

# Primary School Meals in Scotland 2020: a snapshot and a future vision

## Summary report

Around 60% of primary school children in Scotland eat school meals, down from a high of 66% in 2016. School meals provide a unique opportunity to drive the dietary change we need in Scotland and act as an exemplar for healthy eating.

In 2019 the Scottish Government published its recommendations for improving school food standards and committed to introducing new regulations to make school food healthier. The changes were to include the setting of maximum limits for consumption of red processed meat, increasing the amount of fruit and vegetables served, reducing the amount of sugar available throughout the school day, and encouraging the use of fresh, local and sustainable produce<sup>1</sup>.

School menu offerings remain varied across local authorities in 2020, with Scottish primary schools frequently offering soup and salad, while reducing red and processed meat. Puddings are served more frequently and there has been no reduction in the number of local authorities serving chips and pizza since our 2017 report. However, we remain encouraged by the improvements noted in our 2019 review, and hope that local authorities will continue to build on their commendable progress.

## Impact of COVID-19 on School Meals

From Friday 20th March, all schools in Scotland closed in an effort to control the spread of coronavirus. The Scottish Government quickly set in place guidance and funding for the continued support of school children entitled to school meals, throughout the school closures. Several issues were recognised for each type of provision, whether it be cash payments, vouchers, or meal deliveries, and implementation of the new regulations for school food standards had to be pushed back to allow extra time to prepare.

COVID-19 has affected every aspect of our lives, including our schools and school meals. Data in this report was collected prior to the pandemic, and at time of publication, there is little certainty of the format school meals will take moving forward.

## Recommendations for Action

Following our review of Scottish Primary School menus in 2017 and 2019, we called on Scotland's policymakers and local authorities to help transform primary school meals, by acting on four recommendations:



Use unprocessed or minimally processed foods wherever possible



Reduce free sugar content in school meals towards those of the new Scottish Dietary Goals



Prioritise vegetables, soup and salads over puddings



Create a positive physical and social environment for school meals

<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Government (2019) Food and drink in schools: consultation analysis report



## Prioritising Unprocessed and Minimally Processed Food

**The overriding principle in designing and preparing school meals should be to use unprocessed or minimally processed foods**

Progress noted in 2019 has continued into 2020, with sausages and burgers being offered far less frequently. Similarly, there has been an overall reduction in the number of occasions any red or processed meat was offered on menus each week. These results remain extremely encouraging. However, the offering of chips and pizza on menus has remained constant since 2017. We should continue to try to reduce these food types on primary school menus.



### STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

In 2020, Midlothian Council offered fish on their menu five days a week, including tuna and salmon. Not only that, they also offered no sausages, burgers, chicken nuggets or chips during the week studied – making sure salad and fruit was available every day!



## Prioritising Soup and Vegetables

**Prioritise vegetables, soup and salads over puddings**

Soup is a simple way of introducing more vegetables into children's diets. In 2020, soup was offered on the menus of all local authorities. The number of occasions that salad was available across all local authorities during the week studied remained lower than 2017, at 130 vs 139, respectively. More local authorities offered a choice of "soup or pudding" in 2020 than in 2019. Encouragingly however, fruit was available five days a week across 24 of the 29 local authorities studied in 2020. **It is important that children are not made to choose between soup and a less healthy alternative.**



### STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

In 2020, five local authorities offered soup and salad every day in the week studied – none of these five authorities asked pupils to make a choice between soup and pudding. Well done East Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire, Fife, Glasgow City and South Ayrshire Councils!



## Free Sugar Content of School Meals

**In our 2019 report, we noted that the new school nutrition standards will allow free sugar content of school meals an upper limit of 7.5% for primary school pupils**

In 2020, pudding options other than fruit or yoghurt were available an average of 2.7 days per week. This was consistent with 2019 (2.8 days a week), and a marked reduction from 4.2 days a week in 2017. In 2020, four local authorities offered pudding, other than fruit or yoghurt, every day. Sadly, this was double the number of authorities than in 2019. An average school pudding contains 11g of sugar: the same as in 2019. The average sugar content of yoghurt served in school meals has fallen from 12.7g per portion in 2017, to 9.7g in 2019 and 6.6g in 2020. This appears to reflect a shift towards whole milk yoghurts, with less sugar. **To achieve the Scottish Dietary Goals<sup>2</sup>, any puddings, cakes, biscuits and sugary yogurts should be minimised on school menus. This change will help to form healthy eating habits from a young age.**



### STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

In 2020, just as they did in 2019, Edinburgh and Glasgow City Councils only offered fruit and yoghurt as a pudding option, with no unhealthy pudding options served. No local authority offered this in 2017.

### Nutrition information

In 2020, the average calorie content of puddings increased to 232kcal per serving, an increase of 56kcal since 2017. The sugar content of puddings in 2020 remained consistent with 2019, at 11g per pudding. Some high daily offerings in sugar were noted this year. For example, the highest sugar pudding available was a Gingerbread and Custard option containing 37g of sugar per serving – more than 9 teaspoons of sugar, and far higher than the daily recommended sugar intake for a child in any age group. **Local authorities and school caterers should be encouraged to take the lead from those local authorities that do this well.**

<sup>2</sup>The Scottish Government, Revised Scottish Dietary Goals, March 2016



# Create a positive physical and social environment for school meals

An inspirational future vision

We believe that the experience surrounding the eating of school meals is as important as the meal itself, providing a well-earned break from lessons, allowing for socialisation with friends, relationship building across the wider school community and an opportunity to learn about other cultures and dietary requirements. Children can be introduced to new tastes, learn about Scottish food heritage, health and the environment.

Overall, we must strive to positively influence children's diets in the school environment. In order to do so, we must include consideration of the dining experience so that school meals are delivered in positive, vibrant physical and social environments. This is crucial as it may determine whether or not pupils choose the option of school meals, currently at their lowest uptake since the introduction of universal free school meals for Primary 1-3 pupils in 2015<sup>3</sup>.

As we move on from the challenges and obstacles presented by the coronavirus pandemic, towards recovery and rebuild, we can begin to envision the ideal dining experience of primary schools in Scotland. A future vision encompassing positive, vibrant physical and social environments described above, alongside the provision of the best nutrition to support the growth, development and health of Scotland's children. Following our fourth recommendation from our previous reports, 'Create a positive physical and social environment for school meals', we highlighted seven themes, inspired by Better Eating, Better Learning<sup>4</sup>, which can determine how positive the school dining experience is.

Below, we incorporate these themes into our future vision of the school dining experience.

## A day in the life of future primary school pupils in Scotland



<sup>3</sup>The Scottish Government (2014) School Healthy Living Survey Statistics 2019

<sup>4</sup>The Scottish Government (2014) Better Eating, Better Learning. A new context for school food