

# School Food Standards: Updating the legislative framework

**To:** Authorities in England

**For information:** Authorities in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales

## 1 Purpose of the consultation

The Department for Education, working with the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, has launched a consultation on proposed updates to the School Food Standards.

The consultation opened on 13 April 2026 and closes on 12 June 2026, with the government response expected in September 2026. The aim is to modernise the School Food Standards, which date from 2014, and align them with current nutritional evidence and government dietary guidance.

This briefing provides an overview of the consultation; the full consultation document can be viewed here: -

[School Food Standards: Updating the legislative framework](#)

## 2 Policy Context and Rationale

The government states that evidence shows that children consume too much sugar and too little fibre, contributing to rising levels of obesity, dental decay and long-term health risks such as cardiovascular disease. School food provides a significant proportion of daily nutrition for many children and is therefore seen as a key mechanism for improving health outcomes and establishing healthier lifelong eating habits. The proposed changes also support wider government commitments, including the expansion of free breakfast clubs and free school meal eligibility.

### **3 Structure of the Updated Standards**

The consultation proposes a revised framework covering the whole school day, alongside the introduction of a distinct and more detailed set of standards for breakfast provision. This approach reflects the growth of breakfast clubs and aims to provide greater clarity for schools. The requirement for all pupils to have free access to fresh drinking water at all times is reaffirmed.

### **4 Increasing Fibre Intake**

The proposed standards place a strong emphasis on increasing fibre. Schools would be required to provide vegetables or salad with all main meals, including grab-and-go options, and to include fruit with all desserts. Primary schools would introduce at least one fruit-only dessert day per week. The proposals also require a shift towards higher-fibre starchy foods, including wholegrain or higher-fibre bread and at least 50% wholewheat or higher-fibre rice and pasta. Pulses would need to be included within or alongside menus at least once a week, with a phased introduction for secondary schools.

### **5 Reducing Sugar**

Reducing sugar intake is a central objective of the reforms. Fruit juice and fruit-juice-based drinks would no longer be permitted due to their high contribution to free sugars. Primary schools would operate a tightly restricted list of drinks focused on water and milk or fortified plant-based alternatives. Secondary schools would move to similar arrangements through a phased approach. Sweetened baked goods and desserts would be limited to once per week, with staged reductions for secondary schools. Added sugars, honey, syrups and non-sugar sweeteners would be significantly restricted.

### **6 Reducing Fat, Salt and Highly Processed Foods**

The consultation proposes further controls on foods high in fat, sugar and salt. Deep-fried foods would be prohibited, and strict limits would apply to processed meats, batter-coated foods, pastry items and cheese-based main dishes. Snacks served outside mealtimes would be restricted to a limited range of healthier options. Portion limits would apply to condiments and spreads, and meal deals would be more tightly defined, including mandatory fruit and vegetable components.

## **7 Protein Requirements**

The proposals update protein requirements to allow meat, poultry or pulses to meet the requirement on three or more days each week. Pulses would become the main protein source in vegetarian meals and would be more widely used to support fibre intake and reduce saturated fat. Limits would be placed on manufactured meat-alternative products, and the standards would be updated to reflect current guidance on oily fish.

## **8 Early Years Provision**

For maintained nursery schools and nursery units within primary schools, the consultation proposes removing the reduced lunch standards currently set out in Schedule 5. These settings would instead follow the Early Years Foundation Stage nutrition guidance only, providing a single, clearer framework for early years meal provision.

## **9 Governance and Accountability**

To strengthen compliance, the government proposes that schools appoint a lead governor with responsibility for school food. Schools would also be required to publish their food policies and menus on their websites, improving transparency and supporting a whole-school approach to food, health and education.

## **10 Implementation Timeline**

Implementation is proposed from September 2027, allowing schools time to prepare. The standards would apply in full to primary schools from that date. Most secondary school requirements would also begin in September 2027, with specific elements, including drink standards, dessert limits, cheese-based main meals and pulse requirements, phased in fully by September 2028. Schools that feel ready would be able to adopt the new standards earlier.

## APSE Comment

APSE welcomes the government's consultation on updating the School Food Standards and supports the overall ambition to modernise the framework in line with current nutritional evidence and public health priorities. School meals play a crucial role in supporting children's health and wellbeing, particularly for those who rely on school provision for a significant proportion of their daily nutrition, and APSE recognises the importance of ensuring that standards reflect contemporary dietary guidance.

APSE is broadly supportive of the increased emphasis on fibre intake, reduced sugar consumption and tighter controls on highly processed foods, which align with the objectives of improving long-term health outcomes and tackling health inequalities. The introduction of clearer and more robust standards for breakfast provision is also welcomed, reflecting the expanding role of breakfast clubs in supporting pupil attainment, attendance and wellbeing.

However, APSE notes that delivering these changes will present practical and financial challenges for local authority and school meal providers. Increased requirements around wholegrain products, fresh produce and pulses may place additional pressure on food budgets, supply chains and kitchen capacity, particularly in the current context of rising food and energy costs. APSE therefore stresses the importance of adequate funding, realistic implementation timelines and clear national guidance to support consistent delivery across all settings.

APSE also welcomes the proposals to strengthen governance and transparency through the appointment of a named governor lead for school food and the publication of menus and food policies. A whole-school approach to food, supported by effective monitoring and accountability, will be essential to ensure that the updated standards deliver their intended outcomes.

APSE encourages all local authorities and in-house catering services to engage fully with the consultation process, ensuring that the operational realities of school food provision are clearly reflected in the final framework and that the revised standards are both ambitious and deliverable in practice.

On a final point, APSE will be responding to the consultation on behalf of member authorities. To inform the response an online Roundtable is being convened on Tuesday 2 June 2026 at 10.30am – 11.30am, [please click here to book your place](#).

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