

Fuelled in School?

A nation-wide survey of secondary school pupils' opinion on school meals in Scotland

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Executive Summary

About the Research

At the end of 2021, researchers from Glasgow Caledonian University administered an online survey to find out what secondary school pupils in Scotland thought about school meals. This research was initiated by ASSIST FM (the representative body for public sector caterers in Scotland), with the support of ADES (the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland).

About the Report

The aim of this report is to encourage stakeholders – pupils, teachers, parents, caterers, and others – to think about how our school meals service in Scotland can better meet the needs of secondary school pupils. This national report complements 86 briefings that were prepared for secondary schools in March 2022: each of these briefings summarised pupils' experience of meals, and opinion on meals, in their own school.

This report is exploratory, rather than explanatory. It does not offer prescription on what must change and what must be maintained. Rather, this report summarises what over 15,000 secondary school pupils think and explores variations in opinion and experience across pupils. The aim is to inform and open debate. To that end, this report suggests some issues that are worthy of further consideration.

Key Findings – What is Working Well

- Three-quarters of pupils rated the catering staff positively, with one-third rating them as 'really good'.
- Portion sizes, supervision, and ease of payment were also rated positively by pupils.
- Most – but not all – secondary school pupils regularly eat at lunchtime.
- Liking the food and being able to eat with friends were the most common reasons for taking a school meal.

Key Findings – What is Working Less Well

- One-half of pupils were concerned over the length of time it takes to queue for food, with one-quarter of pupils rating this 'really bad'.
- One-third of secondary school pupils report never eating breakfast before they come to school; only one-half of pupils report eating breakfast on 'most days' or 'every day' of the week.
- Although most pupils who are entitled to a free school meal typically have one at lunchtime, one-fifth of these pupils report typically having a packed lunch and one-quarter typically buy outside school.
- Not liking the food and preferring other food were the most common reasons for not taking a school meal.
- Most pupils think that the length of the lunchtime break is too short.
- Only one-third of pupils acknowledge that school meals have become 'healthier' through time.
- More than one-third of pupils' report receiving no information about school meals, and an additional one-third of pupils reported finding out about school meals on arrival in the dining hall.
- Most pupils were not aware of the *Healthy Eating in Schools* regulations.
- Most pupils reported that they had not been asked for their opinion on school meals before completing this survey.

Key Findings – What Else Did We Find?

- Almost one-half of pupils reported that they typically ate a school meal at lunchtime.
- Patterns of school meal consumption are complex and we should avoid simply dividing pupils into those who have school meals and those who do not.
- Girls were more likely than boys to acknowledge the importance of the ‘social context’ of school meals, with more girls identifying ‘eating with friends’ as the main reason for having a school meal.
- One-third of all pupils were using their school meal allowance to buy food at morning break-time, with almost one-half of pupils who were entitled to free school meals using some of their lunchtime allowance to buy food at morning break-time.
- Only a minority – albeit a sizable one – report that choice has reduced through time, although more S6 pupils (one-half) thought that choice had reduced.

Thinking Local – Next Steps

Eighty-six schools have been provided with school-specific findings, which enables them to reflect on what pupils consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of school meal provision in their own school.

- Although this report delivers a national overview, there is abundant evidence of significant and substantial variation in pupils’ experiences across schools. There is a need for school-level analysis and reflection on school meals.
- The finding that almost one-half of pupils who are entitled to free school meals are using their lunchtime allowance to buy food at morning break-time should raise questions for schools who do not permit the allowance to be used in this way – does this mean that there are pupils in their school who are entitled to free school meals whose need for food is not being met?
- This national report should facilitate an understanding of the extent to which pupils’s experience of food in a school is commonplace or atypical across Scotland.

Thinking Local and Beyond - Priority Issues to Consider

It is hoped that this national overview provides insight that is valuable to all stakeholders. SPIRU concludes that the evidence suggests that following issues are worthy of further consideration:

- There is a need to reflect on the evidence across this report to better understand the overall impact of the drive to make school school meals healthier.
- In many ways, the experience of school meals differs across year groups. If school meals are to better serve the needs of Scotland’s children, there is a need to address the concerns of older pupils, while maintaining those aspects of school meals that lead to more positive appraisals among younger pupils.
- There is a need to examine the extent to which school food adequately caters for those with particular dietary requirements and is able to deliver a culturally appropriate offer. It is notable that there are lower levels of school meals consumption and higher levels of dissatisfaction among many of these pupils.
- Most pupils were of the opinion that lunchtime breaks were too short. Anecdotal and systematic research evidence suggests that the length of lunchtime has been reduced in recent years (e.g., to minimise the length of the school day when the school week is condensed to 4.5 days per week). It would be useful to explore the negative consequences and lost opportunities of a short lunch break.
- Schools are busy places, and many asks are made of schools by stakeholders with an interest in promoting many aspects of children’s wellbeing. Notwithstanding these pressures, the high proportion of pupils who report a lack of information about school meals and a lack of awareness of the Healthy Eating in Schools regulations are causes for concern, given the purported significance in Scottish education of a whole-school approach to food.

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About the Research and the Report

The Need to Canvass Secondary School Pupils' Opinion on School Meals

In the summer of 2021, ASSIST FM asked the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit of Glasgow Caledonian University to conduct research with secondary school pupils to provide a state-of-nation understanding of their experience of school meals in Scotland.

School meals make a significant contribution to the health and well-being of secondary school pupils in Scotland

- Over 110,000 meals are served in secondary schools in Scotland every school day.
- Prior to Covid-19, the proportion of pupils taking school meals in secondary schools had been stable for several years (around 45% of all pupils).
- Pupils are entitled to free-school meals if their family is in receipt of certain welfare benefits.

However, the context surrounding school meals has shifted in recent years

- School food in Scotland must meet the requirements of the *Healthy Eating in Schools* regulations, which were introduced in April 2021.
- The Scottish Government has made a commitment to provide all *primary* school pupils with a free school lunch by 2026 at the latest.
- Provision of school meals in Covid-19 times has been challenging, with many young people in S1 and S2 never having experienced a 'normal' lunch service.

There is also growing recognition in Scotland and beyond of the importance of listening to young people's opinion on matters which concern them. Indeed, this a right in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Consequently, it is timely to better understand secondary school pupils' opinion on school meals in Scotland.

SPIRU Research on School Meals and Food Insecurity

SPIRU writes and researches for anti-poverty practitioners, academics, and the general public. Researching food insecurity – in schools and beyond – is one of SPIRU's specialist areas, as described in our [latest annual report](#).

In recent years, SPIRU has shared its research findings on school food to seminars and conferences convened by catering professionals (ASSIST FM and APSE) and educational professionals. It has also co-convened international seminars on school meals with partners in North America.

In 2019, SPIRU summarised the catering sector's evidence base on school meals in Scotland ([Are Pupils Being Served?](#)). In 2020, it canvassed Catering Leads' experience of providing school meals during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic ([School Meals in Scotland in the Autumn of 2020](#)). In 2021, it published two reports. It evaluated the pilot of a grab-n-go breakfast cart intervention in three schools in East Renfrewshire ([Pass Go for Grab-N-Go?](#)). SPIRU was also commissioned by the Poverty and Inequality Commission to identify some case studies of schools, which were strengthening free school meal provision in Scotland ([Tackling Food Insecurity in Scottish Schools](#)).

This is the first of two reports SPIRU expects to publish on school food in Scotland in 2022.

About this Research

At the end of 2021, researchers from Glasgow Caledonian University shared an online survey to find out what secondary school pupils in Scotland thought about school meals. More details of this research are provided in the next section of this report.

Research Aims

The aim of this research was to convey secondary school pupils in Scotland's experiences and opinions on school meals, and issues pertinent to school meals.

School-Level Intelligence

We wanted this research to be useful and impactful. We decided to prepare a short report for each school, which summarises their own results.

On March 1st, 2022, schools with at least 50 pupils responding to the survey were provided with a report. 86 schools received a bespoke report. Fifteen issues were considered across five themes:

- Our Eating Habits
- Explanations for Lunchtime Eating
- What we Think About our School Meals Today
- Changes Through Time
- Are we Well Informed?

About this Report

In this report, we share results for twenty themes from the survey. The objective is to present a 'national overview' and to explore variation among groups of pupils.

Making Sense of the Data – The Research Journey

Research Strategy

A mixed-method research strategy was proposed, comprising an online survey and in-depth interviews.

To achieve some national insight and overview, an online survey was administered to secondary school pupils across Scotland. The survey was open to all pupils. The national survey was successfully administered across Scotland in the late Autumn of 2021.

To explore some of these issues in greater depth, the intention was to administer one-to-one interviews with 20 pupils in each of three case study schools. Schools were selected in Aberdeenshire, Argyll & Bute, and West Lothian to participate in the interview stage. However, Covid-19 conditions and extreme weather events compromised our ability to administer the in-depth interviews. Four group interviews were administered in one school. These insights, while useful and confirmatory of the survey findings, are not considered in this report.

Research Design

Preparatory work informed the design of both the survey and the interviews.

- Initial discussions with representatives of ASSIST FM identified themes for inclusion.
- Opinion of Catering Leads in each of Scotland's 32 local authorities was canvassed.
- Previous surveys canvassing pupil opinion on school meals were reviewed.
- Academic papers, which canvassed pupil opinion on school meals were reviewed.

Based on this work, a survey (and interview schedule) was drafted by the research lead. This survey was reviewed by ASSIST FM and by the wider research team. The final version of the survey was approved by ASSIST FM, prior to administration.

SPIRU Research Team

Professor McKendrick, an experienced social researcher and Director of SPIRU, led this research. This research is part of Glasgow Caledonian University's commitment to the 'common good'¹ in that it provides a 'good cause' with expert research support at no-cost, in return affording opportunities for GCU social science students to acquire practical experience as social researchers.

Degree level students on the BA Social Sciences degree programme have the option of presenting for *Work Placement: Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit*, in their third year of study.² As student researchers, they work together as a research team, directly under the guidance of Professor McKendrick, to complete a social research project. The students attend a weekly Team Briefing at which they are trained, briefed, and debriefed by Professor McKendrick to enable them to make an effective contribution to each stage of the research. Professor McKendrick provides quality assurance.

Research Ethics

The research has adhered to the well-established Ethical Protocols that govern social research.³ The Department of Social Sciences Ethics Committee approved the research.

¹ GLASGOW CALEDONIAN UNIVERSITY, n.d. *Common Good* [online]. [viewed 05 August 2020]. Available at: <https://www.gcu.ac.uk/theuniversity/commongood/>

² For more information, visit: <https://www.gcu.ac.uk/study/modules/info/?Module=M3L325159>

³ ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, n.d. *Research Ethics Guidance*, [online] [viewed 08 March 2022]. Available at:

<https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/>

SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION, 2021, *Research Ethics Guidance*, (viewed 08 March 2022). Available at: <https://the-sra.org.uk/SRA/Ethics/Research-ethics-guidance/SRA/Ethics/Research-Ethics-Guidance.aspx?hkey=5e809828-fb49-42be-a17e-c95d6cc72da1>

At each stage of the research, SPIRU Researchers were briefed in advance to advise on pertinent issues concerning research ethics and research quality. SPIRU researchers were debriefed after task completion. Personal reflective diaries (shared between the SPIRU researcher and Professor McKendrick) were used to engage individual researchers on matters that were deemed inappropriate to address at Team Briefings. More generally, an open and collegiate environment was engendered in which all members of the research team were freely able to raise matters of interest and concern.

Pupils were afforded the opportunity to start the survey immediately, or to find out more information about the survey, before consenting to participate.

Interview participation was with informed consent of participants, with fieldwork conducted remotely in a manner that protected public health (minimising unnecessary contact during the Covid-19 pandemic). SPIRU Researchers were mindful of their role and were aware of their responsibilities.

All research data have been stored securely, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Data are not attributed to individuals in this report.

Survey Promotion

ADES (the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland) were invited to support the research, and individual Directors in each of Scotland's 32 local authorities were approached with this endorsement.

Directors were invited to promote the survey among their schools. Some Directors invited us to contact schools directly. Most Directors were supportive and most responded to confirm that they were supporting the research. One Director responded to advise (regrettably, but understandably) that their authority would be unable to support the research given the volume of other research requests that were asked of their schools.

Some individual schools initiated contact to discuss the research and/or confirm their participation. SPIRU supplemented the core survey for one school to provide it with local intelligence on a particular initiative.

Two follow-up e-mails with all Directors of Education provided an update on returns from within their authority and reminded Directors of the closing date.

Awareness was also raised among a wide range of stakeholders. For example, Young Scot promoted the research among its contacts and offered an incentive of 150 Young Scot Reward points for anyone who completed the survey. Public Health Scotland also offered to raise awareness of the survey among its Facing Up to Poverty in Schools network.

Administration of Survey with Schools

It was left to the discretion of schools to decide how to promote the survey among pupils. In most schools, pupils responded across all year groups, although returns from a small minority of schools would suggest that the survey was more strongly (or only) promoted among a more limited range of age-stages.

Survey Returns

The first response was received on Monday 1st November 2021 and the survey closed on Friday 10th December 2021. The online survey portal was visited 20,924 times, although not every visit registered a response (as is common with online surveys). Across Scotland, over 17,000 pupils from almost 200 secondary schools started to complete the survey.

Quality Assurance – Data Processing

An intensive stage of quality assurance was completed prior to data analysis. The decision was taken to only analyse surveys that answered most of the substantive questions. This reduced the possibility of multiple returns, as it is possible in online surveys to curtail a survey (which still registers a response), but then to return to the portal later to complete the survey.

Invalid data were identified and removed. For example, it was clear from a small number of responses that survey completion had not been taken seriously by all pupils. These data were removed. A few surveys were returned from primary school pupils, and these were also removed.

'Other' responses to survey questions were assessed to ascertain whether they should be recoded to one (or more) of the fixed response categories. Data were

appraised in multi-responses questions to ensure consistency (for example, that no specific dietary requirements were acknowledged from the fixed list of option, if the pupil had already indicated that they had no dietary requirements).

Following data quality assurance, the final survey population was 15,582 pupils.

School Identification

Pupils were asked to identify their school, adding in parenthesis the name of the town, if it was not obvious from the school's name. In most cases, school identification was straightforward, although not all pupils identified their school.

Some schools in Scotland share the same name. In some instances, insufficient detail was provided to assign a pupil to their school.

Data Analysis

This report reports frequency distributions for the survey population. It also reports findings from exploratory data analysis, which considers differences among pupils. Standard measures of statistical association (chi-square) are used to guide interpretation.

What do the Numbers Mean? Is it Representative of all Secondary School Pupils in Scotland?

It is not claimed that conclusions are drawn from a representative sample of pupils across Scotland. The research design does not permit such a claim to be staked.

However, the report shares the opinions of a substantial number of secondary school pupils in Scotland. Equally pertinent is that a broad cross-section of schools participated across Scotland – from urban and rural schools, from large and small schools, and from schools serving communities with very different pupil population profiles. Furthermore, sufficient responses were received to facilitate the exploratory data analysis, which considers differences among groups of pupils.

Respondent Profile

Who Completed the Survey?

Across Scotland, over 17,000 pupils from almost 200 secondary schools completed the survey. The survey population in this report comprises 15,582 pupils.

In this report, variation in pupil experience and opinion is explored across seven dimensions.

School Profile

Returns were received from over 200 secondary schools. Sufficient returns (defined as 50 responses, or 10% of pupils in schools with a total roll of under 500 pupils) were received from 86 schools to justify school-level analysis.

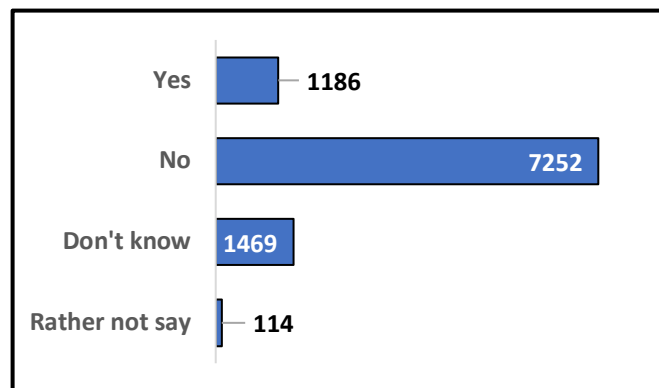
Caution is required in the interpretation of findings at the level of the school. It has not been a research objective to ascertain the extent to which findings are truly representative of an individual school's population. However, as an indication of the range of experience across schools in Scotland, comment is made on variation across schools for most of the issues addressed in this report.

There is the possibility of undertaking further school-level analysis, e.g., comparing responses according to whether the level of entitlement to free school meals in the school that the pupil attends. This is beyond the scope of this report.

Entitlement to Free School Meals

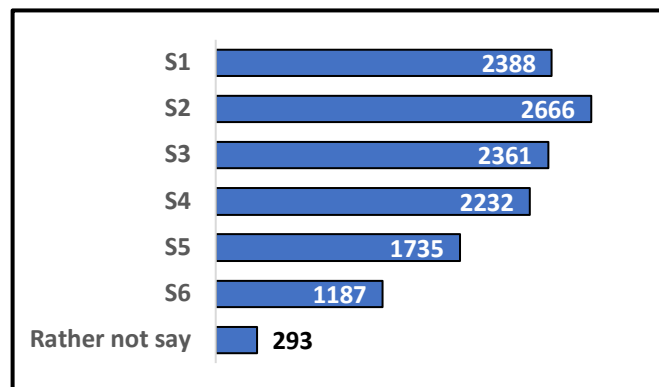
Pupils were asked if they were entitled to free school meals. 10,021 answered the question (5,561 did not).

Enough responses were received to explore differences between those entitled to free school meals (14% of yes/no responses) and those who are not (86%).



Year Groups

Pupils were asked to identify their year group. 12,876 answered the question (2,706 did not).

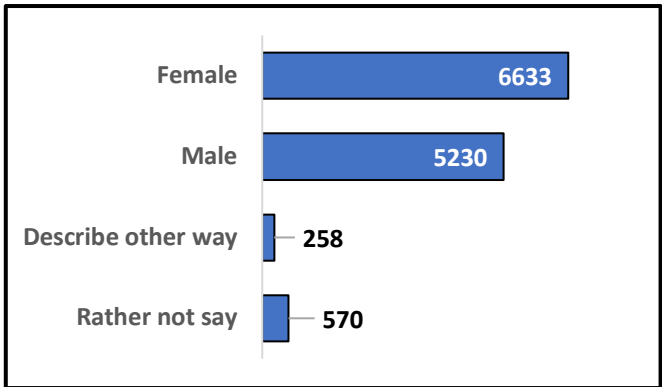


Enough responses were received to explore differences across year groups. There are good reasons for focusing on individual year groups, e.g., in some schools, S1 pupils are forbidden from leaving school grounds at lunchtime, and some S6 pupils are of an age where they are legally able to drive to school.

However, it may also be useful to compare across broad age-stages, e.g., early (S1/S2 – 40% of pupils by age stage in the survey), middle (S3/4 – 36%) and senior (S5/S6 – 23%).

Gender

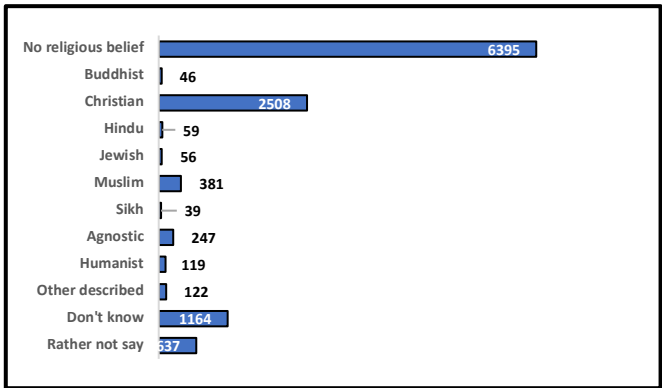
Pupils were asked to identify their gender. 12,851 answered the question (although not all responded using the fixed options); 2,731 skipped the question.



Enough responses were received to compare male (44% of male/female) and female (56%) pupils.

Religion

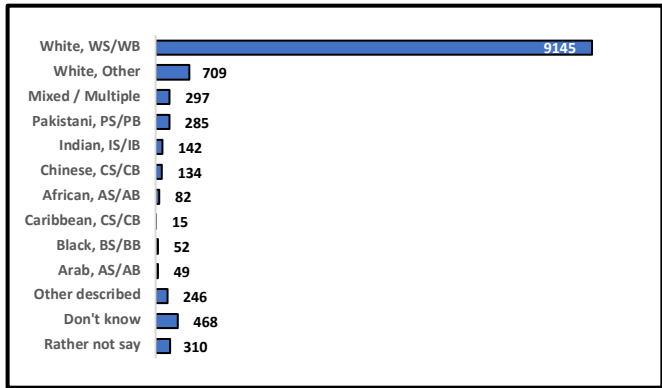
Pupils were asked to identify their religion. 11,887 answered the question (although not all responded using the fixed options); 3,695 skipped this question.



Several religions were acknowledged by only a small number of pupils. Sufficient responses were received to compare Christians, Muslims, and those with no religious belief.

Ethnic Group

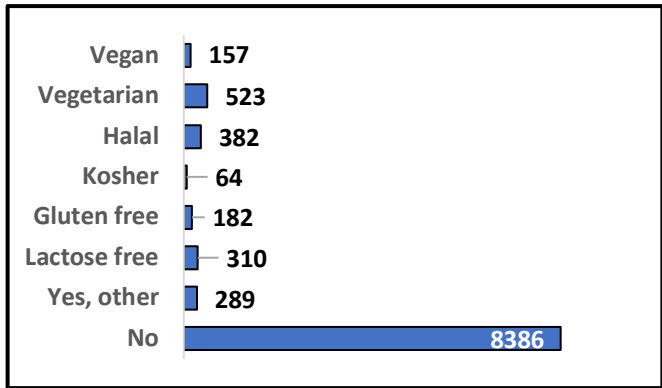
Pupils were also asked to identify their ethnic group. 11,950 answered the question (although not all responded using the fixed options); 3,632 skipped this question.



Enough responses were received to compare White Scottish/British, White Other, Mixed Ethnic Group and Pakistani. With some caution, comment may also be drawn for pupils of Indian and Chinese ethnic background.

Dietary Requirements

Pupils were asked to identify whether they had any dietary needs/preferences. Pupils could select more than one answer to this question. 9,741 answered the question (5,841 did not).



Enough responses were received to compare those with a dietary requirement (14%) and those who did not (86%).

Enough responses were received to compare all others to Vegetarians, those with Halal requirements and those who were Lactose-intolerant. With some caution, comparisons can be drawn for those with vegan and gluten-related requirements.

When Pupils Eat in and Before the School Day

What we Asked

We asked pupils about eating habits on school days. We asked them to provide details for: (i) breakfast time / before the start of the school day; (ii) morning break-time; and (iii) lunchtime.

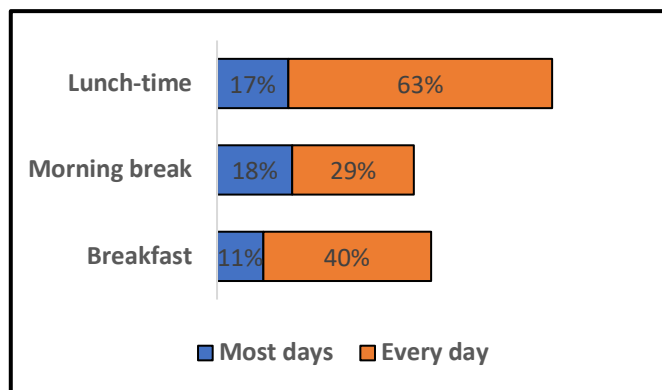
For each, we asked pupils to indicate if they ate every day, most days (3 or 4 times a week), a few times every week, (1 or 2 times a week), sometimes but not every week, or never. Pupils could opt-out, indicating that they “did not know” or would “rather not say”.

In the bar chart, we give the proportion of pupils who either ate ‘most days’ or ‘every day’. In the table, we provide the full range of responses.

We then explore variation according to whether pupils reported eating regularly (‘most days or every day’, or less regularly (‘one or two days, sometimes or never’).

Headlines

Most pupils regularly eat at lunchtime, although one-fifth of pupils do not eat lunch on ‘most’ days (or every day). Furthermore, many pupils reported not eating regularly at breakfast and morning-break time.



	Every day	Most days	1or2 Days	Some-times	Never	DK / RNS
Lunch	63%	17%	7%	7%	6%	(193)
Morning Break	29%	18%	12%	17%	24%	(170)
Breakfast	40%	11%	6%	11%	32%	(293)

Note: Most days were described as 3 or 4 days per week. DK = Don't know. RNS = Rather not day. Cases: 15,138; 14,945 and 14,894 pupils.

Variation Across Schools

In most schools between 40% and 60% of pupils reported that had breakfast ‘most’ days or every day. However, there were some outliers; only 23% of pupils in one school reported eating breakfast regularly, while in another as many as 72% of pupils reported eating breakfast regularly.

Similarly, in most schools between 40% and 55% of pupils reported that they ate at morning break-time on ‘most’ days or every day. However, there were some outliers; only 19% of pupils in one school reported eating regularly at morning break-time, while in another as many as 65% of pupils reported eating regularly at morning break-time.

In most schools between 70% and 85% of pupils reported that they ate at lunchtime on ‘most’ days or every day. However, there were some outliers; only 62% of pupils in one school reported eating lunch regularly, while in another as many as 94% of pupils reported eating lunch regularly.

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Pupils entitled to free school meals were less likely to eat breakfast regularly (41%, compared to 51% of those no entitled to free school meals).

No significant differences for regularity of eating at morning break time.

No significant differences for regularity of eating at lunchtime.

Variation Across Year Groups

Younger pupils were more likely to eat breakfast regularly. S1 (62%) and S2 (57%) were more likely than other year groups to eat regularly at breakfast time, with regular eating reported by only 49% of S3 pupils and 43% of S6 pupils.

Younger pupils were more likely to eat regularly at morning break time. S1 (59%) and S2 (51%) were more likely than other year groups to eat regularly at morning break time, with regular eating reported by only 43% of S3 pupils and 38% of S6 pupils.

Younger pupils were more likely to eat regularly at lunchtime. S1 (87%) and S2 (83%) were more likely than other year groups to eat regularly at lunchtime, with regular eating reported by 79% of S3 pupils and 74% of S6 pupils.

Variation Among Boys and Girls

Boys were more likely than girls to report eating breakfast regularly (58%, compared to 47%).

No significant differences for regularity of eating at morning break time.

No substantial differences for regularity of eating at lunchtime.

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

No significant differences for regularity of eating breakfast.

Pupils of Muslim ethnic background were more likely than others to report not eating regularly at morning break-time (37%, compared to 47% of all pupils). Pakistani pupils were also less likely to eat at morning break-time (33%, compared to 47% of all pupils).

Only small differences were reported across religions and ethnic groups over patterns of lunchtime eating.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

No significant differences for regularity of eating breakfast.

Those with a dietary requirement were less likely to eat at morning break-time (41%, compared to 47% of those without a requirement). This was evident for Halal eaters (34%) and those who are Lactose-intolerant (40%).

Those with a dietary requirement were less likely to eat at lunchtime (74%, compared to 81% of those without a requirement). This was evident for vegans (66%), vegetarians (76%), Halal eaters (73%), Kosher eaters (67%), those needing food that is gluten-free (68%) and those who are Lactose-intolerant (73%).

Issues and Implications

Schools are important as places in which children can access food during the school day. This follows from the finding that pupils who are entitled to free school meals are less likely than those who are not to have breakfast before school.

The significance – on health and education – of the high proportion of pupils who do not ever eat breakfast before school (and those who do not eat breakfast regularly) is worth exploring.

The significance – on health and education – of the high proportion of older pupils who eat less regularly throughout the school day is worth exploring.

Where Pupils Have Lunch

What we Asked

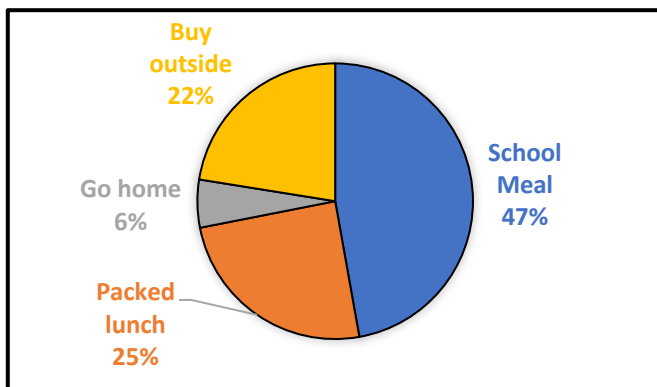
We asked where pupils usually ate lunch. We asked pupils to choose one of four options. Pupils could opt-out, indicating either that they “do not usually eat at lunchtime” (5% of pupils) or to provide an ‘Other’ response (4%).

In the figure below, we compare across the four modes of lunchtime eating.

We then explore variation across the three main modes of lunchtime eating.

Headlines

Experience is varied, with a significant minority of pupils reporting buying their lunch outside of school or eating a packed lunch. The most common experience – reported by almost one-half of pupils – was eating a school meal.



Cases: 14,191 pupils

Variation Across Schools

There was much variation across schools in the proportion of pupils who reported typically having a school meal at lunchtime. It ranged from as low as 9% (in three schools) to 69% in one school (with six schools having more than 60% of pupils reporting that they typically have a school meal at lunchtime).

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Pupils who are entitled to free school meals are more likely to typically eat a school meal at lunchtime (55%, compared to 34% of those who are not). One-fifth of those entitled to free school meals typically have a packed lunch (18%) and one-quarter typically buy outside of school (27%).

Variation Across Year Groups

S1 pupils are significantly more likely than other year groups to typically have a school meal (45%, compared to, for example, 32% of S3 pupils and 28% of S6 pupils).

Variation Among Boys and Girls

Boys are more likely than girls to typically eat outside of school at lunchtime (37%, compared to 24%), with slightly higher proportions of girls than boys typically having packed lunches or school meals.

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

Indian (59%) and Pakistani (50%) pupils were more likely to report typically eating a packed lunch. Although caution is required due to number of survey respondents, it would also appear that African pupils are more likely to typically have a school meal (47%).

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

Those with dietary requirements are more likely to typically have a packed lunch (47%, compared to 34% of those without). This holds for vegans (44%), vegetarians (48%), Halal (43%) and Gluten-free (43%).

Issues and Implications

Although most pupils who are entitled to a free school meal typically have one at lunchtime, it would be

worth exploring why many do not use this entitlement.

It would be worth exploring what could be changed to encourage more from the older age groups to present for school meals at lunchtime.

It would be worth exploring whether these findings suggest the need for menu development of culturally appropriate meals and those which meet the needs of pupils with special dietary requirements.

How Often Pupils Have School Meals

What we Asked

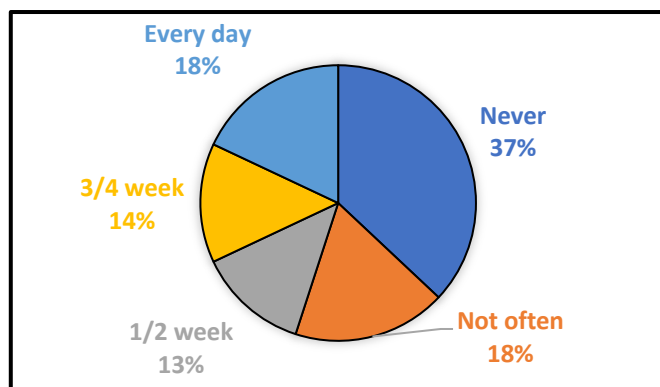
We asked how often pupils had a school meal at lunchtime. We asked pupils to choose one of five options. Pupils could opt-out, indicating that they 'did not know' or would 'rather not say' (only 18 pupils).

In the figure below, we compare pupil distribution across the five timeframes.

We then explore variation according to whether pupils reported eating school meals regularly ('most days' or 'every day'), less regularly ('one or two days per week' or 'sometimes') or 'never'.

Headlines

Experience is varied. Around one in six pupils report eating a school meal every day, although more than one-third never eat a school meal and almost one in four pupils report eating one 'not very often'.



Cases: 15,423 pupils

Variation Across Schools

There was much variation across schools in how often pupils ate school meals at lunchtime. Regular eating ranged from as low as 9% (with three schools returning less than 10% of pupils regularly having a school meal at lunchtime) to 66% (only two schools were reported to have more than 60% of pupils regularly having a school meal at lunchtime).

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Those who were entitled to free school meals were more likely to eat school meals regularly (48%, compared to 31% of others). However, more than one-fifth of those entitled to free school meals reported that they never ate them (23%).

Variation Across Year Groups

S1 pupils are significantly more likely to regularly eat school meals: in contrast, S6 pupils are significantly less likely to typically eat school meals, i.e., 44% of S1 pupils and 23% of S6 pupils, compared to, for example, 29% of S4 pupils.

Variation Among Boys and Girls

Although equally likely to be regular consumers (32%), boys were more likely than girls to never eat school meals (42%, compared to 33%).

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

Small differences were reported across religions and ethnic groups over regularity of eating school meals.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

Those with dietary requirements were less likely to regularly eat school meals (27%, compared to 33% of others). This held for pupils who were vegans (24%), vegetarians (26%), and gluten-free (26%)

Issues and Implications

These results provide further reason for exploring the issues highlighted in conclusion to 'where pupils have lunch' in the previous section.

All Reasons for Having a School Meal

What we Asked

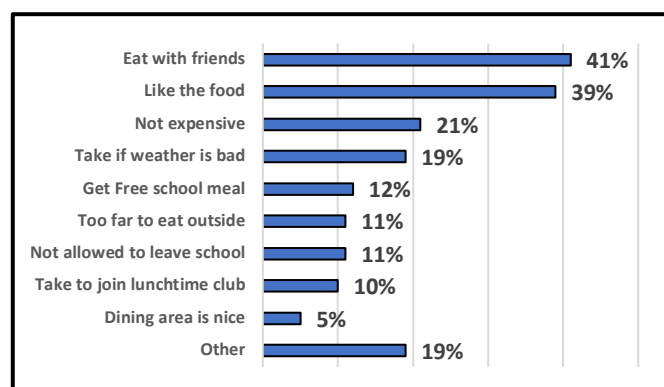
If a pupil had a school meal, we asked them why they chose to have one.

We gave a list of nine reasons and asked them to identify all their reasons for taking a school meal. We also provided an 'Other' option and invited pupils to describe this reason.

Findings are reported in the Figure below. Thereafter, we explore whether there are some groups of pupils who were more likely than others to report 'liking the food' as a reason for having a school meal.

Headlines

Although a wide range of reasons are reported by pupils, two of these clearly emerge as the most common reasons for having a school meal – liking the food, and being able to eat with friends.



Cases: 9,810 pupils

Variation Across Schools

In most schools between 30% and 50% of pupils reported 'liking the food' as a reason for having school meals. However, there were some outliers; only 14% of pupils in one school identified 'liking the food' as a reason, while in another as many as 65% of pupils reported this reason for having a school meal.

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Pupils who were entitled to free school meals were less likely than those who were not to identify 'liking the food' as a reason for having a school meal at lunchtime (30%, compared to 38%).

Variation Across Year Groups

Pupils in the earliest age stages were most likely to identify 'liking the food' as a reason for having a school meal at lunchtime (57% of S1 pupils and 42% of S2 pupils, compared to, for example, 29% of S4 pupils).

Variation Among Boys and Girls

Boys were more likely than girls to identify 'liking the food' as a reason for having a school meal at lunchtime (42%, compared to 38%).

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

Muslim pupils were least likely to identify 'liking the food' as a reason for having a school meal at lunchtime (33%, compared to 38%). Pupils of Pakistani ethnic origin were also less likely to report 'liking the food' as a reason (31%).

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

Pupils with dietary requirements were less likely than those without one to identify 'liking the food' as a reason for having a school meal at lunchtime (31%, compared to 40%). This held for vegetarians (27%), Halal (31%), Lactose-intolerant (25%).

Issues and Implications

These findings offer further reason for exploring whether there is a need for menu development of culturally appropriate meals and those which meet the needs of pupils with special dietary requirements.

The substantially lower proportion of older pupils who report 'liking the food' as a reason for taking school meals should be explored in more detail.

Main Reason for Having School Meals

What we Asked

We also asked pupils to identify the most important reason for taking a school meal. A list of fixed options was provided, repeating the 'all reasons' list.

The table below is ordered according to commonality of response. One in ten pupils offered an 'Other' reason.

Thereafter, we explore whether there are some groups of pupils who were more likely than others to report 'I can eat with my friends' as the main reason for having a school meal.

Headlines

The most common reasons for taking a school meal were also the most important reasons. Almost one-quarter of pupils reported taking a school meal as it allowed them to eat with friends at lunchtime.

24%	I can eat with my friends
23%	I like the food
10%	I eat school meals when the weather is bad
9%	It does not cost a lot of money
7%	I get free school meals
7%	I am not allowed to leave the school grounds
4%	Eating places outside are too far away
4%	I can take part in lunchtime clubs/activities
1%	The dining area is a nice place to eat lunch

Cases: 9,519 pupils

Variation Across Schools

In most schools between 15% and 30% of pupils reported eating with friends as the main reason for having school meals. However, there were some outliers; only 4% of pupils in one school gave this as the main reason, while in another as many as 51% of pupils reported 'eating with friends' as the main reason for having a school meal.

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Pupils who were entitled to free school meals were less likely than those who were not to identify 'eating with friends' as the main reason for having a school meal at lunchtime (14%, compared to 24%).

Variation Across Year Groups

No consistent difference across age stages in the likelihood of identifying 'eating with friends' as the main reason for having a school meal.

Variation Among Boys and Girls

Girls were more likely than boys to identify 'eating with friends' as the main reason for having a school meal at lunchtime (27%, compared to 21%).

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

No substantial differences across religion or ethnic groups in the likelihood of identifying 'eating with friends' as the main reason for having a school meal.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

Although there were no differences between all pupils with a dietary requirement and those without, vegans were less likely (10%) and those with Lactose-intolerance were less likely (17%) to identify 'eating with friends' as the main reason for having a school meal at lunchtime.

Issues and Implications

Although most pupils report a 'positive' main reason for having a school meal, one-third of pupils' decision-making is functional ('entitlement to free meals' and 'enables participation in other activity') or reflect a limitation outside the dining hall that encourages them into the dining hall ('bad weather', 'not permitted to leave school', and 'other places outside school are too far away').

Improving School Meals

What we Asked

If a pupil ate a school meal every day, we asked them “what in your own words – if anything – could improve school meals”. 2,043 pupils responded to this question.

Headlines

In the context of asking of improvements from those who have school meals every day, a ‘nothing’ response (around 100 pupils) is a positive. On the other hand, there is no room for complacency. This group of regular consumers identified many ways in which school meals could be improved.

Concerns were expressed over the quality and range of food on offer. For some, this was a plea for healthier food, or food that catered to dietary or cultural requirements. However, for the vast majority of pupils concern was expressed at the quality of what was presented.

- *Better quality food, supplying more of the popular foods so there is enough for everyone because there are too often not enough food choices left. Potentially more choice. I understand this is expensive, but more people will eat from the school canteen if there are choices that interest them.*
- *Better vegetarian options rather than just macaroni every other day. Bring back puddings like iced sponge at least once or twice a week. Nicer salads, for example, with avocado, falafel, etc. Also, better fruit options rather than just some squishy grapes and apple in a pot.*
- *Have more healthy food like cold pasta, salad. And change it up instead of the same old.*
- *In my school the meals are terrible. I understand that school meals aren't supposed to be the best especially for £1.60 but the meals in my school are borderline edible. For example, today I went to take a bite out of the “burrito” (a piece of very thin horrible tasting bread) and ‘cause the wrap was too thin, it all fell apart. This is also due to the rice still being saturated with water. I’m not asking for some amazing food: I’m just asking for a meal that’s*

high in nutrients and doesn’t leave you hungry after ‘cause for some pupils that’s their only meal a day and there’s not even enough on the plate to fill them up.

- *Get better tasting food instead of healthy food. Ask anyone - they’ll all say the same.*
- *Everything needs improved. The curries are nice. There needs to be salt and pepper. There needs to be larger menu options- and beef burgers (like McDonalds) and chicken nuggets (like McDonalds) and some more chicken options like fillets, fillet burgers, popcorn chicken.*
- *Do more of other things and not just 983298932 paninis and 3 of everything else.*
- *Learn how to make something remotely nice. I eat just so I can be full not ‘cause I like it.*
- *Better meals. The school food tastes so bad I just tolerate it.*
- *PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF GOD PUT BUTTER ON THE SAUSAGE, BACON, CHICKEN BURGER ROLLS!!*
- *A wider range of choices. More flavouring/seasoning. No polystyrene packaging.*
- *I feel that the quality of the food items has dipped since pre – COVID.*

It is important also to note that concerns over food were very often expressed in terms of ‘bringing back’ food that had been previously served in school meals.

- *Bring back pepperoni panini.*
- *Bring back desserts.*
- *Bring back cupcakes.*
- *Bring back hotdogs bring back burgers.*
- *Bring back pies and square sausage, I speak for everyone.*
- *Bring back the cans of juice.*
- *Bring back the old food we used to have, I feel they have gone too far with the healthy eating as there is no harm in having one brownie at break. Having only healthy options has just resulted in people going down to the shops and buying twice the amount of unhealthy food.*
- *[there was a long list of food that different pupils want brought back].*

Some pupils had much to say about how the quality of food could be improved.

- *1) Bring back baked beans at the sandwich queue so they can be had with baked potatoes*
- *2) Make proper mashed potatoes, please don't use smash*
- *3) Bring back desserts especially iced sponge!*
- *4) Have less macaroni on the menu, barely anyone actually likes it they only have it because the queue is the shortest!*
- *5) Less repetition, for example we don't need macaroni 3 days in a row*
- *6) Have better fruit options, instead of squishy, mouldy rubbish fruit and make fruit cheaper*
- *7) Take the fruit out of the cupcakes, it can remain in the muffins, but fruit does not belong in cupcakes!*
- *8) Bring back the raspberry muffins as they were really good but disappeared one day*
- *9) Have blueberry muffins on offer*
- *10) Have sweet potato chips as they are tastier and healthier.*

Cost was also a prominent concern among these regular consumers. It was noted how free school meal allowance was not always adequate and that the cost of school meals had risen over their school years.

- *They are too expensive as the prices of the meals have gradually risen over my school years and for some people it has become unaffordable, and they have resort to other means of getting lunch.*
- *Cheaper meals - maybe making them cost £2.*
- *I get £2.45 a day as part of my free meals, which is not enough for something at break for a drink and a meal at lunch.*
- *Lower prices. At my school it is £2.70 for a hot meal or a tikka wrap, £1.50 for a pizzini and it is too expensive especially when you have siblings at the school.*
- *Make them cheaper. I was once paying £2.40 per day for my lunch now I am about £4 per day which is £20 per week and this all adds up. For example, a SANDWICH was once £1.20 which is reasonable, NOW they are £2.70 which I think for a school sandwich shocking.*
- *The prices could be improved for a drink and a main meal so that you can get both for £2.40, because right now a main meal is £1.80 and then a drink is £0.80 which is £2.60. So, people with free school meals [allowance] cannot get a main meal and a drink without bringing in extra money.*

Some concern was expressed at how schools were managing school meals.

- *For Christmas dinner at the school, you shouldn't have to be paying for a drink separately from the dinner. If you are paying for the Christmas dinner that is taking most of the money that the school gives you for the free school meals which means that you don't have enough money for a drink.*
- *Being able to buy a break time snack with free school meals to make up for breakfast.*
- *Allow 6th years to go for lunch earlier every now and then because by the time we get to the queue ... there is barely anything left.*
- *Provide what we WANT to eat. Last year our school took away the donuts, which were the only things I, and many of my friends, looked forward to eating. In addition, our school has a rule that if you want to buy chips on Thursday (Thursdays are the only days they sell chips), you need to buy a main meal to go along with it - which is terrible because I very much don't like the main meals, but I do however like chips. So, either I have to suffer through a miserable panini or a terribly sad pizza in order to be able get the chips or I just don't get them at all. Please for the love of God do something to let me have that little joy of donuts and chips again.*

Cost and loss of favourite foods were not the only changes that had been observed through time.

- *The sandwich bar that my school used to have was great. I could go and make whatever I was feeling like on the day and because of this customization the food would taste nice but still not delicious. If Covid is the reason that the sandwich bar closed, then I understand the motive but then how can the usual canteen continue selling awful food? Another improvement that could be made is the return of Pasta King or a similar substitute. The pasta there was very good. When I was in primary school, I was jealous from how my older friends spoke about it and when I came up for induction days, I was not disappointed - it was incredible. Over the past 5 and a half years I have seen the deterioration of the food and if the food from 5 years ago was brought back, I would look forward to eating school lunches again.*

What we Also Asked

If a pupil ate a school meal (i) most days, (ii) one or two days per week, or (iii) sometimes but not every week, we asked them “what in your own words – if anything – would make you want to have school meals more often”.

This question was not asked in this way to pupils who (i) always or (ii) never ate school meals. 8,474 pupils responded to this question.

The tenor of response re-affirms the suggestions for improving school meals, and to avoid repetition, these are not described in this report.

All Reasons for Not Having School Meals

What we Asked

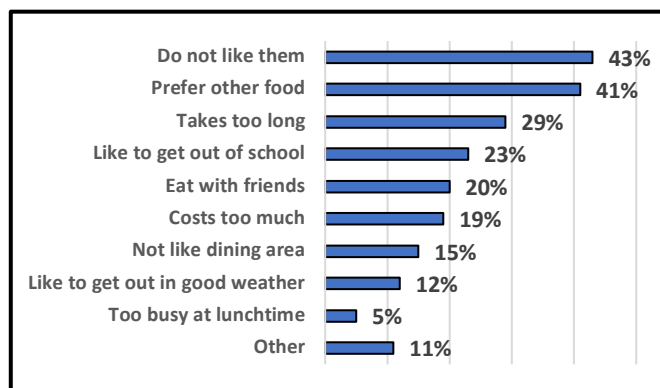
If a pupil did not always have a school meal, we asked them why they chose not to have one.

We gave a list of nine reasons and asked them to identify all their reasons for not taking a school meal. We also provided an 'Other' option and invited pupils to describe this reason. Findings are reported in the Figure below.

Thereafter, we explore whether there are some groups of pupils who were more likely than others to report 'taking too long', as a reason for not having a school meal.

Headlines

Pupils were more likely to give more reasons for not taking a school lunch. Not liking the food, or preferring other food were the most common reasons for not taking a school lunch. Taking too long and liking to get out of school at lunchtime were also reasons noted by around one-quarter of pupils.



Cases: 12,555 pupils

Variation Across Schools

There was much variation across schools in the proportion of pupils who reported 'taking too long' as a reason for not having a school meal at lunchtime. It ranged from as low as 3% (with six schools returning less than 10% of pupils identifying this as a reason) to 68% in one school (only two schools had more than 60% of pupils identifying 'taking too long' as a reason).

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

There was no difference in the likelihood of identifying 'taking too long' as a reason for not having a school meal at lunchtime.

Variation Across Year Groups

There was no difference across age stages in the likelihood of identifying 'taking too long' as a reason for not having a school meal at lunchtime.

Variation Among Boys and Girls

Girls were more likely than boys to identify 'taking too long' as a reason for not having a school meal at lunchtime (33%, compared to 25%).

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

There was no significant difference in the likelihood of identifying 'taking too long' as a reason for not having a school meal at lunchtime.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

Those with dietary requirements were more likely to identify 'taking too long' as a reason for not having a school meal at lunchtime (34%, compared to 29%). However, when exploring variation according to specific dietary requirement, it was found that this difference was only evident for vegetarians (37%, compared to 29%).

Issues and Implications

It is significant to note that 'not liking the food' is the most common reason for not having a school meal – 'liking the food' was also the most common reason for those who had a school meal.

Main Reason for Not Having a School Meal

What we Asked

We also asked pupils to identify the most important reason for not taking a school meal. A list of fixed options was provided, repeating the 'all reasons' list.

The table below is ordered according to commonality of response. One-in-eight pupils provided an 'Other' answer.

Thereafter, we explore whether there are some groups of pupils who were more likely than others to report 'not liking school meals' as the main reason for not having a school meal.

Headlines

The main reasons for not taking a school meal were also the most common reasons. Almost one-third of pupils who did not take a school meal reported that 'not liking the food' was the main reason for not taking one. Together with preferring other food, one-half of pupils identify a 'food-related' main reason.

29%	I do not like school meals
22%	I prefer the food that I usually get at lunch
12%	It takes too long
9%	It costs a lot of money
7%	I like to eat with my friends
7%	I like to get outside of school at lunchtime
3%	The dining area is not a nice place to eat
3%	I like to get out of school in good weather
1%	I am too busy with lunchtime clubs/activities
1%	I do not take when school finishes at lunch

Cases: 12,306 pupils

Variation Across Schools

In most schools between 25% and 40% of pupils reported not liking the food as the main reason for not having school meals. However, there were some outliers; only 13% of pupils in one school gave this as the main reason, while in another as many as 52% of pupils reported 'not liking the food' as the main reason for not having a school meal.

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

There was no difference according to school meal entitlement in the likelihood of identifying 'not liking the food' as the main reason for not having a school meal at lunchtime.

Variation Across Year Groups

S1 pupils were less likely than others to identify 'not liking school meals' as the main reason for not having a school meal at lunchtime (19%, compared to, for example, 33% of S4 pupils).

Variation Among Boys and Girls

There was no difference between boys and girls in the likelihood of identifying 'not liking the food' as the main reason for not having a school meal at lunchtime.

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

There was some variation across groups of pupils, although low numbers necessitate some caution. For example, 42% of the 31 pupils who identified as Sikh identified 'not liking the food' as a main reason, which contrasted with only 23% of the 105 pupils from Chinese ethnic origin who identified 'not liking the food' as the main reason for not having a school meal.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

Overall, there was no difference according to dietary requirements in the likelihood of identifying 'not liking the food' as the main reason for not having a school meal at lunchtime. However, pupils who were Kosher were more likely to identify this as the main reason for not having school meals (54%, compared to 29% of others), as were those who were Lactose-intolerant (40%, compared to 29%).

Issues and Implications

The high proportion of pupils who identify a 'food issue' as the main reason for not taking a school meal is worthy of further analysis.

Strategies to Encourage Non-Eaters to Take School Meals

What we Asked

If a pupil never ate a school, we asked them “what in your own words – if anything – would want to make you have school meals”. 3,539 pupils responded to this question.

Issues

Many pupils were adamant that they would not take schools meals (430 simply stated “nothing” in response to this question. Others conveyed the same sentiment in more expressive ways:

- *A gun.*
- *I'd rather just have the packed lunch because I LOVE the food my mum packs me.*

Many strong opinions were held by pupils over changes to school food and the nature of the food now being offered. Although some pupils wanted food to be healthier (first bullet below), more expressed concern over the food that was served:

- *Healthier options, more appetising food. I know that it is only a school cafeteria but some of the food that my friends receive would make me not want to buy lunch from there (which I don't, food seems very unhealthy).*
- *After Covid I never really thought about eating in again because it hasn't been the same.*
- *Better food instead of pushing too hard to get healthier food out (like no butter on toast, bagels etc. Not having rotten food like turkey and chicken rolls: not one single person in my school likes them. Having nice baked goods. like muffins, pancakes (with butter on them!).*
- *Better food and drinks, the food in the cafeteria is barely edible ... they take away all the good food off the menu 3 (school) years ago. My school doesn't even allow us to go to the shops outside, but most students go anyway ... the food in our school is horrible.*
- *Better options. Same food as before lockdown - March 2020 because they were good back then - I miss the home baking.*
- *Bringing back rolls at break 🍞🍞🍞*

- *Bring back more variety and keep vegetarian options optional instead of forcing them upon students.*
- *Enough seats in the dining hall, and some plainer warm meals, like chicken nuggets or even just the chips they serve. I like the chips, but they always come with something else that I have to throw away.*
- *Being able to eat chips without a meal. Why do I need to cross contaminate my food? Now that a burger has been plonked on top of the chips, I can no longer eat them. I've went hungry many lunch times.*

Concerns were also expressed over the cost of food. This was often expressed in terms of value for money:

- *... make it less expensive ... it can be £3.*
- *A bit cheaper and ... the same standard outside of school.*
- *Food should be better quality if it's going to stay at the same price. We need far more options and the menu needs released before.*
- *For it to cost less or nothing at all. People shouldn't have to pay for the basic human right of a meal, and I understand that it costs to provide the food but that's up to the council and government to make sure that schools have enough money to do so :).*
- *I would only wish to have school meals if Pizzinis prices were brought back down to the original £1. This sudden increase in price is simply too much and discourages me and many other people into buying them. If schools are hoping to make children eat healthier foods, raising the price of school foods will only make it much worse.*
- *It is priced as if it should be on sale within a Waitrose café. For Example, I do not wish to pay £1.50 for a "Pizzini" that's contents are processed so heavily that I cannot tell what is within it without having to research it. On top of this the brownies are quite frankly horrible if not so hot that it becomes impossible to taste. However, this is never met as despite them supposedly being fresh and then kept on top of a hot plate in front of us, the brownies are still more often than not cold and hard. These Brownies are not worth the 80p.*

The quality and arrangements in the dining hall were also criticised, but in the context of this question, were presented as problems that could be solved:

- *Not being allowed to stand and chat in the canteen while you eat.*
- *Better food without a 30-minute queue to get it when your lunch is only 45 or 50 minutes.*
- *I do not have the time in the school day to get food during a lunch or a break. If it was more accessible to do so I would.*
- *CLEAN TABLES, I cannot stress this enough, it's as if hygiene is forgotten. Nice food. No horrendously long queues that are extremely stressful. And finally, I'll repeat, CLEAN TABLES!!!*
- *... the cafeteria is absolutely disgusting as there is food stuck to the floor and stains everywhere. I feel like if I fell and got a cut on my knee it would get infected due to the floors that are never cleaned.*
- *Different lunch times worked well as the canteen was less busy. Now it's extremely busy and I remember the last time I went it was hard to find a seat.*
- *If I actually believed that the food, there was going to be good value and enjoyable. The conditions of the seating are horrendous as no one wants to eat food shoulder to shoulder with another person in an uncomfortable seat which only serves the purpose of being able to cram as many pupils as possible into one corner of an unclean hall. Alongside this the lack of cash options for payments makes it very inconvenient - I'm sure this is applicable to many pupils at this school as many carry money. If this was integrated into the system, I could assure there would be an increase in the number of pupils buying items from the canteen.*
- *Figuring out ParentPay (card-based payment system).*

Pupils not only identified the problems that discouraged them from having school meals. Many solutions to overcome these problems were identified – in addition to the ones that are self-evident from the problems described.

- *A larger area to eat lunch so everyone every day has seating. We don't always have seating. We want the S1s to get out because it is very cramped in the lunch hall. We are told to leave after a while even if we are still eating.*
- *Cheesy chips 👍 they're very good - and more places to eat inside. There is barely anywhere so my friends and I have to eat outside on the ground (not good when it's winter).*
- *Make the queue shorter by adding more tills and counters so more people can go at once.*
- *Free food one day a week if you have school lunches the other 4 days.*
- *A handout given to all pupils telling giving them a menu and ingredients for every meal.*
- *Fresh ingredients, meals with a lot of flavour (like spices, herbs), more variety, and food quality. A different place to eat, maybe a lunch hall separate from the main hall (if not possible maybe just more/new tables?). Specific brands of food (like branded cereal, cookies) or food from a specific shop (like Tesco for the S1s to enjoy when they can't go outside).*
- *Have the menu in front so students know the price if they don't pre-order the food.*
- *I don't know how to put money on the Young Scot card (that's the only way you're allowed to pay). I asked once but then I still didn't know. So, if it would say somewhere like in the dinner hall then I would probably eat them more often.*
- *The school also don't offer any caloric information (or traffic light) on any of their products - especially those prepared by the company of the canteen.*
- *If it was delivered to your classroom right before lunch time and if you could get a meal deal with for example chips and a drink.*

Pupils also acknowledged that they should be consulted over school meals. This was on-the-agenda in some schools, although pupils lamented inaction and lack of progress that followed consultation:

- *Actual half decent food rather than stale cookies and crusty baguettes. The head pupil should also be taking this into her own hands as her policies were to make school meals cheaper and to have a menu - we have not progressed on either.*
- *Asking students opinions and getting a few new ideas based on what the students would like to eat.*
- *Having a survey for the most liked school meals and having them more often.*

It should be acknowledged that some pupils will experience challenges in negotiating the school meals environment. The environment is not one – in its current form – that caters for all pupils:

- *No unless I built up confidence.*
- *If I wasn't anxious about eating, I front of people.*

What Pupils Think About School Meals Today

What we Asked

We asked pupils to rate ten aspects of school meals at lunchtime.

For each, we asked them to rate as either really good, good, mixed, bad, or really bad.

Pupils could opt-out, indicating that they 'did not know' or would 'rather not say' (which ranged from 957 pupils for the seating area to 1,701 pupils for supervision).

2,684 pupils skipped the whole question, with a smaller number skipping some but not all questions (ranging from 48 to 179 across the ten dimensions).

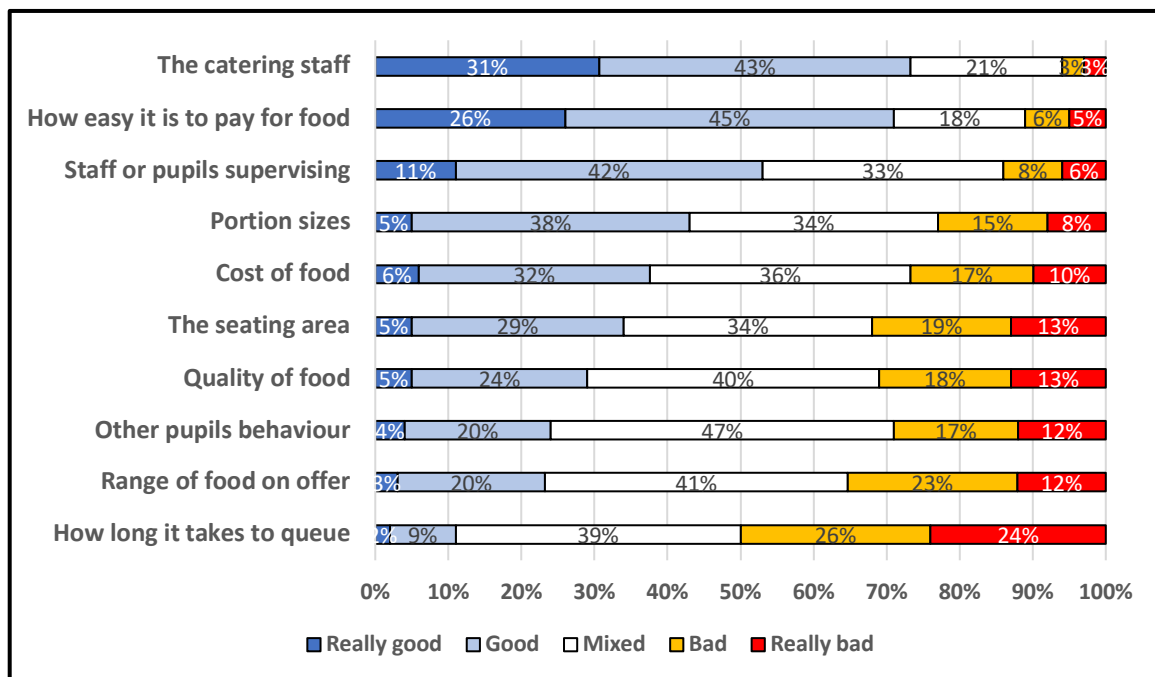
In the analysis that follows, we explore variation across three themes – the cost of food, the quality of food and the range of food on offer.

Headlines

Many issues were viewed positively. In particular, the vast majority of pupils reported that the catering staff, ease of paying for food, and supervision were viewed positively.

For other issues, more pupils expressed positive than negative opinions, although sizeable numbers were positive, neutral and negative (portion sizes, cost of food, seating area and quality of food).

At the other extreme, more negative opinion was expressed over how long it took to pay for food and range of food (and to a lesser extent over other pupils' behaviour).



Cases: Responses ranged from 11,086 pupils (portion sizes) to 11,612 pupils (other pupils' behaviour).

Variation Across Schools

In most schools between 15% and 30% of pupils rated the range of food as 'good/really good'. In thirteen schools more than one-third of pupils rated this positively (44% in one school). Five schools had less than 10% of pupils giving a positive rating, with only 3% of pupils in one school rating the range of food as 'good/really good'.

In most schools between 20% and 45% of pupils rated the quality of food as 'good/really good'. Many pupils in three schools gave a positive rating (53% in one school). Two schools had less than 10% of pupils giving a positive rating, with only 6% of pupils in one school rating the quality of food as 'good/really good'.

In most schools between 15% and 40% of pupils rated the cost of food as 'bad/really bad'. Most pupils in two schools gave a negative rating (68% in one school). Five schools had less than 10% of pupils giving a negative rating, with only 4% of pupils in one school rating the cost of food as 'bad/really bad'.

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

There was no difference of opinion on the range of food on offer, according to school meal entitlement.

Those who were not entitled to free school meals were more likely to rate the quality of food as 'bad/really bad' (35%, compared to 29% of those who were entitled to a free school meal).

Those who were entitled to free school meals were more likely to rate the cost of food as 'good/really good' (41%, compared to 37% of those who were entitled to a free school meal).

Variation Across Year Groups

Younger pupils were much more positive about the range of food on offer – 42% of S1 pupils considered it to be 'good/really good', compared to 26% of S2 pupils and, for example, 16% of S5 pupils.

Younger pupils were much more positive about the quality of food on offer – 51% of S1 pupils considered it to be 'good/really good', compared to 33% of S2 pupils and, for example, 20% of S4 pupils.

Younger pupils were much more positive about the cost of food– 50% of S1 pupils considered it to be 'good/really good', as did 38% of S2 pupils, compared to, for example, 34% of S4 pupils.

Variation Among Boys and Girls

There was no substantial difference of opinion on the range of food on offer, between boys and girls.

There was no consistent difference of opinion on the quality of food on offer, between boys and girls (girls were more likely to hold mixed opinions).

There was no substantial difference of opinion on the cost of food, between boys and girls.

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

Although low numbers necessitate caution in interpretation, pupils identifying as Christian (32%) were less likely than those not identifying with a religion (36%), who in turn were less likely than those from other religious groups (e.g., 45% of Muslim pupils) to rate the range of food as 'bad/really bad'. Similarly, 47% of Pakistani pupils rated the range of food as 'bad/really bad' (as did 49% of the 45 pupils of Arabian ethnic origin); in contrast 34% of the pupils of Black Scottish/British ethnic origin rated the range of food as 'good/very good'.

Although low numbers necessitate caution in interpretation, pupils identifying as Christian (30%) and those not identifying with a religion (32%), were less likely than those from other religious groups (e.g., 37% of Muslim students) to rate the quality of food as 'bad/really bad'. Similarly, 38% of Pakistani pupils rated the quality of food as 'bad/really bad' (as did 43% of the 42 pupils of Arabian ethnic origin); in contrast 34% of the pupils of Indian ethnic origin rated the quality of food as 'good/very good'.

Although low numbers necessitate caution in interpretation, pupils identifying as Christian (26%) and those not identifying with a religion (26%), were less likely than those from many other religious groups (e.g., 54% of the 46 pupils who identified as Jewish) to rate the cost of food as 'bad/really bad'. Similarly, 39% of pupils of Pakistani ethnic origin rated the cost of food as 'bad/really bad'.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

Those with a dietary requirement were less positive about the range of food on offer – 48% considered it to be ‘bad/really bad’, compared to 34% of pupils without a requirement. This held for pupils who were vegan (61%), vegetarian (54%), Halal (48%), Kosher, (73%), Gluten-free (58%) and Lactose-intolerant (57%).

Those with a dietary requirement were less positive about the quality of food on offer – 39% considered it to be ‘bad/really bad’, compared to 31% of pupils without a requirement. This held for pupils who were vegan (48%), vegetarian (42%), Halal (43%), Kosher, (64%), Gluten-free (46%) and Lactose-intolerant (48%).

Those with a dietary requirement were less positive about the cost of food – 32% considered it to be ‘bad/really bad’, compared to 26% of pupils without a requirement. This held for pupils who were vegan (37%), vegetarians (32%), Halal (38%), Kosher, (61%), Gluten-free (37%) and Lactose-intolerant (37%).

Issues and Implications

Catering staff were highly praised, which would suggest that pupils value their work over and above the preparation of food (which is evaluated less positively).

Ease of payment is also highly praised. It should be acknowledged that the investment in payment systems over the last decade seems to have been impactful. On the other hand, improving payment systems has not addressed all the problems that were associated with more time-intensive systems of paying for food, as many pupils remain concerned over the length of time it takes to access school food.

Opinion is divided over many issues. This suggests that it would be possible to find confirmatory advice from some pupils for any pre-conceptions over particular aspects of school food. However, it may be more useful to explore the reasons that underlie these differences of opinion. These balance of opinion (across good, bad, or in-between) varies across schools, but there is variation of opinion within most schools for many issues.

The reasons for the much less positive appraisal of school food after S1 need to be better understood.

These findings offer further reason for exploring whether there is a need for menu development of culturally appropriate meals and those which meet the needs of pupils with special dietary requirements.

Issues around queueing and dining environment – which many pupils view critically - need to be appraised.

Accounting for What Was “Really Good” About School Meals

What we Asked

We asked pupils to provide an explanation for any aspect of school meals that they rated as “really good”. 4,128 pupils responded.

Headlines

Many pupils had much to say on ‘ease of payment’ and the ‘catering staff. The following examples convey pupil opinion on catering staff.

- *The catering staff are extremely friendly.*
- *The dinner ladies are really nice, and friendly.*
- *The lunch ladies are fun.*
- *All the catering staff are very nice and say hello and make sure we are happy.*
- *AMAZING DINER LADY WOMEN LOVE THEM.*
- *Because Alice the lunch lady is everything that is right with the world.*
- *Because the pin machine is easy to use. Staff are kind and happy and supervisors always ask how your day is.*
- *Canteen staff are lovely and [it is] a shame you force them to feed us rubbish and not allow them to have any active input that would actually make food good.*
- *The dinner ladies always so kind and nice. I’d love to stand there for a nice chat but don’t want my food to get cold. The nicest bunch of women ever.*
- *I love the catering staff. They’re all really really sweet to me and they make our day at school worthwhile.*
- *The dinner ladies are always so kind and know every pupil’s name.*
- *The lunch ladies are very nice and hard working. I have a friend who can’t afford school meals or just meals in general and the school said they would give him free food, but they didn’t. The lunch lady heard and started giving him free food herself.*
- *Defo class ladies. Let me off when I don’t have that last 10p and sometimes give me free packets of sauce.*
- *I think the catering staff are really good as they are kind and extremely understanding when you may not have money in your account etc.*

The food was also praised, albeit much less often than ‘ease of payment’ and catering staff.

- *Because the food is 10/10.*
- *Because the food is good for a low price.*
- *Because the food tasted amazing from flavour to texture.*
- *Because usually meals outside of school are more expensive than the meals you get inside school, for example: You could get baked potatoes for £4, and you can get a baked potato for about £1.*

Many pupils reported a bundle of factors that together led them to judge school food as ‘really good’.

- *... the way they do things at lunch is quite impressive and not to mention necessary.*
- *I think the portion sizes are just right and I always finish the food - they recently brought in contactless lunch cards which you scan making it really easy to pay - there is almost always a teacher in the lunch hall supervising everything.*
- *[With] the [Young] Scot [card]... there is no hassle, the canteen people are lovely and patient and teachers around are polite, and the portions are a good size for the money.*
- *Because I think the food is tasty and you can get things you haven’t heard of before like a pizzini and the catering staff are friendly and all smile at you.*
- *There’s good seating areas and I like to talk with friends. The staff are really nice. The supervisors are good at their job.*
- *Catering staff are respectful and nice and quick to serve, paying is easy as it is just the touch of a card and prefects who manage the lunch queue do a good job.*

Some of the reasons why pupils rated school meals as ‘really good’ reflect changes that have been implemented to manage school meals over the Covid-19 period.

- *Because of covid, lunches are split so there are less people, so you don’t have to queue or if you do there is only 3 or 4 people in front of you.*
- *... cause of staggered lunches due to corona the queues aren’t too long.*

Accounting for What Was “Really Bad” About School Meals

What we Asked

We also asked pupils to provide an explanation for any aspect of school meals that they rated as “really bad”. 4,056 pupils responded to this question.

Headlines

Many of the concerns already noted in response to the questions on what could be changed to improve school meals and what would encourage greater uptake also featured prominently when pupils were explaining what was “really bad” about school meals, e.g. queues, poor food, and other pupils’ behaviour.

Several pupils also observed that the school meals environment was not one that was conducive to meeting their needs.

- *I am autistic and pupils skip in front of me when in line. My parents wish I had a separate line to cater for my needs. I don't know what's on offer for lunch, so I order the same thing. I wish portion sizes were bigger and food cheaper. It's cheaper and easier to bring a packed lunch but on cold days I would like a warm lunch.*
- *Because it's too busy and noisy for someone with a sensory issue who would like to sit inside where it is warm and quiet.*
- *The big crowds also make people feel anxious and panicked and people don't feel comfortable eating in front of people. Even if you could get food there's nowhere to eat it anyway so it's best to just get nothing.*
- *I get scared in large crowds and having to wait in a large crowd for a long time makes me anxious.*
- *As a Halal eating student, I often feel like there are not many options for me and its always the same things being sold. Most of the time I am left feeling hungry and have to wait the entire day until home time to get a decent meal.*
- *I also think that a lot of bullying (especially physical pushing and shoving) takes place in the canteen and that there is not enough action being taken against this. It makes it a very scary place for me to be as a new student.*

Although behaviour and the way in which lunches were managed was a concern for many pupils, there was also a sense that the school estate was not well equipped to handle lunchtime eating:

- *I have to eat in a classroom because there is no room in the dining hall, yet we often get kicked out of the classroom because we aren't allowed to be in there during lunch hours - so there is nowhere for us to sit and eat our food.*
- *In my school there is nowhere near enough space for pupils to eat lunch. There are tables in 2 halls that hold an estimate of 300-350 people in a school that has this year reached over 1,000 pupils. At lunchtime pupils can be found eating their lunch sitting on the floor in corridors and on stairwells, which is not only not particularly hygienic but also a hindrance to people walking down these areas.*
- *600 odd pupils in a small lunch hall, not great, all seats are taken and just a mess in general.*

Some recent changes were thought to have resulted in a poorer service (although others have improved matters). Some of these drivers are attributed to managing Covid-19, but other reflect wider ambitions for school food.

- *... the Healthy Eating Act has really cut down on what is on offer.*
- *Due to the first years not being allowed down the street, and bringing lunches is practically unheard of - lunch lines have reached awful lengths. It's almost as if the school isn't bothering to fix this, either. I have seen pupils coming out of the canteen with twenty minutes left of lunch - considering we have a 45-minute lunch, this is bad. Another 'really bad' is due to our seating area; with covid and such our seating area was removed, but they still haven't reopened it. We have nowhere to eat.*
- *Prior to Covid there were not a sufficient amount of chairs for everybody to sit with their friends. However, staggered lunches have made that better would like to keep them.*
- *Queuing depends on the day, sometimes it is quick, sometimes not. It is quicker now we have staggered lunchtimes.*

It was not uncommon for pupils to identify a range of inter-related problems with school meals, which led them to evaluate the service as “really bad”.

- *Rammed full of people, no organisation, so expensive I could get a return flight from Orlando for the same amount if I saved up for a couple of months. Staff shout at you when you get skipped by others and ask them to move back, I mean what's that about? You get the worst food possible - pizza like a rock. Everything is terrible, so much so my headteacher ordered a salad and was sitting at the dining tables and took a bite and almost spued.*
- *Food options are extremely limited and not very healthy at all - not a great deal of fruit and veg options. We are unaware of the prices of the food that is served in our school until we get to the till to pay. Portion sizes that are served are often too big therefore we cannot finish our food leading to food waste.*
- *The dictatorship of what we can and can't eat is unfair. We had no say in whether we can eat food we like or not. The time we have to actually eat is ridiculous as we used to get 50ish minutes but now because it is 40 the time to go and get food, eat it and get back is just not possible. I think that they could improve meals by going back to the way it was when I started high school or even a few years back. When I look back, I think of how many more things were on offer and how many people would look forward to the food.*
- *School lunch food isn't something I look forward to. It's hard to find out what's on the next day, which would be helpful because then you know whether to order it or make a pack lunch. The queues are very long and take about 10-15 to get anything and you're not guaranteed any food as it's usually gone within the first 5 minutes (not enough made). The lunch hall is not a comfortable clean environment as you get food thrown at you and there's rubbish left behind/ tables aren't always clean. Also, there is not enough seating for everyone. Options are very limited. If you want something that will fill you up, usually*

the only edible part of the meal is the main part such as a panini, the 'desserts' are not worth paying for they are very dry (muffins) or its rock hard (cookies).

- *I feel there could be a larger range of food on offer, particularly vegetarian food. Portion sizes vary, in general they are the right size but sometimes they are too big or too small. The food is reasonably cheap, however the cost of traybakes is quite expensive. The seating is pretty bad, considering Covid, as it is too cold to eat outside and there are no tables outside to put food on.*

There was also much criticism of other year groups.

- *Because there's almost no available seating after S5/6 and S1's.*
- *Depends which age range of pupils that are in the canteen for how they behave, generally younger years have worse behaviour.*
- *Due to my status in school as a young student (aka an S1), I am always looked down by seniors. Examples such as lunch lines are bad for fellow S1s like me. This is why I put “really bad”.*
- *Behaviour of other pupils, especially those who have come straight from primary school.*
- *Portion sizes are simply not suitable for high school pupils: how is it expected for an S1 to eat the same as an S6? I know a large number of people who buy 2/3 main food items as they are always still hungry. I don't believe that the quality of food is good enough. Schools are meant to be promoting healthy eating, and then serve junk. For some pupils, a school meal is the only hot, proper nutritious meal they eat in a day - at our school the food is none of the above.*

More optimistically, although many problems were identified, there was some optimism among pupils:

- *I think these things can be easily changed with the right actions.*

Use of Lunchtime Allowance at Morning Break Time

What we Asked

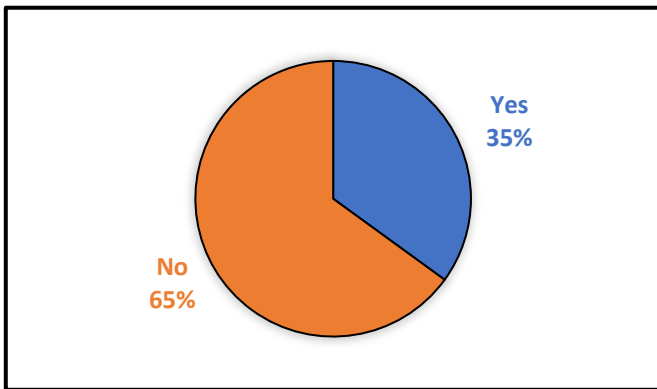
We asked pupils whether they ever used any of their school meal allowance to buy food at morning break time.

Pupils could opt-out, indicating that they 'did not know' or would 'rather not say' (385 pupils). Many also skipped this question (5,650).

After presenting the 'headline' data, we explore variation among groups of pupils.

Headlines

One-third of pupils reported using some of their lunchtime allowance to buy food at morning break-time.



Cases: 9,547 pupils

Variation Across Schools

In most schools between 25% and 40% of pupils reported using some of their lunchtime allowance at morning break-time. In two schools more than 60% of pupils had used lunchtime allowance in this way (71% of pupils in one school). In contrast, in four schools less than 10% of pupils had used lunchtime food money at morning break-time (2% in one school).

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Those who are entitled to free school meals are more likely to use some of their lunchtime allowance at morning break time (44%, compared to 34% of others).

Variation Across Year Groups

Younger pupils are more likely to use some of their lunchtime allowance at morning break time (42% of S1 pupils, 46% of S2 pupils, compared to, for example, 34% of S4 pupils).

Variation Among Boys and Girls

No substantial differences.

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

Muslim pupils were less likely to report using their lunchtime allowance at morning break-time (25%)

Pupils of Pakistani ethnic origin were also more likely to report using their lunchtime allowance at morning break-time (29%). Although caution is required due to response rate, Chinese pupils are also less likely to use their allowance in this way (22%).

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

Those without dietary requirements are more likely to use some of their lunchtime allowance at morning break-time (29%, compared to 36% of those with). This holds for pupils who are vegan (25%), vegetarian (29%), Halal (25%) and Gluten-free (25%).

Issues and Implications

The finding for free school meal-entitled pupils is interesting. It raises the questions of whether the lunchtime allowance is adequate to meet their need for food over the whole of the school day. The widespread use of lunchtime allowance in this way, raises questions for schools, which do not permit free school meal allowance to be used outside of lunchtime.

Length of Lunchtime Break

What we Asked

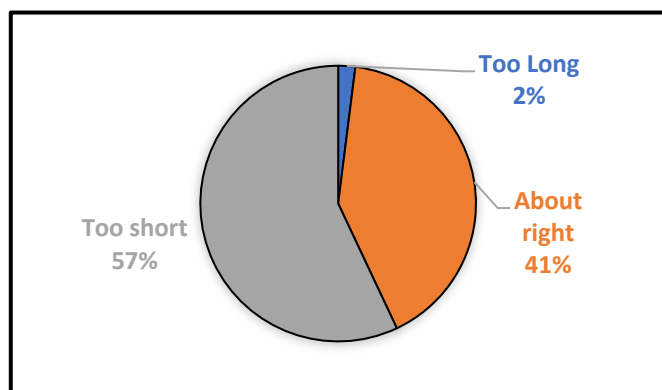
We asked pupils what they thought about the length of the lunchtime break.

We gave three options. Pupils could opt-out, indicating that they “did not know” or would ‘rather not say’ (313). 2,619 pupils skipped this question.

After presenting the ‘headline’ data, we explore variation according to whether pupils considered that the lunchtime break was ‘too short’.

Headlines

Most pupils thought that the length of the lunchtime break was ‘too short’, although two-fifths of pupils thought that it was ‘about right’.



Cases: 12,650 pupils

Variation Across Schools

There was much variation across schools in pupil opinion of the length of the lunchtime break. In six schools more than three-quarters of pupils believed it was ‘too short’ (79% of pupils in one school). In contrast, in five schools, fewer than one-third of pupils considered the break to be ‘too short’ (as low as 23% in one school).

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Pupils entitled to free school meals were more likely to think that the length of the lunchtime break was ‘too short’ (62%, compared to 54%).

Variation Across Year Groups

Except for S1 (for which pupils were evenly divided in opinion), the younger age stages were more likely to think that the length of the lunchtime break was ‘too short’ (e.g., 63% for S2, compared to 58% for S4 and 43% of S6).

Variation Among Boys and Girls

There was no substantial difference of opinion.

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

Pupils of Muslim ethnic origin were more likely to think that the length of the lunchtime break was ‘too short’ (64%), as were pupils of Pakistani ethnic origin (65%).

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

There was no difference of opinion.

Issues and Implications

Further work is required to map pupil responses against the actual length of lunchtimes in schools. However, it is important to acknowledge that there were differences of opinion among pupils within schools.

Pupils are less critical of the length of lunchtime in the senior years. It may be useful to examine whether this reflects a timetable is less intense, i.e., one which provides free periods in the school day, which might provide the time-out that younger pupils do not have.

Changes Through Time

We wanted to find out whether pupils thought school meals had changed through time.

We were interested to find out whether pupils thought school meals had changed since the introduction of the Healthy Eating in School Regulations, which were introduced in April 2021.

To avoid answers being influenced by lockdown, we asked S2 pupils to compare school meals today to the early part of S1. We asked pupils in S3 and above to compare school meals today to school food before lockdown in 2020. We did not ask the 2,400 S1 pupils to answer these questions.

The next three themes in the report explore changes through time.

Have School Meals Become Healthier?

What we Asked

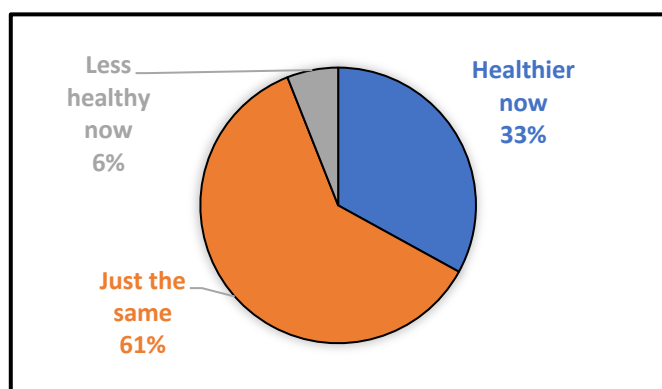
We asked pupils if they thought that school meals were healthier now.

We asked pupils to choose one of three options (healthier, less healthy, no change). Pupils could opt-out, indicating that they 'did not know' or would 'rather not say' (3,261 pupils). A further 3,257 pupils skipped this question.

After presenting the 'headline' data, we explore variation according to whether pupils perceived school meals had become healthier in recent years.

Headlines

Most pupils reported no change in recent years, although one-third of pupils perceived that school meals had become 'healthier' in recent years.



Cases: 6,664 pupils

Variation Across Schools

There was much variation across schools in pupil opinion over whether school meals had become healthier. In four schools fewer than 10% of pupils thought that they had become healthier (4% of pupils in one school). In contrast, in two schools more than two-thirds of pupils reported that meals were now healthier (84% of pupils in one school).

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

There was no difference of opinion on whether school meals had become healthier according to free school meal entitlement.

Variation Across Year Groups

Older pupils were more likely to observe that school meals had become healthier (25% of S2 pupils, compared to, for example, 33% of S3 pupils, and 40% of S6 pupils).

Variation Among Boys and Girls

Girls were more likely than boys to observe that school meals had become healthier (36%, compared to 31%).

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

Although low numbers necessitate caution, there were differences among ethnic groups. More Sikhs observed that meals have become healthier (46% of the 24 who responded), in contrast to fewer Jewish pupils (22% of the 32 pupils who responded). Similarly, fewer Chinese pupils considered meals had become healthier (20% of the 61 pupils who responded), in contrast to Indian pupils (39% of the 64 pupils who responded).

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

More of those who offered their opinion on whether school meals had become healthier and who also provided details of their dietary requirements (regardless of their opinion) considered school meals to be healthier – 41% of all who responded to this question – contrasting with 33% for the whole survey population.

Against this base of 41%, those with a dietary requirement were less likely to observe that school meals had become healthier (36% compared to 41% of pupils without a requirement). This held for pupils who were vegan (35%) and gluten-free (27%).

Issues and Implications

The headline finding could be viewed negatively – the changes introduced through the *Healthy Eating in Schools* regulations are not leading to an acknowledgement among pupils that school meals are now healthier. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that older pupils - those who have been aware of school meals for longer – are more likely than younger pupils to observe a positive change (that school meals have become healthier through time).

Has Choice Increased in School Meals?

What we Asked

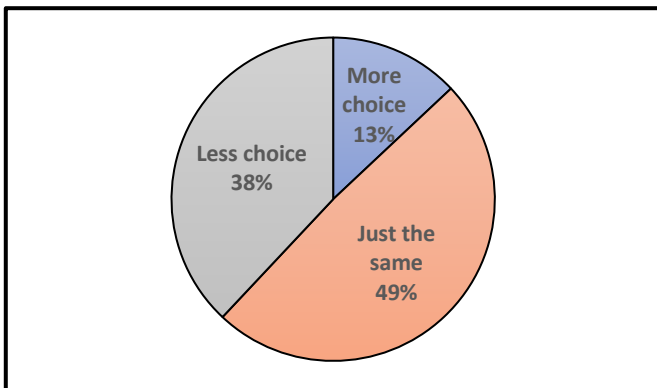
We asked pupils if they thought that they had more choice with school meals than beforehand.

We asked pupils to choose one of three options (more, less or the same). Pupils could opt-out, indicating that they 'did not know' or would 'rather not say' (2,630 pupils). A further 3,282 pupils skipped this question.

After presenting the 'headline' data, we explore variation according to whether pupils perceived that there is now less choice in school meals.

Headlines

One-half of pupils reported no change in recent years in amount of choice over school meals. More than one-third of pupils thought that there was now less choice in school meals.



Cases: 7,270 pupils

Variation Across Schools

There was much variation across schools in pupil opinion over whether school meals had become healthier. In one school only 11% of pupils thought that there was less choice. In contrast, in six schools more than two-thirds of pupils reported less choice in school meals (74% of pupils in one school).

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

There was no difference of opinion on choice among pupils who were and were not entitled to a free school meal.

Variation Across Year Groups

Older pupils were more likely to observe that choice had reduced (21% of S2 pupils, compared to, for example, 39% of S3 pupils, and 49% of S6 pupils).

Variation Among Boys and Girls

There was no substantial difference of opinion over the amount of choice in school meals among boys and girls.

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

Low numbers necessitate caution. There was some evidence of difference of opinion. One-half of the 24 Sikh pupils thought that choice had reduced, as did 41% of pupils of Indian ethnic origin. In contrast, only one-fifth of the 65 pupils of Chinese ethnic origin thought that choice had reduced.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

More of those who responded to the question on dietary requirements (regardless of their opinion) considered choice to have reduced through time – 43% of all who responded to this question – contrasting with 38% for the whole survey population. However, pupils who were lactose-intolerant were more likely to report less choice (50%, compared to 43%).

Issues and Implications

Here, the headline finding could be viewed positively – a minority consider that choice has reduced. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that older pupils were more likely to observe reduced choice.

Do Pupils Eat School Meals More Regularly?

What we Asked

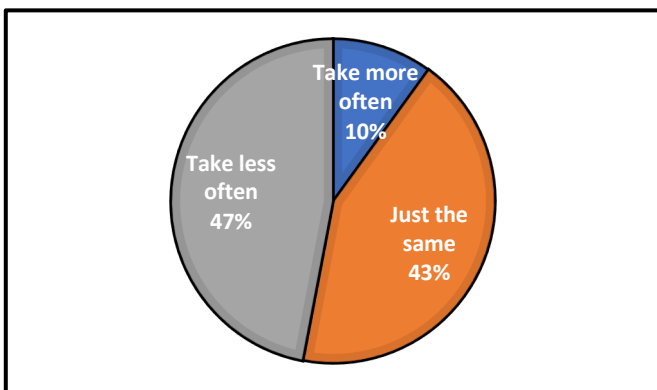
We asked pupils if they took school meals more often than before.

We asked pupils to choose one of three options (more, less, the same). Pupils could opt-out, indicating that they 'did not know' or would 'rather not say'.

After presenting the 'headline' data, we explore variation according to whether pupils have school meals less often than before.

Headlines

Pupils were fairly evenly split between those who reported no change and those who reported that they were taking school meals less often than before. One-tenth of pupils reported taking them more often.



Cases: 7,594 pupils

Variation Across Schools

In most schools between 40% and 60% of pupils reported that they had school meals less often than before. In six schools, fewer than one-third of pupils were having meals less often (28% in one school). At the other extreme, three-quarters of pupils in one school reported having school meals less often than before (75% of pupils).

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Pupils who were not entitled to free school meals were more likely to report that they now took school meals less often (50%, compared to 40% of pupils entitled to free school meals).

Variation Across Year Groups

S2 pupils were less likely than others to report having school meals less often (43%, compared to, for example, 50% of S5 pupils).

Variation Among Boys and Girls

Girls were more likely than boys to report taking school meals both more often (11%, compared to 8%) and less often (50%, compared to 43%) than before.

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

Low numbers necessitate caution, but some differences could be observed. For example, Sikh pupils were less likely to report not having school meals as often as before (31%, compared to 47% of all pupils). Pupils of Pakistani ethnic origin were more likely (56%), and those of African ethnic origin were less likely (38% of the 53 who responded), to take school meals less often than before.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

Those with a dietary requirement were more likely than those without to report taking a school meal less often (54%, compared to 48%). This held for Halal eaters (56%). In contrast, pupils who were lactose-intolerant were more likely than others to report taking school meals more often than before (16%, compared to 9%).

Issues and Implications

The extent to which the one-half of pupils who report taking school meals less often (and indeed the small minority who take them more often) can be attributed to changes in the school meals offer, are worthy of further analysis.

Information About School Meals

What we Asked

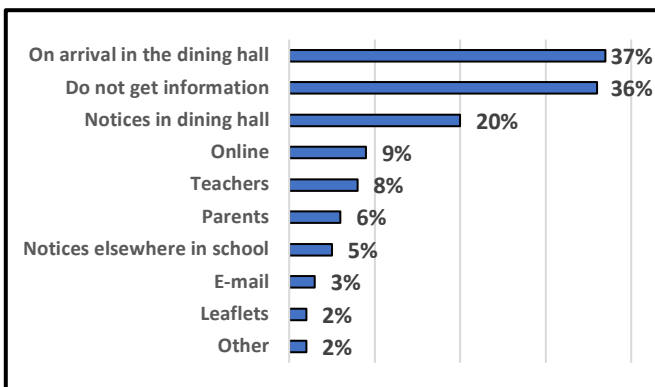
We asked pupils about how they get information about school meals.

We gave a list of nine sources of information and asked them to identify all the ways in which they find out information about school meals. 2,773 pupils skipped the whole question.

After presenting the 'headline' data, we explore variation among pupils according to whether any information was received.

Headlines

One-third of pupils reported that they received no information at all about school meals. Those who received information were most likely to report being made aware of what was on offer only on arrival at the dining hall.



Cases: 11,798 pupils

Variation Across Schools

In most schools between 25% and 50% of pupils reported that they received no information about school meals. In eleven schools over 90% of pupils had not been consulted (94% in two of these schools). Two schools reported equal proportions of pupils who had and had not been consulted beforehand.

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Pupils who are not entitled to free school meals were more likely to report not receiving any information about school meals (38%, compared to 31%).

Variation Across Year Groups

Older pupils were more likely to report not receiving any information about school meals (43% of pupils in S4 through S6, compared to 39% of pupils in S3, 33% of pupils in S2 and 23% of pupils in S1).

Variation Among Boys and Girls

There were no differences between boys and girls over the likelihood of receiving information about school meals.

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

Low numbers necessitate caution, although some variation can be observed. Fewer Hindu pupils reported not receiving any information (21% of the 57 pupils). Similarly, fewer pupils of African ethnic origin (21% of the 79 pupils) and more pupils of Arabian ethnic origin (43% of the 49 pupils) reported not receiving any information.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

Pupils with a dietary requirement were more likely to report not receiving information about school meals (40%, compared to 36% of those without a requirement). This holds for vegetarians (43%) and pupils who are lactose-intolerant (45%).

Issues and Implications

Although some pupils have access to a range of information sources, it appears that many pupils encounter a lack of information – in advance of lunchtime - about school meals.

Awareness of *Healthy Eating in Schools* Regulations

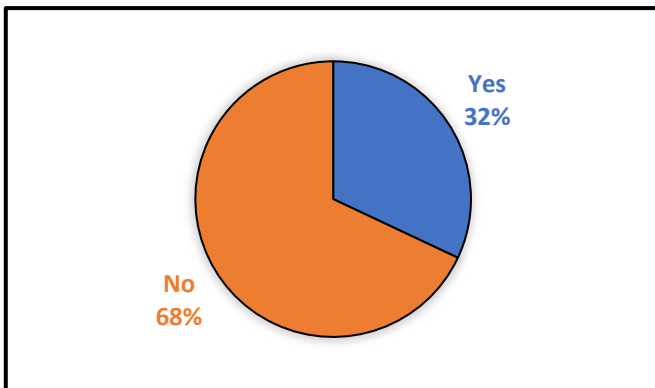
What we Asked

We asked pupils if they had ever heard of the *Healthy Eating in Schools* regulations that were introduced in April 2021. Pupils could opt-out, indicating that they 'did not know' or would 'rather not say' (1,055 pupils). 2,608 pupils skipped this question.

After presenting the 'headline' data, we explore variation among groups of pupils.

Headlines

Two-thirds of pupils were not aware of *Healthy Eating in Schools* regulations.



Cases: 11,919 pupils

Variation Across Schools

In most schools between 25% and 45% of pupils reported that they were aware of the *Healthy Eating in School* regulations. In six schools most pupils reported receiving information about the regulations (59% in one school). At the other extreme, in one school only 5% of pupils reported receiving no information.

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Pupils who were entitled to free school meals were more likely to report awareness of the *Healthy Eating in Schools* regulations (38%, compared to 33% of all pupils).

Variation Across Year Groups

There was no consistent difference across year groups.

Variation Among Boys and Girls

Girls were more likely than boys to be aware of the Regulations (36%, compared to 29%).

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

There were no substantial differences across religions and ethnic groups.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

There was no substantial difference according to dietary requirements.

Issues and Implications

There is clearly an information gap that needs to be addressed. Pupils are not aware of one of the key drivers that is shaping the nature of school meals in Scotland at the current time.

Whether Pupils are Consulted on School Meals

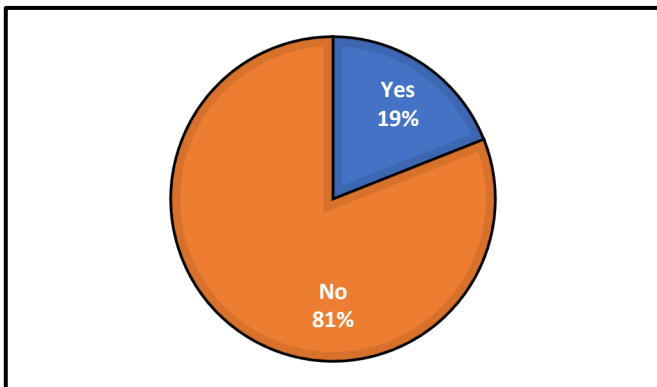
What we Asked

We asked pupils if they had ever been asked for their opinion on school meals before. Pupils could opt-out, indicating that they 'did not know' or would 'rather not say' (1,647 pupils). 2,555 pupils skipped this question.

After presenting the 'headline' data, we explore variation among groups of pupils.

Headlines

The majority of pupils had never been asked for their opinion on school meals before completing this survey.



Cases: 11,380 pupils

Variation Across Schools

In most schools between 70% and 90% of pupils reported that they had not been asked for their opinions on school meals before completing this survey. In eleven schools over 90% of pupils had not been consulted (94% in two of these schools). Two schools reported equal proportions of pupils who had and had not been consulted beforehand.

Variation According to Whether or Not Pupils are Entitled to Free School Meals

Pupils who were entitled to free school meals were more likely to report being asked their opinion on school meals (24%, compared to 19%).

Variation Across Year Groups

There were no substantial differences across year groups.

Variation Among Boys and Girls

There were no substantial differences

Variation Across Religions and Ethnic Groups

There were no differences by religion or ethnic group.

Variation According to Dietary Requirements

There were no differences by dietary preferences.

Issues and Implications

It is children's right under the UN Convention of the Rights of Children to have their voices heard in relation to matters that impact on them. It is hoped that this research achieves more than this: it is intended that the evidence base provides the means to facilitate local and national conversations over the current condition and future form of school meals in Scotland.

Conclusion

The Context

School meals make a significant contribution to the health and well-being of secondary school pupils in Scotland. In recent times, schools have faced challenges (provision of school meals in Covid-19 times) and embraced innovations (*Healthy Eating in Schools* regulations). For that reason alone, it was timely to canvass the opinion on school meals of secondary school pupils. Furthermore, there is also growing recognition in Scotland and beyond of the importance of listening to young people's opinion on matters which concern them. Indeed, this is a right in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Objective

This report sought to summarise what over 15,000 secondary school pupils think about school meals in Scotland, and to explore variations in opinion and experience across pupils.

The Findings

Positives, negatives, and new insights were found. Some of these findings will confirm what stakeholders already knew, perhaps providing a stronger evidence base to maintain support for what is working, and to provide evidence to introduce change for what is not working as well. Other insight offers fresh perspective on long-standing issues, or timely insight on contemporary issues.

The Next Steps - Local

Eighty-six schools have been provided with school-specific findings, which enables them to reflect on what pupils consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of school meal provision in their own school.

- Although this report delivers a national overview, there is abundant evidence of significant and substantial variation in pupils' experiences across schools. There is a need for school-level analysis and reflection on school meals.

- The finding that almost one-half of pupils who are entitled to free school meals are using their lunchtime allowance to buy food at morning break-time should raise questions for schools who do not permit the allowance to be used in this way – does this mean that there are pupils who are entitled to free school meals whose need for food is not being met?
- For schools with their own briefing, this national report should facilitate an understanding of the extent to which their school experiences are commonplace or atypical compared to other schools in Scotland.

The Next Steps – Local and Beyond

It is hoped that the national overview provided in this report provides insight that is valuable to all stakeholders. SPIRU concludes that the evidence suggests that following issues are worthy of further consideration:

- There is a need to connect the issues in this report to better understand the overall impact of the drive to make school school meals healthier.
- In many ways, the experience of school meals differs across year groups. If school meals are to better serve the needs of Scotland's children, there is a need to address the concerns of older pupils, while maintaining those aspects of school meals that lead to more positive appraisals among younger pupils.
- It must be examined whether needs are being met of pupils with dietary requirements or a requirement for culturally appropriate food.
- Most pupils were of the opinion that lunchtime breaks were too short. It would be useful to explore the negative consequences and lost opportunities of a short lunch break.
- The high proportion of pupils who report a lack of information about school meals and a lack of awareness of the *Healthy Eating in Schools* regulations are causes for concern, given the purported significance in Scottish education of a whole-school approach to food.