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Department
for Education

Guidance

School food in England

Updated 14 September 2026

Applies to England

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This guidance explains the legal requirements for food and drink provided in state-

funded schools in England. It outlines the role of governing bodies and supports schools to plan and provide food throughout the school day.

We use the term 'must' when the person in question is legally required to do something and 'should' when advice is being offered.

Relevant legislation

This advice relates to the following legislation:

- Sections 512, 512ZA, 512ZB, 512A, 512B, 512C and 533 of the [Education Act 1996](#), as amended
- Section 114A of the [School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#)
- [The Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014](#)

Important changes proposed from September 2027

Subject to Parliamentary approval, updated school food standards will come into force from September 2027 to reflect the latest government dietary recommendations. Legislation will follow later in the 2026 autumn term, and we will update this guidance again in due course.

Subject to Parliamentary approval, the proposed changes would:

- increase the amount of fibre, fruit and vegetables offered
- reduce foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt
- introduce new breakfast standards
- phase in some secondary school requirements from September 2028

There are also proposals to remove schedule 5 of the existing regulations, which applies to maintained nurseries and nursery units attached to primary schools. These settings must follow the [early years foundation stage nutrition](#).

Governing boards should appoint a lead governor for school food.

Schools should publish their school food policies and menus online to strengthen accountability and improve compliance.

What schools should do now

Schools should:

- review the proposed changes to the school food standards set out in the [School Food Standards: updating the legislative framework consultation response](#)
- discuss the changes with catering providers
- review menus, contracts and procurement arrangements
- plan for the appointment of a lead governor for school food from September 2027
- prepare to publish school food policies and menus online from September 2027
- monitor further guidance and legislative updates at [School food standards](#)

Further guidance

Further guidance on the updated school food standards is available at [School food standards](#). We are working with the sector, including caterers and governing bodies, to develop more guidance and identify and share best practice. We will update our guidance pages and signpost to useful resources available externally.

Why these changes are being made

The current school food standards have been in place since 2015. Since then, nutritional advice and evidence about children's diets and health have changed. Surveys show that many children eat too much sugar and not enough fibre, fruit and vegetables.

The updated standards will be designed to help schools provide healthier food and drinks, support children to develop healthy eating habits, and ensure school meals continue to meet the dietary recommendations set out by the scientific advisory committee on nutrition (SACN).

The Department for Education (DfE) consulted on proposed changes to the school food standards between 13 April 2026 and 12 June 2026. Feedback from schools, parents, pupils, catering providers, local authorities and other stakeholders informed the final policy decisions. The government's response to the consultation is available at [School Food Standards: updating the legislative framework](#).

What this means for schools and pupils

These changes aim to support children's health, wellbeing and learning while giving schools clear and up-to-date standards to follow. Schools will continue to offer a range of healthy meals, but there will be new requirements around foods such as wholewheat, fruit, vegetables, pulses and healthier drinks. There will also be tighter limits on sugary foods and desserts and some foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt.

At a glance:

- every main savoury meal must comprise 3 elements:
 - a starchy carbohydrate
 - a protein
 - vegetables or salad
- only savoury foods that are part of a meal or meet the requirements for snacks may be sold during the school day
- menus must comply with the food frequency requirements set out in the new standards
- the breakfast standards set out the foods and drinks that may be provided at breakfast. Starchy carbohydrates must form the basis of the breakfast offer and any items not included in the breakfast standards are not permitted
- the school food standards do not apply to food provided for celebrations, fundraising events, rewards, cooking activities or food occasionally brought in by parents or pupils

Important information

The government encourages all schools to promote healthy eating and provide healthy, tasty and nutritious food and drink. Compliance with the school food standards is mandatory for all maintained schools, academies and free schools.

The school food standards help ensure that food and drinks provided to pupils is nutritious and of high quality, promotes good health, supports nutritionally vulnerable pupils and encourages healthy eating habits.

The existing standards for school food came into force on 1 January 2015 and are set out in [The Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014](#).

A summary of the standards and a practical guide are available at [School food standards: practical guide and resources for schools](#).

The regulations set out the requirements for school lunches provided to registered pupils, whether on the school premises or not, and to any other person on the school premises.

The regulations also set out the requirements for food and drink other than lunch, provided to pupils on school premises up to 6pm, including breakfast clubs, tuck shops, mid-morning break, vending and after school clubs.

They also apply to other food provided before 6pm on school trips where the trip is for at least 7 days.

Schools should make reasonable adjustments for pupils with particular requirements, for example, to reflect medical, dietary and cultural needs.

The [Food Information Regulations 2014](#) requires all food businesses including school caterers to show the allergen ingredients' information for the food they serve. This makes it easier for schools to identify the food that pupils with allergies can and cannot eat.

More information about food allergies is available in the [School food standards: allergy guide](#) and the statutory guidance on [Allergy safety in schools](#) outlines what schools must do to support pupils with allergies.

Schools should also comply with the [requirements for labelling of allergens on](#)

[prepacked for direct sale \(PPDS\) food](#).

Free school meals

From September 2014, every child in reception, year 1 and year 2 in state-funded schools is entitled to a free school lunch. Further information is available at [Free school meals: guidance for schools and local authorities](#).

From the start of the 2026 to 2027 academic year, entitlement to free school meals (FSM) will apply to all children from households receiving universal credit, regardless of earnings. The duty to provide free meals to eligible pupils applies to all state-funded settings. [FSM guidance](#) for schools and local authorities sets out how the eligibility criteria for FSM are changing and how the expansion of support should be delivered.

Free breakfast clubs and the holiday activities and food programme

The government has successfully:

- started rolling out free breakfast clubs
- confirmed funding for the holiday activities and food (HAF) programme for the next 3 years
- boosted the number of places through the wraparound childcare programme

This means that more pupils are benefiting from good quality, nutritious food before and after the formal school day and in holiday time.

This growth will continue with the government's commitment to rolling out free breakfast clubs to all state funded primary schools in England.

Following the passage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act (2026), all state-funded schools with primary-age pupils will be required to offer a free breakfast club. This marks a significant milestone and reflects our shared belief in the importance of giving every child, regardless of background, the best possible start

to their day.

Following the success of the early adopter scheme, national rollout of free breakfast clubs began in April 2026. New groups of schools will be onboarded in stages throughout 2027 and 2028.

Subject to Parliamentary approval, we are proposing to include a separate set of standards that will apply specifically to breakfast and food served before the school day starts, to provide clearer, more detailed requirements.

Roles and responsibilities of governors

Governing bodies are able to decide the form that school lunches take but must ensure that the lunches and other food and drink provided meets the school food standards.

Although there is no requirement that meals must be hot, hot lunches should be provided wherever possible to ensure that all pupils are able to eat at least one hot meal every day.

School governing bodies and academy proprietors must provide school meals to a pupil free of charge if the pupil or a parent meets eligibility criteria set out within sections 512 and 512ZB of the Education Act 1996 and a request is received for free meals to be provided either by the pupil or someone acting on their behalf.

Drinking water must be provided free of charge at all times on school premises.

Facilities to eat food that pupils bring to school must be provided free of charge for pupils not taking school meals. As a minimum, these facilities should include accommodation, furniture and supervision, so that pupils can eat food they have brought from home in a safe and social environment.

The school food standards require lower fat milk or lactose reduced milk to be available for drinking at least once a day during school hours. Milk must be provided free of charge to infant and benefits-based free school meals pupils when it is offered as part of their school meal and free to benefits-based free school meals pupils at all other times. Charges can be made for all other pupils.

Whole milk can be provided for pupils up to the end of the school year in which they reach age 5. After that, milk must be lower fat or lactose reduced.

To assist with the cost of providing milk, schools can take part in the [national school milk subsidy scheme](#). There is also the [nursery milk scheme](#), operated by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), which provides free milk to children under the age of 5 at participating schools and childcare settings.

Children aged 4 to 6 in state-funded infant, primary and special schools throughout England are eligible to receive a free piece of fruit or vegetable every school day outside of their school lunch through the school fruit and vegetable scheme administered by DHSC. There is no statutory requirement for schools to participate in this scheme.

What the governing body should do

From September 2027, governing bodies should appoint a lead governor for school food and schools should publish their school food policies and menus online to strengthen accountability and improve compliance. More information will be published ahead of this change.

The governing body or academy proprietor is responsible for ensuring that the national school food standards are met. How this is carried out will depend on the catering arrangements within the school.

All food and drink provided in state-schools must meet the national school food standards in England. Where food is provided by the local authority or a private caterer, compliance with the school food standards should be specified within the catering contract or service level agreement and the caterer should provide the governing body with evidence of compliance with the standards.

If the school provides food, it should evaluate the food and drink provision against the standards and produce evidence of compliance.

There should be a process in place to ensure that catering services are coordinated across all school food and drink outlets to ensure that compliance with the school food standards is maintained.

The governing body should ensure that it receives regular reports on compliance with the school food standards as well as take-up of school lunches and financial aspects of school food provision.

Governing bodies are strongly encouraged to work with the senior leadership team

to develop a whole school food policy, including:

- setting out the school's approach to its provision of food
- food education (including practical cooking)
- the role of the catering team as part of the wider school team
- the school's strategy to increase the take-up of school lunches

The [checklist for headteachers](#) includes all the things that can make a big difference to take-up of school lunches and food culture in schools. The checklist is designed to be pinned up in the head's office and the kitchen.

Exemptions to the school food regulations

These exemptions will remain in the new regulations and, subject to Parliamentary approval from September 2027, an additional exemption will be added to cover unforeseen circumstances materially affecting the school or its catering provision.

The school food regulations do not apply to food provided:

- at parties or celebrations to mark religious or cultural occasions
- at fundraising events
- as rewards for achievement, good behaviour or effort
- for use in teaching food preparation and cookery skills, including where the food prepared is served to pupils as part of a school lunch
- on an occasional basis by parents or pupils

Certain types of schools that are unable to meet the drinking milk requirement for religious reasons will be required to offer fortified plant-based drinks instead.

The requirements in the school food regulations do not apply to confectionery, snacks, cakes or biscuits, served as part of an evening meal at maintained boarding schools after 6pm.

Maintained nurseries and nursery units attached to primary schools and early years in state-funded schools

From September 2027, the reduced set of standards for food served at lunchtime (schedule 5) for maintained nurseries and nursery units attached to primary schools, is proposed to be removed.

These settings are required to follow the [Early Years Foundation Stage \(EYFS\) nutrition guidance](#).

For reception year pupils, schools must also follow the EYFS statutory framework and must have regard to the EYFS nutrition guidance. This means that for reception year pupils, schools should follow the EYFS nutrition guidance unless there is good reason not to. This provides flexibility where full implementation may be difficult. For example, where reception pupils are included within wider school food arrangements that must comply with the school food standards.

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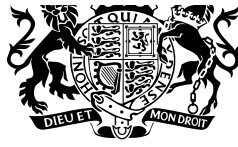
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