by the Western Board to encourage those entitled to free school meals to register for them, shows considerable promise. The Department told us that it had met with Advice NI and as a result has written to the other four Boards highlighting the Western Board experience and encouraging contact with Advice NI. We welcome this move and strongly recommend that the other Boards liaise with the Western Board and Advice NI to gauge how successful the initiative is in addressing low levels of free school meals uptake and use it as an exemplar in developing a similar approach among their own schools.
- 3.22 In the longer term both the Western Board and Advice NI believe that the most comprehensive and effective solution lies in enabling the sharing of data across

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key stakeholders. The Board and the Department have been working with the Department for Social Development and the Department for Work and Pensions with a view to gaining access to the latter's Customer Information System. This would enable the Boards to identify families with school age children that meet the qualifying criteria but fail to come forward to claim their entitlement. However, it is recognised that there are significant cost implications and legislative issues in relation to the sharing of data which need to be overcome prior to the Department being able to make such improvements.

- 3.23 In 2003, a Best Value Review of school catering services in Northern Ireland⁴⁴ raised the possibility of introducing universal free school meals for all nursery and school children up to the age of 18. It called on the Department to carry out a cost benefit analysis on this issue and *"...at the very least...recommended a degree of subsidy be provided to bring prices in line with those of local authorities in Great Britain"*. Research from Sweden and Finland, where school meals are free for all pupils, shows that uptake rates are very impressive – 85 per cent and 95 per cent respectively⁴⁵. Closer to home, all primary school children in County Durham and Newham are to receive free school lunches as part of a two year trial.
- 3.24 The Department told us it has calculated that to provide free school meals to all children aged 3-7 years would require £20 million of additional funding each

year. It also told us that to provide universal free school meals for all nursery and school children up to the age of 18 would be in the region of £140 million each year. Against such a costing, and in the current fiscal climate, there are no plans to introduce such an initiative. Other stakeholders have suggested that a better use of resources would be the re-introduction of the school meals subsidy (paragraph 3.6). The Department told us that indicative figures suggest that every four pence of subsidy would cost in the region of £1 million.

There may be a case for restricting the alternative choices available to pupils

- 3.25 It is also impossible to look at school meals in isolation from the alternatives available. Northern Ireland's well documented health problems and their primary causes – poverty, unemployment, poor housing and unhealthy lifestyles – impact on any efforts to dissuade pupils from using fashionable fast food outlets in the vicinity of the school which may often be places visited by families outside school. During one of our school visits, the Kitchen Supervisor expressed her frustration at the lunchtime deliveries regularly made by local bakeries and chip shops to the school gates. The challenge is therefore to persuade as many pupils as possible, both those who pay for meals and those entitled to free school meals, to use the school meals facility. If this is achieved and the nutrient content of the meals on offer meets the new nutritional standards then the health potential of

44 Fundamental Service Review, School Catering Service, Central Management Support Unit for Education and Library Boards, December 2003.

45 The Provision of school food in 18 countries, School Food Trust, July 2008.

good school provision will be realised. A good practice example, highlighted by one of the Boards, demonstrates how one Principal took positive steps to limit the access pupils have to external fast food establishments - see Case Study 'D'.

the school meal is enjoyable and worth staying in school for, comes from home. Parents have to feel confident that pupils will receive value for money and will be served with a meal of an appropriate nutrient content.

Improved marketing of school meals is a key factor in increasing uptake

3.26 Improvement in nutritional standards of school meals will only lead to improvement in children's eating habits and health if there is increased uptake of the meals. It is important that, not only are the pupils encouraged into the dining room, but also that they are encouraged to make nutritionally "healthy choices". A key way in which to encourage this is through the use of marketing. In order to influence uptake, marketing will have to impact on parents as the message that

3.27 In 2003, the review of catering⁴⁶ recommended that the service should develop a marketing strategy to maximise commercial and income generation activities, raise the profile of the service and place the benefits it delivers more effectively in the minds of stakeholders and the general public. To be effective, it was deemed that the proposed marketing strategy should target all stakeholders emphasising nutritional standards, the promotion of healthy lifestyle, the relatively low cost of meals and additional services available. It was envisaged that income from entrepreneurial activities, such as catering for training courses and open

Case Study 'D'

This school made a significant change to one of its long term policies. From September 2008 only Year 13 and 14 pupils were allowed to leave the school premises at lunch time as opposed to all pupils (school only caters for years 11-14). The Board worked closely with the Principal and with some minor design changes to the dining room provided a "grab n go" service point to encourage children to buy the healthy school food before leaving the school grounds. This appeared to work well and cash takings in the school canteen increased. However, despite this promising start, the school has now reverted back to the pre-September 2008 policy with all children now being allowed to leave the school grounds. This resulted from the departure of the proactive Principal who had worked with the catering staff to encourage the uptake of school meals, and the subsequent lack of support from elsewhere in the school for the policy change. This has been a disappointing result for those involved in the provision of school meals and again highlights the crucial role of the Principal, when working with and encouraging other stakeholders in the school community, in the effort to increase the uptake of healthy school meals.

46 Fundamental Service Review, School Catering Service, Central Management Support Unit for Education and Library Boards, December 2003.

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nights, would be used to subsidise the cost of the service or to improve catering facilities. The need for marketing and communication was highlighted again in 2005 by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) in its evaluation of the piloting of nutritional standards. Their report concluded that *“a core element of the success criteria for the implementation of the nutritional standards is in engaging parents and children in the process”*⁴⁷.

3.28 The research by the Health Promotion Agency in 2008⁴⁸ found that less than half of parents (48 per cent) interviewed had rules on what their children were allowed to eat. This research also found that Principals and teachers believed there was a need for better education of parents and pupils on the importance of healthy eating and the need for parents to support the schools’ efforts.

3.29 Despite the changes made over the past few years and the effort invested in implementing nutritional standards, it is disappointing to note that just over half of the pupils (54 per cent) interviewed for the research were aware of healthy eating initiatives in their school. Moreover the research found that, despite the concerted efforts to improve the quality and nutritious value of school meals in recent years, over a third of post-primary pupils that take packed lunches believed this to be the healthier option. Clearly much more needs to be done to raise awareness amongst pupils and parents of the nutritional standards and the significant changes which have taken place with regard to healthier school meals.

3.30 During our school visits, and those of the Nutritional Associates, evidence was found of catering staff promoting healthy food choices through localised marketing such as competitions, theme days, tasting sessions, attractive menus and presentation of food. These local initiatives aimed at promoting and increasing school meal uptake numbers, encouraging pupils to try new foods and expanding their knowledge of food, are to be welcomed. However, they are no substitute for a high profile and properly targeted regional marketing strategy which should ideally have been in place when the roll out of the nutritional standards for school lunches was completed in Autumn 2006.

3.31 While the importance of a cohesive marketing approach was recognised as far back as 2003 by the Fundamental Service Review (paragraph 3.27), we found that only now are steps being taken to properly address this key issue. Following research commissioned by the Health Promotion Agency in 2008⁴⁹ and its publication of a guide on school meals in February 2009⁵⁰, the Department now intends to launch a school meals marketing strategy in 2011 under the title of *School Food: Top Marks*. In our view, marketing of school meals now needs to be coordinated and driven by the Department to ensure that: clear and consistent messages are provided at regional and local levels; duplication of effort is avoided and the exchange of good practice is maximised. We consider that it is also imperative that this strategy is linked to specific performance indicators and targets to ensure that its

47 Department of Education for NI Evaluation of the pilot of the ‘Catering for Healthier Lifestyles standards’ in Northern Ireland, PwC, December 2005.

48 Research on Nutrition in Schools, Health Promotion Agency, December 2008.

49 Research on Nutrition in Schools, Health Promotion Agency, December 2008.

50 School Food: The Essential Guide, Health Promotion Agency, February 2009.

success can be measured and revisions made where necessary.

Appropriate performance indicators and targets should be introduced for the school meals service

3.32 In the context of the wider agenda of obesity, the Department shares a Public Service Agreement target with DHSSPS and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to halt the rise in obesity by 2011⁵¹. Given persistently high levels of obesity among children in Northern Ireland (paragraph 1.1) we consider it important that actions be taken to reverse current trends towards obesity and related physical problems. While school meals services cannot be expected to solve these problems alone, when combined with aspects of the revised curriculum, they are well positioned to positively influence what children eat and to ensure that they know the importance of good nutrition.

3.33 Ensuring as high a level of uptake of school meals as possible is essential if the opportunity they present in the effort to improve obesity levels among children and young people is to be realised. The decline in uptake has now levelled off and the most recent Census figures have shown an increase in the number of pupils taking school meals to 52.5 per cent (Figure 2). Whilst there remains considerable scope for increasing the number of children eating school meals, we found that the Department had only

set targets to improve uptake for 2007-08 and that these targets related specifically to increasing the uptake of free school meals rather than school meals uptake generally. The targets were:

- To increase the overall uptake of free school meals among eligible pupils by 2 per cent; and
- To reduce the differential in uptake of free school meals between maintained and controlled sectors by at least 1 per cent.

Targets should be set for increasing the uptake of school meals

3.34 Neither of these targets was achieved and the Department told us that employing authorities and schools continued to work towards them and that no additional targets had been set for 2008-09 or 2009-10. During the course of this report, the Department has set three targets for the Boards in 2010-11:

- To maintain uptake of school meals at current levels or greater;
- To maintain uptake of free school meals versus entitlement at existing level or greater; and
- By March 2011, most schools inspected by ETI Nutritional Associates are to be making at least 'very good' progress in the implementation of the *School Food: Top Marks* programme.

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3.35 While we acknowledge the very significant recent improvements in the nutritional content of school meals, current uptake levels demonstrate the challenges that remain in removing barriers to healthy eating for both paying and non-paying pupils. If schools are to play their full part in improving the wider health agenda, it is important that hard evidence is obtained to show the extent to which they are exerting a positive influence on children's food choices. Towards this end, it is essential that the Department produces quantitative indicators and sets challenging but realistic targets for the increase in uptake of the healthier school meals at the earliest opportunity.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Nutritional Standards (paragraph 1.9)

THE NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL LUNCHES

Food group	Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods
The Standards	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Every lunch service must contain a portion or portions of food from this group. 2. Rice and pasta must be offered at least once a week. In a single choice menu, rice or pasta must be served at least once a week. 3. Bread should be available every day in all schools. 	
Notes to the standards	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starchy foods are usually inexpensive and provide energy, fibre, vitamins and minerals. • Offering rice and pasta provides variety and encourages children to try foods they might not get the chance to try at home. • Bread is a healthy source of carbohydrates. • Nearly all types of bread are acceptable: white, brown, wholemeal, wheaten, granary, highfibre white bread and rolls, home-made bread, bagels, pitta bread, chapattis made without fat. • Bread should be provided without spread, although this should be available at the servery. • Bread is additional to, and not a replacement for, the main meal accompaniment and it should be positioned at the end of the servery. 	
Food group	Fruit and vegetables
The Standards	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No fewer than two portions of fruit and vegetables should be available per child throughout the lunch service. 2. Of these, at least one portion should be vegetables or salad and at least one portion should be fruit (fresh, tinned in natural juice, fruit salad, fruit juice or dried fruit). 3. Pies, crumbles and other composite fruit dishes must contain at least one portion of fruit per serving. 4. 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. 5. In nursery and primary schools a fruit based dessert, such as fruit tinned in natural juice, fruit salads, fruit crumble, fruit fool or fruit pie, must be offered at least three times a week. 6. Baked beans must not be served as a vegetable more than once a week in a primary school. They must not be the only vegetable option on any day in a post-primary school. 7. If beans or pulses form the protein part of a main course, another vegetable must be available. 	

Notes to the standards

- Fruit and vegetables provide vitamins, minerals and fibre. It is recommended that we eat five or more portions of fruit and vegetables a day. Information about portion sizes is included in the table below.
- Spaghetti tinned in tomato sauce does not count as a vegetable.
- Unlike most vegetables, baked beans do not contain vitamin C.
- Serving a separate non pulse vegetable with pulse based vegetarian options provides variety for vegetarians and ensures that a mixture of nutrients is provided.

What is a serving of fruit and vegetables?

For adults, a portion of fruit or vegetables is 80g, but there are no recommendations for children. Practically we suggest a good guide would be to serve at least half an adult portion (40g) to nursery pupils, moving towards an adult portion for primary and post-primary pupils. The table below gives examples of how these portions translate into servings.

	Nursery	Primary and post-primary
	One portion	One portion
Cooked vegetables	1-2 tablespoons (tbsp)	2-3 tablespoons (tbsp)
Salad vegetables	½ dessert bowl	1 dessert bowl
Medium sized piece of fruit	½ -1 fruit	1 fruit
Fruit salad, fruit tinned in juice	1-2 tbsp	2-3 tbsp
Fruit juice	150ml	150ml
Dried fruit	½ -1 tbsp	1-2 tbsp

Food group**Milk and dairy foods****The Standards**

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

Notes to the standards

- Milk and milk products are excellent sources of several nutrients including calcium, which is important for good bone development, protein and vitamins.
- Milk, plain or flavoured, is a good drink option. Semi-skimmed milk has the same amount of calcium as whole milk and is the preferred choice in primary and post-primary schools. Skimmed milk is not appropriate for children under five years.
- Alternatives to cheese provide variety for vegetarians. Recommended alternatives include beans, pulses and lentils.
- Where a portion of cheese is served as the main protein item, it also counts as a portion of food from Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein.

Appendix 1: Nutritional Standards (paragraph 1.9)

Food group	Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein
The Standards	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Every lunch service must contain a portion or portions of food from this group. 2. In nursery and primary schools, meals containing red meat must be served a minimum of twice a week and a maximum of three times a week. In post-primary schools this must be a minimum of three times a week and a maximum of four times a week. 3. Fish should be available at least once a week in primary schools and at least twice a week in post-primary schools. 4. Oily fish should be available at least once every four weeks. 	
Notes to the standards	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The standards for red meat apply to all food served across the whole school day, not just at lunch time. For example if a post-primary school provides a breakfast, break and lunch service then over the school week this provides 15 service opportunities within which red meat will be allowed a maximum of four times. • Red meat includes beef, pork and lamb and meals made from them. • Red meat is a good source of iron. • Meat, fish, eggs, beans, pulses and meat alternatives such as textured vegetable protein (TVP), are major sources of protein. • Sausages are not classed as red meat but as a meat product. Burgers are classed as a meat product unless they contain at least 95% lean mince meat and then will be classed as red meat. Composite dishes made from mince containing less than 95% lean meat are classed as a meat product. See Fried and other high fat foods for further information on meat products. • On days when red meat is being served at lunch, there can be more than one red meat meal choice as pupils will only choose one option. • Offering fish provides variety and offers foods that children might not otherwise get a chance to try. This would include sandwich and baguette fillings such as tuna and salmon. • An oily fish is one containing omega 3 fatty acids which help maintain a healthy heart. This includes fresh, canned or frozen salmon, sardines, pilchards, mackerel, herring and fresh or frozen tuna. • Tuna only counts as an oily fish when it is fresh or frozen because the omega 3 fatty acids are removed during the canning process. However, canned tuna can be counted as one of the non-oily portions of fish. • On a week when oily fish is provided this will meet the standard for fish for that week in primary schools. In post-primary schools fish will need to be offered once more that week. 	

Food group	FOOD AND DRINKS HIGH IN FAT AND/OR SUGAR Fried and other high fat foods
The Standards	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fried and other high fat food products, such as chips, roast potatoes, other fried potatoes, garlic bread, fried fish or meal choices such as quiche, apple pie and vol-au-vents containing pastry, may be served a maximum of twice a week. 2. In addition to standard 1, breadcrumb fillet of fish (oven baked) can be served once a week. 3. Meat or chicken products (such as burgers, sausages, chicken nuggets etc) may be served a maximum of once a week in primary schools and a maximum of twice a week in post-primary schools. 4. To allow choice for pupils on the days when meat or chicken products are available, schools should aim for 50% healthy meal options and they should be presented and marketed in a competitive way to other meal options. This standard does not apply to single choice menus. 5. There should be at least two days each week without any meat or chicken products, fried foods, foods cooked in batter, breadcrumbs or foods containing pastry such as fish in breadcrumbs, chips, sausages, vol-au-vents, quiche, apple pie etc. This is to encourage children to try a greater range of foods in their diets and explore new taste experiences. 6. When a high fat starchy food such as chips or garlic bread is served, an alternative without added fat must be available. 7. Lower fat desserts must be available on days when fried foods and other high fat foods are offered. 8. The only savoury snacks available should be nuts and seeds with no added salt or sugar. Savoury crackers or breadsticks may be offered provided they are served with fruit or vegetables or a dairy food. 	
Notes to the standards	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The standards for fried and other high fat foods applies to all food served across the whole school day, not just at lunch time. For example, if a post-primary school provides a break and lunch service then over the school week this provides 10 food service opportunities. This means that fried and other high fat foods can only be served twice and meat or chicken products are also limited to two times over the 10 service opportunities. • Fried or other high fat foods include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - any food that is deep-fried, either in the kitchen or in the manufacturing process, even flash fried foods or foods such as roast potatoes, chips, oven chips, potato waffles and potato shapes that have been brushed or sprayed with oil; - pre-prepared coated, battered and breadcrumb products such as chicken nuggets, fried fish, fish fingers, battered onion rings and doughnuts. • Meat and chicken products are bought in manufactured products that have been processed in some way and are generally ready for cooking/reheating: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - on days when they are being served at lunch, there can be more than one meat or chicken product choice as pupils will only choose one option. • Whole muscle meat or chicken, which is dipped in egg, coated in home-made breadcrumbs without the addition of any fat or oil and dry baked does not count as a meat or chicken product. 	

Appendix 1: Nutritional Standards (paragraph 1.9)

- Meat products must:
 - meet the legal minimum meat content levels set out in the Meat Products Regulations (NI) 2004 as amended or updated from time to time. Products not specifically covered by these legal minimal requirements must meet the same minimum meat content levels prescribed for burgers;
 - not be “economy burgers” as described in the Meat Products Regulations (NI) 2004;
 - contain none of the prohibited list of offal.
- Offering lower fat desserts on days that fried and other high fat foods are on offer limits the fat content of lunches. Lower fat desserts should have 10% or less fat in the complete dish. Examples of lower fat desserts include:
 - fresh, stewed or tinned fruit (in natural fruit juice) or fruit salad, either on its own or served with low-fat yogurt or fromage frais;
 - baked apple with custard;
 - low-fat yogurt or fromage frais;
 - milk puddings: custard, semolina, rice pudding and tapioca served with fruit;
 - fruit crumble with custard;
 - fruit sponge made with egg or fatless sponge, e.g. Eve’s pudding served with custard;
 - fruit crisp (breadcrumb topping) with custard;
 - fruit ‘fool’ made with custard, fromage frais or yogurt;
 - jelly and fruit;
 - ice-cream and fruit;
 - jelly, ice-cream and fruit;
 - instant dessert served with fruit;
 - bread and butter pudding with custard;
 - fruit flan (egg or fatless sponge) with fresh or tinned fruit and fromage frais;
 - wholemeal or flakemeal biscuit, half portion of fruit and semi-skimmed milk to drink;
 - muffin and orange juice (except choc-chip muffins).

To be considered as lower fat options it is essential that these dessert combinations are served as shown here, as it is the OVERALL fat content of each combination that was used to determine its suitability.

- Be aware that some pupils may have an allergic reaction to nuts, and whole nuts should not be served to under fives in case they choke. It will be for individual schools to decide on whether or not to provide nuts.
- Remember fresh cream or imitation cream is classed as a high fat food and should not be used in lower fat desserts or as a topping.

Food group	FOOD AND DRINKS HIGH IN FAT AND/OR SUGAR Confectionery and other sweet foods
The Standards	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Confectionery, chocolate and chocolate coated products should not be available throughout the lunch time. 2. Cakes and biscuits can only be provided at lunch time and as part of a meal. 3. Cakes, biscuits and puddings made with cocoa powder should only be available a maximum of two days per week. 4. High fat and/or high sugar toppings used for decoration such as cream, butter cream and icing sugar should be kept to a minimum and only used if essential, e.g. to set fruit on top of a sponge. If used, an undecorated or healthier dessert should also be available. 	

Notes to the standards

Confectionery, chocolate and chocolate coated products include:

- bars of milk, plain or white chocolate; chocolate flakes, buttons, or chocolate-filled eggs;
- chocolate coated bars;
- biscuits containing or coated in chocolate (including those with a chocolate drizzle, partly and fully-coated biscuits such as chocolate digestives, chocolate covered caramel wafers, chocolate fingers, choc-chip cookies);
- sweets, e.g. boiled or chewy sweets, gum, liquorice, mint and other sweets, also sherbet, fudge, marshmallows, toffee and chewing-gum; this includes sugar-free sweets and sugar-free chewing-gum;
- cereal chewy bars, cereal crunchy bars, cereal cake bars, processed fruit bars;
- fresh or dried fruit that has been sugared or covered with a yoghurt or chocolate coating;
- choc ices and other chocolate coated ice-cream.

Drinks

The Standards

1. The only drinks available in school should be:
 - plain water (still or sparkling);
 - milk;
 - unsweetened fruit or vegetable juices;
 - yoghurt or milk drinks (with less than 5% added sugar);
 - drinks made from combinations of the above (e.g. smoothies);
 - tea, coffee and low calorie hot chocolate* (these drinks are not suitable for the nursery sector).
2. Combination drinks must contain at least 50% milk, yoghurt or fruit juice. Artificial sweeteners are only permitted in combination drinks.
3. Fresh drinking water, i.e. tap water, must be provided free every day.

*Low calorie hot chocolate is defined as less than 20kcal/100ml.

Salt and Condiments

The Standards

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

Appendix 1: Nutritional Standards (paragraph 1.9)

THE NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR OTHER FOOD AND DRINKS IN SCHOOLS

The following standards apply to other food and drinks served in schools through breakfast clubs, vending machines, tuck shops, after school clubs and at break times.

Standard 1: Confectionery

No confectionery should be sold in schools.

Standard 2: Cakes and biscuits

No cakes and biscuits.

Standard 3: Savoury snacks

No savoury snacks other than nuts* and seeds (without added salt or sugar) should be sold.

Standard 4: Fruit and vegetables

A variety of fruit and vegetables should be available in all school food outlets. This could include fresh, frozen, tinned, dried** and juiced products.

Standard 5: Water

Children and young people must have easy access at all times to free, fresh, preferably chilled water.

Standard 6: Drinks

The only other drinks available should be:

- plain water (still or sparkling);
- milk (semi-skimmed is the preferred choice in schools);
- unsweetened fruit or vegetable juices;
- yoghurt or milk drinks (with less than 5% added sugar);
- drinks made from combinations of the above (e.g. smoothies);
- tea, coffee and low calorie hot chocolate (these drinks are not suitable for the nursery sector).

Combination drinks must contain at least 50% of the milk, yoghurt or fruit juice.

Artificial sweeteners are only permitted in combination drinks.

* Be aware that some pupils may take a severe allergic reaction to nuts and whole nuts should not be served to under fives in case they choke. It will be for individual schools to decide on whether or not to provide nuts.

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

Standard 7: Foods high in fat

This standard must be applied in three parts:

- a) Fried and other high fat foods are restricted across the whole school day and should not be offered in total more than twice a week.
- b) Meat or chicken products are restricted across the whole school day and should only be offered a maximum of once a week in primary schools and a maximum of twice a week in post-primary schools.
- c) There should be at least two days each week without any meat or chicken products, fried foods, foods cooked in batter, breadcrumbs or food containing pastry.

Standard 8: Red meat

Food choices or meals containing red meat must be served a minimum of twice a week and a maximum of three times a week in nursery and primary schools and a minimum of three times a week and a maximum of four times a week in post-primary schools. This standard applies across the whole school week.

Appendix 2: Sample Menu for a Cash Cafeteria following implementation of the Nutritional Standards (paragraph 1.9)

Meal	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Breakfast	Cheese Soda Toast Mixed Cereals	Bacon Bap Toast Mixed Cereals	Toasted Cheese Toast Mixed Cereals	Bacon Melt Toast Mixed Cereals	Hot Dog Toast Mixed Cereals
Starters	Vegetable Soup Pure Fruit Juice Fresh Melon & Grapes Wheaten & Cheese Pancake, Butter & Jam Egg Marie Rose	Vegetable Broth Pure Fruit Juice Fresh Melon & Grapes Wheaten & Cheese Pancake, Butter & Jam Egg Marie Rose	Potato & Leek Soup Pure Fruit Juice Fresh Melon & Grapes Wheaten & Cheese Pancake, Butter & Jam Egg Marie Rose	Lentil Soup Pure Fruit Juice Fresh Melon & Grapes Wheaten & Cheese Pancake, Butter & Jam Egg Marie Rose	Carrot & Coriander Soup Pure Fruit Juice Fresh Melon & Grapes Wheaten & Cheese Pancake, Butter & Jam Egg Marie Rose
Vegetarian	Loaded Potato	Vegetarian Puff	Vegetarian Burger	Stuffed Peppers	Vegetarian Pasta
Main Meal	Cajun Chicken & Rice Beef Curry & Rice	Pasta Bolognaise Italian Chicken Salmon & Broccoli Bake	Chicken Tikka Masala with Rice Chilli Con Carni	Beef Casserole Chicken & Ham Pie	Breaded Haddock Pepper Chicken
Choice of Vegetables	Carrot Potatoes	Mixed Veg Potatoes	Mexican Sweetcorn Potatoes	Cabbage Potatoes	Peas Potatoes
Dessert	Jelly Pot Assorted Yoghurts	Mini Muffin & Custard Assorted Yoghurts	Jelly & Ice Cream Assorted Yoghurts	Jelly & Ice Cream Assorted Yoghurts	Mini Muffin & Custard Assorted Yoghurts
Snack & Grab	Selection of Paninis Chicken Burger	Selection of Paninis Chicken Burger	Selection of Paninis Chicken Burger	Selection of Paninis Chicken Burger	Selection of Paninis Chicken Burger Chips
Deli Bar	Fresh Fruit Pasta or Noodles with Sauce Selection of Sandwiches, Wraps & Baps Tea, Coffee & Hot Chocolate Semi Skimmed Milk Chilled Water	Fresh Fruit Pasta or Noodles with Sauce Selection of Sandwiches, Wraps & Baps Tea, Coffee & Hot Chocolate Semi Skimmed Milk Chilled Water	Fresh Fruit Pasta or Noodles with Sauce Selection of Sandwiches, Wraps & Baps Tea, Coffee & Hot Chocolate Semi Skimmed Milk Chilled Water	Fresh Fruit Pasta or Noodles with Sauce Selection of Sandwiches, Wraps & Baps Tea, Coffee & Hot Chocolate Semi Skimmed Milk Chilled Water	Fresh Fruit Pasta or Noodles with Sauce Selection of Sandwiches, Wraps & Baps Tea, Coffee & Hot Chocolate Semi Skimmed Milk Chilled Water

Appendix 3: Free school meal entitlement criteria (paragraph 3.15)

A pupil shall be entitled to free school meals where:

- i. he/she or the parent is in receipt of Income Support or Income based Jobseeker's Allowance; or
- ii. he/she or the parent is in receipt of Income related Employment and Support Allowance; or
- iii. the parent receives the Child Tax Credit; and is ineligible for the Working Tax Credit because he/she works less than 16 hours per week; and has an annual taxable income not exceeding £16,190; or
- iv. the parent receives the Guarantee element of State Pension Credit; or
- v. he/she has a statement of special educational needs and is designated to require a special diet; or
- vi. he/she is a boarder at a special school; or
- vii. he/she is the child of an asylum seeker supported by the Home Office National Asylum Support Service (NASS)⁵²; or
- viii. he/she is a full-time nursery or primary school pupil whose parents are in receipt of Working Tax Credit and have an annual taxable income which does not exceed £16,190⁵³;

- ix. if none of the above apply and a school believes that a child may be a child in need⁵⁴, that is presenting at school hungry, then the school should provide free school meals to the child. This initial decision, taken by the school at the point of need, must be followed immediately with a referral to the Gateway Team of the local Health and Social Care Trust. The school should continue to provide free school meals upon confirmation of the child's situation by a social worker from the Trust. If, following initial assessment by the Trust the child is deemed not to be a child in need, provision should cease.

NOTE: Following changes to the way HM Revenue & Customs awards Working Tax Credit, the Department has amended the eligibility criteria for free school meals so that where a parent is in receipt of Working Tax Credit during the four-week period immediately after their employment finishes or after they start to work less than 16 hours per week, they can claim free school meals.

52 In the interim period, until such time as the result of the application for NASS support is known, education and library boards should arrange to provide free school meals to children of asylum seekers enrolled in schools.

53 This new criterion has been introduced on a phased basis commencing with nursery, Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 pupils being eligible from September 2010.

54 Under Article 17 of the Children (NI) Order 1995 (the Children Order) a child is in need if *inter alia* he is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of personal social services by a Health and Social Care Trust. Article 18 of the Children Order places a general duty on each Trust to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within its area who are in need and to provide a range and level of personal services appropriate to those children's needs.

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