Department of Health & Social Care

Department for Education

Research and analysis

Updating the school food standards: feasibility pilot findings - summary

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Applies to England

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This report gives details of research that contributed to the testing and development of new school food standards (SFS) for schools in England. This part of the process piloted proposed new standards in schools. The Department for Education (DfE) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) used the findings to revise the standards before they were consulted on between April and June 2026.

Aims of the project

This report presents findings from a pilot study of proposed changes to the SFS. The project was undertaken by the research agency Verian on behalf of DHSC, in partnership with DfE. The project aimed to assess:

- the feasibility, acceptability and nutritional quality of the lunches provided
- the effect of changes to the SFS on costs, waste and lunch uptake
- whether caterers could correctly interpret and apply the updated SFS in practice
- any unintended consequences

Participants and methodology

Eight primary schools, one middle school and 2 secondary schools with a range of catering models (in-house, charitable and private) took part in the trial. The trial took place during the autumn term of the 2025 to 2026 school year. Schools were asked to redevelop their menus in the first half of the autumn term, based on the SFS pilot proposals. They served the new menus to pupils in the second half of the term. Schools were not provided with additional support for implementation.

Data gathering

Data on the effect of the trialled changes was gathered through:

- baseline and post-pilot interviews with school leaders and caterers
- 2 surveys with parents and pupils
- visits to 6 schools to observe lunchtimes and conduct short interviews with caterers, pupils and parents
- nutrient analysis of menus before and after the updated changes

Findings

The findings presented below show associations only. They should not be interpreted as proof of causation due to the small sample size of the research. However, the research and findings provide valuable information that has been used in further developing the standards for consultation.

Feasibility

The research found that participating schools that provided lunches in line with the existing SFS and those with whole-school approaches to food (see main report for definition) found the changes easier to implement.

The type of caterer also affected outcomes, with in-house and charitable caterers being more likely and more able to adapt to the SFS than those from the private sector. Most caterers, from all types of schools, thought that a longer lead-in (about 12 months) would be necessary to effectively adopt the new SFS.

Secondary schools found the pilot standards more difficult to implement than primary schools. This was largely due to them not being able to develop compliant and acceptable ‘grab-and-go’ options (see main report for definition) in a short timeframe. This was affected by:

- limited redevelopment time
- kitchen constraints
- sourcing of some ingredients

Some secondary schools also reported that limited dining space and timetabling pressures were barriers to meeting the pilot standards. None of the participating schools fully implemented all standards during the pilot, largely due to the short planning and procurement timeline.

There is information in the conclusions section below about the changes made to the SFS pilot proposals to improve the feasibility of implementation.

Acceptability to pupils

The pilot found that there was broad support for updating the SFS.

The new menu was better accepted in schools that had invested in educating pupils about food and involving them, and sometimes their parents, in menu development. In these schools, new options were introduced slowly, over a longer time period, so pupils could become familiar with them. A small number of schools experienced significant resistance to the updated standards and received complaints from pupils and their parents.

Although schools and caterers were sometimes nervous about some of the standards, their concerns about pupil acceptance did not always turn out as they expected. For example, pupils generally accepted fruit as a dessert, when caterers had been unsure that it would be well received.

Reductions in the use of cheese and foods high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS), and the removal of fruit juices, were less popular, especially in secondary schools.

There is information in the conclusions section below about the changes made to the SFS pilot proposals to improve acceptability.

Nutritional quality

The SFS are supported by a nutrient framework, which sets out the average nutrient contribution that school lunches should make to pupils' diets.

Nutrient analysis during the pilot found that updated standards improved the nutritional quality of the menus, compared with pre-pilot menus. Levels of sugar and total and saturated fat reduced despite the standards only being partially implemented. Sodium levels reduced in most menus and remained below the maximum limit. Protein levels remained above the nutrient framework.

Lunches did not always meet the energy requirements for pupils, likely due to challenges with caterers interpreting and estimating portion sizes. Portion sizes remain the same as the current SFS and have been part of the guidance since 2014.

The fibre content of grab-and-go options doubled, which is where the greatest improvement was required. Fibre content was maintained or increased in other menu options. Overall, increases were less than expected, although this is likely due to

incomplete or inconsistent higher-fibre substitutions.

In primary schools, most vitamins and minerals met or exceeded the framework. Levels of most micronutrients increased in grab-and-go items. The changes varied across plated secondary school meals, although levels of riboflavin, folate and iodine increased or were maintained because of changes to the menus.

While the nutrient quality of lunches improved overall, interpretation is subject to limitations related to partial compliance and uncertainty around portion size estimation.

Lunch uptake

Over half of schools saw an increase or no change in the uptake of school lunches during the pilot. This tended to be in schools that had taken a whole-school approach to food.

Some schools found that the uptake of school lunches declined during the pilot. Pupils chose packed lunches, bought food offsite instead or skipped lunch altogether. A decrease in uptake by secondary schools was mainly due to limited grab-and-go options, pulse-only days and the removal of some cheese-based and HFSS foods.

Some staff were concerned that food brought from home, or bought offsite, was often of poorer nutritional quality and harder to regulate. They also thought that this could place additional cost pressures on families, particularly those eligible to receive free school meals.

There is information in the conclusions section below about the changes made to the SFS pilot proposals to reduce the effect on uptake of school lunches.

Costs

Although data was not provided consistently, most schools reported their costs had increased due to higher prices for reduced-fat dairy products, wholegrain ingredients and fruit.

Some schools also reported needing more staff time for:

- training
- preparing fresh fruit
- producing new items
- changing the packaging or labelling on items

This did not necessarily lead to increases in labour costs, as staff sometimes dropped other duties to accommodate these tasks.

In-house and charitable caterers could manage cost increases more easily than commercial providers, who identified risks to their financial viability without additional government support.

There is information in the conclusions section below about the changes made to the SFS pilot proposals to reduce the effect on costs.

Food waste

Schools taking a whole-school approach to food generally did not see increased waste. This tended to be because their menus had minimal changes, and because pupils were familiar with eating food that complied with the pilot standards and having new foods introduced on a relatively regular basis.

When food waste did increase, this occurred most usually for vegetables, pulses and oily fish. Caterers suggested that offering pupils a choice of vegetables reduced the amount of food wasted. However, fruit waste was lower than expected.

There is information in the conclusions section below about the changes made to the SFS pilot proposals to reduce the effect on waste.

Conclusions

Overall, the pilot provides evidence that the updated SFS can be:

- feasible to implement
- acceptable across different school settings

However, this depends on schools being given:

- sufficient lead-in time
- practical support
- flexibility

Even with partial implementation and a short lead-in time, the proposals achieved their central aim of improving children's diets. Menus contained less sugar, fat and salt. Fibre and most vitamins and minerals met the nutrient framework. Levels of some vitamins and minerals increased. Nutritional improvements were also evident in secondary school grab-and-go provision.

This shows that improvements are achievable across different types of menus.

Support for the standards and how they were implemented

There was broad support for the aims of the proposals, and meal uptake was maintained or increased in more than half of participating schools. Implementation was easiest where schools already had:

- a whole-school approach to food
- strong leadership
- experienced catering staff
- provision that was closer to the proposed standards

This indicates that the standards can be introduced successfully and accepted by pupils, particularly when healthier food is part of the school's culture and changes are introduced gradually.

The pilot also identified practical challenges. These included:

- the compressed implementation timetable
- sourcing suitable products
- adapting recipes
- additional staff time and costs

- explaining the reasons for change

Secondary schools faced particular constraints because limited dining space meant they relied more on grab-and-go items. Some schools also needed flexibility to maintain suitable provision for pupils receiving free school meals or pupils with sensory needs.

These findings point to the conditions needed for effective rollout rather than questioning the overall feasibility of the standards.

Changes to the pilot proposals

Following the pilot, the proposals were refined before public consultation. The standards that were most difficult to implement without reducing uptake were revised. Appropriate lead-in time to allow schools to make gradual changes over time was considered. These adjustments were designed to:

- reduce cost pressures
- help implementation to be more affordable
- minimise food waste
- maintain meal uptake

The following changes were made to the pilot proposals.

Starchy foods: to improve pupil acceptance, the standard was amended to require at least 50% of pasta and rice to be brown, wholemeal or added-fibre white varieties, rather than 100%.

Fruit and vegetables: to reduce food and packaging waste, the standard was revised to allow one or more portions of vegetables or salad to be included within grab-and-go items, rather than only being available as a side portion.

Dairy products: given the high cost reported, the requirement to use reduced fat dairy products was removed from the standards and became part of the additional, supporting guidance.

Use of pulses: to improve pupil acceptability, the proposal that beans and pulses form the main protein source for all menu options on one day a week was amended. One portion of beans and pulses should now be included within or alongside all

menu options on one day a week. To help this transition in secondary schools in the first year the standards are in place, this will be required once every 2 weeks.

HFSS foods: to improve pupil acceptability, the standard to not serve more than 2 portions of food that contain cheese a week was revised. It now excludes food where cheese is used as an optional topping on items such as a jacket potato. This provides additional scope for cheese to be served, but in smaller portions. To help the transition in secondary schools, for the first year the standards are in place, up to 3 portions of food where cheese is a main ingredient can be served a week.

Food can be a complex issue for children with special educational needs and disabilities, sensory needs and anxiety about food. These children often see cheese as a ‘safe’ food. Schools are expected to work closely with parents, carers and professionals to make appropriate adjustments where necessary.

Desserts: to ease the transition to a reduced provision of desserts, the consultation proposed that secondary schools could serve no more than 2 portions of sweetened baked products and desserts per week for the first year the standards were in place. After this, secondary schools would need to move to serving only one portion of sweetened baked products and desserts per week.

Drinks: pupils in secondary schools said the SFS pilot proposal for drinks was one of the most significant changes. Given the importance of hydration and the ability of many of these pupils to buy drinks off-site, the standard was amended for the consultation to include sugar-free flavoured waters and no-added-sugar fruit-flavoured drinks. These drinks must contain a maximum of 0.5 grams total sugar per 100 millilitres. No changes were made to the SFS pilot proposals for drinks in primary schools. The consultation also proposed that for the first year the standards were in place, the current permitted drinks list could still be served. This would allow schools to phase in the new requirements.

Conditions for successful rollout of the updated standards

With a phased introduction, clear standards and guidance, and sustained support - including food-related education for pupils and catering workforce development - the updated SFS can be implemented successfully.

The evidence from the pilot supports proceeding with rollout on the basis that these implementation conditions are put in place, to secure lasting nutritional

improvements to children’s diets while protecting meal uptake.

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