

Government scraps high-sugar food from school menus

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High-sugar and deep-fried food taken off the menu in new plans to overhaul school dinners amid health crisis facing children, helping to tackle obesity

Millions of children will benefit from healthier, more nutritious, tasty meals at school as the government today [Monday 13th April] sets out its plans to overhaul the School Food Standards for the first time in over a decade.

One in three children are leaving primary school overweight or obese, while tooth decay from diets high in sugar is the leading cause of hospital admissions for kids aged 5 to 9 – all while sugary treats and deep-fried food continue to feature on school menus.

The move comes after parent polling revealed three quarters are concerned by the food their children are eating. The government is tackling this head on – with our proposals including limiting food and drinks high in fat, salt and sugar and putting more fruit, vegetables and wholegrains on every child's plate.

Today's consultation launches as over 500 new Free Breakfast Clubs begin to open their doors this month, offering places up to 142,000 children. We have already rolled out free breakfast clubs in 750 schools – helping save parents up to £450 a year and gaining up to 95 hours precious time back a year.

The new standards have been developed alongside nutritionists and public health experts and will apply to all breakfasts and lunches served by schools. Under the plans, schools will no longer be able to offer unhealthy 'grab and go' options like sausage rolls and pizza every day, while deep fried food will be banned completely. Fruit will also need to be served instead of sugar-laden treats for the majority of the school week.

Sample menus include a colourful range of tasty, health-packed meals – including spaghetti Bolognese, Mexican style burritos, cottage pie with root-veg mash, jerk chicken with rice and peas and roasted chickpea, vegetable and mozzarella wrap.

The government has today launched a nine-week consultation on the healthier options with parents and children, alongside a new national enforcement mechanism to monitor the new standards and ensure they are applied consistently.

These changes are supported by food campaigners, charities and nutritional experts including Bite Back, Tom Kerridge, Chefs in Schools, Emma Thompson and Henry Dimbleby. Many schools are already leading the way with delicious, nutritious meals that children love – proof that higher standards are both achievable and popular. But while many are already serving healthy school dinners, these new standards level the playing field so that every child – no matter where they live – gets good-quality food at school.

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said:

Today we are launching the most ambitious overhaul of school food in a generation, and

it is long overdue.

Every child deserves to have delicious, nutritious food at school that gives them the energy to concentrate, learn and thrive – meals that children will actually recognise and enjoy, backed by robust compliance so that good standards on paper become good food on the plate.

From our Free Breakfast Clubs to extending Free School Meals to over half a million more children, this means good-quality food from the moment children arrive at school to the end of the day.

Health Minister Sharon Hodgson said:

Children are consuming twice the recommended amount of free sugar and offering more nutritious meals at school is a great way of ensuring they eat healthier food.

We're determined to reduce the child obesity epidemic and the new School Food Standards represent another piece in a jigsaw of measures designed to help raise the healthiest generation of children ever.

This delivers on change parents and campaigners have been calling for. New polling shows 74% of parents have at least one concern about their child's nutrition – from too much sugar (43%) and too many fatty foods (24%), to not enough fruit and vegetables (30%).

The new School Food Standards also include new dedicated breakfast standards to ensure every child begins their day with food that sets them up to learn and thrive.

To ensure schools follow the new standards, the government is committed to developing a robust national enforcement system including monitoring schools' compliance. Full details will be announced this September, with enforcement in place from September 2027.

The government also wants every school to appoint a lead governor to be responsible for school food, as well as asking every school to publish their food policy and menus online. With 50% of parents in England saying they don't get enough information about what their child is being served, this means parents, pupils and communities can hold schools to account.

Dame Emma Thompson, Actor and Food Foundation Ambassador said:

I am absolutely thrilled that the government is changing the School Food Standards to make sure that every child has delicious, nutritious school food that they deserve.

School meals are a golden opportunity to support children's health, learning and wellbeing – and getting this right means children across the country can truly thrive. This is a landmark moment for families, for the NHS, and for the future of our young people.

Jamie Oliver, Chef and Campaigner said:

Twenty years ago, dog food had higher standards than school dinners. I've been banging the drum ever since because I refuse to accept our kids being fed anything less than proper, nourishing meals.

School food is the UK's most important restaurant chain. From September, during term-time schools will provide two-thirds of a child's daily diet - a massive opportunity to improve health at scale. My Good School Food Awards prove that world-class meals are possible right now, and every child deserves that same quality.

So, I'm delighted this government is now updating and enforcing these standards.

Henry Dimbleby, former government food tsar, author of the Independent National Food Strategy and co-founder of Bramble Partners and Leon, said:

Today we have a rare chance to reset school food: wider access to free school meals, higher standards - with proper monitoring to help schools improve what ends up on the plate. September can mark the start of a new normal, where every child can count on a lunch that is both delicious and nutritious, and every parent can have real confidence in what's being served.

Done right it will boost children's health, their academic outcomes and their chances of success in later life. But it will only work if the government sticks to the timetable set out today - and if schools and caterers are backed to deliver, and held to it.

Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive at Chefs in Schools, one of the lead partners of the School Food Project said:

We are pleased to see the first update to school food standards in over a decade, and a commitment to monitoring that means these measures will have real impact. Suggested changes will see a shift towards more freshly prepared and delicious meals that are packed full of nutrition. More fruit and veg and fibre will be served so that young people get all the goodness they need to grow up healthy and thrive.

To make the most of this opportunity and ensure our young people are getting the lunch they deserve, we're also hugely excited to announce the philanthropy funded School Food Project. This coalition of the UK's leading food and education organisations, including Bite Back, Chefs in Schools, Jamie Oliver Group, School Food Matters and The Food Foundation have joined forces to offer schools practical support to transform school food and improve food education.

There will be a phased approach for some changes in secondary schools - giving schools time to develop recipes, update menus and train staff. However, schools who are ready to adopt the new standards are encouraged to do so straight away.

Hilary Priest, Headteacher at The Grove School in Devon, said:

At The Grove, we believe a healthy mind and a healthy body go hand in hand, and that starts with what children eat.

We're incredibly proud to be the first school in Devon to partner with Chefs in Schools, who are doing remarkable work to transform school food across the country. Every meal here is freshly prepared on site, with a daily choice of main or alternative, a varied salad bar, fresh fruit and water always available.

We're changing our whole school culture around food — from the curriculum to the kitchen garden, where children will grow produce for their own meals and meet the local producers who supply us. By offering healthy, tasty meals every day, we're showing children that good food is something to enjoy, explore and be proud of.

Today's announcement builds on the government's extension of Free School Meals to every child from a household in receipt of Universal Credit from September 2026 — reaching over half a million more children and lifting 100,000 out of poverty. Together, these reforms represent the biggest expansion of school food provision in a generation.

Additional supportive commentary:

Anna Taylor, Executive Director, The Food Foundation, said:

With government announcing higher school food standards, which will also be monitored, and rolling out universal breakfast clubs and wider access to free school meals, the huge potential of school food to nourish and energise the next generation is finally being recognised. This must be the moment the whole sector pulls together to make school food delicious and nutritious, and embed food education into the school day. We have a unique opportunity to initiate a seismic shift in child health, and we are excited to drive this forward with our partners at the School Food Project.

Stephanie Slater MBE, Founder and Chief Executive of School Food Matters:

This is a truly exciting moment for school food. Government's move to update the school food standards will strengthen the extension of free school meals and the continued roll-out of universal primary breakfast clubs. This has the potential to revolutionise access to delicious, nutritious and sustainable food for children and young people across the country.

We're proud to be part of the School Food Project, working in partnership to help schools turn government ambition into reality. Through our Young Marketeers programme, we'll introduce children to the joys of growing fresh fruit and vegetables, and our Nourish programme will support schools to take a whole school approach to food, creating lasting change in school food culture and putting children's nutrition and wellbeing first.

Thomasina Miers, Wahaca co-founder, Masterchef winner, and Chefs in Schools Trustee said:

In the schools I've visited, I've seen children eagerly eating food that would hold its own in any restaurant — made from scratch, with skill and care, on a school budget. This is not a pipe dream. It's happening right now. The School Food Project exists to make sure

every child gets that — not just the lucky ones. Kids are our future. Let's feed them like it.

D'Arcy Williams, CEO of Bite Back, said:

We welcome this consultation — it's a long-overdue step towards improving the food young people rely on every day. But the scale of the challenge cannot be ignored. It is deeply worrying that so many children are consuming too much sugar, and that three quarters of parents are concerned about what their children are eating.

The reality is that the system hasn't been working. We have standards that are meant to protect children's health, but without proper monitoring and accountability, they haven't been consistently enforced. That's allowed a grab-and-go culture to take hold in many schools — where speed and convenience often come at the expense of nutrition.

Our recent Grab and Go research shows how this plays out in practice. With short lunch breaks, long queues and limited healthier options, young people are being pushed towards quick fixes that leave them hungry, tired and unable to focus in lessons.

The government's ambition to create the healthiest generation ever is the right one. But it will only be achieved if these new standards are properly implemented and enforced, and if the reality of how young people eat during the school day is fully addressed. This is a real opportunity to reset the system — and we must get it right.

Head chef, Russ Ball, at Pokesdown Community Primary School in Bournemouth said:

I've always believed that great school food doesn't have to cost the earth — by cooking seasonally from scratch and buying smart, we serve over 300 fresh, nutritious and delicious meals that the children love every day, within budget.

For me, it's never just about what's on the plate. It's about taking children on a journey with food — from growing it in the garden to learning about the food and eating together and encouraging each other to try new things. In the five years of being a chef here, we have seen uptake in school lunches triple, with pupils more energised to learn and excited to try new foods.

That is why I am delighted to welcome these new school food standards — every child deserves food that fuels them, excites them and teaches them something along the way.

Katharine Jenner, Executive Director, Obesity Health Alliance:

Schools should be a place that actively supports children's health. Strengthening school food standards, so children can enjoy affordable, tasty and nutritious meals, is a vital and welcome step.

Right now, children are surrounded by unhealthy food at almost every turn — not just at school, but also online, on the high street, at home and beyond. Action cannot stop at the school gates — it is needed across the wider food environment to truly give every child

the best start in life.

Brad Pearce, Chair of The School Food People said:

The School Food People welcome's the Governments review of the School Food Standards. Our members are focussed on creating the healthiest generation ever and this can only be achieved by having robust standards, which are monitored and funded appropriately to support and protect sustainable services. We will work with Government to ensure the views of providers, suppliers, schools, and MATs are understood – so that we can support a system that focusses on children's health, wellbeing and readiness to learn.

Frank Young, Chief Executive of Parentkind said:

There should be no place for junk food in schools. We monitor what happens in the classroom because we have high expectations for learning so we are right to take the same approach with healthy meals. That's why parents overwhelmingly back this approach.

Taking tough action to stamp out junk food will help children to learn and tackle widespread childhood obesity.

Barbara Crowther, Children's Food Campaign Manager for Sustain said:

Current school food standards have reached their use-by date. They no longer reflect the scientific evidence on the harms of high sugar, low-fibre diets and risks associated with high consumption of meat and ultra processed foods both for children's health and the planet. This consultation is a golden opportunity to raise the bar. We urge government and schools to be bold and ambitious in setting new standards, so that our schools can become beacons of a healthier and more sustainable food system, and our children can grow up healthy wherever they live and learn.

Sustain's parent ambassador, Mandy Mazliah (she/her). Parent of 3 children, 15, 14 & 10. Based in East Cambridgeshire.

I'm pleased the government is reviewing school food standards. As a mum of three, I've been shocked by how often options like doughnuts, sausage rolls and sugary or ultra-processed foods dominate. This is a real opportunity to improve what children are eating by cutting sugar and ultra-processed foods while increasing vegetables, whole foods and plant-based options. Our children need good quality food to fuel their learning and ensure that they can live healthy lives.

Sustain's parent ambassador, Gemma Mcfarlane (she/her). Parent of 2 children, 17 and 14. Based in East Sussex.

I welcome the School Food Standards consultation, it's a positive and much-needed step. Parents are frustrated that it's still too easy for students to fill up on less healthy options like tray bakes and fizzy drinks instead of balanced meals. I'd like to see limits on these, alongside more sustainable options and better support in schools to help children make healthier decisions. Families see first-hand how food impacts children, so it's vital our voices are heard. I really hope the government will listen to parents like me.

Emma Balchin, Chief Executive, National Governance Association:

NGA welcomes the proposed updates to the school food standards, recognising the vital importance of ensuring every child has access to high-quality and nutritious food during the school day. We know that our schools and trusts play an instrumental role in supporting pupils to develop healthy habits and behaviours that extend into adulthood, with good nutrition underpinning both wellbeing and readiness to learn.

We also welcome the role these standards play in addressing issues of food insecurity in England, which currently affects millions of children in this country. This comes alongside government rollout of free breakfast clubs and expansion of free school meal eligibility – initiatives NGA have championed, as part of a joined-up approach to improving children's health, wellbeing and access to education.

Governing boards have long been ensuring the food standards are met as part of their crucial compliance role, and we will be engaging with the Department throughout this consultation to further explore how boards can best support this worthy ambition.

Reema Reid, Headteacher Hollydale Primary school, Southwark, said:

For many children, a nutritious meal at school is not simply an addition to their day—it is a necessity. Free school meals ensure that pupils arrive in classrooms ready to learn, able to concentrate, and supported in both their physical and emotional wellbeing. Without this provision, too many children face the barriers of hunger, reduced focus, and diminished educational outcomes.

In communities where families are experiencing financial hardship, free school meals act as a safeguard. They help to reduce inequality, remove stigma, and provide every child with a fair opportunity to succeed. Importantly, they also support families under pressure, offering reassurance that their children will receive at least one healthy, balanced meal each day.

From my 25 years' experience in education, I have seen first-hand how access to nutritious food directly impacts behaviour, engagement, and attainment. Schools such as Hollydale that prioritise food provision are not only nurturing healthier pupils but are also creating environments where children can truly thrive.

Investing in free school meals is, therefore, an investment in equity, in education, and in the future of our multicultural society.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-scraps-high-sugar-food-from-school-menus>