Fuelling the Future

How does secondary school food fare for our young people?

FOOD ACT!VE

HEG Health Equalities Group

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Acknowledgements

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Please note that all names of pupils, parents, headteachers, school cooks and the schools themselves have been removed for anonymity.

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Executive summary

Introduction:

Schools have a significant opportunity to positively impact young people's food choices, helping to shape their lifelong dietary behaviours and reduce the risk of diet-related diseases such as obesity and dental decay. This research aims to understand young people's experiences of food availability within the school setting and the wider environment surrounding the school boundary. The fieldwork undertaken considers breaktime provision, the dining environment, school food policies and the food environment beyond the school gates. This research also gathered views from headteachers, school cooks and parents and was carried out as part of the Food Active North West programme of work.

Methods:

- A series of face-to-face focus groups were conducted with approximately 40 secondary school pupils across the North West.
- Interviews were also conducted with a small number of headteachers, school cooks and parents to further explore some of the issues raised by young people in the focus groups.
- Participating schools received a gift voucher to purchase school resources, and parents also received a gift voucher for their contributions to the research.

Key findings:

- Breaktime provision is a very popular food service, however healthier options are currently limited.
- Cost of food and drink is an important factor for young people; some referenced price increases alongside a reduction in portion sizes.
- Young people consistently raised issues about the chaotic and stressful nature of the dining space, and lengthy queues.
- Lunchtimes are too short, and many young people report issues such as running out of food and making compromises on other activities such as clubs and sport in order to eat.
- Young people frequently noted the poor quality and limited variety of foods being served across the school day and want to see this improved.
- Young people were typically unfamiliar with schools offering healthy eating initiatives or aware of any policies relating to provision of healthier options.
- Young people had lots of ideas on how to encourage healthier eating in school, including making healthier foods more appealing, changes to pricing, providing more information on healthy eating, introducing gardening clubs and restricting the promotion of less healthy options when paying.
- Places to buy food on a pupil's journey to school are generally dominated by less healthy options, and these are popular, attractive and convenient for young people when compared to the offer within schools.
- Schools are taking steps to address many of the issues reported by pupils, including introducing rotas at lunchtime and converting other spaces such as the hall into seating areas, but challenges remain.

Recommendations at a glance:

It is important to consider these findings in the wider context of the significant number of challenges schools are facing in the current climate. Schools are under increasing pressure from the rising cost of food, insufficient uplifts to funding for school meals and other wider challenges such as operating at or over capacity and behavioural issues – yet government support has not increased. As such, this research has informed a series of recommendations for national and local government, in addition to considerations for schools.

Please see Page 32 for our full set of recommendations.

National government. Review and increase funding for school food provision, specifically: increasing the funding per pupil to ensure this enables schools to provide high quality, healthy and sustainable meals that meet the School Food Standards; funding to improve school buildings and facilities, particularly in schools that are at or over capacity, to improve the dining and school kitchen facilities to ensure there is sufficient space to cater for all pupils.

Local government. Consider the school fringe, utilising planning levers to restrict the proliferation of less healthy food and drink outlets and implement a healthier advertising policy to ensure only healthier foods can be advertised on council-owned advertising assets.

Schools. Ensure there are regular opportunities to consult with pupils and parents about school food provision and gather their feedback.

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Introduction

Schools have unparalleled access to young people throughout their childhood, ultimately presenting a significant window of opportunity to positively influence their health and wellbeing. Evidence shows children who have access to nutritious school food every day have better academic performance, improved lifetime productivity and overall good health [1, 2]. Good school food is important to consider within the current challenges facing child health in England. Currently, most children in England are not eating enough fruits and vegetables and dietary fibre and are exceeding intake recommendations for free sugars and saturated fat [3]. Worryingly, 65% of children's daily energy intake is from ultra processed foods (UPFs), such as pizza, burgers, chips, donuts and cakes [4]. The impact of such poor diets on children's physical and mental health are far ranging; over 20% of children in England who start school are living with overweight or obesity, rising to 36% by Year 6 [5]. A further 16% of Year 6 children have experienced tooth decay [6]. There are also stark health inequalities across England - children living in the most deprived areas are more likely to have overall worse physical and mental health and educational attainment compared to their more affluent peers [7].

As such, serving good quality, nutritious food during the school day can help to address many of these current challenges.

National policy context

The current School Food Standards, mandatory in all maintained schools, new academies and free schools, came into force in January 2015 [8]. The standards, which apply across all food and drink served across the school day, are designed to ensure food provided in schools is nutritious and of high quality, to promote good nutritional health in all pupils and protect those who are nutritionally vulnerable. The standards provide guidance on what food should be served, when and how often. A variety of fruits and vegetables, a starchy food, a protein source and a portion of dairy or dairy alternative should be served every day. Additionally, fresh water should be readily available. Although school governors are responsible for ensuring school food meets the School Food Standards, there is little evidence on how schools implement and monitor compliance. A recent Food for Life investigation discovered at least 60% of schools to be non-complaint with the standards across the school day [9]. To address this, the Department for Education and the Food Standard's Agency commissioned the School Food Standards Compliance Pilot, to identify potential non-compliance alongside food hygiene inspections [10]. Blackpool Council, one of 18 local authorities who took part in the pilot, found too many products cooked in fat or oil, an overreliance of meat/poultry products and UPFs, and a lack of healthy vegetarian and vegan options. Primary schools were found to be meeting more standards than secondary schools, providing an excellent variety of fruits and vegetables and fresh drinking water readily available [11].

Good practice: Further information on Blackpool's experience of the pilot can be found here, and Phase 1 results from all 18 pilot sites can be found here.

About this research

Consultation with members of the Food Active North West network identified concerns regarding secondary schools in particular meeting the SFS, with specific concerns about the types of food being served during breaktime, as well as the food and drink available for pupils beyond the school gates. Additionally, the dining experience was raised as a potential issue, with reports from pupils not having long enough to queue and eat their lunch in the allocated time. This research specifically aimed to explore perspectives from pupils themselves, however insights from other key stakeholders were also included such as headteachers, school cooks and parents. The key four areas explored as part of this research included:

Breaktime food and drink offer: The School Food Plan uncovered break time menus typically served pizzas, paninis, sausage rolls and cake, with many pupils having their main meal of the day at this time, leaving lunchtime free for clubs and activities. Previous fieldwork reported similar findings - parents reported children grabbing a slice of pizza at morning break "because it's a hot meal and it takes too long to get food at lunchtime" [12]. This type of provision indicates non-adherence to the School Food Standards which stipulates 'no snacks, except fruit, vegetables, nuts and seeds (applies across the whole school day) [13].

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Sample breaktime menu

BREAKTIME MENU

Cheese & tomato pizza slice	£1.00
with Topping	£1.00
Filled bagels: Cheese, Cheese & Bacon, Cheese & Ham	£1.80
Cheese & Ham Croissant	£1.80
Pizzini Pizza	£1.80
Panini	£1.80
Pizza Bagel (1/2)	£1.00
Breakfast tray	£1.80
Garlic slice	£1.00
Turkey/beef/veggie/ vegan burger	£1.40
Chicken Epic	£1.80
Chicken Bites (5)	£1.00
Bacon or sausage Bap	£1.40
Sausage Roll	£1.00
Cheese & Onion Slice	£1.10
Hot Dog	£1.40
Quorn Dog	£1.40
Jumbo Hot Dog/Jumbo Quorn Dog	£1.80
Chips/Curly Fries/Lattice/Wedges/ Crispers/Sweet Potato Rustics/Twisters/Diced Potatoes	£1.00

Hash Brown	£1.00
Large Baguette, Vienna Roll, 10" Wrap	£1.80
Mini French Baguette/Sandwich	£1.40
Toast & Flora (2) Toasted Bagel	60P
American Pancake (2)/ Large Sweet Pancakes	£1.00
Croissant/Pain au Chocolat	£1.00
Whole Fruit	80P
Grape Bag/Melon Slice/Pineapple Slice	80P
Chunky Fruit Pot	80P
Sweet Waffle	80P
Mouse/Jelly/Yoghurt Pot/Cheesecake	£1.00
Cookie/Cake/Muffin/Donut	£1.00
Nachos	80P
Baked Crisps/Crisps	£1.00
Seabrook Crisps	80P
Popcorn	£1.00
Scrummy biscuits/Cakes	£1.00

This sample breaktime menu, taken from a secondary school in England, highlights the types of foods typically offered at morning breaktime. It demonstrates the wide variety of hot and cold savoury and sweet foods available, in addition to whole or chopped fruit. Many of the products on this menu might typically contain high levels of salt, fat and sugar, such as pizza, burgers, hot dogs, chips, donuts, waffles and cakes. According to the School Food Standards, many of the products on this menu are not permitted or have limits on how often they can be served throughout the school week. For example, processed meat products like sausages, hot dogs and bacon can only be served a maximum of twice per week (for secondary schools), and sweet products such as croissants, must not be served more than twice per week, as a maximum. This research aims to explore the types of food available, the popularity of breaktime provision, and any changes young people would like to see applied to menus.

The dining environment: This research also set out to establish what pupils think about the school dining environment, specifically: looking at the duration of the lunch break; how long the queues are for food; and, how comfortable the dining area is. Evidence suggests that short lunch breaks may negatively impact children's dietary choices and quantity of the meal consumed [14], with one study reporting students in secondary schools with a lunchtime of 45 minutes or under, less likely to eat a meal [15]. New polling data from The Children's Food Campaign highlighted parent's concerns about shortened lunchtimes causing their children to change to pack lunches, opting to eat more unhealthy snack foods at breaktime or skipping lunch altogether [16]. However, evidence is fairly limited on this topic, with research focusing more on the food itself, rather than the school food environment as a whole.

School food policies: This research also aimed to understand pupils, parents, school cook and headteacher's thoughts regarding existing policies currently in place to promote healthy eating, and any policies and/or initiatives that might be introduced. School food policies can reinforce the School Food Standards within the school environment and demonstrate how schools are committed to promoting healthier food and drink choices for all pupils [17]. For example, some schools have adopted milk or water only policies to promote healthy sources of hydration and good oral health among children [18]. Additionally, adequate hydration has been linked to improved cognitive performance in children [19].

The food environment beyond the school gates: Lastly, the research aimed to explore the type of food available to pupils beyond the school gates, whether young people choose to buy food from local shops, instead of food at school, and the reasons for their choices. A significant body of research suggests the local food environment influences food choices, with young people likely to purchase food from convenience shops, takeaways, bakeries and fast-food outlets [20]. Evidence suggests this is largely influenced by the lack of choice and variety of school food, as well as being able to purchase cheaper food outside of school [21].

This research aims to add insight to inform the emerging evidence base regarding school food provision, and in particular to explore the views of young people regarding their experiences and how this shapes their food choices. The feedback generated through the fieldwork has informed a set of recommendations for schools, local authorities and government to improve pupil's dietary quality during the school day and overall experience of school food, which can be found on Page 32.

Methods

A series of face-to-face focus groups were conducted with secondary school pupils, between 11-14 years of age in Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool, Trafford and Wirral. Approximately 40 pupils were engaged between July 2023-January 2024. Schools were recruited via local authority public health teams from within the Food Active North West network and were offered vouchers for school resources as an incentive for taking part.

Interviews were also conducted with a small number of headteachers, school cooks and parents to further explore some of the issues raised by young people in the focus groups. Participants were offered a gift voucher for taking part in the interviews.

Focus group and interview recordings were transcribed through a professional transcription service, with transcriptions then undergoing thematic analysis. See the Appendices for a list of focus group questions used on Page 36.

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Key findings

The following themes have been drawn out based on the primary aim of sharing the feedback provided by young people in particular, and then supplemented where relevant with additional commentary from parents, headteachers and school cooks.

Breaktime provision is a very popular food service, but healthier options are currently limited

It was clear from the young people taking part that breaktime provision is a popular service which is used regularly by them and their peers. They liked the fact it gives them flexibility in when they can eat, particularly if they haven't had breakfast or want to play sports or engage in other lunch time activities. For some pupils this option was preferred to avoid the canteen during lunchtime, as it is a busy and a stressful environment (see Page 14 for further commentary on this theme).

> *If you want to have a lot at break, then not have lunch, you can do that. If you want to get nothing at break and have a bigger lunch, you can do that.* ***Pupil.***

> *I think it's good, because say you're in a rush and you don't have any time to have breakfast or anything, you can just get a quick thing to eat there, and there's lots of variety as well.* ***Pupil.***

> *We have quite a long morning, so we have a longer morning and a shorter afternoon, so I can imagine they're hungry. I think most adults would be hungry by that time.* ***Headteacher.***

> *To ask children to work through a long morning and not eat until lunchtime is quite a tall order.* ***School cook.***

What types of food and drink are available at breaktime?

On the following page is a word cloud representing the food and drink the young people told us was available for them to buy during break. The most common foods reported were waffles and sweet pastries (croissants and pain au chocolat), pizza, hash browns and other sweet goods such as cookies and brownies. The headteachers and school cooks suggested pizza was also very popular at break. Fruit was mentioned by a few pupils, including sliced melon, pineapple and grapes.

NB. The bigger and bolder the word appears, the more often it was mentioned by the young people we spoke to.

It's very greasy food, the hash browns are really greasy so, it's like is very greasy. The waffles are sugary, you bite in and you just get this massive lump of sugar that has crystallised. It's not that I don't like greasy food, it's that the only things they seem to do on offer, are always the waffles, the bacon barms, and the hash browns and they can be quite greasy. ***Pupil***

Yes, I think a popular food at breaktime is pizzas, they tend to be things like pizzas. Grab and go items really, so it's quick to get them through the queue. ***School cook.***

I wouldn't have thought a pizza was a pre-lunch snack. That's ruining your lunch! ***Parent***

There's a lot of options, the pizza, paninis, pasties, and I don't think there's a lot of veg. Either they could put the veg in the pizzas or the meals themselves, you know, like, you know, mash them up and put them in. ***Parent***

I would expect usual things, such as the fruit, the yoghurt, the toast, the crumpets, that sort of things. No pastries, nothing like that, because that is what I would expect them to be offered as their pudding for lunchtimes. ***Parent.***

Cheese and tomato pizza is definitely the most popular at break – we could sell those three to four times over! But we do make them with wholemeal base and they are only small. ***School cook.***

Yes, I think a popular food at breaktime is pizzas, they tend to be things like pizzas. Grab and go items really, so it's quick to get them through the queue. ***School cook.***

I know they get the pizza bits, and things like that, and I think the introduction of fruit has been good because they are getting a more balanced diet from that. ***Assistant headteacher.***

Good practice: One school recognised that due to the high proportion of pupils on free school meals, many of these children may not have the funds to be able to buy any food at breaktime and were concerned they may be going hungry until lunchtime. They now offer a free fruit pot or cereal bar at breaktime, and this is available for all pupils to reduce stigma. The fruit pots vary from just one fruit to a mixed pot, they are attractively presented and proving popular with pupils.

When asked what changes they'd like to see made to the breaktime provision, some pupils suggested they didn't necessarily want more options – they felt there was already enough available, making it difficult to choose. Whilst other pupils suggested they would like to see cereals, eggs, and different kinds of fruit offered at breaktime.

Cost of food and drink is an important factor for young people, some referenced price increases alongside a reduction in portion sizes

Cost was regularly cited as an important factor when deciding on the type of food and drink to buy during the school day. However, the young people consulted had noticed an increase in prices, in addition to reductions in portion sizes.

Some things have got more expensive, or stayed the same price but a smaller portion is offered – I have noticed this with the fruit pots and some puddings. ***Pupil.***

My mum literally puts in £20 a week for my food money, and it will be gone by Wednesday. ***Pupil.***

It's like, you used to have a cookie and it was quite big and it would fill up some of the packet it was in, but it's now the same price but it's half the size of the packet, it looks really small and it's not as big anymore. ***Pupil.***

The food portions have gone down. Last time we complained about this, they made the portions bigger but now we've come back after the holidays they have reduced again. ***Pupil.***

My daughter has told me that things are smaller portions, they're restricted to certain items that they can get at certain times, which I didn't know about, and it's really a first come, first serve basis, so if they run out then the choice is gone. ***Parent.***

Portion sizes: A school taking part in the research explained the school council had reported small food portions, suggesting that the portion size should change depending on the age of the pupil. However, canteen staff said they use utensils based on government guidance, and they measure portion sizes according to guidelines.

My son's school only offers meal deals, so he can't just buy a panini and a drink. He has to have the meal deal which includes a biscuit and that then bumps up the price. He has to take a biscuit whether he likes or not. I think they should individually price things, and then it could put the price down for students. ***Parent.***

My husband's the only one working, so we're on a budget, so I put a certain amount on, so by Wednesday, if he has something for break, the money I put in is finished. I put £15 on, and by Wednesday, it's gone. That's like a fiver a day for one child, and that's not including breakfast at home and the meal after. Because we don't get any benefits, we don't get any support from the government, families like us struggle. ***Parent.***

Young people consistently raised issues about the chaotic and stressful nature of the dining space, and lengthy queues

It was evident from the young people taking part in this research that lunchtimes are considered stressful and, in some cases, not a pleasurable experience. Many reported queues being very long and cramped, with older year groups pushing in the queue, bad behaviour and hence waiting in the queue takes up the majority of their free time at lunch.

But the thing is, most of the queues are cramped. Like they're way too small and lots of people are pushing in and it's not nice. ***Pupil.***

It can get really hot waiting in line for lunch, we are all pushed up against a wall because there isn't enough space for everyone. ***Pupil.***

It gets absolutely crowded most days and if you're not there in the first 30 seconds, there's a queue right out of the door, so, it gets really annoying. ***Pupil.***

Because we aren't allowed to go to the toilet during lesson time, you have to choose whether you want food or whether you want to go to the toilet. ***Pupil.***

We do sometimes struggle to get all 950 students through the queues on a Friday when fish and chips are on the menu. ***Assistant headteacher.***

My daughter takes a packed lunch anyway at lunchtime, because it's too stressful. ***Parent.***

Sometimes he runs out of time because the lesson goes over and he's not able to make it, and also the length of the queue. So sometimes, he is not able to get hot food, so he has to go to the food queue where it's cold sandwiches. He prefers the hot option. ***Parent.***

Most days, my daughter tends to not have lunch and she just eats like when she comes home because of the queue. ***Parent.***

You've got children pushing in front, elbowing each other, taking food off each other's plates. It's not manned, it's not staffed, and then if you've got a child who's last, and then something's not on the menu, that's it, they don't get that option because it's gone, so it doesn't seem to be well thought out. ***Parent.***

Some reported other concerns with the dining environment such as uncomfortable seating and lack of space during busy lunch periods, which deters pupils from spending time in dining spaces to eat and socialise.

I grab my food and go – I don't want to spend time there eating because it is unclean and messy. ***Pupil.***

[the benches] they're all cramped there and then there's no way for you to get out, so you get stuck. Some more space would be good. ***Pupil.***

Whilst some pupils suggested there is plenty of seating, others said there is not enough space for all pupils to sit down and eat their lunch.

There's rows of benches but they're all cramped and then there's no way for you to get out. ***Pupil.***

I've been to my son's school and there's not much of a dining area, so where the reception is, you go past the reception and there's like a corridor, and it's not much of a dining area. ***Pupil.***

There are lots of tables, benches as well, so we're not short on seating. ***Pupil.***

Yes, there's always enough room for everyone to sit down and you know, find a space. My daughter has never had a problem with that. ***Parent.***

Young people expressed a preference for 'grab and go' options during lunchtime, so that they don't spend their whole lunch queuing for food. Some pupils described bags containing a sandwich, drink and dessert such as a cookie, however others suggested there are also hot options for grab and go bags, such as hot baguettes.

Sometimes people don't go to the canteen, because a lot of people are pushing in the queue and they just want to grab and go, so they get grab bags, because they don't want to be taking too long. ***Pupil.***

You get like, a flavoured water, you get a dessert, which is cookies or anything and then you get a sandwich, which is ham with butter, there's Cajun chicken something. ***Pupil.***

Lunchtimes are too short, and many young people report issues such as running out of food and making compromises on other activities such as clubs and sport in order to eat

Compounding the stressful nature of lunchtimes could be the little time pupils have for lunch. There was a strong consensus from the young people consulted that lunchtimes were too short, averaging at around 25-55 minutes, some had noticed a decrease during their time at school. They simply felt that this was not long enough to be able to queue, sit down and eat a full meal and this can result in them being late to lessons, sacrificing clubs or skipping lunch.

We literally have 25 minutes to queue for lunch and eat – the teachers are always rushing us, and we end up being late for lessons because we don't have enough time to eat. ***Pupil.***

Lots of people are late for lessons, because by the time they've got their food, it's five minutes before we go back to lessons. ***Pupil.***

There was 2 minutes to the end of break and there were still people waiting in line at the canteen to get lunch. ***Pupil.***

When I was in Year 7, it was an hour, but lunch has actually got a bit shorter over the last couple of years, it's only about 45 minutes now. ***Pupil.***

I don't think lunchtimes are long enough because sometimes like, you spend like 25 minutes out of the half an hour in the queue like to get your food so by the time you've gotten it and sat down you have already got to go to lesson so you have to like eat it on the way to your lesson. ***Pupil.***

These lengthy queues mean 'grab and go' options are popular with the pupils we spoke to – particularly those who take part in clubs at lunchtime.

Sometimes you have clubs and competitions that you're going to go to and sometimes you want a quick meal, you might take them around places because it's not like, on plates and needs like, knives and forks and that. ***Pupil.***

I have gymnastics club at lunch so don't have time to queue for a hot meal and eat it – I just grab something quick. ***Pupil.***

Also, if you do clubs and you wait to get your food, say I'm doing volleyball and I haven't eaten and I'm really hungry and I go to the quick canteen and it's shut down, it doesn't stay open all lunch. ***Pupil.***

She hasn't been able to get lunch when she's been going to a club within her lunchtime, so sometimes I provide her with a snack in case she didn't get time to get what she wanted, or it would be by the time she got to the front of the queue, there wasn't enough time, it would be a snack and a drink, not actually a main meal for her lunch. ***Parent.***

It's hard because the school provide these clubs within the lunch hour for them to take up, but then it does then go into the time that they're going to spend eating. ***Parent.***

There was a desire from pupils for lunch to be extended, particularly given the length of time spent waiting in queues. An individual school reported they were increasing lunchtime from 35 minutes to 45 minutes in the following academic year, and pupils expressed that between 45 minutes and an hour would be a more preferable duration.

In my old school, in summertime, we always have an hour for lunch. ***Pupil.***

Because it feels like at lunch that like even though we have half an hour it just feels like it goes fast. Maybe they could add on like everybody's time for like I don't know, an extra 15 minutes or something. ***Pupil.***

Many pupils raised concerns about how often the kitchen runs out of food, meaning they often have to settle for something they don't like for lunch, or just wait until school is finished to buy something on their way home or when they get home.

Almost every single lunchtime the pasta bar completely runs out. Once that food runs out, you've got a doughnut or a drink. ***Pupil.***

I just sometimes don't eat lunch, not because I don't want it because there is nothing there or there is no time. ***Pupil.***

It's annoying when they run out, can't they restock maybe halfway through? ***Pupil.***

There are no restock at all for lunch really, there's like two trays and that's that, you're going to have to make do, if you don't get lunch, you don't get lunch. ***Pupil****.*

My daughter wanted something particular, she was looking forward to it, and it'd ran out, and then she got something that she just didn't like at all, so she didn't have anything for lunch, so that's why now, she never has a hot meal in school. ***Parent.***

Young people frequently noted the poor quality and limited variety of foods being served across the school day and want to see this improved.

A number of pupils commented that the food served at school can be unappealing, such as not being cooked properly, the taste is lacking, or it isn't served or presented well.

From the start of last week, I've started to bring my own food in because I can't cope with that food in the canteen. ***Pupil.***

Sometimes people will grab a bagel but throw it in the bin straight away because it is untoasted with no spread, or sometimes they are soggy. ***Pupil.***

The paninis definitely differ in quality I would say. I've had an absolutely burnt one before and then one was slightly overcooked. ***Pupil.***

There's always loads of water at the bottom of the cup, like red water, that they serve the pasta in. They slop it all in there, but then you can see all this water, pour into the cup, it's really unappetising. ***Pupil.***

At lunch let's say chips, they're like hard like potatoes like they haven't even been cooked. cooked. Like they've only been dipped in the fryer for a minute. ***Pupil.***

My son thinks it's quite unhealthy because the pizza that's being sold at school, it's more like oily, so it could be healthier. The food could be healthier and also, more fruits could be introduced. ***Parent.***

My daughter said she's not happy with the food, she goes the standards have fallen. The quality of the food. ***Parent.***

Others reported the lack of variety of foods being offered, particularly how often foods with tomato sauce are available.

Sometimes I just take plain pasta because that's the only thing that's there because I don't like tomato sauce, that's the only thing that you can have with it. ***Pupil.***

Honestly, the flavours currently are basically, tomato, tomato with meat, tomato with a different meat, tomato with basil, tomato, and tomato. It's a lot of tomato. ***Pupil.***

Young people were typically unfamiliar with schools offering healthy eating initiatives or aware of any policies relating to provision of healthier options.

The pupils we spoke to as part of this research were not familiar with any specific school policies or initiatives and commented on the lack of information provided about nutrition and healthy eating.

Since I've been here, I think I've done like three lessons on healthy eating. I've been here for three years. ***Pupil.***

I think they should make a poster of why we should eat healthy foods every single day, and five fruits a day, so it can motivate other kids to eat fruits. ***Pupil.***

We tried a meat-free Monday, but it wasn't very successful. Most of the children were asking whether it was going to be a regular thing because they said, well if it was, they're going to bring packed lunch, so it didn't go down very well, so we don't do that anymore. ***Assistant headteacher.***

I've been here for 10 years and there's nothing that I can think, oh we've had a big push on healthy eating or anything like that. ***Assistant headteacher.***

We've removed popular foods such as chips, slushies and fruit juice as they aren't very good for them and to try and promote healthier eating. ***Headteacher.***

Young people had lots of ideas on how to encourage healthier eating in school, including making healthier foods more appealing, changes to pricing, providing more information, introducing gardening clubs and restricting the promotion of less healthy options when paying.

When asked how the school could better promote healthier eating, young people suggested a range of different ideas, including giving pupils' choice by offering more fruits and vegetables and ensuring they are fresh, appealing and a variety of types served, increasing the price of less healthy options to act as a disincentive and limiting the amount of less healthy food pupils can buy.

There's like no vegetables anywhere. I'm not saying I want vegetables all the time but to have the option to have vegetables would be good. The only time you can get vegetables is with a chicken wrap and for the past four times I've had chicken wrap they've run out of salad. I don't think any of us are saying we want organic food every single day, but it's just having more variety than lettuce leaves. ***Pupil.***

It would be nice to have maybe a couple of times a term, just to have fruit that is properly fresh, chopped up and served on a platter. ***Pupil.***

Everything right now is expensive, but if they made the pizza a bit more expensive than the fruit pots and everything, then people would want it, because they think it's a better deal. ***Pupil.***

I think they should put a limit on how much unhealthy food you can have, to stop people from having loads of food. ***Pupil.***

Suggestions included how pupils may be incentivised to buy healthier food and drink in school through a stamp or loyalty scheme and catering staff encouraging pupils to have a portion of salad with their meal.

I've got this idea so like, every time someone gets healthy food, they get a stamp and the person with the most stamps at the end of the day, they can get prizes and stuff like that. ***Pupil.***

I think with the policies, I think they need to sit down with parents and pupils and see what they need, because it's them that are affected especially the pupils. ***Parent.***

I think eating habits stem from like in school as well. They need to build those healthy eating habits in school, whereas you might find, even my daughter in primary school, she goes, somebody brought in a Vimto, and their parents were called in to remove that Vimto from the child. ***Parent.***

One young person also suggested that canteen staff promote less healthy options to pupils when they are paying for food and drinks and want to see healthier options promoted instead.

> *You know when you buy food and then they ask you, when you pay for the food, do you want like, a Coco Pop bar, so they're promoting unhealthy food. Instead, when we are paying, they can have like, fruit bowls and you can just take a piece of fruit.* ***Pupil.***

Another pupil suggested they would like to see their school re-introduce the gardening club, which grew produce such as strawberries and raspberries.

> *They could take one part in the field and make that a green class maybe so that you can plant and that means you can save money. If you want salad, you can grow some lettuce, toward and keep them there.* ***Pupil.***

Places to buy food on a pupil's journey to school are generally dominated by less healthy options, and these are popular, attractive and convenient for young people when compared to the offer within schools.

The young people consulted reported there are a number of different places to buy food and drink near school, and that these were attractive options and are used frequently by pupils.

> *I can easily walk to McDonalds, Greggs, Subway and a chippy from my school.* ***Pupil.***

> *There's a KFC and Chester's at the top of the road.* ***Pupil.***

> *A lot of people go to this shop, it's just down the road from some schools, so it's easy for people to just go there and get some quick takeaways.* ***Pupil.***

> *There are at least five food shops on my way to school – butty shop, chicken shop, Tesco, chippy, Lidl. Loads of pupils go into the butty shop, its literally round the corner and for kids its £1 and you can get sausage, egg, hash brown and bacon bap.* ***Pupil.***

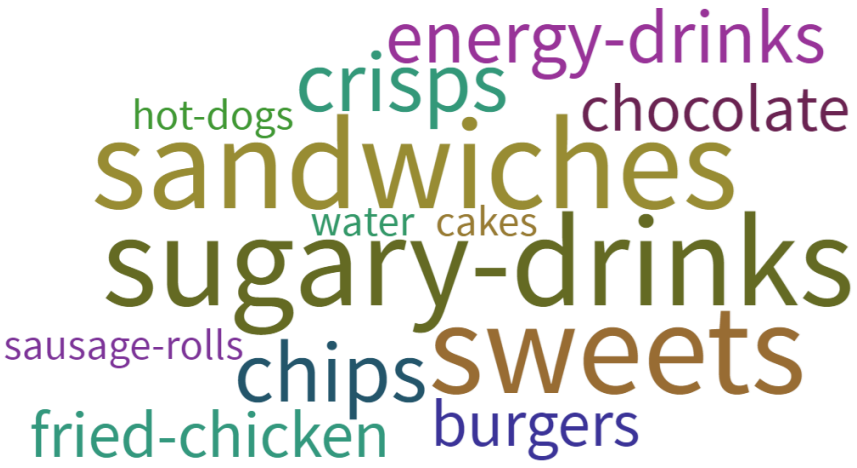
> *There is a Premier that is literally just across the road. I bet you they are making a fortune. They sell sweets, slush puppies, crisps and sandwiches and all that. That's why everybody goes there like once I saw like a massive 10-foot line going in there.* ***Pupil***

> *[the students] They do tend to bring extra money to go after school with their friends and go to the takeaways, yes definitely.* ***Assistant headteacher.***

> *For pupils getting the bus, the McDonalds becomes like a regular stopping point before they get the bus.* ***Parent.***

When asked what type of food pupils can typically buy near school and/or on their way to and from school, those reported are largely less healthy options and are presented in the word cloud below.

What types of food and drink can young people buy near their school?



NB. The bigger and bolder the word appears, the more often it was mentioned by the young people we spoke to.

You know, there's something wrong about the shops that I go to, they don't have any healthy stuff there, they only have like, candy, sweet and drinks. They don't have vegetables or fruits there. ***Pupil.***

There is this little shop called Bargain Booze near the school and because it's near our bus stop it's really close to the school. They sell loads of sweets and crisps and fizzy drinks and stuff. We buy it but it's really expensive, the food is really bad for you but sometimes, you're hungry and you've got a long journey home, you just buy it anyway. ***Pupil.***

We usually go to Poundland because it's cheaper, its usually things are a pound or slightly more than a pound. Most of the stuff is sweets and fizzy drinks and things like that. ***Pupil.***

The reasons why young people buy food from these places were due to the convenience, appeal to young people and in some cases, it is easier than queuing up and buying food in school.

It's faster and sometimes cheaper, than school, because you have to queue up and everything, where there, you can just take, and buy, and go. ***Pupil.***

It's convenient and it's on the way. ***Pupil.***

It's [the shops] got a load of things that are targeted towards kids, like certain drinks and that, so when you go in, you know, you see a lot of things and you buy it. The drinks are brightly coloured you know and they're cheap. ***Pupil.***

Some students said eating healthily was difficult because healthy food is so expensive, and less healthy food and drink is heavily marketed to them to make it look more appealing.

I feel like unhealthy food just looks more aesthetically pleasing, from the packaging and all of that. Just normal food, healthy food, it doesn't look that exciting to some people. ***Pupil.***

The corner shop by my school just sells junk food, there is a small section for fruit, but it doesn't look appealing and is so expensive. ***Pupil.***

I see junk food adverts all the time on TikTok – they make the food look so tasty. ***Pupil***

I went to the shop to get some strawberries – I had £3 – that wasn't enough for strawberries, or even blueberries, so I gave up and got a big packet of crisps instead. ***Pupil.***

The healthy stuff is nowhere near the stuff that they want the kids to buy. If you want the healthy stuff, it's at the back of the shops hidden where none of the kids go. ***Pupil.***

Schools are taking steps to address many of the issues reported by pupils, including introducing rotas at lunchtime and converting other spaces such as the hall into seating areas, but challenges remain.

The schools taking part in this research recognised some of the concerns reported by pupils in the focus groups and have been trying to address issues such as long queues, poor behaviour and lack of seating. Below are some of the changes and plans the headteachers and school cooks fed back during the interviews:

- Ensuring a senior member of staff and a teacher are present every day on duty to control behaviour in the queue, which has been beneficial.
- Giving Year 7s extra time to come in, choose their meals and feel comfortable instead of having to wait in line with older pupils.
- Introducing rotas for year groups has helped to reduce overcrowding for some schools. Others suggested they had tried staggered lunchtimes, but this came at a cost as clubs couldn't run as teachers would still be in class teaching and it posed challenges in terms of staff duty and supervision. Hiring an external catering company for older pupils, was tested, set up in the outside terraced area to reduce queues and pressures on the cooks. However, as the school doesn't own the building they are bound by contractual agreements and this wouldn't be suitable all year round, particularly during the colder months and therefore this means all five-year groups have to go for lunch at the same time.
- Providing multiple service points for food across school premises has helped to reduce the queues in one school; by providing more options for pupils and this also helps to spread them out across the school premises rather than one main dining space.
- Through consultation with the school council, where the lack of dining space was raised as an issue, the school now open the hall and set up dining tables during lunch to provide more space for pupils. This was a welcomed move, and the space is regularly used by pupils during lunchtime. This however means the hall cannot be used for approximately 30 minutes before and after lunchtime, to allow the caretaker to set up and take down this additional seating area.

- Another school regularly has conversations with the senior leadership team, who actively try to gather feedback from students on the food offer.
- As students are not permitted to take plates and cutlery outside of the main dining area in one school, takeaway tubs are offered for food to allows pupils to take their food away and eat in other communal areas of the school. This has helped to reduce overcrowding in the dining area. However, on days with poor weather, the additional spaces tend to be out of use, clearly affecting the dining space.
- A planned consultation on extending lunch, to include parents, pupils and other key stakeholders.
- Introduction of a pre-ordering system for lunch, so pupils can quickly collect their food as opposed to waiting in the main queue. However, students reported issues such as pre-order's being given away if not collected within 15 minutes, which is a challenge for those playing sport at lunch. Students also reported they felt awkward accessing their pre-orders as they have to go to the front of the queue, meaning other pupils think they are pushing in, and this can make them feel nervous. One of the parents consulted through this research suggested pre-ordering meals would help.

We used to get complaints every now and then about children not having had their lunch, that they'd waited for so long, and sometimes you kind of had to take it with a pinch of salt, because when you actually spoke to them, they'd either been playing and they didn't get there on time. Since the rota has been introduced, I've not had a single complaint that a child's had to wait too long for a lunch, so it definitely works. ***Headteacher.***

We also have a senior member of staff and a teacher who pretty much do every day on duty, and that's helped a lot in terms of controlling the queue. ***Headteacher.***

However, headteachers and school cooks were also aware of a number of ongoing challenges relating to issues with IT systems, student cards, autonomy on food choice and their lack of power to influence the food available to pupils beyond the school gates.

We've had some issues with technology, they have to swipe a dinner card, and that hasn't been working, but it's up and running again now. ***Headteachers.***

What doesn't help with the queues is when children forget their student cards which means our staff have to type and find their name on the system to card their account when paying. ***School cook.***

Sometimes it's actually quite difficult to control what they eat, because even when you provide them with what's relatively healthy, if they make the wrong choices, they can have quite an unhealthy lunch. there's probably too much autonomy in terms of what they eat. ***Headteacher.***

I think the problem is, because we're a school that is situated right in the town centre, there are lots of places to buy food on our doorstep whereas sometimes you'll have schools that are actually quite remote, and they don't have access to an awful lot. I think it would be very difficult for us as a school to determine what the people living in our local have access to, so, I think that would be very difficult for us to have any influence on. ***Headteacher.***

In relation to the quality of food being provided at schools, the schools we spoke to were satisfied and some had suggested recent changes to staff had resulted in improvements in the quality of food offered.

The food itself serves a purpose and fills them up. And I think it's a good thing it does fill them up. ***Assistant headteacher.***

The food itself serves a purpose and fills them up. And I think it's a good thing it does fill them up. ***Assistant headteacher.***

I've been working at this school for 10 years now, and I think from students', and my own point of view, I think the food that's on offer this year has been the best, as in they do like the food. You have more students that are queuing for it, whereas I remember a few years back when students would just rather wait until the end of the day, go home, and eat. ***Assistant headteacher.***

We have recently had a change in school cook and our food provision has changed dramatically since the change of school cook, and some of the food that comes out of the canteen is much tastier, much healthier, and much more appealing, so that's been a real positive change for us. ***Assistant headteacher.***

Parents also had suggestions for schools to consider to create a more positive food experience.

I think they should staff the queues, make sure that children who are quiet are getting options and choices. I think they need to maybe communicate better with the families to know how many people are going to want hot meals, you know, so they don't run out of things. ***Parent***.

To help with the queuing situation, I think the children should be able to pre-order their meals the night before. ***Parent***.

Just give them options and then obviously, do something about the queues, isn't it? That's the main put up isn't it, the queues? ***Parent.***

I think schools need to encourage healthier options, rather than like, they have, I don't know if his school has caterers because I think mainly these days, it's ready meals. Like, the pizzas, the pasties, they're already pre-made. ***Parent.***

In primary schools, when they change the menus, they bring in the parents to taste the food, get opinions. I think that would be better for the high school to do as well. Bring in the parents, taste the food if, you know, see what they think and maybe look at the pricing as well of certain things, and you know, not doing meal deals. ***Parent.***

Discussion

Breaktime food and drink offer

Food served at breaktime is not an area of provision that is frequently explored in research; however, it was clear from the young people who contributed to the focus groups that this is a very popular service within the school day. It is also proving an important source of food for some young people, who may choose to eat their main meal at break given the number of issues pupils reported about lunchtime service. Some schools have quite a lengthy morning period, starting at 8:30am and with lunch not until 1:15pm, and therefore food served at breaktime can help to fuel pupils through this stretch of the day.

However, the types of foods and drinks available at break, as reported by the young people, are of clear concern and this research suggests the offer is dominated by less healthy options and may not be meeting the School Food Standards. This is similar to the findings of a report by Guys and St Thomas's Charity, which also reported secondary schools offering largely carbohydrate-heavy foods with baked goods such as pizza, burgers, toasted sandwiches, sausage rolls, chicken nuggets or wings, cookies and pastries and at 60% of the secondary schools reviewed, the food on offer at break times would fail to meet School Food Standards. The report also suggested schools are often not aware that break time food is covered by School Food Standards, which may explain why the food being offered is not compliant. This therefore suggests there is a need for more training and awareness of the standards among the workforce. Headteachers and school cooks also suggested that some of the less healthy food options, such as pizza, are very popular with young people. Parents also felt that the types of food offered at break were not appropriate for the time of day and could reduce appetite for lunch.

However, the issue of non-compliance is unlikely to be identified as there is no national mandate to monitor the implementation of the School Food Standards. It was promising to see the Food Standards Agency and Department for Education commission a compliance pilot across 18 sites in England in 2022-23: Phase 1 results suggest the process of incorporating checks into the role of Food Safety officers can help to improve compliance, however several improvements were also identified. The important learning generated from this pilot should be shared nationally to consider how local authorities can be supported further to ensure there is capacity for Food Safety Officers to take on this important role. Trading Standards is a sector which is often under-resourced yet holds a number of responsibilities relating to food hygiene and safety inspections, as well as enforcement of legislation to restrict the promotion of less healthy food and drink by place (i.e. checkouts, store entrances and end of aisles). Phase 2 of the compliance pilot is underway to explore the feasibility of an updated monitoring design, informed by the Phase 1 findings and is expected to be published imminently (Spring 2024) [22]. Learning more about the findings from this second phase will play a key role in placing a greater emphasis on schools meeting the School Food Standards and help to increase understanding and awareness of the standards within the school catering workforce.

Breaktime is clearly a popular food service for young people, particularly considering the challenges relating to lunchtime service. However, improvements need to be made to ensure this is meeting the School Food Standards and students are provided with a balanced offer at breaktime should they wish to eat during this time. There is also a concern that pupils may be filling up at break, skipping lunch and then taking advantage of the wide range of food and drink outlets available to them as the leave the school gates.

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The dining environment

Lunchtime should be an enjoyable time to socialise with friends and have a break from learning. This research demonstrates that many of the pupils consulted feel overwise, it is apparent that the queues were a concern for young people, and parents. Conversely, the headteachers and school cook discussed what changes they've made and that the queues were improving. Similar concerns regarding the length of queues, and the impact this has on pupil's eating habits, have been noted in other pieces of research [23, 24].

The pupils taking part in the research, suggested they had to compromise between getting lunch or taking part in lunchtime clubs and sports. If they chose to play sport, this often results in some parts of the lunch service being closed, and food or time running out. These barriers may also act as a disincentive for pupils to engage in extra-curricular activities, including physical activity, during their lunch hour.

On top of the lengthy queues, the young people we spoke to felt that lunch was simply too short and an overall reduction in time for lunchtime breaks has been reported nationally [25]. This is important to consider given there is evidence to suggest that shorter lunch breaks are associated with less healthy dietary choices by students [26], for example the 'grab and go' options that many pupils discussed in this research.

Improving the dining experience can have benefits for a variety of reasons. Research suggests this can have a beneficial impact on students' behaviour, resulting in improved independent study skills [27] and can help to increase uptake of school meals [28]. The findings from this report suggest that a poor dining environment can put pupils off using the school canteen entirely.

Whilst not directly asked, the pupils consulted were keen to feedback about the quality of food generally being provided at school, the poorer quality food being reported in some instances may also be a factor affecting school meal uptake. It is clear pupils want to see better quality and tastier foods being served. Parents also fed back similar concerns, yet headteachers and school cooks appeared confident the offer was serving a purpose, and pupils were satisfied.

School food policies

There was little knowledge of policies or initiatives designed to promote healthy eating reported by the pupils in the schools engaged in this research. However, some schools had taken steps to provide free fruit and remove items that are less healthy, such as chips, from the menu.

Furthermore, the opportunities for learning about a healthy diet and practical cookery were also limited in the students we spoke to. Whilst food education forms part of the national curriculum, in 2016, Food & Nutrition was removed from the A-Level curriculum by the Department for Education following extensive reforms. A survey with secondary school food teachers found that many believe this has led to a reduction in food and nutrition education at KS3 level and funding for teaching food in many schools [29]. This may help to explain the lack of learning opportunities around food, nutrition and practical cookery reported by the students consulted in this research. However, both the pupils and the parents we spoke to suggested they felt the school could do more and suggested some fantastic ideas including promoting healthier eating, making healthier options more available and appealing and more.

A coherent whole school food approach to healthy eating has the potential to significantly improve a young person's food choice, therefore impacting the nutrient intake and potentially the health and wellbeing of not only pupils, but staff too. This is a positive opportunity for schools, yet research suggests there is a gap in the understanding of how effective secondary school food policy can be implemented and sustained, which therefore may be hampering progress to improving school food provision and nutrition education [30], such issues which have been reported in this research. Further support, resources and tools for schools are clearly needed to enable schools to adopt a whole school food policy.

There are examples of good practice underway across England which are supporting schools to adopt school food policies, including the Healthy Zones programme in boroughs across London; the Food for Life Schools Award; Milk or Water Only Policies in Cheshire West and Chester and Greater London; Whole School Food Policy guidance across Leeds and more.

Food and drink beyond the school gates

Stores selling less healthy food and drink nearby to schools are a clear concern and may be negatively impacting on the diets of young people. The pupils, parents and headteachers consulted all reported a range of different food and drink outlets accessible to pupils on their journey to school and as they leave the school gates. These outlets and the foods available are a popular choice and may be even more attractive given the range of issues reported by pupils relating to accessing food within the school setting. Headteachers consulted through the research were aware of this but were uncertain of how they could influence or change this.

In recent years, local authorities in particular have sought to utilise different levers to promote healthier food environments for their residents, and in particular children and young people. This has included implementing hot food takeaway exclusion zones within 400m of schools or in areas with the highest level of children with obesity, running healthier catering schemes with local food and drink outlets [31, 32, 33] and adopting healthier advertising policies [34].

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The latter is a growing movement, spurred by the Transport for London's policy adopted in 2019, and has now been implemented by over 10 councils across England which stipulates only adverts that feature healthier foods and drink (typically defined by the Nutrient Profiling Model*) can be placed on council-owned advertising estate (for example billboards, street lights and other spaces) [35].

Some pupils also recognised the influence food marketing has on the choices they make, and are aware companies are targeting them to purchase less healthy products. The government had outlined plans to restrict advertisements for less healthy food and drink before 9pm on TV and similar restrictions online as part of the National Obesity Strategy in 2020; which would help to take less healthy food and drink out of the spotlight of children's media. However, in 2022 the government delayed this legislation until October 2025, and this has been heavily criticised by campaigners [36]. There is a strong body of evidence that shows exposure to advertising of less healthy food and drink can influence children's eating preferences, brand awareness, food intake and BMI [37]. There is strong support from the public for restrictions on such marketing; polling data commissioned by the Obesity Health Alliance suggested that 8 out of 10 UK adults support the Government banning advertising of unhealthy food on TV (79%) and online (81%) to kids [38]. This research and voices from the Bite Back youth board have consistently highlighted the sheer volume and impact this advertising can have on them [39]; the case for action is clear and the government should bring forward the legislation as soon as possible and prioritise children's health.

**The Nutrient Profiling Model was developed by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) in 2004-2005 as a tool to help Ofcom differentiate foods and improve the balance of television advertising to children. The model uses a simple scoring system where points are allocated on the basis of the nutrient content of 100g of a food or drink.*

These findings in context of the wider, systemic challenges currently facing schools.

The themes drawn from this research suggest that the current food culture within schools could be improved further, particularly in the face of attractive options beyond the school gates. Many of the pupils consulted are purchasing food elsewhere, often spending their money on less healthy options. A number of pupils and parents also stated they now take a packed lunch or wait until they get home after school to eat due to being dissatisfied with their schools' offer.

It is important however to consider these issues in the wider context of the significant number of challenges schools are facing at present. Many of the issues reported in this research are subsequent effects of wider systemic issues, many beyond school's control. The cost-of-living crisis and rising food inflation has resulted in school kitchens facing a number of challenges in providing high quality, nutritious meals that meet the School Food Standards. For 2023/24, the government increased funding for universal and means-tested free school meals by 5% from £2.41 to £2.53 per child [40]. Campaigners believe this is simply not enough to cover the rising cost of food, staff costs and energy costs and will ultimately result in a compromising of the quality of foods served whilst trying to meet the current School Food Standards.

Furthermore, for the 2022/23 academic year, the Department for Education reported almost 1 in 5 secondary schools are at or over capacity, up from a low of 14% in 2014/15 [41]. This is evidently having an impact at mealtimes and adding to the pressures of ensuring children get through the lunch break and resulting in lengthy queues, lack of seating and running out of food during lunch service as reported in this research. In addition, pressing concerns such as poor behaviour, school absenteeism, staff retention and recruitment, educational attainment and funding gaps often take priority; unfortunately, resulting in food provision and school food policies falling down the priority list.

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Conclusions

Schools are an ideal setting to promote health and wellbeing and positive dietary habits; and whilst there is some good practice demonstrated via this research, it is evident there are areas that schools are consistently struggling with, and parents and pupils want to see further changes made to improve the overall food experience in schools.

It was apparent from the focus groups that young people were keen to share their experiences of school food provision; and offered plenty of practical suggestions on how improvements can be implemented to enhance their overall experience. Schools should be encouraged to recognise this and utilise student feedback regularly, alongside that provided via other mechanisms such as the school council. Whilst schools have several limitations regarding changing provision (due to contracts etc.), utilising feedback would provide opportunities to review and adapt to meet the needs of pupils and ensure eating and dining is perceived as a pleasurable part of the school day, the offer is attractive, varied and nutritious, and the environment becomes a calm space to socialise with friends. On some issues, in particular the lengthy queues, opinions varied, pupils felt strongly on this issue, and recognised this as a barrier yet school staff felt improvements had been made. This point highlights an opportunity to undertake further consultation with pupils, regarding their experiences.

As discussed in the early stages of this report, good school food plays a key role in increasing opportunities for pupils to access a healthy and nutritious diet. This is especially relevant in the current economic climate where healthy foods are over twice as expensive per calorie as less healthy foods [42]. Furthermore, there is potential to address health inequalities through access to good school food. For pupils who are in receipt of free school meals, school lunch may be their main, or in some cases their only, meal of the day, therefore it is critical the food provided at school is as nutritious as possible. In addition to providing good food, providing an enjoyable, positive dining experience for pupils to eat and socialise and promoting healthy behaviours can lead to improved behaviour and educational attainment, whilst supporting healthy relationships with food. The opportunities to best support our future generations with access to good food are more important than ever – schools are aware of this but are struggling to prioritise this due to the array of challenges they are currently facing.

Schools are under increasing pressure, but government support has not increased. This holds the key to unlocking a much-needed revolution of school food.

Recommendations

Schools need support from national and local government to be able to address the concerns raised within this report. A range of recommendations are detailed below that seek to bridge this gap and may go some way in bringing about longer-term, sustainable change. A number of recommendations have also been set out for schools to consider how they can start to embed a good food culture and consult with pupils and parents. These recommendations have been informed by the findings of this research and prioritised to align with the Food Active policy calls.

National government

- Review and increase funding for school food provision, specifically: increasing the funding per pupil to ensure this enables schools to provide high quality, healthy and sustainable meals that meet the School Food Standards; funding to improve school buildings and facilities, particularly in schools that are at or over capacity, to improve the dining and school kitchen facilities to ensure there is sufficient space to cater for all pupils.
- Review the average school day, to mandate protected mealtimes and ensure sufficient opportunities for pupils to take part in extracurricular activities to promote health and wellbeing.
- Review and update the School Food Standards in line with latest dietary guidance, as promised in the Childhood Obesity Plan Chapter 1.
- Consider the learning generated from the School Food Standards compliance pilot in 2022-23 to replicate this nationally, ensuring that sufficient resources and funding are provided to both local authorities and schools for implementation. To include more staff training for school cooks on the School Food Standards to improve awareness across the workforce.

Local government

- Consider the school fringe, utilising planning levers to restrict the proliferation of less healthy food and drink outlets and implement a healthier advertising policy to ensure only healthier foods can be advertised on council-owned advertising assets.
- Consider taking a whole systems approach to promote healthier weight across the borough, to include engaging with schools and providing support to take steps to promote healthier eating and physical activity within the school setting.
- Explore opportunities to influence improved quality and healthier food provision through procurement and catering contracts.

Schools

- Ensure there are regular opportunities to consult with pupils and parents about school food provision and gather their feedback.
- Co-produce and implement a whole school food policy to apply to food provision across the school day and wider learning opportunities through extra -curricular activities.
- Consider how choice architecture and incentivisation can be utilised to promote healthier choices for pupils and avoid promoting less healthy options to pupils in the canteen and through meal deals.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Pupil focus group

Break time food provision

- Tell me what types of food and drinks are served at breaktime, what can you typically buy and where from? What are some of the most popular items?
- What do you think about the type of food and drink served at breaktime – Prompts: think about the cost, how appealing it is, how healthy it is.
- Is there anything you would like to see different about the breakfast and breaktime menu? What foods and drinks are missing from the menu?
- Does the cost of food help you decide what food you are going to buy at school?

School dining environment

- Put your hands up if you go to the canteen at lunch. (For those who don't, why not?)
- How long do you get for lunch? Is it enough time to get yourself something to eat?
- What are the queues and seating area like at lunchtime? How do you feel about that?

Support for wider school initiatives

- Do you have any ideas on what your school could do to encourage pupils to make healthier choices? Prompts: make healthy options cheaper, offer less sweets and chocolate, more PE, healthier school meals.

Wider school food environment

- Describe what type of shops you visit before or after school, and the types of food you buy.
- Why do you choose to go to these shops?
- How close are these places to your school?
- In your opinion, what makes it harder to make healthy choices when it comes to food and drink.

Appendix 2: Parent, headteacher and school cook focus group questions

Please note these questions were used as a basis and adapted depending on the interviewee.

- What types of food are available to pupils at your school during breaktime? What is most popular with children?
- Do you think this offer could be improved to better support their health and wellbeing?
- Describe the set up at dinner time for pupils. How long do they get for lunch?
- As a school, have you implemented any policies that aim to improve pupils' access to a healthy diet? Have you tried anything in the past that hasn't worked?
- What are your thoughts on the types of food available to pupils in the surrounding environment i.e. corner shops and takeaways? Do you know if these are popular with your pupils?

Fuelling the Future

How does secondary school food fare for our young people?

About Food Active

Food Active is a healthier weight programme of work originally based in the North West of England, delivered by the public health charity the Health Equalities Group. The programme aims to address the environmental, social, economic and legislative factors that influence people's lifestyle choices and behaviours. To achieve this we take three approaches:

- **Influence Policy:** We work to influence policy to promote healthier weight at local and national level.
- **Campaigns & Tools**: We develop tools, campaigns, and training opportunities to promote healthier weight, including balanced diet and physically active lifestyles, to populations who suffer the greatest level of health inequalities.
- **Research & Partnerships**: We undertake research and develop strategic partnerships to lobby and advocate on issues pertaining to healthier weight and the impact of both the food and built environment.

Click here to follow us on socials, subscribe to our podcast and join our mailing list: https://linktr.ee/food_active

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