

SCHOOL MEALS SERVICE

ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE PROVISION OF MILK, MEALS AND RELATED FACILITIES

**Under the Provisions of Articles 58 and 59 of the Education & Libraries
(Northern Ireland) Order 1986, as amended.**

GRANT-MAINTAINED INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

ISSUED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

JULY 2025

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1. INTERPRETATION

In these arrangements -

“school day” means a day on which a school is open for instruction excluding Saturday and Sunday.

2. PROVISION OF MILK

Mandatory Provision

2.1 The Board of Governors of a grant-maintained integrated school shall provide free of charge one-third of a pint (0.18 litre) of milk on every school day to every primary age pupil who wishes such provision -

- i. in respect of whom the Education Authority holds a valid certificate signed by a medical officer of the Health and Social Care Board stating that it is necessary in the interests of the health of that pupil that he/she be provided with milk; or
- ii. where a school dinner is not available for that pupil.

2.2 In carrying out this duty or any other function described in these arrangements the Board of Governors may seek the assistance of the Education Authority.

Discretionary Provision

2.3 The Board of Governors may ask the Education Authority to provide milk for sale at a reduced charge to any primary pupil in attendance at the school in accordance with certain conditions determined by the Authority.

2.4 The power of the Board of Governors in relation to the provision of milk to persons other than pupils is contained in paragraph 8.1.

Milk Standards

2.5 All milk supplied to pupils shall conform with the standards laid down by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

2.6 If liquid milk which satisfies the requirements of paragraph 2.5 is not available, the Board of Governors may, as a temporary measure, provide a suitable substitute.

3. NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR ALL SCHOOL FOOD

Boards of Governors shall comply with the Department’s nutritional standards for school lunches as outlined in the attached Annex. The Department also expects schools to adhere to the Nutritional Standards for Other Food and Drinks in Schools and to ensure that only compliant food is available in vending machines and tuckshops, in line with the whole school approach to food in schools.

4. PROVISION OF SCHOOL DINNERS TO NURSERY AND PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS

Mandatory Provision

4.1 The Board of Governors shall provide school dinners on every school day for pupils attending the school who wish such provision. Organised parties of pupils, who are on educational visits during term-time, may be regarded as attending a school which is open for instruction.

4.2 A school dinner is defined as a meal which is adequate in quantity and quality so as to be suitable as the main meal of the day for a pupil. The Board of Governors shall comply with the Department's standards as outlined at paragraph 3.

Discretionary Provision

4.3 The Board of Governors may provide dinners to:

- i. pupils described in paragraph 4.1 on days other than school days; or
- ii. other primary age pupils visiting the school on any day.

Charges

4.4 The charge for a dinner shall be sufficient to recover the full cost of production.

Remission of Charges

4.5 The charge shall be remitted in full where a pupil is entitled to free school meals (see paragraph 6).

5. PROVISION OF MEALS AND REFRESHMENTS TO SECONDARY AGE PUPILS

Mandatory Provision

5.1 The Board of Governors shall have available on every school day for pupils attending school who are entitled to a free meal, items of food adequate in quantity and quality which constitute a nutritionally balanced meal suitable as the main meal of the day. The Board of Governors shall comply with the Department's standards as outlined at paragraph 3. Organised parties of pupils, who are on educational visits during term-time, may be regarded as attending a school which is open for instruction.

5.2 Where the Board of Governors operate a cafeteria system the Department will determine the maximum monetary value of a free meal in consultation with the school.

Discretionary Provision

5.3 The Board of Governors may provide meals or other refreshment to:

- i. pupils described in paragraph 5.1. on days other than school days;

- ii. pupils (on any day) who are not entitled to free meals and who attend the school;
- iii. other secondary age pupils visiting the school on any day.

Charges

5.4 The charge for any meal or refreshment shall be sufficient to recover the full cost of production.

Remission of Charges

5.5 The charge shall be remitted in full where a pupil is entitled to free school meals (see paragraph 6).

6. ENTITLEMENT TO FREE SCHOOL MEALS

A pupil shall be entitled to free school meals where:

- i. the pupil or parent is in receipt of Universal Credit and has net earnings not exceeding an amount as determined by the Department; or
- ii. the pupil or parent is in receipt of Income Support or Income based Jobseeker's Allowance or Income related Employment and Support Allowance; or
- iii. the parent receives the Guarantee element of State Pension Credit; or
- iv. the pupil has a statement of special educational needs and is designated to require a special diet; or
- v. the pupil is a boarder at a special school; or
- vi. the pupil is the child of an asylum seeker supported by the Home Office National Asylum Support Service (NASS)¹; or
- vii. if none of the above apply and a child presents at school hungry, then the school should, on humanitarian grounds, 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 Education Authority's Education Welfare Service (EWS). The school should continue to provide free school meals while the EWS is carrying out its assessment. If, following an initial assessment using the UNOCINI Assessment Framework², the EWS is not satisfied that the Level 2 indicators are present (across the Child, the Parent Capacity and the Family and Environmental factors), the provision of free school meals should cease.

¹ In the interim period, until such time as the result of the application for NASS support is known, the Education Authority should arrange to provide free school meals to children of asylum seekers enrolled in schools.

² The UNOCINI Thresholds of Need Model can be viewed at:
<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/thresholds-need-model>

A further referral to the EWS for assessment for free school meals should not be made unless the school becomes aware of any change in the child's circumstances. Where the entitlement to free school meals on days when the child has neither food nor the means to pay for a meal is confirmed it will be reassessed by the EWS prior to or at the beginning of each school year.

If the EWS or school finds that the child already has a social worker EWS will request that the social worker completes the assessment for Free School Meals and forwards the outcome of this in writing to the EWS.

In making their assessment, if the EWS determines that a child is a child in need³ they should, in addition to making a determination about the child's entitlement to free school meals, make a referral to the Gateway Team of the local Health and Social Care Trust. This referral should be made on the basis of a completed UNOCINI which will enable the Gateway Team to establish if there is a need for this service to undertake any further assessment.

Note: Only pupils in full-time places in school are eligible to avail of a free meal.

Application for the award of free school meals under sub-paragraphs i. – viii. should be made by the parent to the Education Authority.

Schools should inform the Education authority as soon as possible of any pupils being provided with free meals under sub-paragraph ix. and should provide the following details: pupil's name, date of birth, home address and period through which free meals are to be provided together with confirmation of the previous school attended if he/she has recently moved school. The names and national insurance numbers of the pupil's parents should also be supplied where available.

7. EXCEPTIONS TO MANDATORY DUTY

A Board of Governors shall not be under a duty as stipulated in paragraphs 4.1 and 5.1 to provide dinners/meals in schools where the average daily number of pupils wishing to avail themselves of this provision is such that the Board of Governors considers the cost of producing or otherwise providing the dinners/meals cannot be justified.

8. PROVISION OF FOOD TO ADULTS

Discretionary Provision

8.1 The Board of Governors may provide meals or other refreshment to persons, other than pupils, having business at the school.

Charges

8.2 The charge for meals or refreshment provided shall be sufficient to recover at least the full cost of provision, except meals for kitchen and supervisory staff who, under their terms and conditions of service, are entitled to receive a meal free of charge.

³ 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.

9. PROVISION OF FACILITIES FOR PUPILS BRINGING FOOD TO SCHOOL

Mandatory Provision

9.1 The Board of Governors shall provide free of charge facilities at the school for the consumption of any food brought to the school by pupils.

Description of Facilities

9.2 The facilities should include accommodation, furniture and supervision to enable pupils to eat in reasonable conditions. Provision should also be made for the cleaning of the accommodation to be used. However, the requirement to provide facilities does not extend to providing light equipment, such as knives, forks, plates, beakers, etc nor does it extend to providing facilities for cooking or heating food. Optimum use should be made of existing accommodation and furniture to facilitate these pupils. Where there is spare accommodation in the school meals dining area this should be the first choice for the placement of pupils bringing packed lunches. Where there is no such spare capacity, or where it is inadequate to meet the needs of all pupils bringing lunches, then other existing appropriate accommodation, such as an assembly hall or classrooms, should be used. Consideration should also be given to introducing staggered lunch breaks where feasible. The provision of purpose-built accommodation for such purposes should be a last resort and would require prior approval from the Department.

10. REFERRAL TO DEPARTMENT

Any doubt or dispute as to the meaning or the effect of these Arrangements shall be referred to the Department whose decision thereon shall be final.

ANNEX



NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL LUNCHES

August 2008

NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL LUNCHES

Food group	Standards
Group 1: Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods eg noodles and cereals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every lunch service must contain a portion or portions of food from this group. • 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. • Bread should be available on a daily basis in all schools. • Also see additional requirements on fried foods – see Group 5a.
Notes	
<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, high-fibre white bread and rolls, homemade bread, bagels, pitta bread, chapattis made without fat. • Bread should be provided without spread, which should be freely available. • 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	Standards
Group 2: Fruit and vegetables. This group includes fresh, frozen, canned and dried varieties and fruit juices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not less than two portions of fruit and vegetables should be available per child throughout the lunch service. Of this, at least one portion should be vegetables or salad and at least one portion should be fruit (fresh, tinned in juice, fruit salad, fruit juice or dried fruit). Pies, crumbles and other composite fruit dishes must contain at least one portion of fruit per serving. 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. 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. Baked beans must not be served as a vegetable more than once a week in a primary school. Baked beans must not be the only vegetable option on any day in a post-primary school. If beans or pulses form the protein part of a main course, another vegetable must be available.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notes 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 following table. 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 portion?

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, (ie 40g) to nursery pupils, moving towards an adult portion (ie 80g) for primary/post-primary pupils. The table below gives examples of how these portions translate into kitchen servings.

	Nursery	Primary/Post-Primary
	One portion	One portion
Cooked vegetables	1-2 tablespoons (tbsp)	2-3 tablespoons (tbsp)
Salad vegetables	½ dessert bowl	1 dessert bowl
Fresh fruit	½ -1 fruit	1 fruit
Fruit salad, fruit tinned in juice	1-2 tablespoons (tbsp)	2-3 tablespoons (tbsp)
Fruit juice	150ml	150ml
Dried fruit	½ -1 tablespoon (tbsp)	1 tablespoon (tbsp)

Food Group	Standards
Group 3: Milk and dairy foods. This group includes milk, cheese, yogurt and milk puddings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every lunch service must contain a portion or portions of food from this group. In addition drinking milk must be available as an option every day. Cheese must not be served as the only vegetarian option more than twice a week. Cheese may be used as a topping more frequently.
Notes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 Group 4. Eggs, butter and ice cream are not included within this group. Eggs are included within Group 4, butter is classed as a fat and ice cream is included under Group 5b. 	

Food Group	Standards
Group 4: Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein. This group includes beef, pork, lamb, chicken, fish, eggs, pulses, eg peas, beans, lentils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every lunch service must contain a portion or portions of food from this group. Meals containing red meat must be served: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. Fish should be available at least once a week in primary schools and at least twice a week in post-primary schools. Oily fish should be available at least once every four weeks.
<p>Notes</p> <p>'Times a week' refers to a service opportunity ie a breakfast service, break service or lunch service. For example if a post primary school provides a breakfast, break and lunch service then over the school week this provides 15 service opportunities which red meat will be allowed a maximum of four times.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Red meat includes beef, pork and lamb and meals made from them. 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 which contain less than 95% lean meat are classed as a meat product. See Group 5a for further information on meat products On days when red meat is being served at lunch, there can be more than one choice as pupils will only choose one option. Red meat is a good source of iron. Meat, fish and alternatives such as eggs, beans and pulses are a major source of protein. 	

- 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 the weeks when oily fish is provided this meets the standard for fish for that week in primary schools and will count towards the post primary standard.

Food group	Standards
Group 5a: Fried and other high fat foods. This group includes cooking fats and oils, oily salad dressings, mayonnaise, salad cream, crisps, cream, pastry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deep-fried foods or other high fat products, such as chips, roast potatoes, other fried potatoes, garlic bread, or meal choices containing pastry, eg quiche, apple pie, vol-au-vent may be served a maximum of twice a week. In addition whole muscle or fillet of fish coated in breadcrumbs can be served once a week. 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. 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. There should be at least 2 days each week without any meat or chicken products, fried foods, foods cooked in batter, breadcrumbs or foods containing pastry, for example 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. When a high fat starchy food is served for eg chips or garlic bread an alternative without added fat must be available. Lower fat desserts must be available on days when deep-fried foods and other high fat foods are offered. 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

'Times a week' refers to a food service opportunity ie a breakfast service, break service or lunch service.

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 deep fried or high fat foods can only be served twice and meat or chicken products are also limited to two times over the 10 service opportunities.

- 'Deep-fried or other high fat foods' includes:
 - any food that is deep-fried, either in the kitchen or in the manufacturing process, even flash fried foods or foods brushed or sprayed with oil, eg roast potatoes, chips, oven chips, potato waffles, potato shapes;
 - pre-prepared coated, battered and breaded products, eg 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.
- On days when meat or chicken products are being served at lunch, there can be more than one choice as pupils will only choose one option.
- Whole muscle meat or chicken, which is dipped in egg, coated in home-made crumb without the addition of any fat or oil and dry baked will not count as a meat or chicken product.
- Limiting fried and other high fat options helps to limit the overall fat content of lunches.
- Offering non-fried options when fried or high fat options are on the menu helps to ensure that a variety of other starchy foods are provided.
- Limit the fat content of lunches by not offering too many foods from this group which have added fat, eg pastry toppings on pies or battered coating on fish.

- 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 deep-fried or 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 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, eg custard, semolina, rice pudding, tapioca – served with fruit;
 - fruit crumble with custard;
 - fruit sponge made with egg/fatless sponge eg Eves pudding served with custard;
 - fruit crisp (breadcrumb topping) with custard;
 - fruit ‘fool’ made with custard/ fromage frais/ 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/fatless sponge) with fresh or tinned fruit and fromage frais;
 - wholemeal/flakemeal biscuit, ½ portion of fruit and semi skimmed milk to drink;
 - muffin and orange juice (except choc-chip muffins).

NB It is essential that the dessert combinations are as shown here for them to be considered as lower fat options, as it is the **OVERALL** fat content of the menu item that was used to determine their suitability.

- Be aware of nut allergies. 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 toppings

Food group	Standards
Group 5b: Confectionery and Other Sweet Foods: Sugar, Sweet pastry, Chocolate, Sweets, Sweetened Soft Drinks, Puddings, Cakes, Biscuits, Jam, Jelly, Ice-cream.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confectionery, chocolate and chocolate-coated products should not be available throughout the lunchtime. Cakes and biscuits can only be provided at lunchtime and as part of a meal. Cakes, biscuits and puddings made with cocoa powder should only be available a maximum of 2 days per week. High fat and or high sugar toppings used for decoration for example cream, butter cream, icing sugar should be kept to a minimum and only used if essential eg to set fruit on top of a sponge. If used, an undecorated or healthier dessert should also be available.
Notes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confectionery includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chocolate and chocolate products, for example: 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, for example: boiled, chewy, gum, liquorice, mint and other sweets, also sherbet, fudge, marshmallows, toffee and chewing-gum; this includes sugar-free sweets and 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. <p>NB This does not include cocoa powder used in cakes, puddings, biscuits or low calorie drinking chocolate or combination drinks made with yoghurt or dairy equivalents.</p>	

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

Drinks

The only drinks available 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 (eg smoothies)
- low calorie hot chocolate } these drinks are
- tea } not suitable for
- coffee } the nursery sector

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

Artificial sweeteners are only permitted in combination drinks.

Low calorie hot chocolate is defined as 20Kcals/100mls.

Drinking water, ie tap water, must be provided free every day.

Salt and Condiments

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.

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.

SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Meals provided for pupils in special schools should follow the standards listed for primary schools. However, portion sizes should reflect the pupil's age.

It should also be noted that pupils in special schools often require special diets, and that some, e.g. those suffering from autism, often have particular food aversions, or will only eat particular foods. Appropriate adjustments should therefore be made to the meals service. A diet sheet, prepared by a Registered Dietitian, or specific guidance in agreement with the child's doctor, parent and principal should be available for the children concerned.

NUTRITIONAL STANDARDS FOR OTHER FOOD AND DRINKS IN SCHOOLS

The following standards apply to food sold or served in schools through vending machines, tuck shops, breakfast clubs, after school clubs and at break times and should be read in combination with the food-based lunch standards:

- (i) no confectionery should be sold in schools;
- (ii) no savoury snacks other than nuts* and seeds (without added salt or sugar) should be sold in schools;
- (iii) a variety of fruit and vegetables should be available in all school food outlets. This could include fresh, dried**, frozen, tinned and juiced products;
- (iv) children and young people must have easy access at all times to free, fresh, preferably chilled, water in schools so that children do not have to depend on going to the lavatory to get water;
- (v) the only other drinks available should be bottled water (still or sparkling), milk, unsweetened fruit or vegetable juices, yoghurt and milk drinks (with less than 5% added sugar) or drinks made from combinations of these, eg smoothies, low calorie hot chocolate, tea and coffee. Artificial sweeteners are only permitted in combination drinks. Combination drinks must contain at least 50% of the milk, yoghurt or fruit juice as appropriate.

Low calorie hot chocolate is defined as 20 calories per 100 millilitres.

* Be aware of nut allergies. It will be for individual schools to decide on whether or not to provide nuts.

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