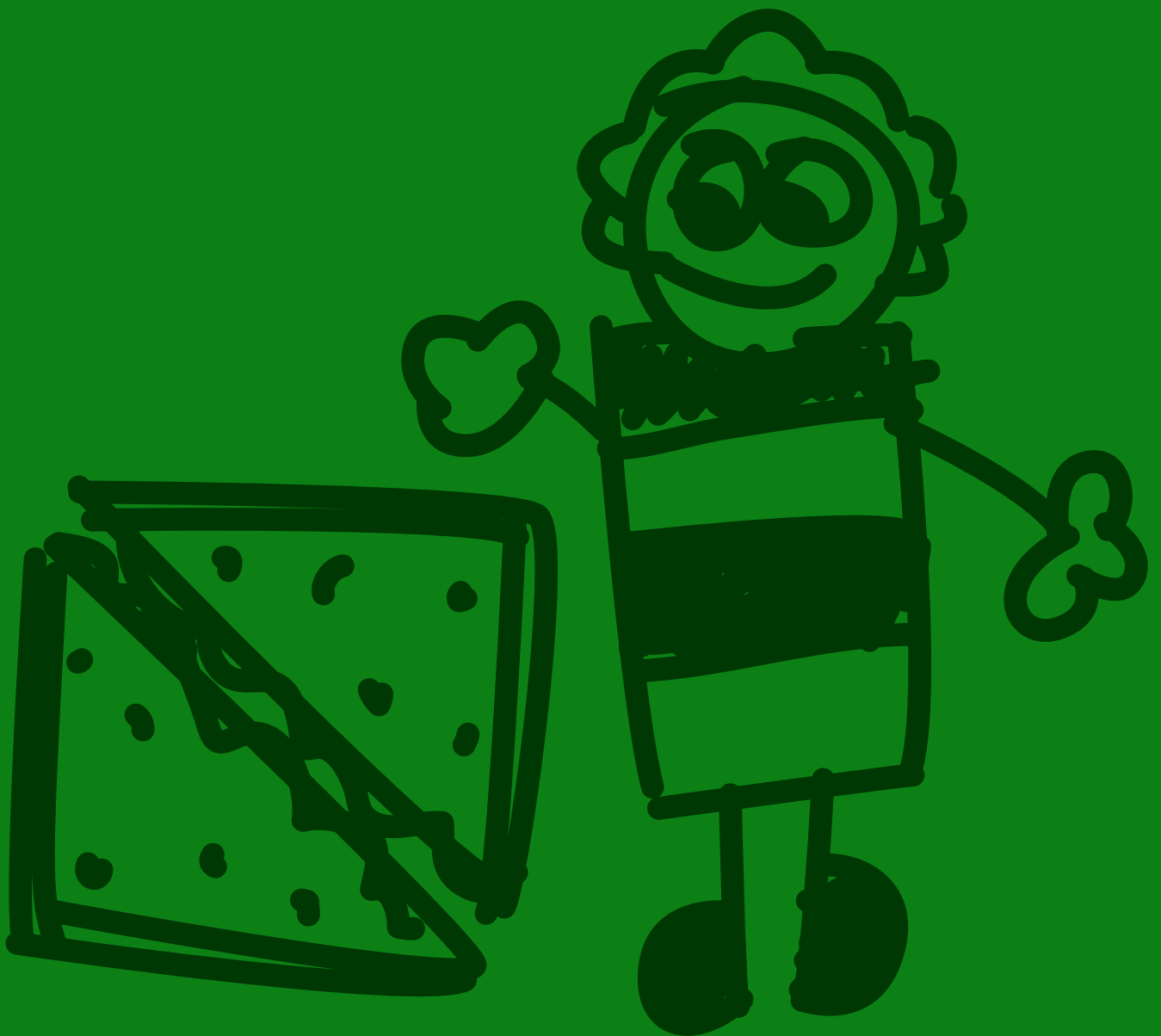




'I WANT TO SIT NEXT TO SANDWICHES'

Special Mission: School Dinners
Findings



Acknowledgments

We would like to say thank you to those who contributed to this work. We are particularly grateful to Gwyther Rees from the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University who helped us analyse the survey results.



This report is available in alternative formats by phoning us on 01792 765600 or emailing us at post@childcomwales.org.uk

There is a set of laws, including the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Children's Commissioner for Wales Act 2001, which explains the role and responsibilities of the Children's Commissioner for Wales. The Children's Commissioner for Wales wants to see Wales as a country where children and young people are respected, valued, listened to and supported to lead safe and happy lives.

There's a team of people who work with Keith Towler, the current Commissioner – from offices in Swansea and Colwyn Bay – to help him:

support children and young people to find out about children's rights

listen to children and young people to find out what's important to them

advise children, young people and those who care for them if they feel they've got nowhere else to go with their problems

influence government and other organisations who say they're going to make a difference to children's lives, making sure they keep their promises to children and young people

speak up for children and young people nationally on important issues – being the children's champion in Wales.

You can find and download copies of all our reports on our website: www.childcomwales.org.uk



Introduction

This is a report on the findings of a survey of children in Wales about their views of school dinners. The survey was undertaken with almost 1,000 children, mostly aged 5 to 11 years old, in almost all local authority areas between the 1 May 2014 and the 27 June 2014. The children that took part in the survey were engaged via the Children's Commissioner for Wales' Super Ambassadors scheme (see page 04 for further information about the scheme).

The report is divided into four sections. The first section sets out the context and aims of the research and provides information about how the survey was carried out and how the data was analysed. The next two sections summarise the key statistical and thematic findings. The final section of the report provides a brief conclusion.

Context

Keith's Blog

Keith Towler, the current Children's Commissioner for Wales, wrote about his experiences of talking to children about their school dinners in his blog in February 2014. He wrote:

In some of my meetings with School Councils they have referred to Article 24 of the UNCRC and their work on making sure school dinners have drinking water and good nutritious food. They have taken forward proposals to improve things and have highlighted some issues for schools and local authorities to think about. In my conversations with children I have been told:

- That portion size does not increase the older you get so children in Year 5 and 6 complain that they are often hungry in the afternoon.
- Some children don't like the moulded serving trays but others like them. The serving size is limited by these trays and that's not lost on older children in primary settings. Other children have said that they do like the moulded trays.
- Seconds is a big issue. In some counties I'm told there is a policy of not issuing seconds where as in other areas seconds are available. If seconds are not available and older children are going hungry that creates some resentment and a sense of injustice. This is particularly heightened when kitchen staff are instructed to throw away unused food.
- In secondary schools the issue of choice and quality is the hot topic. Some complain of very limited choice (vegetarian options coming in for most criticism) and that the quality can be variable. The race to get in early so that you avoid being at the end of the queue where you are left with only having what nobody wants.

— Then there is the issue of cost. Children in primary and secondary have both commented on costs and how difficult it is for families who have two or more children in school to afford school dinners. From what I can gather the average daily cost of a school dinner in primary school is £2.15 so if you have two children in school the cost to the family is £21.50 per week. Clearly a high proportion of children in Wales have free school meals and there are a variety of paying methods that aim to maintain confidentiality.

— Free school breakfasts in primary schools in Wales are a big hit with children and staff alike telling me how important they are. Free milk for the under 5's is also highly valued and older children remember their free milk days with fondness.

— Then there are conversations I've had with children who tell me that in the school holidays they miss their school dinners. Those conversations are not about the quality of the food but reflect a more worrying trend for some children who go hungry during school holidays.

The position then of school dinners remains as important as ever for school children today. I must say that there are a few things that strike me about all this. Firstly there is some variation across Wales about the quality and availability of school dinners and that older children in primary settings complain of hunger in the afternoon. Then there is the impact that poverty levels are having where the school dinner provides the main meal of the day. Of course for 12 weeks of the year children are on school holidays and some of the conversations I've had with children are leading me to believe that for many this is a time when they are going hungry. I'm wondering if the subject of School Dinners could be a future special mission for my Super Ambassadors so we can get a more comprehensive picture of what children think about food in schools.

Super Ambassadors scheme in Wales

This Children's Commissioner for Wales-led scheme is an initiative that empowers pupils to become ambassadors for the Commissioner within their schools.

Two pupils usually from Year 5/6, elected by their peers, take a lead role in promoting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the role of the Children's Commissioner for Wales to others within the school.

Ambassadors are also required to complete special missions, canvassing opinions from peers on a wide range of issues. During the period between May and June 2014, 150 schools were signed up to the scheme.

www.superambassadors.org.uk

Welsh Government Guidance on School Dinners

'Appetite for Life'

'Appetite for Life', published in November 2007, introduced more stringent nutritional standards which exceeded the then minimum compulsory standards and applied to all food served whether it was provided by the school e.g. tuck shop/vending, in-house catering team, local authority catering services or an outside catering provider/contractor.

Recommendations contained within 'Appetite for Life' were not compulsory, however all schools were advised to work towards these recommendations in readiness for changes to legislation.

The Healthy Eating in Schools (Nutritional Standards & Requirements) (Wales) Regulations 2013

The Healthy Eating in Schools Regulations 2013 replace the previous 'Appetite for Life' implementation guidelines. They set out the type of food and drink that can and cannot be provided in local authority maintained schools and sets out nutritional standards for school lunches.

These regulations are part of the wider Healthy Eating in Schools Measure 2009. The Measure places a legal requirement on local authorities and governing bodies to promote healthy eating and drinking by pupils in maintained schools throughout Wales.

Why is healthy eating in schools important?

There has been long-standing concern about the number of children who are overweight or obese and the impact this has on health and wellbeing, especially in relation to reducing healthy inequalities. Poor diet is a major contributing factor. The food and drink provided in schools can make a positive contribution towards giving children and young people a healthy balanced diet and encouraging them to develop good eating habits. The aim is to achieve a whole school approach towards healthy eating and to encourage healthy attitudes to food and drink at an early age.

Aims of the study

In light of the above context the aims of the current study were:

- to seek the views of children on their experiences of school dinner time; and**
- to quantify the anecdotal evidence of the Children's Commissioner during visit to schools across Wales.**

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was completed by children themselves via an online questionnaire as well as on offline etap survey used at summer events in May and June 2014. It contained 12 questions.

The first two questions were about the local authority area and age of the child as summarised above.

The next seven questions were in tick-box format and asked about:

- **Whether children ate school dinners**
- **Whether they felt that they had good choice what to eat**
- **Whether they felt full after their school dinner**
- **Whether they could get more food if they asked for it**
- **Whether they had to wait or queue for a long time for their dinner**
- **Whether they had enough time to eat their dinner**
- **If their school used plastic moulded trays for school dinners and, if so, what they thought of these.**

The first six of these questions had three response options - 'Yes', 'Sometimes' and 'No'. The last question had four response options – 'Yes', 'I don't mind', 'No', and 'My school doesn't use plastic trays'.

The answers to these seven questions are summarised in Section 2 below.

Finally, the questionnaire also contained three open-ended questions:

- **Tell us what you think is the best thing about school dinners.**
- **Tell us what you think is the worst thing about school dinners?**
- **What one thing would you change to make school dinner times even better?**

An analysis of the answers to these questions is presented in Section 3 below.

Carrying out the survey

The survey was shared with children as a Special Mission via our Super Ambassadors scheme and website between 1 May and 27 June 2014. Although the scheme is one for primary schools, the survey was opened up to children of all ages. Information was shared about the scheme by the Commissioner at any school visits during that period as well as email marketing to schools and on Twitter.

Offline surveys on mobile tablets were used during any events attended by the Commissioner's Participation team during that period– these included regional Ambassadors Events in North Wales, South Wales and Mid Wales and the Urdd Eisteddfod in Bala.

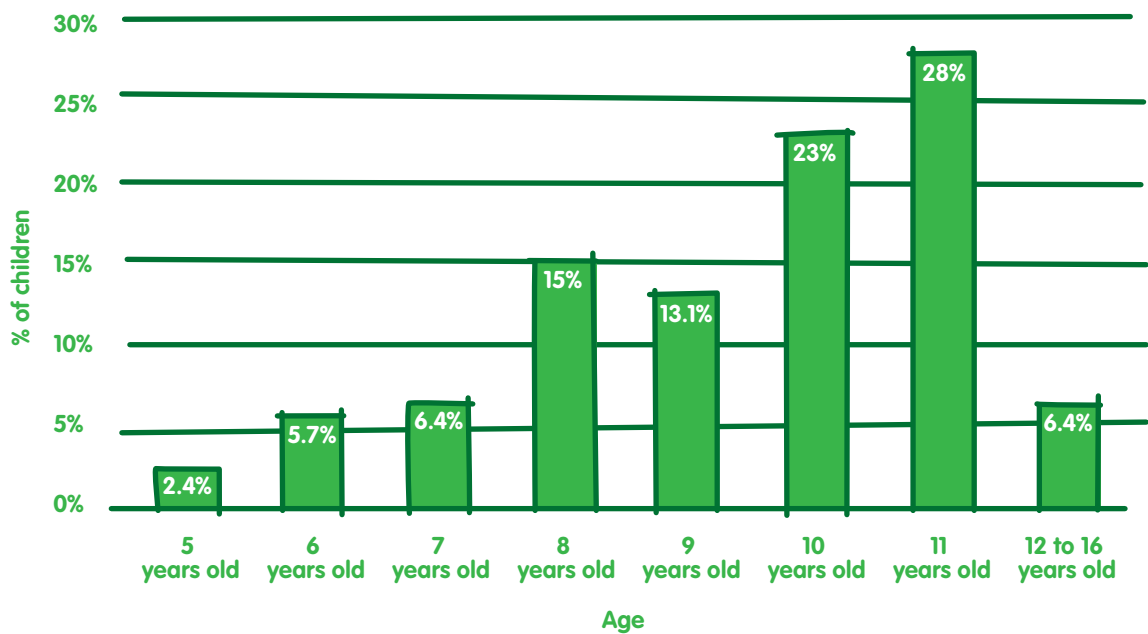
The survey sample

The achieved survey sample consisted of 942 children.

Age

The majority of the children in the survey were aged 9 to 11 years old. Around 30% were under 9 years old and 7% were older than 11. As the survey appears to have been carried out in June, most of the children aged 11 would still be in primary school. So in the discussion below it is assumed that only children aged 12 and over are in secondary school. Age was unknown for 20 children who are not included in the above percentages or in the chart below.

Figure 1: Ages of children in the sample



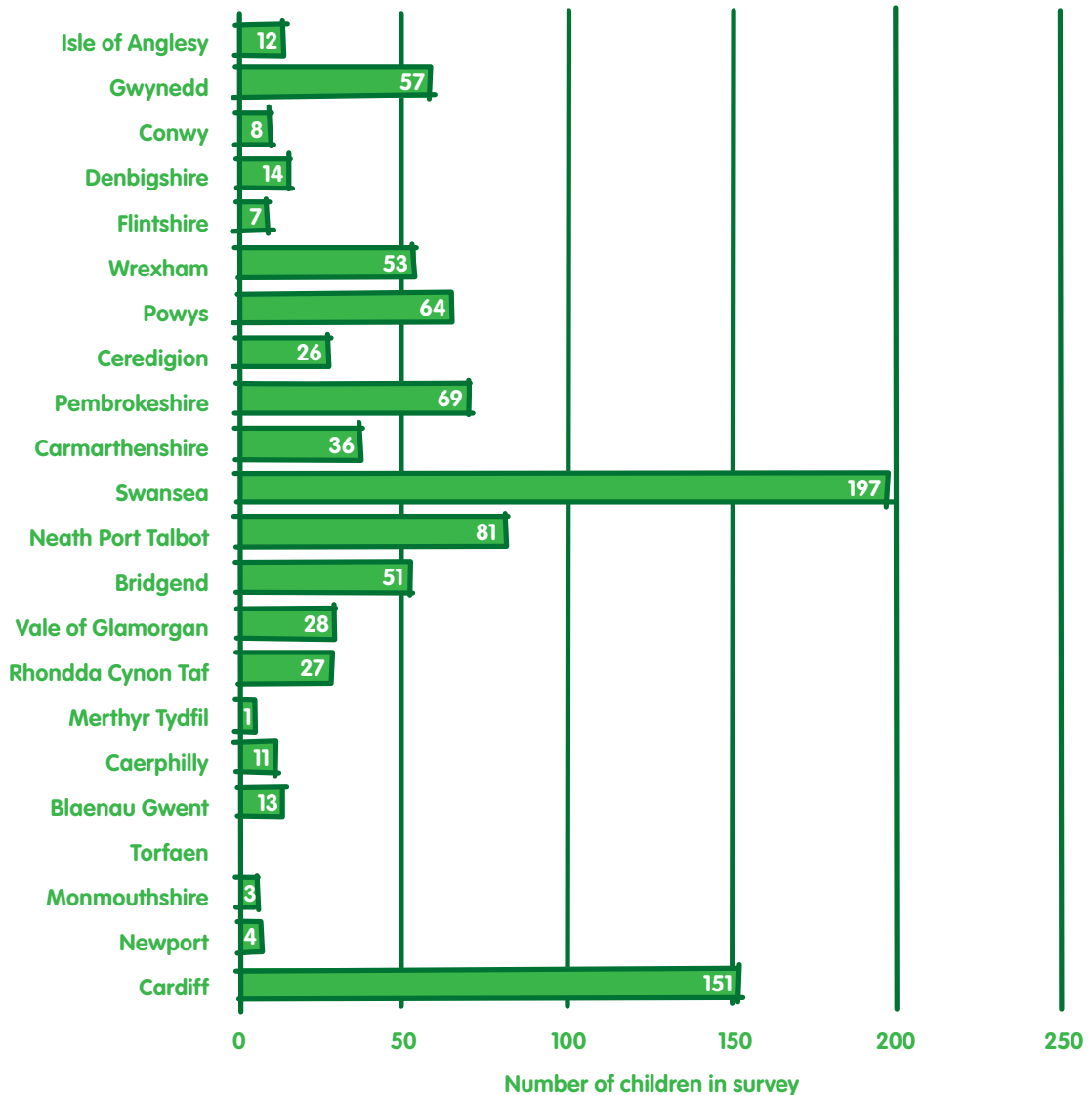
Language

Just over a fifth (21%) of the children completed the survey in Welsh and the remainder (79%) completed it in English.

Local authority

Children from all but one of the local authorities in Wales completed the survey (Figure 2). There was quite a range of participation rates across local authorities with the highest numbers in Cardiff and Swansea and relatively few children taking part in some South East Wales areas. Figure 2 does not include 29 children for whom the local authority area was not known.

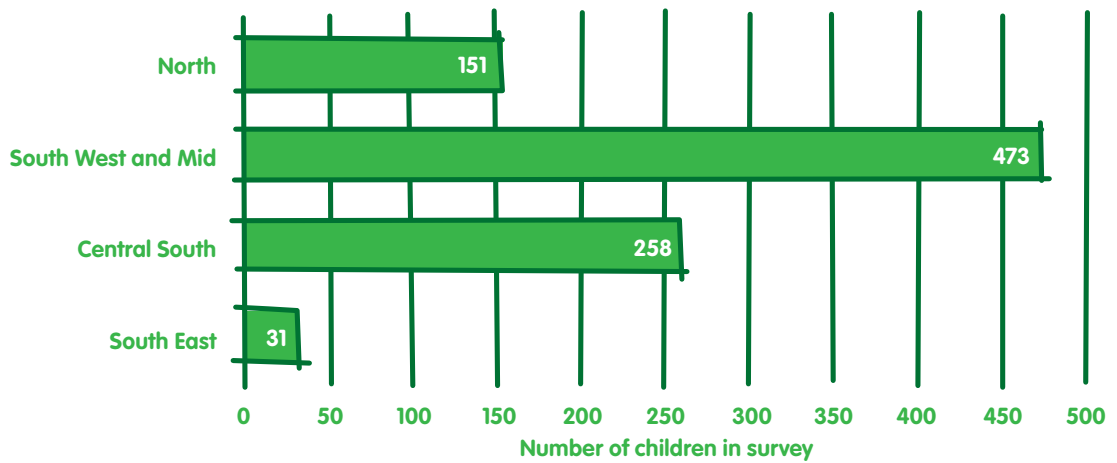
Figure 2: Number of children taking part in each local authority



Region

The data on local authority can be grouped into four broad geographical regions as shown in Figure 3. It can be seen that there was good representation in three of the four regions but a limited number of children participating in the South East Wales region.

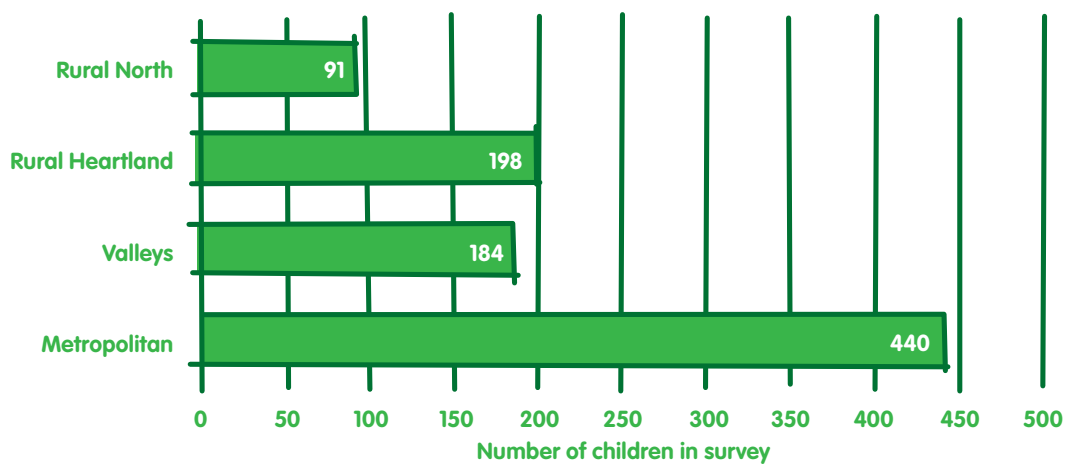
Figure 3: Number of children taking part by geographical region



Macro region

The local authorities can also be grouped by macro region – based on the type of area – as shown in Figure 4. Here there is a good spread of participation across the four macro regions.

Figure 4: Number of children taking part by macro region



Data analysis and results

The statistical data from the closed questions included in the survey questionnaire was analysed using SPSS – a statistical software package. Basic statistical tests¹ were conducted in relation to some of the differences noted in Section 2 but due to the nature of the sample these should only be regarded as tentative indications. Because of the uneven age distribution in the survey, the overall percentages for each question have been weighted equally by age group to provide a more accurate reflection of the overall picture. It is important to acknowledge that we cannot be sure how representative the sample is of all primary school children in Wales. Nevertheless, it is important to take into account the views of the almost 1,000 children who participated in the survey

Children's responses to the open-ended questions were collated in an Excel spreadsheet and themes within these responses were identified and coded manually.

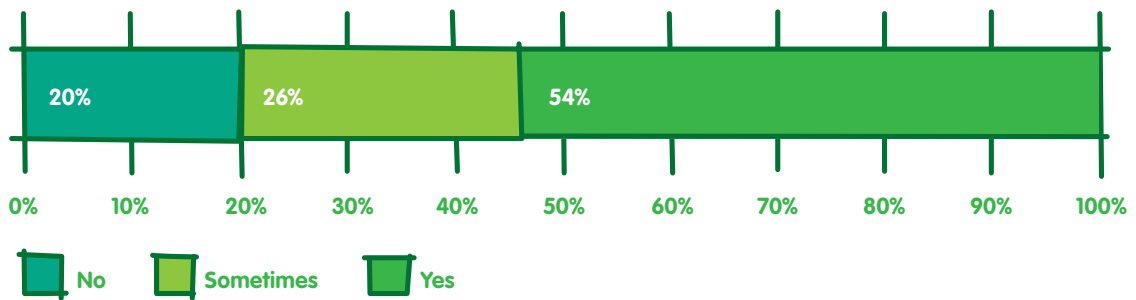
¹ Chi-square and non-parametric ordinal tests

Statistical findings

Do you eat school dinners?

The overall breakdown for this question is shown in Figure 5. Over half of the primary school children surveyed (54%) always ate school dinners and a further 26% sometimes did. The analysis of subsequent closed-response questions is based on the sub-group of children who either answered 'yes' or 'sometimes' to this question.

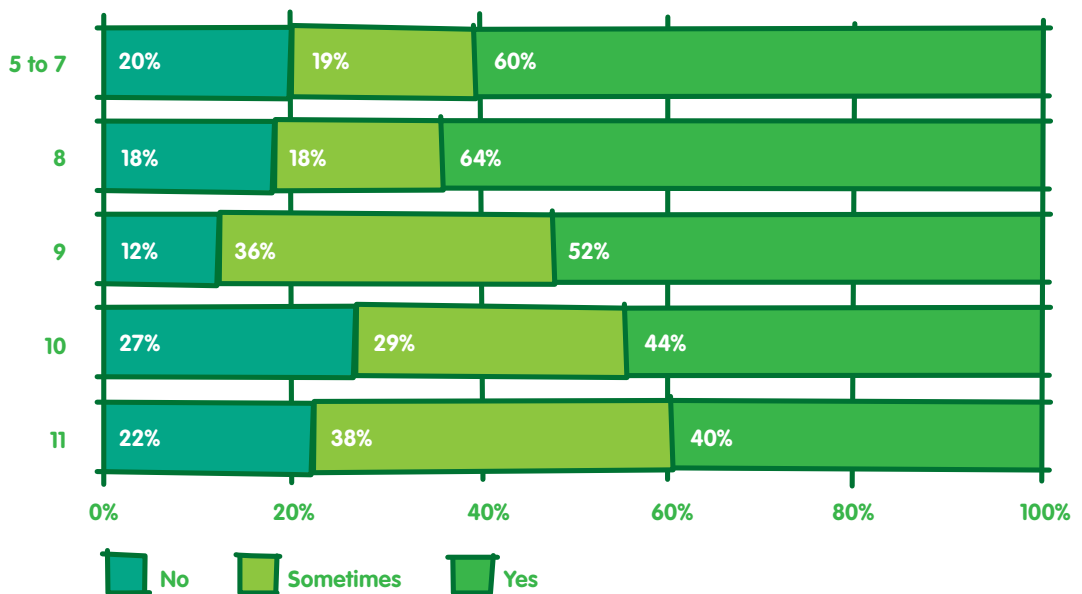
Figure 5: 'Do you eat school dinners?'



Weighted equally by age group

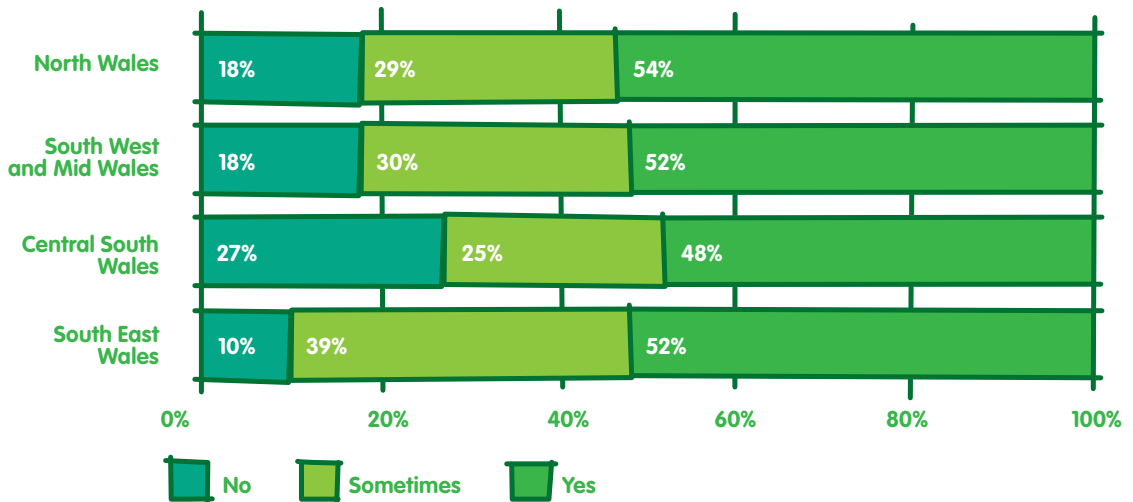
The proportion of children eating school dinners seemed to decline with age between 8 and 11. Over 60% of children aged eight years old and younger answered 'yes' compared to 40% of those aged 11 years old.

Figure 6: 'Do you eat school dinners?' (by age)



Looking at patterns of response to this question in different regions of Wales (Figure 7) there was relatively little variation in the proportions of children answering 'Yes' to this question. It did appear that a smaller proportion of children answered 'No' in the South East Wales region, but this figure is based on a small sample of 31 children and so is not reliable.

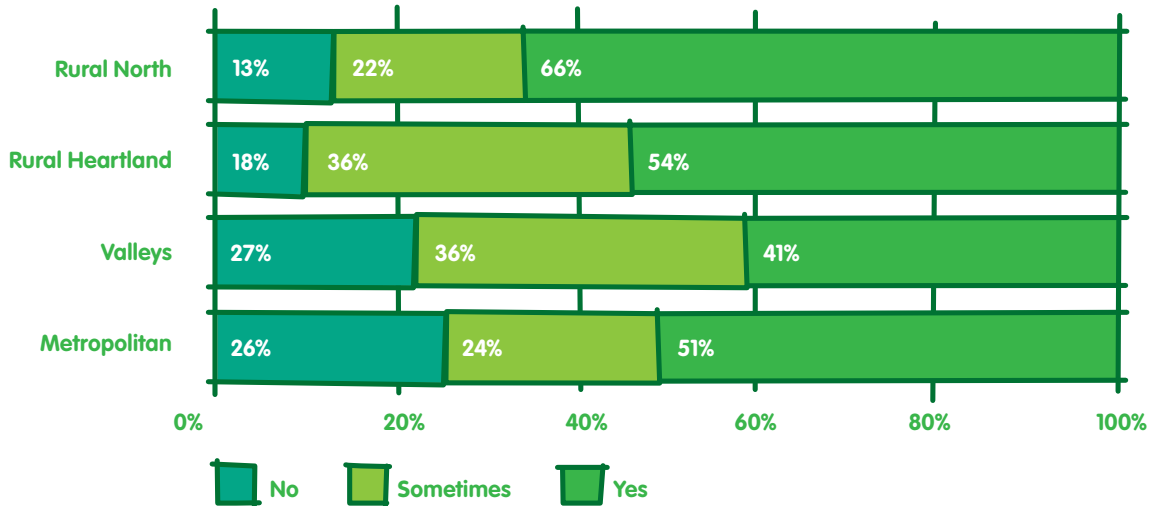
Figure 7: 'Do you eat school dinners?' (by geographical region)



Unweighted sample

A slightly different picture emerges when looking at the macro regions representing different types of local areas in Wales, (Figure 8). The proportion of children always eating school dinners was highest in the rural North and lowest in the Valleys. Looking at those who sometimes or always ate school dinners the main difference appears to be between the rural areas and the more urban areas (Valleys and Metropolitan).

Figure 8: 'Do you eat school dinners?' (by macro region)

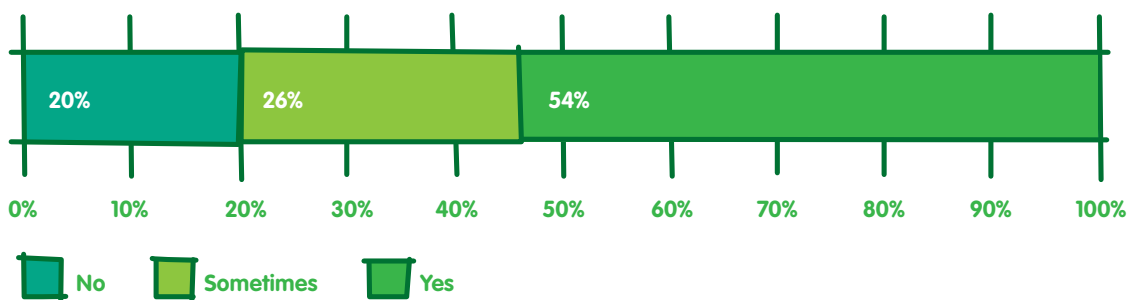


Unweighted sample

Do you get a good choice of what to eat?

Over half (54%) of children felt that they got a good choice of what to eat, and a further 28% felt that this was the case sometimes.

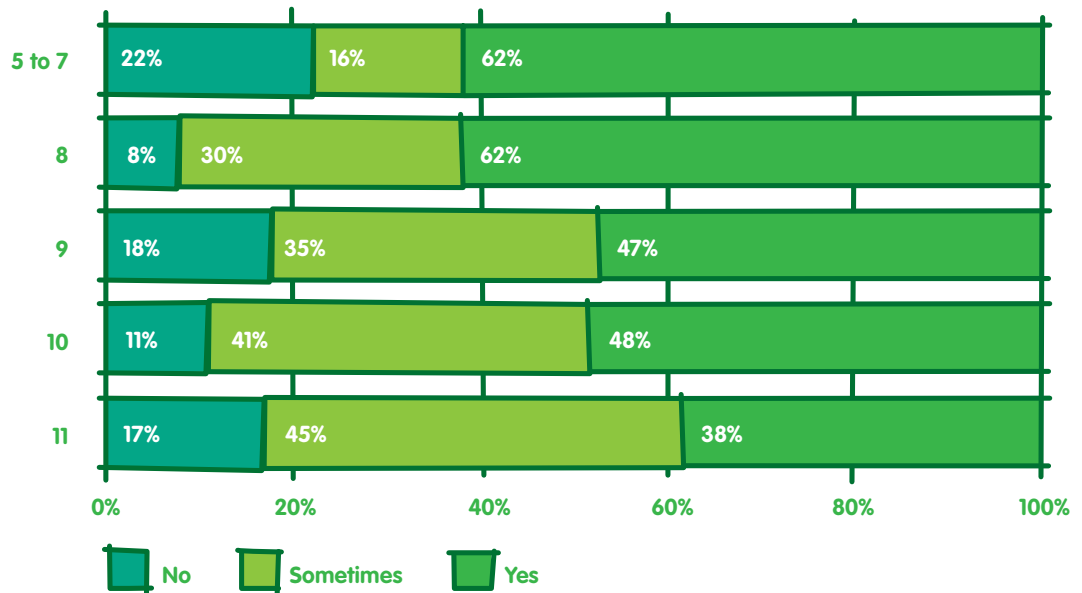
Figure 9: 'Do you get a good choice of what to eat?'



Weighted equally by age group

Satisfaction with choice varied by age – with the proportion of children saying 'yes' falling from the age of 8 to the age of 11, although the 'no' category did not show a clear age pattern. This raises the question of whether there are different approaches to choice for different age groups in primary schools (which seems unlikely) or whether children become less satisfied with the same amount of choice as they get older.

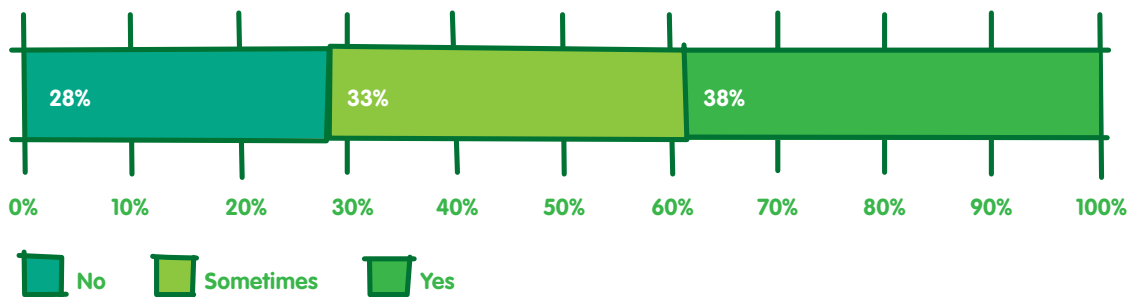
Figure 10: 'Do you get a good choice of what to eat?' (by age)



Do you feel full after your school dinner?

Over a quarter of children (28%) said they did not feel full after their school dinner and a further third said they sometimes felt full.

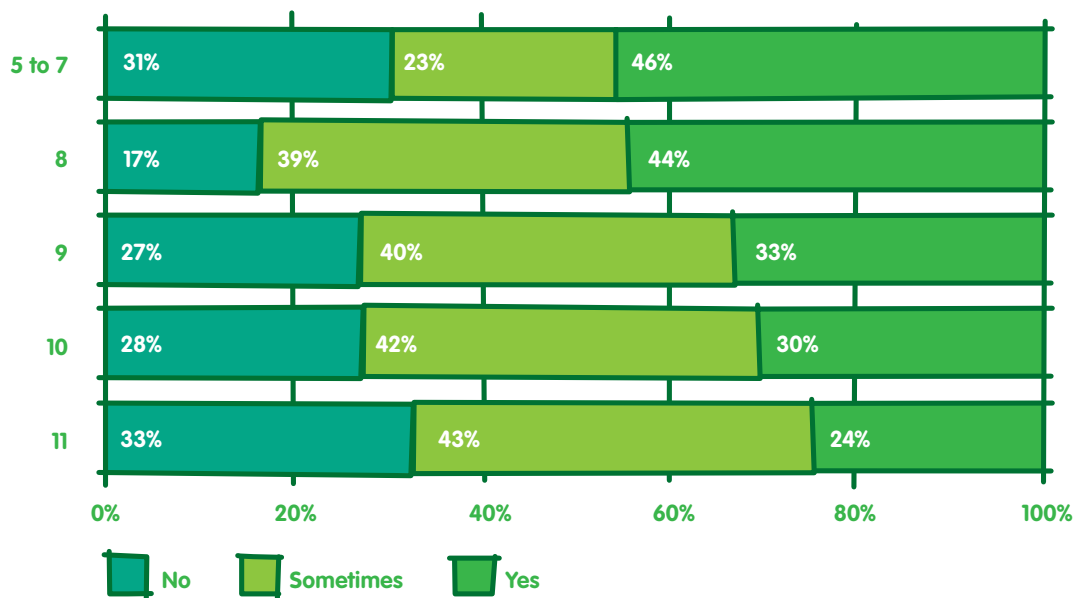
Figure 11: 'Do you feel full after your school dinner?'



Weighted equally by age group

Again there were some age patterns here – with the proportion answering 'yes' to this question decreasing from around 45% for 5 to 8 year olds to 24% for 11 year olds.

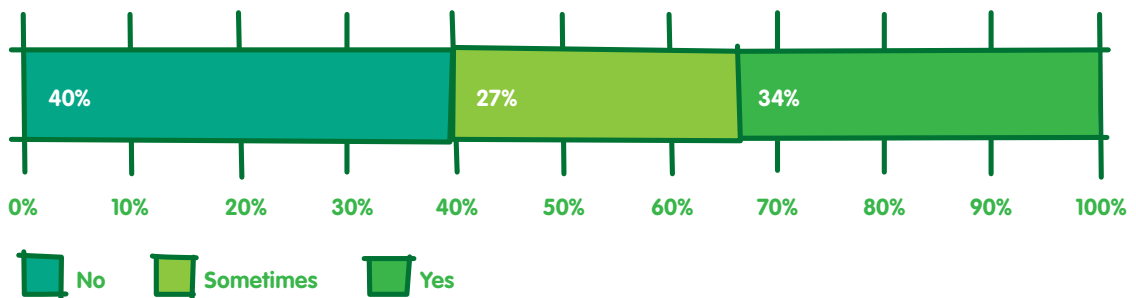
Figure 12: 'Do you feel full after your school dinner?' (by age)



Do you get more food if you ask for it?

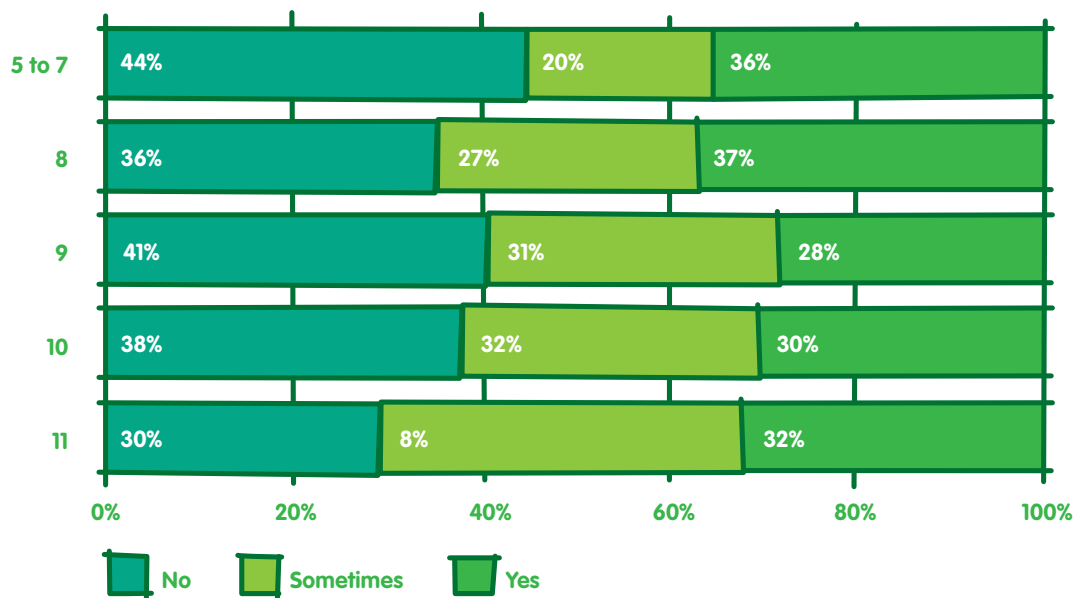
Around a third (34%) of children said that they did get more food if they asked for it. On the other hand, two-fifths (40%) said that they did not.

Figure 13: 'Do you get more food if you ask for it?'



Answers to this question do not appear to vary systematically by age amongst primary school children. This suggests some consistency within schools about the policy on providing second helpings, irrespective of age.

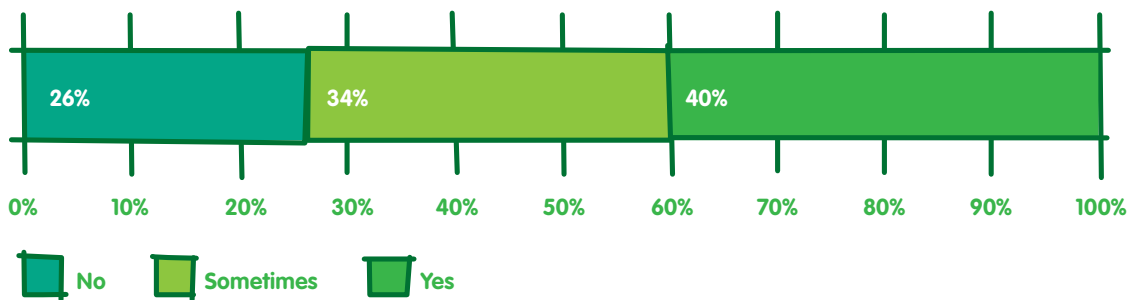
Figure 14: 'Do you get more food if you ask for it?' (by age)



Do you have to wait or queue a long time for your school dinner?

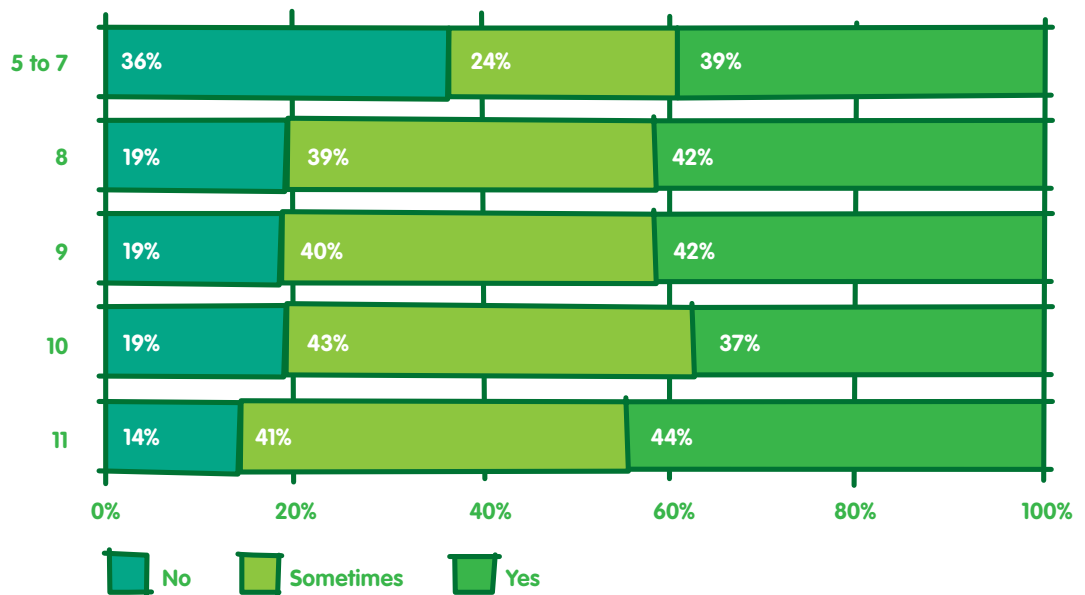
Queuing or waiting was an issue for most children – with around three-quarters of children answering 'yes' or 'sometimes'.

Figure 15: 'Do you have to wait or queue a long time for your school dinner?'



Among primary school children it seems that the youngest age groups (5 to 7 years old) were less likely to have to queue but there was no discernible difference in experiences amongst 8 to 11 year olds. The pattern regarding the youngest age group perhaps reflects a common policy in primary schools of organising lunch times so that younger children eat first. This was a matter of some comment from children in older age groups (see later).

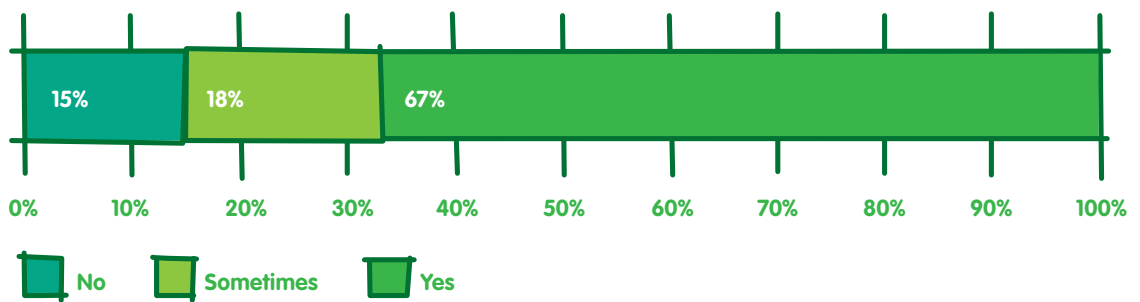
Figure 16: 'Do you have to wait or queue a long time for your school dinner?' (by age)



Do you have enough time to eat your dinner?

Children's answers to this question were relatively positive with over two-thirds (67%) saying 'yes' and a further 18% saying 'sometimes'.

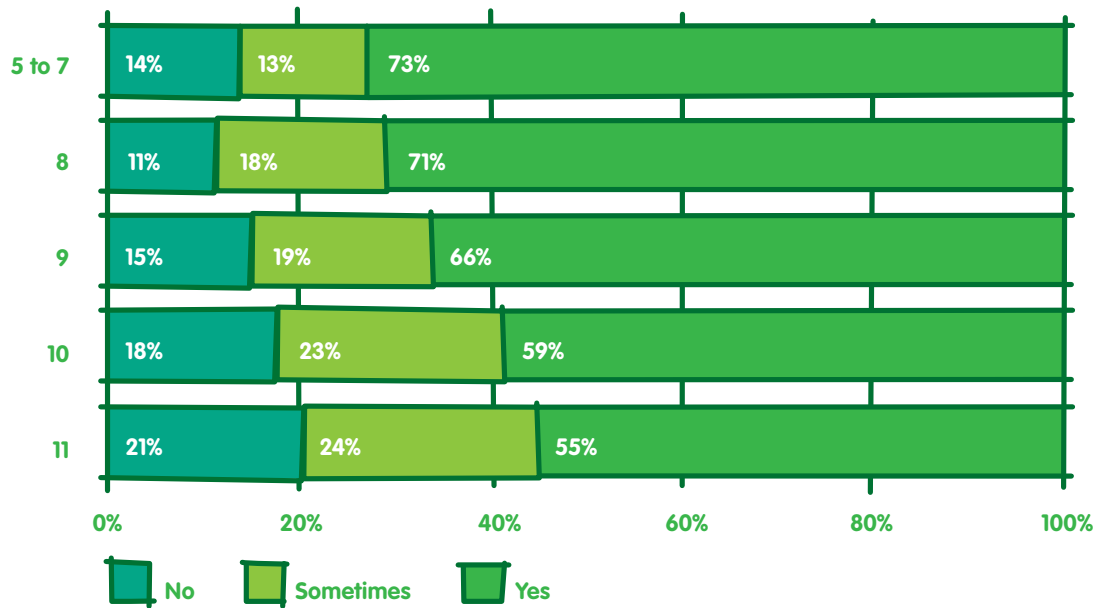
Figure 17: 'Do you have enough time to eat your dinner?'



Weighted equally by age group

In the primary age group, older children were less likely to feel that they always had enough time to eat their dinner. This appears to be at least partly to do with the way that lunchtimes are organised – with older age groups often eating later than younger age groups – see comments from children later.

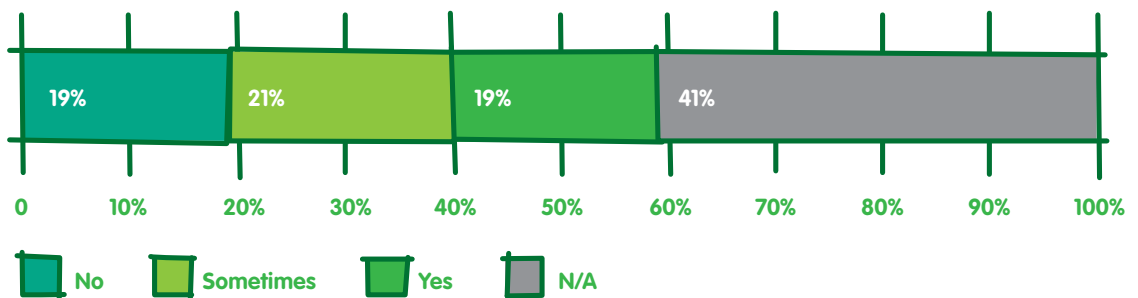
Figure 18: 'Do you have enough time to eat your dinner?' (by age)



If your school uses plastic moulded trays, do you like them?

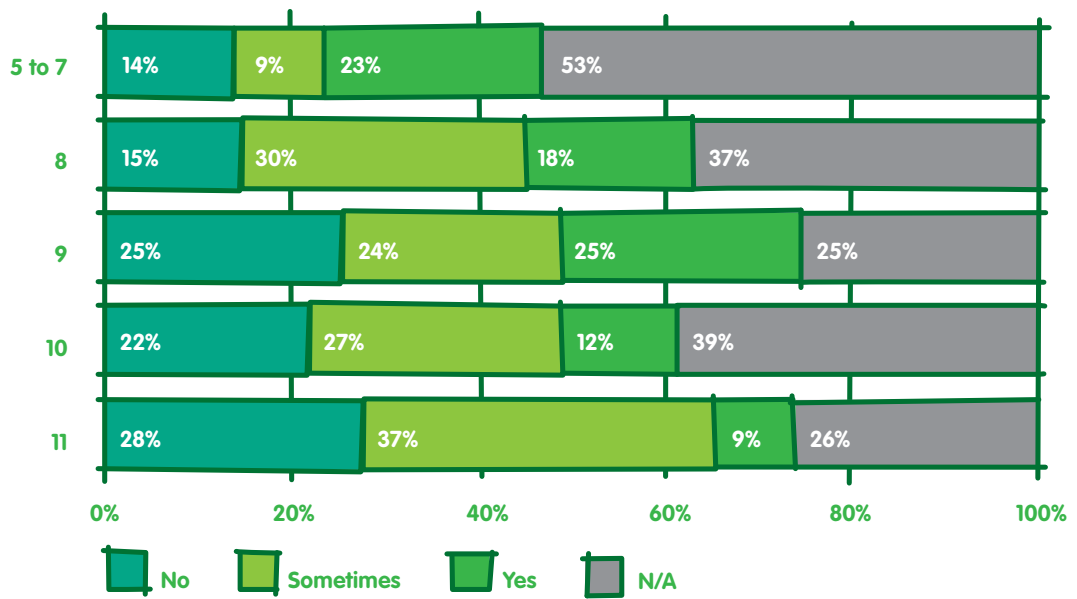
Just over two-fifths of children (41%) said that their school did not use plastic moulded trays. Of the remainder, roughly equal proportions of children said they did not like the trays, that they did like the trays, or that they were indifferent on this matter.

Figure 19: 'If your school uses plastic moulded trays, do you like them?'



There were some indications that older children were less favourable to plastic trays than younger children.

Figure 20: 'If your school uses plastic moulded trays, do you like them?' (by age)



Secondary school aged children

There were 59 children aged 12 to 16 who participated in the survey, of which 49 always or sometimes had school dinners. This is not a large enough sample to be representative of the population of secondary school aged children in Wales.

However, in order to represent the views of these children who participated in the survey, their responses to the closed questions in the survey are briefly summarised here. Some observations about differences in their answers compared to the primary school children are as follows. Compared to the primary school children, the secondary school children were:

- more satisfied with the amount of choice they had in what to eat (Figure 21)
- more likely to say that they felt full after their school dinner than the primary school children (Figure 22)
- less likely to say they could have more food if they asked for it (Figure 23)
- more likely to say that they have to wait or queue a long time for their dinner (Figure 24)
- more likely than the 9 year old to 11 year old age group to say that they had enough time to eat their dinner (Figure 25)

There was no clear age-related picture in relation to views about plastic trays.

The above bullet points are based on a small sample and more research would be needed to make reliable comparisons between the views of children in primary and secondary schools about school dinners.

Figure 21: 'Do you get a good choice of what to eat?' (by age group)

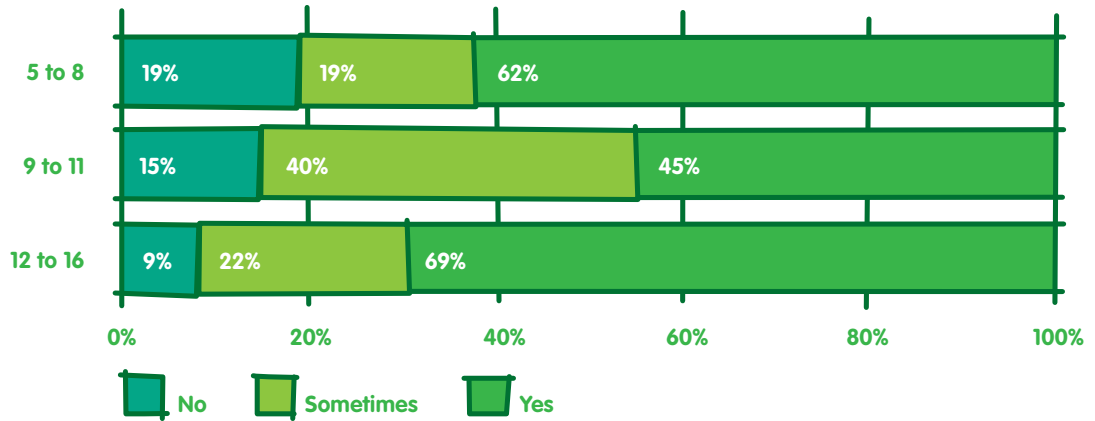


Figure 22: 'Do you feel full after your school dinner?' (by age group)

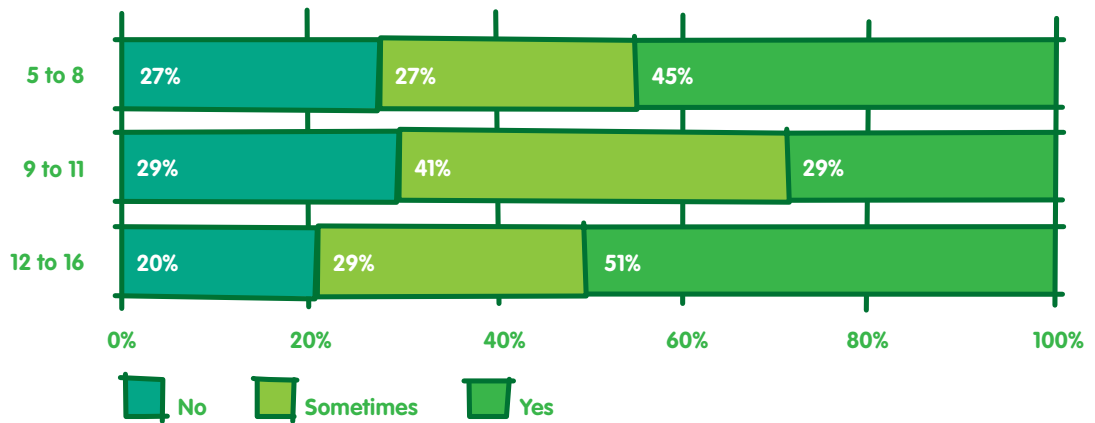


Figure 23: 'Do you get more food if you ask for it?' (by age group)

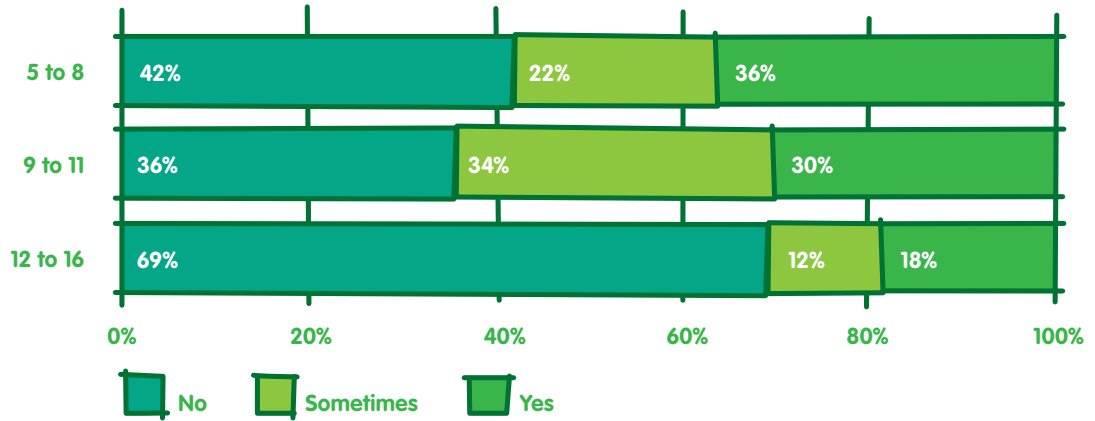


Figure 24: 'Do you have to wait or queue a long time for your school dinner?' (by age group)

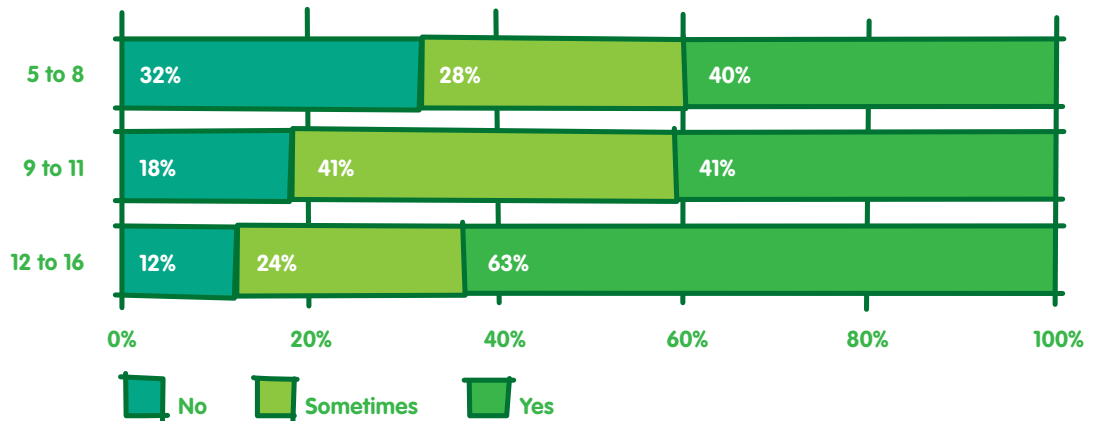


Figure 25: 'Do you have enough time to eat your dinner?' (by age group)

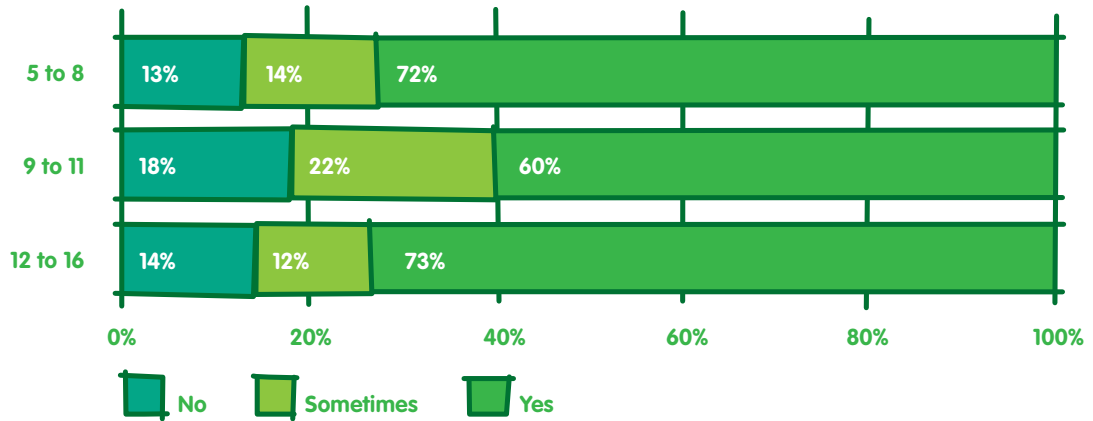
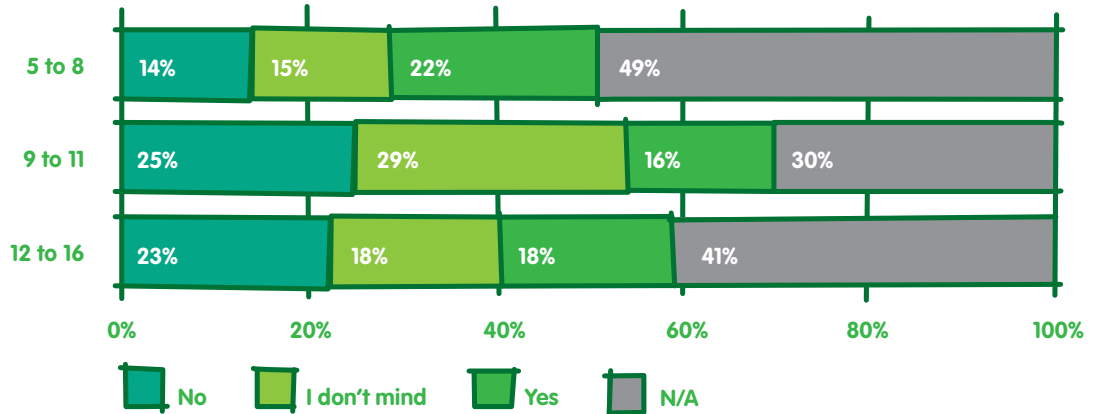


Figure 26: 'If your school uses plastic moulded trays, do you like them?' (by age group)



Children who did not eat school dinners

As outlined earlier, around a fifth of the children surveyed aged 5 to 11 years old said that they did not eat school dinners. Many of these children provided answers to the subsequent questions outlined above. It is not certain, but seems likely that these children would have been answering the questions on the basis of past experience of eating school dinners. In general, these children had a more negative opinion about the choices available, the amount of food provided and the amount of time available to eat school dinner. These patterns may provide some indications of the reasons why some of these children prefer not to have school dinners. However, it should be borne in mind that the mean age of children (9.4 years old) not eating school dinners was slightly older than those who ate school dinners (9.2 years old) and this may also have some effect on the differences observed.

Children's comments about school dinners

Children were asked three open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire:

1. Tell us what you think is the best thing about school dinners?
2. Tell us what you think is the worst thing about school dinners?
3. What one thing would you change to make school dinner times even better?

These questions received an excellent response with many children writing detailed answers with views and ideas.

An content analysis was conducted of all responses² and this suggested a set of broad themes that are relevant to the answers provided to all three questions. It would therefore be repetitive to summarise findings for each question separately, and what follows is a combination of responses organised around ten key themes identified through the analysis. These ten themes, of which the first five were the most common topics of comment, were:

1. Quantity
2. Quality
3. Options and choice
4. Process and organisation
5. Comments about specific foods
6. Social aspects
7. Physical aspects – space and equipment
8. Cost
9. Staff
10. Participation

² Irrespective of age or whether the child currently ate school dinners

In the sections that follow, the approximate numbers of children mentioning specific themes and issues have sometimes been provided. This has been done only to give a rough idea of the prominence of particular themes and should not be taken as a precise estimate of the scale of each issue that can be generalised to the child population. It should also be noted that some children's answers contained more than one issue or theme, for example:

"In my opinion I don't like the plates and we have to wait for the babanod to have dinner first and sometimes I don't get a choice of what to have for pudding and sometimes I don't like everything that's left"

Worst thing, 10 year old

These have been categorised separately for each theme, so it is not appropriate to add up the different figures as this will involve double-counting some children.

Quotes have been selected to illustrate key points. These have been reproduced exactly as written – no modifications have been made to grammar or spelling, although it should be noted that quotes originally written in Welsh have been translated into English.

Before looking at each theme, it is worth noting that some children expressed either complete satisfaction or complete dissatisfaction with school dinners without providing any further details. In response to the question about the 'best thing', while there were many wholly positive comments, over 50 children answered 'nothing'. In response to the question about the 'worst' thing, more than 90 children answered 'nothing' while around 30 answered 'everything'.

Theme 1: Quantity

This was a prominent and fairly straightforward theme. The quantity of food available and the option to ask for extra food were mentioned as the best thing about school dinners by over 100 children. Similarly over 70 children mentioned small portions as one of the worst things about school dinners and around 70 also proposed this as a priority for change.

Many children particularly valued the possibility of having a second helping of food where this was available:

"i think the best thing is that if you want more you can have more"

Best thing, 9 year old

There were some indications that the amount of food available was a particular issue for older children, and sometimes this was linked to a sense of unfairness about the way quantities of food were allocated:

"The size of the dinners are the same for year 1 to year 6"

Worst thing, 10 year old

"Bigger portions available for bigger kids and more time given to eat"

Priority for change, 11 year old

"The year 6 pupils get the same amount of food as the younger ones and you have to wait a long time in the queue."

Worst thing, 10 year old

**"when the little children get seconds pudding
everytime and the big children don't"**

Worst thing, 9 year old

Linked to this, older children seemed often to feel that the system of older age groups eating at later times disadvantaged them, as there was sometimes not enough food or choice of food left for them:

**"There's never enough by the
time we get there"**

Worst thing, 11 year old

**"Year 6 should
go in first"**

Priority for change, 11 year old

Compared to these comments about the importance of having enough food and being able to have second helpings, there were only a handful of comments about there being too much food and about children being asked to finish their food when they did not want to.

Theme 2: Quality

General comments about the quality of the food were very common. Many children were really positive about this aspect. Around 70 children said the best thing about school dinners was that they were 'tasty' or 'blasus'. Other common adjectives were: 'nice' (49 mentions), 'yummy' (16 mentions) and a range of other words were mentioned by fewer children such as 'lovely', 'delicious', 'marvellous' and 'lush'. The general quality of the food was mentioned by around 25 children as the worst thing about school dinners, and was identified as a priority for change by a similar number.

Some issues were mentioned about the temperature at which food was served – with over 30 children mentioning this as the 'best thing' and ten children mentioning cold food as the 'worst thing'. Some children seemed to particularly appreciate having a hot meal at lunchtime:

"It is nice to have a hot meal after a long morning in school."

Best thing, 11 year old

"In the winter it is nice to eat hot food."

Best thing, 10 year old

There were only a small number of comments (around ten children) about food being over-cooked, burnt, under-cooked, soggy or greasy.

There were also some comments about food hygiene, and in particular finding hairs in food. It seemed that these issues were clustered in the data set so they may have related to specific recent incidents in a few schools. Some children's suggestions for change were for dinner staff always to wear hair nets.

Quite a few children (over 40) mentioned the food being 'healthy' as the best thing about school dinners.

"They give you healthy meals"

Best thing, 9 year old

This was also reflected in a few of the negative comments and suggestions for change in terms of making food healthier. There were also a few comments about other potentially health-related issues – for example children saying that the worst thing about school dinners was lack of salt.

"i think we should have salt on our chips"

Worst thing, 10 year old

Theme 3: Options and choice

This was one of the most common themes in children's responses. Around 70 children mentioned choice as one of the best things about school dinners.

"I get to choose food I like"

Best thing, 7 year old

"that you have 3 choices and you get to pick what you want to have for"

Best thing, 8 year old

Around 50 children mentioned lack of choice as one of the worst things and a further 50 or so said that there was not food that they liked.

Sometimes this was linked to particular dietary needs:

"that they dont have much vegetarian options"

Worst thing, 11 year old

"I am a Muslim so I'd want halal chicken or meat in my school dinners."

Priority for change, 7 year old

In response to the question about one thing to change about school dinners, improving choice was the most popular response with over 120 mentions across the age range.

"Change the food and I want to choose my food that I want."

Priority for change, 5 year old

"Have more choices for food or anything in general"

Priority for change, 11 year old

As suggested by the second quote, for some children, this issue of choice extended beyond the specific food on offer. There were also comments about having choices about when to eat and who to sit with, which link to other themes:

"I don't get a choice"

Worst thing, 6 year old

Linked to the issue of choice was that of variety:

"I like my school dinners because you get different things every day"

Best thing, 7 year old

More variety was the fifth most common suggestion for change, mentioned by 27 children:

"Variety, choices and tastes"

Priority for change, 7 year old

"Cooks should be given more freedom to invent own menus."

Worst thing, Age unknown

On the other hand, there were some indications that children also enjoyed some of the routines of school dinners and knowing in advance what they were going to have on a particular day.

"We have the same dinners every week."

Best thing, 7 year old

"Enjoy Sunday dinner and I like the fact I know what day it's on the menu."

Best thing, 7 year old

The most common theme here was:

"the best thing about school dinners is every friday its a chip day"

Best thing, 11 year old

'Chips on Friday' was mentioned by more than 20 children as the best thing about school dinners.

Theme 4: Process and organisation

There were a substantial number of comments about the processes and organisation of the school dinner system.

Queueing was a common topic with over 100 children citing this as the worst thing about school dinners and around 50 children identifying it as their priority for change.

"waiting in the line when im hungry"

Worst thing, 10 year old

As indicated earlier, this seemed to be a particular issue for the older primary school children and some expressed a sense of injustice about the systems that had been set up whereby they would be last to eat:

"Year 6 go in last so we have to stay in line for a very long time."

Worst thing, 10 year old

"Sometimes because i am in year 6 the food is cold because I am one of [the last]"

Worst thing, 11 year old

"Sometimes there is none of what you want left and you have to make do"

Worst thing, 11 year old

"whne the little children get seconds pudding eveytime and the big children don't"

Worst thing, 9 year old

Related to the issue of queueing many children said that they did not have enough time to eat their lunch, and over 50 children identified this as a priority for change. Some children proposed extending the lunch break to resolve some of the issues outlined above:

"I think that we should have an hours break instead of 45 minutes"

Priority for change, 11 year old

"more playtime"

Priority for change, 9 year old

Theme 5: Comments about specific foods

As might be expected there were a large number of comments about specific foods in response to the questions about best and worst things about school dinners. Much of this will be attributable to individual children's preferences. For example two children thought beef was the best thing about school dinners, while two thought it was the worst thing. However it may be of interest to look at the most common foods or food types mentioned by children.

The most common 'best things' in descending order of (rough) frequency (ten or more mentions) were:

Pudding/dessert/afters in general	110
Chips	70
Pizza	29
Cooked/roast/Sunday dinner	15
Fish (and chips)	14
Burger (and chips)	12
Meatballs	11
Pasta dishes	11
Curry	10

The most common 'worst things' mentioned were:

Drinks	20
Pasta (including bolognese)	20
Mashed potato	19
Curry	15
Cooked dinner	12
Chips	11
Fish	11

The fact that several items (chips, fish, curry, cooked dinner, pasta dishes) appear on both lists is indicative of the difficulties inherent in deciding school dinner menus and reinforces the theme about the importance of offering choice where practical.

The category of 'drinks' in the list of worst things is worth further comment. In addition to the 20 children included in the above table, nine children said that the worst thing about school dinners was that only water was available. This was also mentioned by around 20 children as a priority for change:

"everything firstly the drinks should be better they only have water"

Priority for change, 11 year old

"To not have water from the taps I would like squash better."

Priority for change, 11 year old

Theme 6: Physical aspects – space and equipment

A third theme, although not a very prevalent one, was about physical aspects of dinner times. A small number of comments referred to the limited eating space and issues of comfort.

“when you get your food and try to sit there are no seats.”

Worst thing, 10 year old

“more room in the hall”

Priority for change, 12 to 16 year old

“the sitting area is not comfortable”

Worst thing, 7 year old

As well as these specific mentions, presumably the limitations on space also had a knock-on effect on other issues raised by children such as the phasing of lunch times for different age groups and the amount of time spent queueing.

A few children also mentioned the noisiness of the environment, although there were also suggestions to play music at lunch times.

"The worst thing about school dinners is that it is always too noisy"

Worst thing, 8 year old

A separate strand of comments related to the equipment and utensils provided – seats, trays, plates and cutlery. Some children expressed dissatisfaction about the cleanliness of these items or the environment in general

"The trays are sometimes greasy and still have little bits of food on"

Worst thing, 11 year old

"its to loud in the hall and the mess on the floor from the little ones"

Worst thing, 10 year old

Theme 7: Social aspects

Although the first two open-ended questions were about 'school dinners' rather than 'school dinner times', a number of children mentioned social aspects as important to them.

Over 30 children said that the best thing about school dinners was sitting with and/or talking to their friends:

"sitting with friends while having food and vegetables and healthy food"

Best thing, 10 year old

"that i get a chance to talk with my friends"

Best thing, 11 year old

The opportunity for play time during the lunch hour was also mentioned by some children:

"Going out to play after"

Best thing, 5 year old

"going outside playing with my friends"

Best thing, 6 year old

"We're not allowed out when we've finished our dinner"

Worst thing, 8 year old

"Let everyone go outside when they finish"

Priority for change, 11 year old

Aspects of peer relationships were also mentioned by a few children in relation to the worst thing about school dinners, in particular a few instances of not being allowed to sit with friends or being told not to talk.

"You don't get to sit by your friends and sometimes its a bit tasteless"

Worst thing, 11 year old

It seems that in some schools there is a practice of children who have school dinners not being allowed to sit with those who have packed lunches.

"make the line smaller and mix with people who have packed lunch"

Priority for change, 8 year old

The issue of being able to sit where you choose was identified as one of the top ten priorities for change (at least 14 children):

"sit anywhere even if not school dinner"

Priority for change, 11 year old

"Be able to sit by sandwiches"

Priority for change, 6 year old

As discussed under a previous theme, many children felt that there was not enough time at lunch time and some suggested extending the lunch break so that there was more time to spend with friends.

Theme 8: Cost

There were a small number of comments about the cost of school meals. It is worth noting that children this age are aware of these issues.

Two children thought that the best thing about school dinners was that 'I get them for free'.

Children often find the issue of receiving free school meals stigmatising so it is interesting that this was specifically mentioned as a good thing. Thirteen children mentioned the cost of meals as one of the worst things about school dinners:

"They cost a lot of money and sometimes I don't like what they have."

Worst thing, 10 years old

Similarly ten children identified the cost of meals as a priority for change, although it should be noted that most of these children were of secondary school age.

Theme 9: Staff

This theme only warrants a brief mention as it was the subject of comment by a relatively small number of children. Six children identified the staff as one of the best things about school dinners:

"The dinner ladies are really nice and i love the taste of the food."

Best things, 10 year old

A similar number of children identified the staff as one of the worst things, and a similar number again named this as a priority for change.

Theme 10: Participation

Finally, under priorities for change, there were several suggestions of a greater role for children in relation to school dinners.

"Get children opinion for food so they get something they like to eat."

Priority for change, 10 year old

"pupils to vote for different foods every day"

Priority for change, 8 year old

"I would like it if the cooks made more food and ask children what they want and make different dishes instead of the same thing all the time"

Priority for change, 11 year old

"I would clean the dishes if we were allowed so the dinner - ladies move"

Priority for change, 8 year old

"Getting the children to grow the food and help to cook it"

Priority for change, 10 year old

Given the importance of choice to children, it may be worth further exploring the potential for participation so that children have a greater degree of involvement in the school dinner process.

Conclusions

To conclude the report, this final section summarises some of the key findings and points to have emerged from the analysis of children's responses to the survey.

Overall, there are a number of positive messages. First, there was a reasonably high uptake of school dinners with over half of primary school children in the survey saying that they ate school dinners and a further quarter saying that they sometimes did. Second, many children who did eat school dinners appeared to be relatively satisfied with many aspects of them. Most children felt that they had enough time to eat their dinner, and around half felt there was enough choice. However there were less positive views about at least some aspects of school dinners. Only a little over a third of the primary school children surveyed said that they always felt full after school dinner and around a third said that they could always get more food if they asked.

Overall, the children taking part in the survey identified four key issues and priorities for change:

- **Greater choice and variety of food**
- **Improving the quality of the food**
- **More flexibility in the amounts of food available**
- **Processes and organisation of school dinner times.**

Beside these four key issues, some children also highlighted suggested enhancing the social and play aspects of dinner times and improving the physical environment (space, hygiene and utensils). There were also some ideas about ways in which children's participation in school dinner arrangements could be enhanced.

In considering the priorities identified by children it is important to acknowledge the significant constraints under which schools and local authorities are operating. Some of the above priorities may be at least partly outside school's control. Others may be difficult to resolve, especially in smaller schools. Some also would be likely to have substantial cost implications.

On the other hand, some of children's suggestions regarding processes and organisation could probably be implemented at low or no cost, and these improvements could make a noticeable difference to children's experiences of school dinners. Similarly, the types of ideas suggested by some children regarding a greater degree of participation in decisions about school dinner arrangements might have minimal financial implications and could foster a greater sense of empowerment and shared ownership.

The survey revealed an age profile in relation to many aspects of children's experience of school dinners. Children in the older primary school age group (9 to 11 years old) who did eat school dinners tended to be less positive about their experience than younger children. They were less happy with the choices available, the amounts of food and with the amount of time they had to eat their dinners. There were also some indications, in children's responses to the open-ended questions, that older children did not feel fairly treated in terms of the processes and organisation of school dinner times. It may be partly as a result of these issues that older primary school children appear to be less likely to eat school dinners than younger children. These findings suggest that some specific thought might be given to the comments and issues raised by older children if the take-up of school dinners amongst this group is going to be maximised.



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