An Roinn Sláinte
Department of Health

Nutrition Review of the Hot School Meals Scheme

July 2026

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Executive Summary

The Hot School Meals Scheme was introduced by the Department of Social Protection in 2019 as part of Ireland's commitment to provide a healthy meal each school day to children in need under the European Child Guarantee. It commenced as a pilot scheme in 37 DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) primary schools and has since been rolled out to all DEIS and non-DEIS primary schools with 550,000 children eligible for a hot school meal in the 2025/2026 school year. This equates to the weekly provision of up to 3.4 million meals nationwide, to schools varying significantly in size and geographical location, and is facilitated by over 300 Food Business Operators (FBOs), making it the largest catering operation in the country.

An independent evaluation of the programme in 2022 showed a positive impact on school attendance, children's attitudes to food and improved concentration in school (RSM, 2022). However, robust data was lacking on the nutritional value of meals on offer. The Interdepartmental Working Group identified a need for a comprehensive nutritional review of meals served under the Scheme. Consequently, a CORU-registered dietitian was appointed in the Department of Health from 8th September 2025 to complete this review.

Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals have been available since the inception of the Scheme. These standards set out how menus and meals should be compiled to ensure food provision is in line with national healthy eating guidelines. The Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals contain 16 standards in total, 13 relating to food, and three relating to drinks (Appendix I). The dietitian has worked closely with a Department of Health-led Technical Nutrition Subgroup, to update the Nutrition Standards for School Meals. The purpose of this update was to remove the option to allow higher fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt foods once a week as per the Minister's directive in April 2025. The relevant sections have been re-written and the revised Nutrition Standards are ready for publication.

For this report, the analysis focused on determining compliance with the five nutrition standards that set out which food groups should be contained in each meal to ensure it is nutritious and balanced (Figure 1). In addition, compliance with the Minister of Social Protection's directive to remove foods high in fat, salt, and sugar was checked. Compliance with all five of these nutrition standards is required to achieve full compliance, for the purpose of this report.

Figure 1. Nutrition Standards

- Every meal should contain 1 serving of meat, poultry, fish, egg, or beans.
- Every meal should contain 1 serving of potatoes, pasta, or rice.
- Every meal should contain 2 servings of vegetables, salad, or fruit.
- Of the above, 1 must be a serving of vegetables.
- Foods higher in fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt must not be offered. These include fried foods such as chips, roast potatoes, fried potatoes products fried in the manufacturing process, garlic bread, fried fish or meal choices containing pastry, processed chicken or meat products such as burgers, sausages, chicken nuggets, bacon, ham etc. This Standard was introduced in April 2025 to take effect from the beginning of the 2025/2026 school year.

A desktop nutritional analysis of 360 meals offered by 15 different school meal suppliers was completed by the dietitian. To supplement this, the dietitian and Department of Social Protection completed 54 school visits, involving an inspection and audit of 322 meals ordered across 151 classes.

Key findings of this report are summarised below:

- From desktop analysis and school visits completed, it is evident that there is a wide variety of meals offered under the Scheme, with good availability of nutritious and well-balanced options.
- Of all meals analysed, 82% did not contain foods considered to be high in fat, salt or sugar (HFSS) such as chicken goujons, sausages, or fried potato products. This was confirmed on school visits, with only 15% of meals audited containing HFSS foods.
- Order numbers supplied by ten school meal suppliers show that the continuing availability of a minority of meals that contain HFSS, as well as “no vegetable” options, means children and/or their parents/guardians tend to choose these offerings over healthier alternatives, if available.
- The availability and serving size of foods that contribute to a healthy diet such as vegetables, fruit or salad and wholegrain carbohydrates (i.e. brown rice/pasta/wraps, wholemeal/wholegrain bread) must be improved.

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- While 74% of non-vegetarian/vegan meals contained the required amount of protein this fell to 20% for vegetarian/vegan meals.
- The same portion size is served to all students despite variations in nutritional requirements by age. This means calorie content of meals per serving is low relative to the target of supplying one third of the required daily calorie intake, particularly for older children.
- Some of the recipes analysed were still high in fat and salt and therefore nutrient profile could be improved, particularly for younger children.
- Feedback provided by principals and teachers during school visits was largely positive. Principals rated meals particularly highly on choice, consideration of dietary requirements, quality, and nutritional value.
- 78% of teachers rated meals as acceptable, good or excellent for nutritional value, and 79% rated meals as acceptable, good, or excellent on quality.
- Average opt-in (i.e. proportion of children ordering a meal) across the 151 classes was 85.4%, ranging from 96.6% in younger classes (Junior Infants to 1st class) to 80.6% in older classes (5th and 6th class).
- The average proportion of uneaten meals was 18.9% across all classes, with less waste seen in younger age groups. Absenteeism contributed significantly to total waste.
- When accounting for absences the proportion of uneaten meals fell to 11.1%. it is lower among Junior Infants -1st class at 7% compared to 15% for 5th and 6th class.
- Findings from this review would suggest a “hot-drop” delivery model produces the highest quality meals, particularly in hot drop models where meals are cooked fresh and delivered hot to schools.

Key recommendations arising from findings:

1. The development of a standardised 3-week menu cycle should be prioritised to support school meals suppliers in providing meals and menus that are fully compliant with Nutrition Standards and produced within the allocated budget. This resource should be developed for implementation by the suppliers in September 2027 , pending additional resource allocation (*Department of Health*)
2. Menus should be adapted for special schools and special classes, and children with special dietary requirements to ensure the scheme remains inclusive. This resource should be developed for implementation by the

suppliers in September 2027, pending additional resource allocation. (*Department of Health*)

3. The Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals already contain a requirement for different size meals for different age groups. Clear instructions must be issued to suppliers to provide different size meals for different age groups, as soon as is practically possible. *(Department of Social Protection, Department of Health and Schools in consultation with Food Business Operators)*
4. In the interim, recipes must be revised by all school meals suppliers with immediate effect to increase compliance with fruit and vegetable standards, and to increase wholegrain content of meals. The serving size of protein sources must be increased in vegetarian and vegan meals. Consideration should be given to how these foods are presented to promote their consumption. *(Department of Social Protection and Department of Health in consultation with Food Business Operators)*
5. There is a need for flexibility in ordering either a cold or hot lunch on any given day reflecting feedback from principals and teachers during school visits that this would contribute to waste reduction. (*Department of Social Protection/Department of Education and Youth)*
6. Robust compliance audits of nutrition standards must be developed and in place by September 2027, if resources available. (*Department of Health/Department of Social Protection*)
7. Priority must be given to the development of a robust control procedure for dealing with suppliers who are non-compliant with the nutrition standards, and this must be communicated to both the schools and the suppliers. *(Department of Social Protection)*
8. Food catering systems must be reviewed to see which system meets the nutritional standards in a consistent manner and a weighting system developed as part of the tender evaluation in the procurement process. *(Department of Social Protection/Department of Education/Department of Health)*
9. Schools, as the contract holders, must be proactive in relation to managing their contracts with their supplier to ensure it meets the needs of the students and the schools. *(Department of Education and Youth/Schools)*

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1. Introduction

The current School Meals Programme in Ireland was established in 2003 and is funded and overseen by the Department of Social Protection (DSP). It was developed as part of Ireland's commitment to the European Child Guarantee, which calls on EU Member States to ensure, for children in need, access to healthy nutrition and a healthy meal each school day to encourage school attendance and maximise educational achievement. The Hot School Meals Scheme was initially introduced within this overarching scheme in 2019 as a pilot scheme in 37 DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) primary schools.

In February 2023, the Government approved funding to allow access to the Hot School Meals Scheme for all remaining DEIS primary schools and special schools from September 2023.

From 2024, the roll-out of Hot School Meals to all remaining non-DEIS primary schools commenced on a phased basis and this has continued with all primary schools eligible from September 2025.

This means there are approximately 3,200 schools and 550,000 children eligible for hot school meals in 2025/2026 academic year and 680,000 children eligible for the School Meals Programme overall (Table 1). This includes organisations and DEIS secondary schools who have an entitlement to other meal club types such as breakfast, lunch, dinner or snack. This equates to the weekly provision of up to 3.4 million meals nationwide, to schools varying significantly in size and geographical location, and is facilitated by over 300 Food Business Operators (FBOs), making it the largest catering operation in the country.

Table 1. Number of School and Students eligible for the School Meals Programme

School Year	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Schools	1,466	1,481	1,400	1,587	2,410	3,361	3,700
Students	214,999	219,131	219,622	266,214	408,060	559,207	682,000

With the rapid expansion of the Hot School Meals since 2019, the School Meals Programme budget has increased by 452% (Table 2).

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Table 2. School Meals Expenditure

2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
€54.3m	€53.5m	€58.4m	€77.5m	€108.7m	€181.4m	€230m	€286*

*budget

To determine the impact of the programme, DSP commissioned an independent evaluation of the programme in 2022 which showed a positive effect on school attendance, children's attitudes to food and improved concentration in school (RSM, 2022). There was an overwhelming consensus among all participants in the evaluation that the School Meals Programme is effective, with strong support for extending it. In the evaluation, 74% of principals indicated that it improved physical health, 54% of principals indicated that it improved attendance and 51% of principals indicated that it improved performance.

While perceptions of the programme were predominantly positive, some concerns did emerge such as children feeling they did not receive enough food particularly in older age groups. The report highlighted "gaps in terms of the availability of the data about the indicators that measure programme progress and success" which encompasses data on nutrition.

Nutrition Standards for School Meals were developed under the auspices of Healthy Ireland (Department of Health) in 2017, to ensure meals are in line with national healthy eating guidelines (Healthy Ireland, 2017). A specific set of Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals was developed in 2019.

In the RSM evaluation, compliance of meal options with these Nutrition Standards was determined via self-report from FBOs who supply school meals and school principals only. In depth nutrition analysis or investigation of meals and menus was not completed at that time. Robust data on nutritional quality of meals are required to determine whether the programme meets its objective of providing a nutritious meal. Additionally, having baseline metrics will enable officials to show progress over time**.** It helps focus resources where they are needed most and will give insight into best practice examples of high compliance with Nutrition Standards.

In 2024, the Department of Social Protection developed an Implementation Strategy to manage the rollout of the School Meals Programme due to its rapid expansion. An action outlined in this strategy was to "Implement an audit process of food nutritional standards with the Department of Health whereby a nutritionist completes a spot-check testing process of food compliance with Nutrition

Standards". Following from this, and actions arising from RSM's evaluation, a CORU-registered dietitian was appointed in the Department of Health from 8th September 2025 to address the need for a nutritional review of the School Meals Programme. Given that 85% schools qualifying for the School Meals Programme are eligible for Hot School Meals, this interim review will concentrate on the Hot School Meals Scheme only.

This report is organised into 8 chapters as follows:
Chapter 2: Information on oversight and collaboration groups
Chapter 3: Results from desktop analysis of 360 recipes
Chapter 4: Results from school-based meal audits
Chapter 5: Information from engagement meetings with Food Business Operators
Chapter 6: Discussion points from early stakeholder engagement
Chapter 7: An update on the revision of nutrition standards
Chapter 8: Summary of findings and conclusions

Chapter 2. Oversight & Collaboration groups

2.1. Technical Nutrition Advisory Group for the School Meals Programme

To support the dietitian with her review, a specialist advisory group has been set up to provide guidance on planned project activities such as nutrition analysis, and development of auditing tools and practical resources. Six meetings have been held to date. An official from the Department of Social Protection also attends these meetings.

- Members include:
    - Fiona Ward (Nutrition and Obesity Policy Advisor, Department of Health),
    - Celine Murrin (Associate Professor, School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sport Science, University College Dublin),
    - Audrey Tierney (MSc Human Nutrition and Dietetics Course Director, UL),
    - Joana Caldeira Fernandes da Silva (Lead Dietitian, Better Start Strategic Development & Projects),
    - Representatives from the Food Reformulation Task Force, Food Safety Authority of Ireland, ,
    - Caroline Donovan (Food Service Senior Dietitian, Aramark),

- Laura Heraty, Chief Specialist in Nutrition, Safefood with additional support from Anne Parle (Nutritionist)
- Representatives from Health Promotion & Improvement, Health and Wellbeing Division, Health Service Executive.

2.2. Nutrition Technical Subgroup

The dietitian has worked closely with the Technical Nutrition Subgroup, which is led by the Department of Health, to update the Nutrition Standards for School Meals. The Technical Nutrition Subgroup include representatives from the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute, Safefood, Food Safety Authority of Ireland, and Health Services Executive.

2.3. The Interdepartmental Working Group (IDWG)

A Department of Social Protection-led IDWG was set up in December 2024 with stakeholders from the Department of Education and Youth, the Department of Health, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. Eight meetings and one procurement workshop have been held in 2025. The School Meals dietitian has attended four meetings with the Interdepartmental Working Group since joining the Department in September 2025. The Policy Advisor for Nutrition and Obesity is the Department of Health nominated member of this group since December 2024. Department of Health representatives have contributed to interdepartmental work such as development of the updated Contract for Tender procurement documentation, that was issued by the IDWG in August 2025 and is compulsory for all schools.

2.4. Five Nations Diet and Healthy Weight Technical Group and their Food in Schools Subgroup

Department of Health members of the IDWG participate in the 5 Nations Diet and Healthy Weight Technical Group and their Food in Schools Subgroup. The group is a forum for members to share learning, support each other, and discuss current work in the area of school food provision and implementing and monitoring nutrition standards for school meals in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Ireland.

Chapter 3. Desktop Menu Recipe Analysis

3.1. Overview

Nutrition analysis was completed on a sample of 360 meals submitted by 15 school meal suppliers to the Department of Social Protection between September 2025 and May 2026. Included in this sample were meals offered by the nine largest FBOs i.e. operators supplying forty or more schools[1]. Collectively, these FBOs provide meals to more than 70% of primary schools nationwide. Menus from a sample of six smaller suppliers were also analysed. As well as ranging in size, different catering systems were captured within this sample (Table 3). Additionally, both community-based organisations and businesses delivering meals across a large geographical area from a central production facility were captured. A description of each catering system and how they align with service delivery models can be found in Appendix II.

Table 3. Characteristics of suppliers included in recipe analysis and desktop review of menus

Characteristics	Suppliers % (n=15)	Meals % (N=360)
Size		
Large (supplying > 40 schools daily)	60% (9)	66.4% (239)
Small (supplying </= 40 schools daily)	40% (6)	33.6% (121)
Catering system[1]		
Assembly	20% (3)	15.6% (56)
Centralised Cook-Chill/Freeze	13.3% (2)	10.8% (39)
Centralised Cook-Fresh	33.3% (5)	32.5% (117)
Conventional	6.7% (1)	11.7% (42)
Hybrid	26.7% (4)	29.4% (106)

[1]See Appendix II for explanation of each catering system and the Hot School Meals Service Delivery Models which are possible within each catering system.

[1] This sample was selected in October 2025. The number of schools supplied by a given FBO is subject to change.

3.2. Methods

The Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals contain 16 Standards in total, 13 relating to food and three relating to drinks.

For this report, the focus was compliance with the five nutrition standards that set out which food groups should be contained in each meal to ensure it is nutritious and balanced (Figure 2). In addition, compliance with the Minister of Social Protection's directive to remove foods high in fat, salt, and sugar was checked. Compliance with all five of these nutrition standards is required to achieve full compliance, for the purpose of this report.

Figure 2. Nutrition Standards

- Every meal should contain 1 serving of meat, poultry, fish, egg, or beans.
- Every meal should contain 1 serving of potatoes, pasta, or rice.
- Every meal should contain 2 servings of vegetables, salad, or fruit.
- Of the above, 1 must be a serving of vegetables.
- Foods higher in fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt must not be offered. These include fried foods such as chips, roast potatoes, fried potatoes products fried in the manufacturing process, garlic bread, fried fish or meal choices containing pastry, processed chicken or meat products such as burgers, sausages, chicken nuggets, bacon, ham etc. This Standard was introduced in April 2025 to take effect from the beginning of the 2025/2026 school year.

Nutritics© menu analysis software, a Gold Standard certified software package for recipe analysis, was used to analyse the nutritional content of a sample of meals.

To complete accurate nutrition analysis of meals the following is required:

- individual FBOs standardised recipes
- serving sizes

- detailed information on ingredients such as specification sheets (a detailed document that lists the product name, code, description, ingredients, physical and chemical traits, nutritional content per 100g etc).

Energy (kilocalorie), fat (grams), saturated fat (grams), sugar (grams), fibre (grams), protein (grams), and salt (grams) content of meals were investigated. It is known from previous National Food Consumption Surveys that primary-school aged children in Ireland are consuming too much saturated fat, sugar, and salt and not enough fibre (IUNA National Children's Food Survey II, 2017-2018). This analysis was included to understand how hot school meals are contributing to intake of these key nutrients in primary school-aged children.

3.3. Results from Desktop Analysis

3.3.1. Compliance with Nutrition Standards based on menus and recipes submitted by FBOs

Composition of meals

Menus and meal descriptions submitted by FBOs indicated that most meals contained some fruit or vegetables, a protein source such as meat, chicken, fish, eggs, nuts or beans and a carbohydrate source such rice, potatoes, pasta, bread, or wraps.

The serving size i.e. quantity, of each of these food groups was examined per meal to determine compliance with nutrition standards. The table below sets out a guide as to what constitutes one serving (Table 4). For a comprehensive guide regarding serving sizes please see Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals (Healthy Ireland, 2019). Product names, specification sheets and recipes were used to determine if foods fell into the HFSS category.

Table. 4. Required serving sizes for each food group as per Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals

Food group	1 serving is
Fruit and vegetables	• 1 cup[1]cooked vegetables (80g)* • 1 medium piece of fruit (apple, banana, orange, pear) • 2 small pieces of fruit (kiwi, plums, mandarin)
Protein	• 50-75 g cooked lean beef, lamb, pork, mince or poultry • 100 g cooked fish

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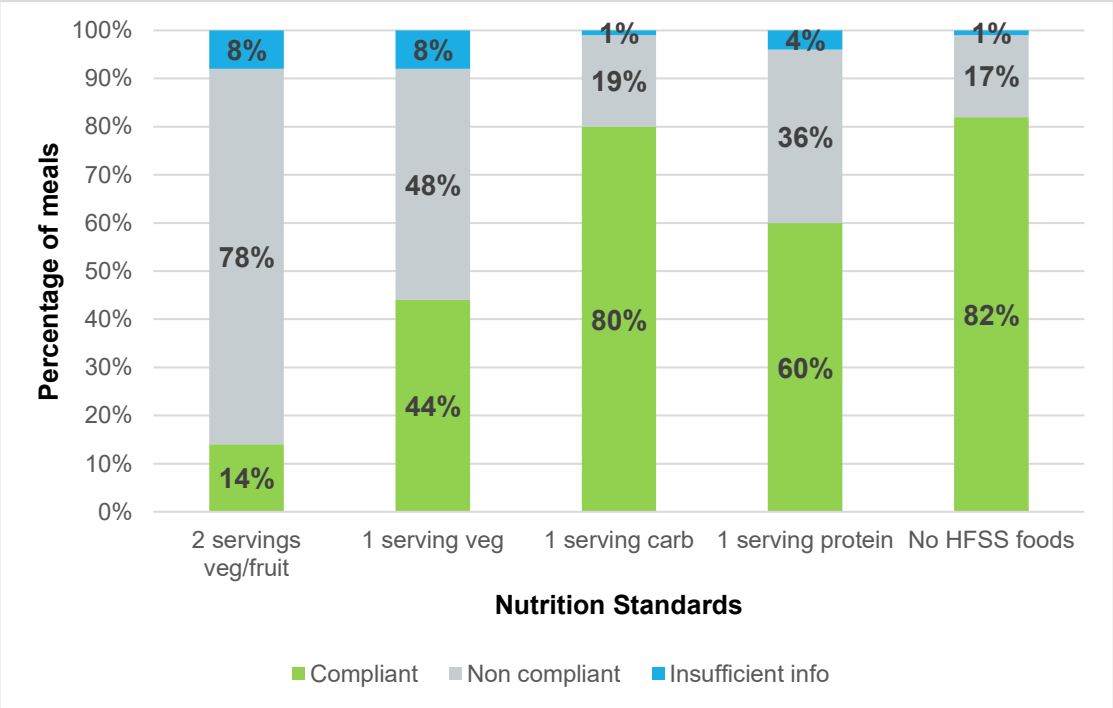
	• ¾ cup[1]beans or lentils (120 g)
Carbohydrate	• 1 cup (approx. 90 g) of cooked pasta or rice or noodles • 2 medium or 4 small potatoes (100-120 g)

[1]A 200ml disposable plastic cup is recommended to guide serving size in the Irish Healthy Eating Guidelines (Food Pyramid). *For composite meals e.g. stews, soups, lasagne, curry 40g vegetables would suffice.

On closer examination, serving sizes for vegetables or fruit, carbohydrate and protein were not consistently meeting the recommended weight as set out in the standards, and some meals contained HFSS foods. Of the 360 meals examined, 59% met at least three of five standards. Of note, 14% (n=49) met 4 standards, while 7% (25 meals) met all five nutrition standards. Compliance rates with each of the five standards were also looked at individually (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Compliance with individual Nutrition Standards



Foods considered to be high in fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS)

Most meals (82%, n =296) did not contain HFSS foods. Foods from this category included bacon, ham, pepperoni, garlic bread, battered or breaded chicken or fish products, burgers, fried potato products, or battered or fried vegetarian substitutes. In some cases, the FBO reported that these foods had been

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reformulated[2]. At present there is no mechanism to ensure reformulated products are used in all cases. This would require all FBOs to provide specific nutrition data. One example of a reformulated breaded chicken product is presented in Appendix III.

Fruit, vegetables, and salad

Nearly half (44%, n = 158) of the meals included a full serving of vegetables (40-80g). Where a full serving of vegetables was not included, 14% (24) of these recipes offered a supplementary piece of fruit as per menus submitted. Few meals contained the required full serving of vegetables, as well as another serving of vegetables or salad or fruit (14%, 52).

Recipes showed innovative ways of incorporating vegetables into meals such as blended vegetables in sauces including white sauce and curries, which may be more acceptable to primary school children than a large portion of plain vegetables served on the side.

Interestingly, there was a positive association between centralised cook-fresh catering systems (i.e. hot drop service delivery model) and meals containing one full serving of vegetables, with meals being more likely to contain a full serving of vegetables compared to other catering models.

Carbohydrate foods: Potatoes, rice, pasta, bread, wraps

Most meals (80%, n = 289) included a full serving or more of carbohydrate foods. Most carbohydrate foods such as rice, pasta, and bread were white varieties. However, there were examples where wholegrains have been incorporated such as wholemeal pizza bases, wholemeal wraps and wholemeal pasta.

Protein foods: Meat, chicken, fish, eggs, nuts, beans, cheese or vegetarian substitutes

Two thirds (60%, n=215) of meals included the required amount of meat, fish, chicken, egg, beans, nuts or cheese. This rises to 74% when vegetarian and vegan meals were omitted from the analysis. Out of 96 vegetarian or vegan meals analysed19 contained a full serving of cheese (25g), beans (100-120g), or other vegetarian or vegan substitutes per meal.

[2] Reformulation means changing the recipes of processed foods to make them healthier, for example reducing salt in a chicken goujons and baking instead of frying it.

3.3.2. Nutritional value of Meals

The same 360 meals were analysed to determine their nutritional content. Analysis was based on standard serving sizes provided by FBOs. Results were compared with nutrient targets for a five-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy with a moderate activity level. This approach was taken to understand where the typical nutrient content of meals lies between the lowest and highest nutrient requirements of primary school aged children. Results are summarised in Table 5 below.

Energy

It is recommended in the current Nutrition Standards that a Hot School Meal should provide roughly one third of a child's total daily energy requirement. This translates to 725kcals for a boy in 6th class and 472kcals for a girl in Junior Infants. The median calorie (energy) content per serving of meals analysed was found to be below these targets, at 301kcals per serving. Energy content ranged from a minimum of 40 kilocalories per meal to a maximum of 668 kilocalories per meal(Table 5).

Only one of the 15 suppliers analysed offered two different serving sizes for younger and older children, making up 4.4% of the total number of recipes analysed. On analysis of the "senior" portion sizes, these were found to have a higher median energy content of 365kcals per serving compared to other suppliers who did not offer two serving sizes (299kcals per serving).

Fat and saturated fat

The median (i.e. typical) fat content of meals was 7.5g per serving, ranging from 0 to 46g per meal. This is well below the limit for a Junior Infants girls and Sixth Class boy (Table 6). Oils and spreads were used in the preparation process in 43% of meals (n=155), with majority containing healthy oils such as vegetable oil/rapeseed oil, sunflower oil, and olive oil. Only 9% (n=31) of meals contained butter or cream, and only 10 meals contained mayonnaise-based sauces such as mayonnaise, taco sauce or cajun sauce.

Sugar

The typical sugar content of meals was 4.6g per meal, ranging from 0 to 39 grams per meal. No limit for total sugar content per meal has been set. However, no added sugar, honey, or syrup was used in majority of meals.

Fibre

The median fibre content of meals was 3.6g per meal, ranging from 0 to 14g per meal. This is slightly below the target fibre content for a girl in Junior Infants and considerably below the target for a 6th class boy (Table 5).

Protein

Protein content was adequate, and ranged from 1.3 to 45 grams per meal, with the typical content being 16g per meal (Table 5). The median protein content for vegetarian and vegan meals (n=96) was considerably lower at 9 grams per meal, which reflects the finding that a higher proportion of these meals did not contain a full serving of beans, pulses, cheese, or other plant-based protein sources.

Salt

The typical salt content per serving of meals analysed was 1.1g. Most meals contained salt levels at or below the recommended limits for older students (84.4%, n=304), but several meals exceeded the recommended limits for younger students (49.4%, n=178).

While the Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals recommend that meals contain no more than 1g of salt per meal, this target is based on the World Health Organisation's 2012 guideline of 3-5g of salt per day depending on age. Since the publication of the Nutrition Standards in 2019, new guidelines have been published by the European Food Safety Association (EFSA 2019). These were used to establish maximum salt limits for both age groups (Table 5).

Meals for children with special dietary requirements

Meals for children with special dietary requirements were included in this analysis, including vegetarian and gluten-free meals. Most suppliers also offered sensory or sensory-adapted menus or menu items for children with selective eating. These menus offered options such as plain pasta, plain rice, chicken goujons, plain potato products etc.

Table 5. Average nutritional content of meals per serving and comparison with reference nutrient targets for lunch for a 12-year-old boy (6th class) and a 5-year-old girl (Junior Infants) (N= 360)

Nutrient per serving	Median content per serving	Reference nutrient targets for 5-year-old girl*	Reference nutrient targets for 12-year-old boy*
Energy[1]	306.5kcals	472kcals	725kcals
Fat[2]	7.5g	Not more than 18.4g	Not more than 28.2g
Saturated fat[3]	2.3g	Not more than 5.2g	Not more than 8g
Sugar[4]	4.6g	Not defined	Not defined
Fibre[5]	3.6g	Not less than 4.7g	Not less than 6.3g
Protein[6]	16g	Not less than 5.2g	Not less than 10.4g
Salt[7]	1.1g	Not more than 1.1g	Not more than 1.7g

Red: does not meet nutrient target Green: Meets nutrient target Orange: Meets nutrient target for some Light green: No target defined

[1] Energy figures were derived from European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) recommended Average Requirement (AR) for daily energy intake (kcal/day) and adjusted to a moderate physical activity level (PAL) in boys aged 12 (PAL=1.6; 2174kcals) and girls aged 5 years (PAL=1.6; 1417kcals/d) (EFSA, 2013). One third of this was calculated to provide a guide for calorie content per meal.

[2] Total fat figures were calculated using EFSA's recommended Reference Intake (RI) for total fat in boys and girls aged 5 years and 12 years (EFSA, 2010).

[3] Saturated fat figures were calculated using the WHO strong recommendation that "children reduce saturated fatty acid intake to 10% of total energy intake" (WHO, 2023a). A third of these total figures were used as a guide for the maximum fat content per meal for both age groups.

[4] There is no recommendation for total sugars. The nutrient content analysis provided in this report is based on the total sugar content of each meal type and not for free sugars, therefore a comparison to the WHO recommendation for free sugars was not determined (WHO, 2015).

[5] Fibre figures were derived from EFSA's recommended Adequate Intake (AI).(EFSA 2010b)

[6] Protein figures derived from EFSA recommended Population Reference Intake (PRI) for protein in g/kg using average weight of 12-year-old boy (i.e. 38.1kg which falls on 50th percentile on UK-WHO growth charts) and average weight for 5-year-old girl (i.e. 18.3kg which falls on 50th percentile on UK-WHO growth charts).(EFSA 2012)

[7] Sodium figures were obtained from EFSA's safe and adequate intake for sodium (g/day) in boys aged 12 years and girls aged 5 years (EFSA, 2019). To convert sodium to salt, the sodium value was multiplied by 2.54. One third of this was used as a recommended limit per meal, 1.1g for a 5-year-old girl, and 1.7g for a 12-year-old boy.

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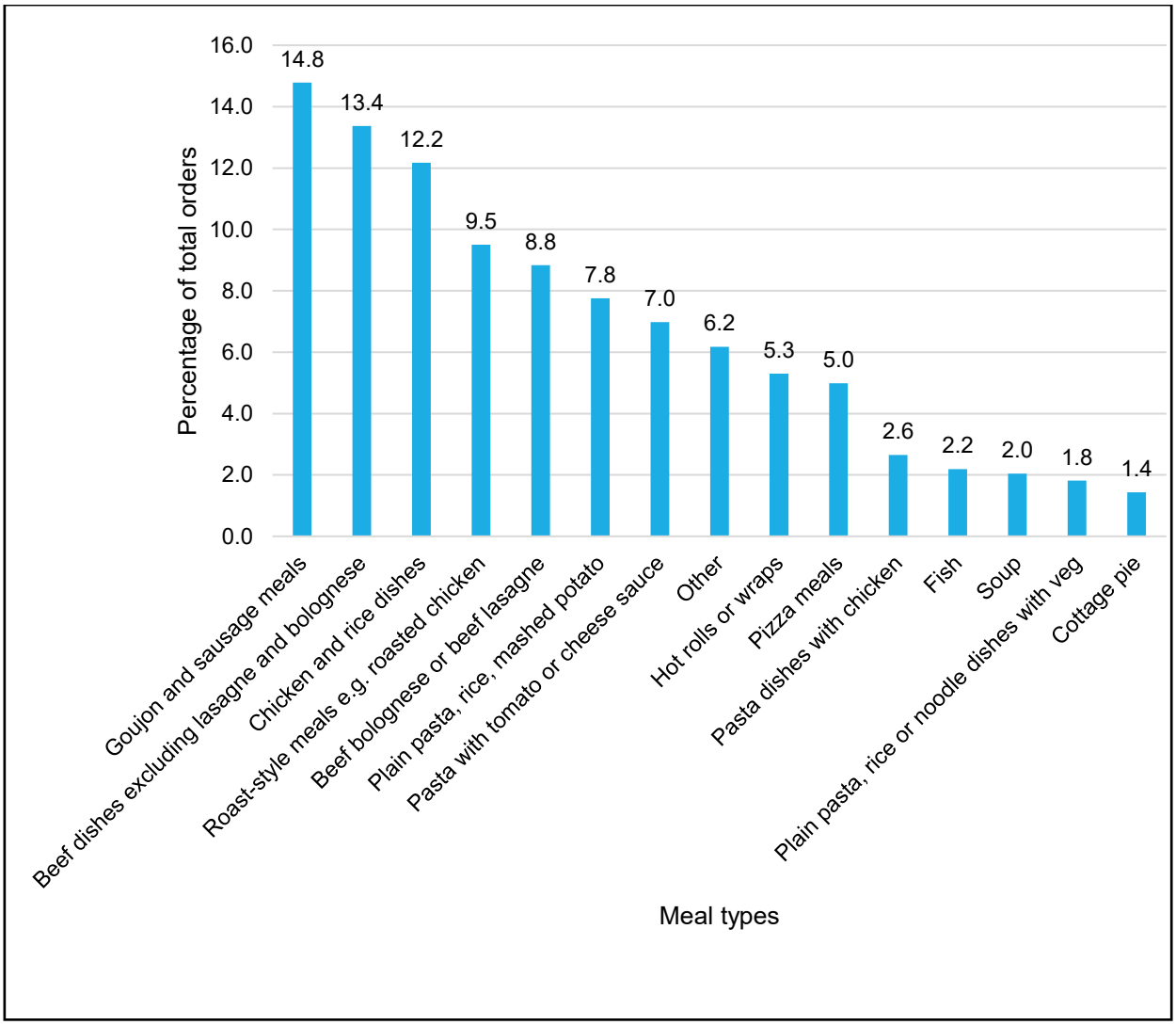
3.3.3. Popular menu items

The same 15 suppliers were asked to provide order numbers of each meal they offer for a defined week since the start of the 2025/2026 school year. Disclosure of this information was not compulsory. Of the nine large FBOs, five provided order information for a specified week between Q3 2025 and Q1 2026. Of the six small suppliers, five provided order numbers for a specified week between Q3 2025 and Q2 2026. Meals were divided into 15 different categories based on their composition (Figure 4). The total order numbers and their distribution across each category and figures for each individual FBO are summarised in the table in Appendix IV. To note, two large suppliers providing meals to roughly 30% of schools nationwide did not provide order numbers and could not be included in this analysis.

When order numbers were combined, meals containing goujons (or breaded chicken products) and sausages formed the biggest proportion of orders (Figure 4). Despite the Minister's directive in April 2025 to omit such foods from menus, these foods are still available to order from certain FBOs. Though 82% of meals analysed during the desktop analysis did not contain these HFSS foods, it is evident that when they are available, children will choose them over healthier options.

Beef dishes such as meatballs and pasta or mash, savoury mince and rice, and beef stew were the second most popular meal type, with chicken and rice dishes the third most common order forming 12% of the total orders. Roast-style meals such as roast chicken, turkey and ham formed nearly 10% of orders, while beef bolognese and lasagne formed 9% of orders. Plain pasta, rice, or mash were the sixth most popular out of the 15 categories. Other frequently ordered meals included handheld options like hot sandwiches, rolls or wraps (5.3%) and pizza meals (5%). Pasta dishes with chicken including pesto chicken pasta, chicken carbonara, and chicken and tomato pasta formed 2.6% of orders. Fish was less popular at 2.2% of total orders. Soup formed 2% of orders, ranging from 0.2% to 20.5% between FBOs. Plain pasta, rice and noodles with vegetables formed 1.8% of orders, but varied between 0.3% to 17.2% across each individual FBO.

Figure 4. Distribution of Total Meal Orders (n=545,001) across meal categories



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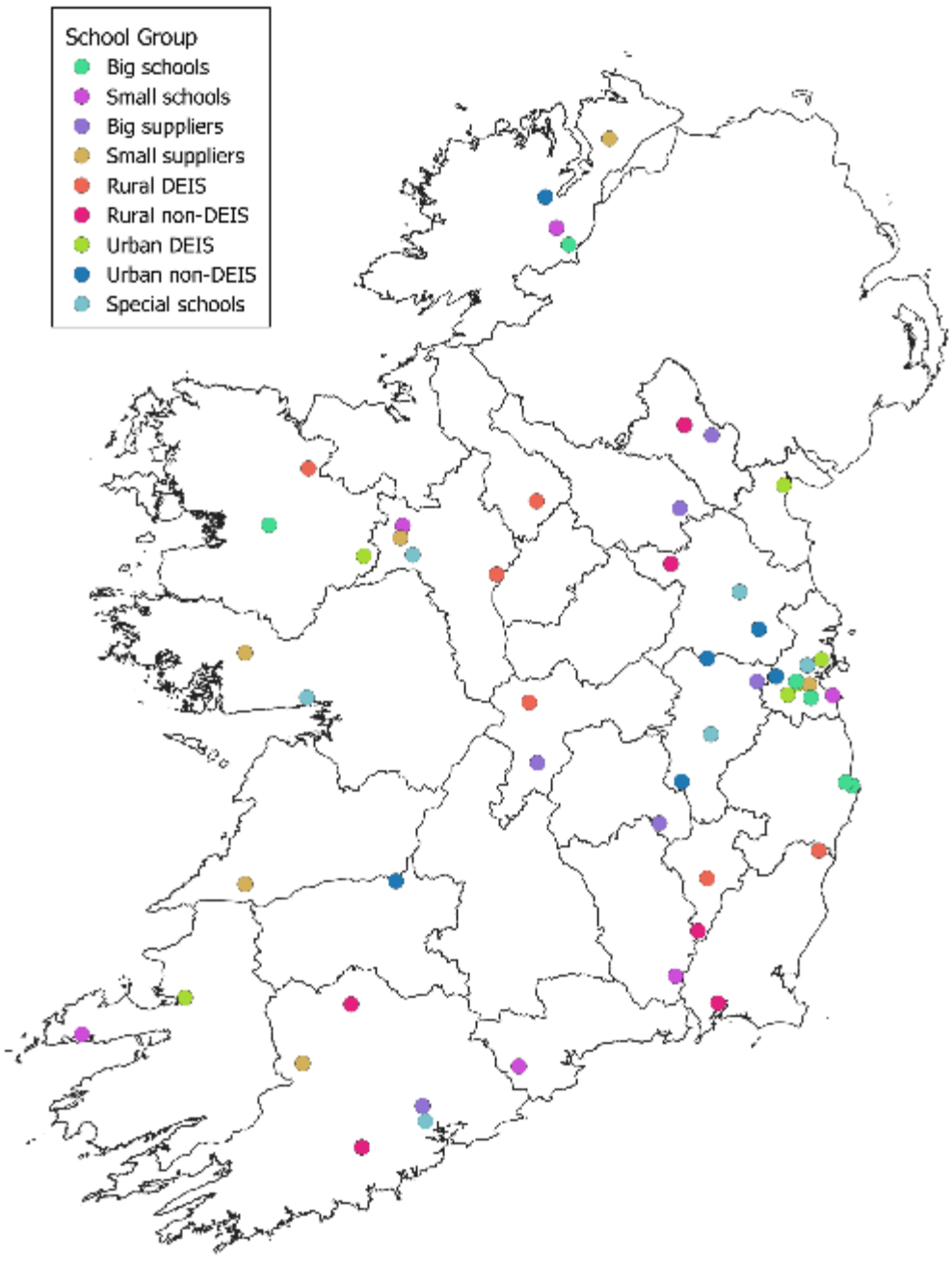
Chapter 4. School-based meal audits

School visits were conducted as part of an initial audit of the meals provided under the Scheme between 11th of March 2026 and 15th May 2026. The objectives of this audit were to:

- Examine the content of meals provided in situ through visual inspections of a sample of meals.
- Test an auditing tool and mechanism for auditing to inform future auditing and monitoring of the programme.
- Examine waste by recording the number unopened meals left over after lunch time in a sample of classes.

As part of this meal audit, a random sample of 54 schools were visited. The Department of Health Statistics and Analytics team recommended a stratified sampling approach. All primary schools were divided into distinct subgroups based on indicators including size, DEIS status, geographic location, the size of their school meal supplier, and special schools were grouped separately. Six schools were randomly selected from each group, and the sample was checked for duplicates. Schools varied in size from 14 students to 849 students. Figure 5 shows the spread of schools visited, by group, across the country. A description of the sample of schools can be found in Table 8.

Figure 5. Map of primary schools visited during initial audit



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4.1. School visit audit process

Four different data collection forms were developed for the purpose of this initial audit (Appendix V). A standardised operating procedure was written, outlining how to arrange the school visit and steps to follow when on-site. The dietitian completed nine visits during two weeks of school visits to test the procedure and data collection tools. Following this initial period, forms were amended where necessary and Department of Social Protection colleagues completed a visit with the dietitian, where they were trained on how to conduct the audit and use the data collection tools. Each school was only visited once, with the majority of schools visited on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday, where possible.

The visits involved:

- Principals were asked to complete a survey (Appendix V).
- Between two and three classes in each school were chosen to participate in the audit. Generally, Junior Infants, 3rd class, and 6th class were chosen where available to capture a range of age groups.
- Teachers of each of the chosen classes were asked to complete a survey (Appendix V).
- The number of meals ordered by each class were recorded, and after lunch the number of unopened meals were noted down. The number of excess meals/unopened meals were used as an indication of the level of waste and meal consumption, for the purpose of this report. If it was standard practice for meals to be brought home, schools were asked not to do this on the day of the visit.
- A meal checklist was completed for each meal on offer that day where an excess unit of that meal was available, noting whether the following was present on visual inspection:
    - A fruit, vegetable, or salad
    - A carbohydrate source
    - A protein source
    - A food considered to be high in fat, salt, or sugar (HFSS) (Appendix V).

Table 6. Characteristics of Schools Audited (n=54)*

Characteristics	% (n)
Geographic location	
Urban	55.6% (30)
Rural	44.4% (24)
Region	
Leinster	50% (27)
Connacht	18.5% (10)
Munster	18.5% (10)
Ulster	13% (7)
School size	
Small (≤100 pupils)	51.9% (28)
Large (<100 pupils)	48.1% (26)
DEIS status	
Non-DEIS	64.8% (35)
DEIS	35.2% (19)
Supplier size	
Large (>/= 40 schools)	70.4% (38)
Small (<40 schools)	29.6% (16)
School type	
Ordinary	46.3% (25)
Ordinary with Special classes	38.9% (21)
Special school	14.8% (8)
Service delivery model	
Cold drop	53.7% (29)
Hot drop	40.7% (22)
Fresh (cook on site)	5.6% (3)
Duration of programme in each school	
Less than 1 year	22.2% (12)
1-2 years	13% (7)
2-3 years	22.2% (12)
More than 3 years	35.2% (19)
NA	7.4% (4)

*Of note, though six schools were chosen from each subgroup, the groups were not mutually exclusive and as such there are more than 6 DEIS schools, large schools, special schools etc.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Ordering, lunchtime practices, and waste disposal

Meal ordering practices, lunchtime practices and waste disposal procedures were captured via principal questionnaires. Four out of 54 principals did not complete the principal questionnaire. No single school type was over-represented amongst those who did not complete the questionnaire.

In 36 schools, parents were responsible for ordering meals via an app or website. In Six schools, school staff could log into ordering systems and order on behalf of students' parents or guardians. In seven schools, a combination of both was possible. One principal did not respond to this question.

In most cases, children ate their hot meals in classrooms, with two schools reporting they have a designated social area/communal area where children eat their meals. In most classes, students were involved in handing out meals (75%).

151 classes were audited across the 54 school visits .In 50% of classes audited, children were given between 10 to 15 minutes to eat their meals. 25% of classes (36) were given more than 15 minutes while 22.9% (33 classes) were given between 5 and 10 minutes to have their lunch.

Waste and excess meal orders were managed differently in schools. 17 reported excess orders were brought to staff room (32%) for staff to eat, 18 (33.3%) of principals reported students bringing home meals, and 30 (55.6%) reported suppliers arranged for disposal of waste on-site or off-site.

32 teachers (22.2%) reported linking healthy eating education with hot school meals.

4.2.2. Opt-in and meal consumption

Opt-in

Opt-in can be defined as the proportion of children participating in the programme and was derived using the number of meals ordered as a percentage of the total number of children in that particular class. 151 classes were audited across the 54 school visits. Overall, the average (median) opt-in was high at 85.4% in this sample of classes.

The most significant differences in opt-in and uneaten meals were seen across age groups and service delivery models (Table 7). Opt-in decreased with age, while total waste and the number of uneaten meals ordered by children present that day was notably higher in older age groups. Average opt-in in younger classes (Junior Infants, Senior Infants, and 1st Class) was 96.6% compared to 81.4% in middle classes (2nd class, 3rd class, and 4th class) and 80.6% in older classes (5th and 6th class) (Table 7).

Opt-in appeared to be highest in schools where the programme has been running for less than 1 year or more than 3 years. As expected, opt-in was higher in DEIS schools vs non-DEIS. There were small differences in opt-in across school size, supplier size and delivery model (Table 7).

Meal consumption and waste

On average, 18.9% of meals were unopened after lunch break. When accounting for absences on the day of visit, 11.1% of meals were unopened that were ordered by children who were in school that day but chose not to eat their meal. For reporting purposes, we have assumed that all children who were absent are opting into the programme. As this assumption may positively skew results, both total waste and unopened meals accounting for absences is reported (Table 7).

A higher percentage of uneaten meals was seen in schools where the programme has been running between 1 and 2 years (13.5%) and 2-3 years (15.4%) compared to schools where the programme has been in place less than 1 year (4.31%) or more than 3 years (10.7%). The drop in consumption of meals as duration increases could be due to the novelty of a hot meal wearing off or menu fatigue due to meal repetition, which could reduce engagement with the programme over time.

Total waste and unopened meals increased by age group. The percentage of unopened meals in older classes was nearly double compared to younger classes (14.6% vs 6.65%), and total waste in older classes was 22.4% compared to 14.6% in younger classes.

The average waste and uneaten meals in classes in special schools and special classes in mainstream schools were analysed separately, as children are not placed in class groups according to age alone. The special classes had a noticeably lower level of waste compared to mainstream school class groups. It is hypothesised that this could be due to a greater proportion of special schools having an onsite canteen or operating a hot drop service delivery model, which allows for a shorter window of cancellation. Moreover, observations from special school visits indicated adaptation of meals for special dietary requirements (plain options, blended meals, own plates and cutlery) and excess meals being taken by older students in the school, as age ranges from five up to 18 years in certain

schools visited. Offering tailored meals and cutlery could lead to increased consumption of meals, coupled with older students eating multiple meals would result in lower levels of waste and uneaten meals.

Across service delivery models, the proportion of uneaten meals was highest in schools operating a cold drop delivery model (15.9%) compared to a hot drop model (4.06%). In schools where meals were cooked fresh on-site, on average 9.3% of meals were uneaten, however this should be interpreted with caution given the small number of schools operating such a model (n=3).

Table 8. Opt-in, waste, and unopened meals by programme duration, DEIS status, school size, supplier size, age groups, and delivery model

	Median Opt-in % (n)	**Median Total Waste% (n)**	**Median Unopened % (n)***
Overall	85.4% (1832)	18.9% (346)	11.1% (186)
Programme duration	%	%	%
Less than 1 year	91.0	8.76	4.31
1-2 years	68.2	19.5	13.5
2-3 year	76.0	23.8	15.4
More than 3 years	91.2	21.5	10.7
DEIS school			
Non-DEIS	82.6	16.7	11.2
DEIS	89.6	21.9	11.0
School size			
Big	87.1	20.3	11.5
Small	82.4	16.2	10.3
Supplier size			
Big	84.5	23.8	15.9
Small	87.4	8.16	0.750
Age groups[1]			
Younger classes	96.6	14.6	6.65
Middle classes	81.4	19.7	12.0
Older Classes	80.6	22.4	14.6
Special classes	86.8	11.2	1.77
Delivery model			
Cold drop	87.7	23.4	15.9
Hot drop	82.9	12.2	4.06
Fresh	85.9	19.7	9.26

*The percentage of unopened meals, not absence-related as this was accounted for in the calculation.

[1]**Younger classes**: Junior Infants-1st class; **Middle classes**: 2nd-4th class; **Older Classes:** 5th & 6th Class

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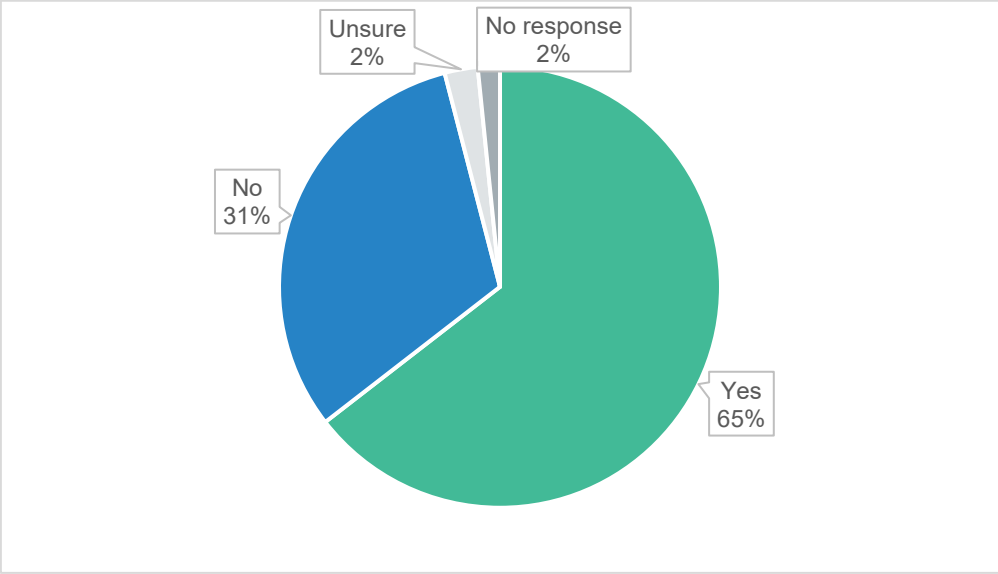
Absenteeism of pupils is a potential contribution to the waste seen during school visits. For production and operational purposes, suppliers are permitted to have a minimum cancellation window of 48 hours, meaning it is not possible to cancel a meal due to unforeseen circumstances such as illness. Additionally, it appears some parents are not opting out of the programme despite their child not eating the meals that are being ordered. These reasons were also cited by principals in feedback in the principal questionnaire. Moreover, 65% of teachers report children are still bringing in a packed lunch from home (Figure 6), and anecdotally many teachers reported that children were having their packed lunch at small break and weren't hungry for a hot lunch during their longer break.

Figure 6. Percentage of teachers reporting most children still bring in packed lunch



4.2.3. Meal composition and compliance with nutrition standards

The number of different meal options ordered varied between 1 meal per class and 13 meals per class, with the average number of meals ordered per class being 6 per day.

335 meals were audited during the school visits. As previously described, meals were visually inspected to determine if they contain a fruit or vegetables or salad, a carbohydrate, a protein source, or a HFSS food. Of the 335 meals, 50% (169)

contained all 3 of the main food groups, and 15% contained foods considered to be HFSS. 57.2% (186) contained a vegetable or fruit or salad, 80.6% (270) contained a protein source, and 95.5% (320) contained a carbohydrate source. These are consistent with finding from the desktop analysis of available meals.

Teachers were asked if fruit was provided as part of the hot lunch, to every child, every day. Nearly half (46.5%) of teachers reported that fruit is provided to every child every day. Three of the 27 suppliers captured by the audit claimed to provide daily. However, during school visits 25% (4) schools supplied by these three FBOs did not receive fruit as part of their lunch.

Fruit was mostly provided as whole fruit that was either handed out (30.6%), or children were responsible for taking a piece (27.8%). One teacher reported fruit being provided cut up and served on a fruit platter, while seven teachers reported fruit being individually portioned and handed out to children. Figure 7a and 7b below shows different ways of fruit was presented on school visits.

FIGURE 7A FRUIT BOWL IN CLASS

FIGURE 7B FRUIT SERVED AT "SERVING STATION"

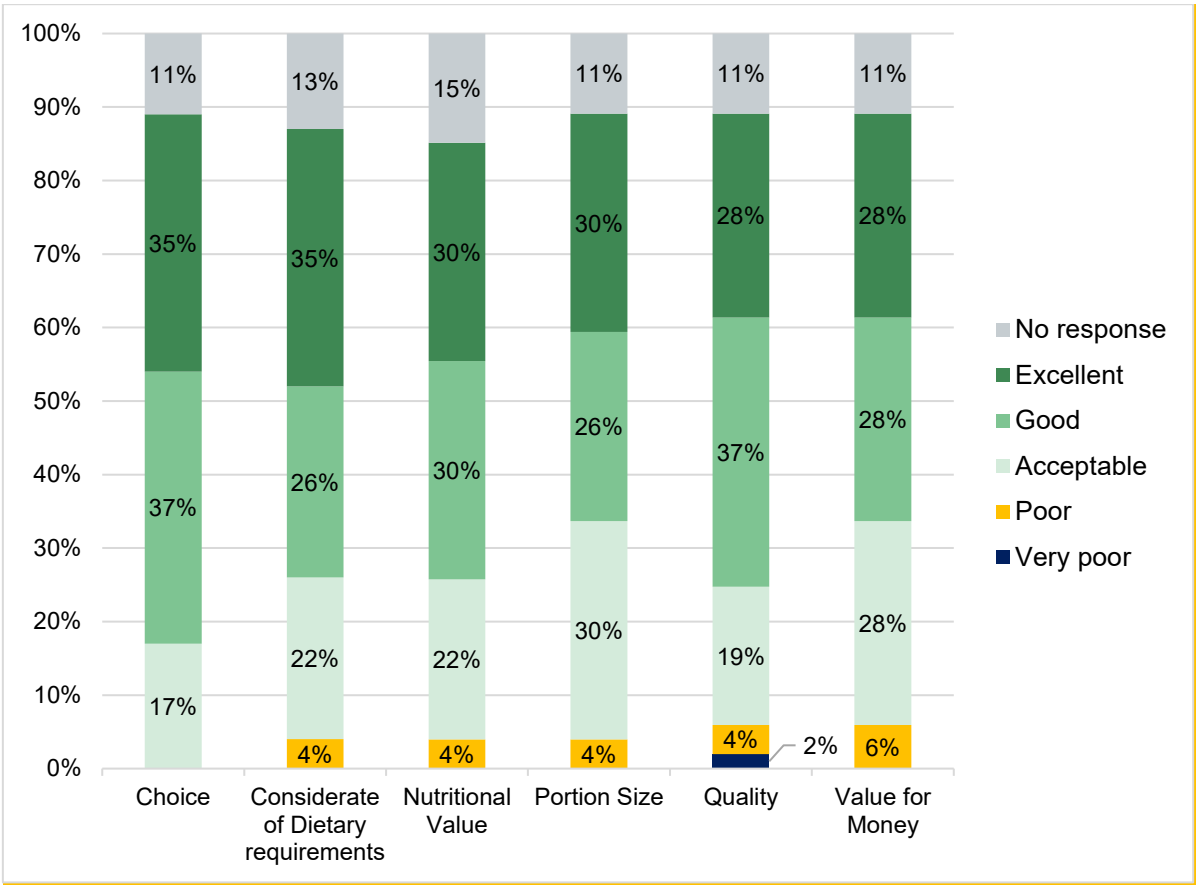
Compliance with standards did not vary between DEIS status, school size, or supplier size. Photos of meals examined on-site can be found in Appendix VI.

4.2.4. Teacher and Principal feedback

Principal feedback

Principals were asked to rate the meals based on choice, consideration of dietary requirements, nutritional value, portion size, quality and value for money. The responses are summarised in Figure 8. Perceptions were largely positive, with particularly high ratings on choice (72% rated good or excellent), consideration of dietary requirements (61% good or excellent) and quality. 60% reported nutritional value as good or excellent, with 52% rating meals as good or excellent value for money.

Figure 8. Principal perceptions of the meals (N=50)



Where feedback was positive, principals consistently praised meals or the Hot School Meals Scheme for:

Meal quality and taste

Many principals highlighted:

- High-quality meals cooked locally
- Good flavour and seasoning
- Children enjoying and looking forward to meals
- Freshness when suppliers are nearby

Supplier performance and communication

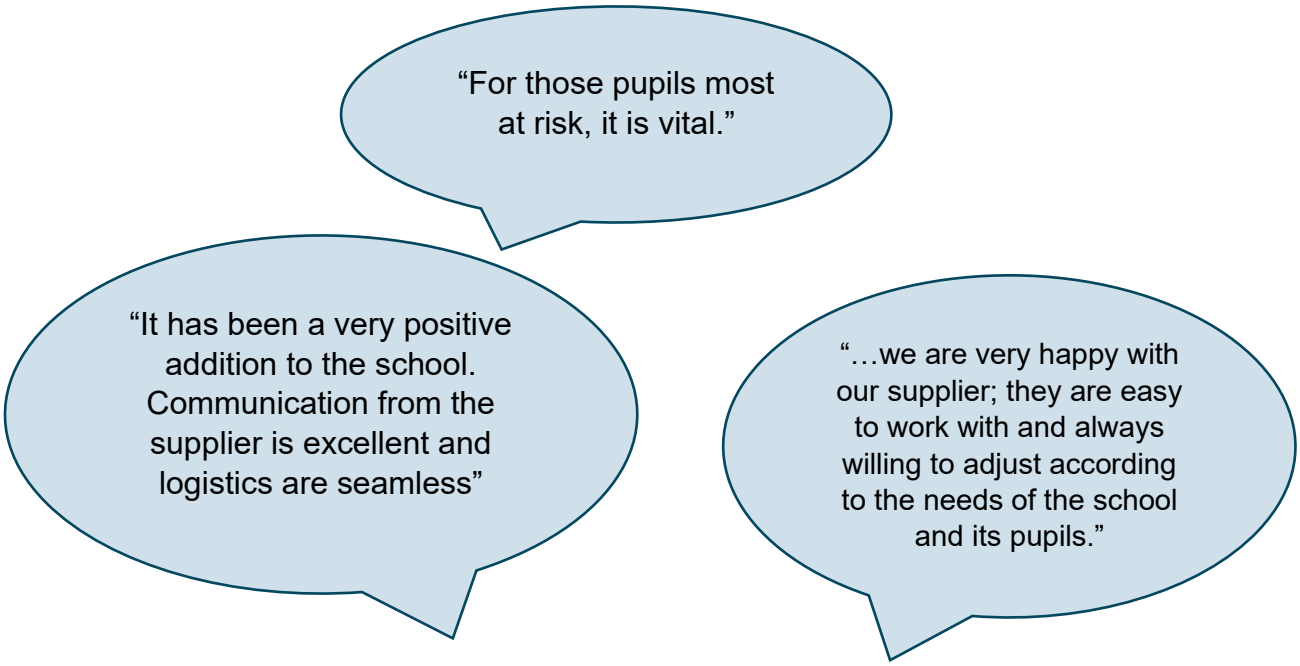
Many schools highlight:

- Excellent communication
- Flexibility and responsiveness
- Willingness to adjust menus
- Smooth logistics and reliable daily deliveries

Impact on pupils (Particularly in DEIS schools)

Strong recurring theme:

- Hot meals are essential for vulnerable pupils
- For some children, it is the only nutritious or hot meal of the day
- Pupils often take leftovers home
- Scheme supports attendance and wellbeing



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Though feedback was overwhelmingly positive from principals, there were some frequently cited issues that can be broadly summarised as follows:

Dietary needs & menu variety

- Vegan and coeliac options are inconsistent and inadequate in some schools
- Some schools reported errors in provision of meals for children with special dietary requirements for example gluten contained in gluten-free meals or meals containing lumps when there is a requirement for a smooth pureed meal.
- Limited alternative protein options for religious dietary needs.

Waste

- Older pupils often leave meals uneaten
- Opt-out from the programme without notifying supplier and absenteeism contribute to unopened meals
- Some reported disposal costs create an additional burden for schools

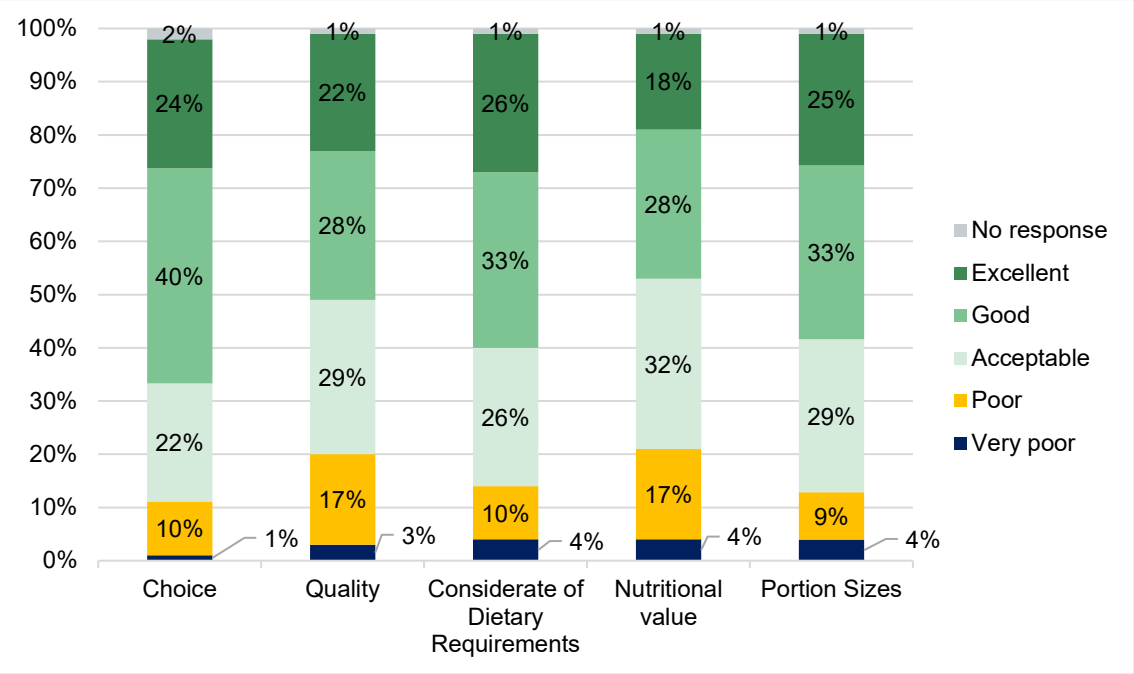
Procurement

- Some report procurement to be cumbersome and time-consuming and can be difficult to manage without administrative support.
- Some schools plan to outsource procurement to external companies

Teacher feedback

Likewise, teachers were asked to rate the meals based on choice, consideration of dietary requirements, nutritional value, portion size, and quality. The responses are summarised in Figure 9. Feedback was largely positive. 64% of teachers felt choice of meals was good or excellent, with roughly half reporting the quality and nutritional value of the meals to be good or excellent. 58% reported the portion sizes to be good or excellent, and 59% scored consideration of dietary requirements to be good or excellent.

Figure 9. Teachers' perception of the meals



Meal quality, taste & variety

- Meals are of a good quality, filling and tasty
- A lot of variety on offer
- Teachers described meals as "delicious", "tasty", "fresh" where they sampled leftover meals.
- Something for "fussy eaters" e.g. plain pasta, rice, noodles
- Where fruit provided this is valued by school staff and well-received

Supplier performance and communication

- Supplier responds positively to feedback
- Efficient service for example meals always on time and as ordered, easy to distribute meals
- Good mechanism for feedback between school and supplier

Impact on pupils

- The programme has led to children trying new foods
- Teachers report children eat the meals and enjoy them

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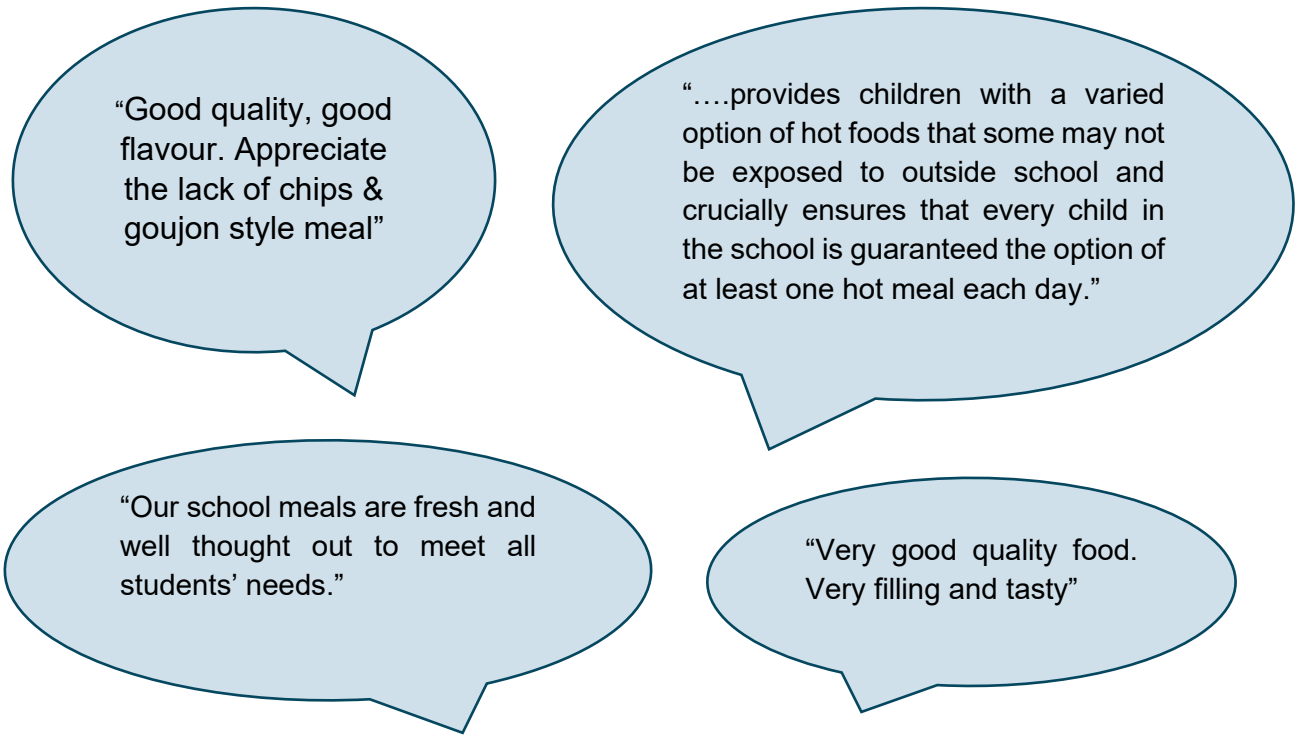

Overall, teacher ratings were slightly lower compared with principal ratings, particularly on quality and nutritional value. Of teachers surveyed, 20% reported concerns with the quality and nutritional value of the meals, giving them a rating of poor or very poor. There were some reported concerns around portion size and consideration of dietary requirements, with 14% of teachers rating meals poor or very poor on consideration of dietary requirements and 13% rating meals poor or very poor on portion sizes.

Reported concerns can be broadly summarised as follows:

Quality and nutritional value

- Concerns regarding the presentation of meals; meals are not visually appealing e.g. some meals appear "sweaty", "mushed together"
- Concerns regarding the taste or texture of the food e.g. food appears "burnt", "soggy", "dry", "undercooked/hard" (particularly potatoes/pasta)
- Over-reliance on carbohydrate foods in some meals
- Some meals do not contain vegetables, or there is an option for parents to pick "no vegetable" option when ordering, "A lot of the pupils tend to opt for goujons etc everyday but there is quite a lot of choice if the pupils were a bit more adventurous"
- Processed meat in some meals

- Inconsistent portioning
- Deterioration in quality since sign up
- Repetitive menu, children get tired of same options every day
- Lack of option for vegan/vegetarians; some gluten free meals containing gluten

Portion size

- Portions too large for younger classes e.g. Junior Infants, and too small for older students e.g. 6th class.
- Some children report they want more food

Waste

Waste was a frequently cited issue. Some potential reasons reported by teachers include:

- Absenteeism
- Parents not cancelling meals children don't like, not changing orders regularly, not opting out
- Some students report difficulty cancelling meals on app
- Older students less engaged with programme
- Parents sending in a big packed lunch
- Some children are picky eaters and do not like the meals on offer or the meals ordered for them by their parents.
- Quality and presentation of meals

Need for cold option and fruit

- Many teachers identified a need for a cold lunch option, with some teachers reporting children asking for cold option themselves e.g. roll or sandwich
- Many teachers noted that provision of fruit would be a welcomed addition

4.2.5. Innovation and best practice examples

Some schools and suppliers have introduced a number of innovative ways to encourage consumption of school meals. Example of these include the following:

- "Meal of the month"
- Recipe competitions

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- Compartmentalised containers
- Fruit provision
- Children using own bowls and metal cutlery

Best practice example: School A

- Communication with parents to discourage parents from sending in an additional lunch if their child is availing of a free school meal
- Communication between school and supplier to meet specific needs of that school including;
  - Option for reduced menu e.g. 2-3 options per day;
  - Regular feedback from school regarding consumption and acceptability of meals amongst students and prompt response by FBO;
- Regular communication between parents and schools
- **Result:** very little unopened (3%, all due to absences), high opt-in (90%), high rating from teachers & principals

Best practice example: Supplier A

- 16 meals analysed during desktop recipe analysis.
- Of meals ordered, 98% met 5 standards, with the remaining meeting 4 standards.
- Larger portions offered, all sauces have “hidden vegetables”. Average energy content was 370kcals.
- Meals analysed were mostly composite meals, requiring 40g of vegetables and an additional piece of fruit or additional serving vegetables (80g). Most meals contained upwards of 120g vegetables, incorporated through creative ways such as blended vegetables in sauces.
- Operate a 3-week menu cycle.
- Do currently offer goujons, but only on a Friday once every 3 weeks. Serve fruit with these meals.
- 2 schools visited
- **Result:** No unopened meals by children who were present, very little waste on school visits (0-6%) and good opt in on day of visit (58-96%).

During the initial audit, 54 schools were audited over a 9-week period, which included a 2-week Easter break. Meals from 27 different suppliers were audited.

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It has demonstrated the feasibility and value of assessing the content of meals served and ordered. However, the paper-based methodology used was resource-intensive, and where non-compliance was found, feedback to suppliers was not possible given resource constraints.

The sample size is not statistically representative, thereforefindings cannot be generalised to all primary schools. However, results were consistent with desktop analysis of recipes provided by FBOs supplying meals to over 70% of primary schools nationwide.

Lastly, due to time constraints, composition of meals available to order were analysed. Currently, the proportion of meals actually ordered that contain the required food groups is not available. However, findings from order numbers that were made available, and observations from school visits suggest that meals containing HFSS or meals with little or no vegetables were more frequently ordered than more balanced options. Further data analysis is required to confirm this.

Chapter 5: Food Business Operator engagement meetings

The dietitian met with the nine large FBOs. (i.e. operators supplying 40 or more schools) alongside officials from DSP on two occasions.

5.1. Initial meetings: December 2025

The purpose of the first round of meetings was to provide an update to FBOs on issues relating to procurement, contracts, nutrition, issues on the ground, and future expansion of the programme to secondary schools. The FBOs were provided with an explanation of the approach being adopted to nutrition analysis and to the key objectives of the project. The importance of adherence to nutrition standards, and the need for a collaborative approach to achieve full compliance was also highlighted.

The dietitian visited a small number of schools in November 2025. Photos from these visits were shown to FBOs, particularly highlighted ongoing provision of HFSS foods such as chicken goujons in some meals, despite clear direction from the Minister earlier in April 2025 to remove these foods from menus with effect from September 2025.

5.2. Follow up meetings: February 2026

In-person meetings were organised with each of the nine largest suppliers between 9th February 2026 and 25th February 2026. These meetings involved:

- Tour of kitchen/production facilities.
- The dietitian gave individual feedback to suppliers based on desktop analysis of their menus, where this was available. In certain cases, individual feedback was not possible due to required information not being sent in time.

5.3. Food Business Operator feedback

- Majority of FBOs and in-house nutrition staff welcome the opportunity to meet with the dietitian and DSP staff.
- Suppliers are motivated to work together to achieve compliance with standards and ensure a high-quality School Meals Programme.
- Out of the nine FBOs seven have in-house nutritionist or dietetic support.
- At the time of meeting FBOs (in December 2025, and February 2026) the Nutrition Standards in the public domain had not been updated to give guidance on HFSS foods as per the Minister of Social Protection's Directive. This led to ambiguity and different interpretations by FBOs. The Nutrition Standards have since been re-written, with this revision beginning in November 2025 and the final Standards due to be published in tandem with this report. A Department of Health-led Nutrition Technical Group have oversight of these Standards and their revision. This is a voluntary group and capacity of the group is affected by other competing work priorities related to members' formal roles, resulting in this process taking seven months to complete.
- FBOs reported that there is a requirement to include HFSS foods because children do not like other foods, and therefore they anticipate increased waste or opting out of the scheme, however this was not supported by evidence collected by the FBO.
- FBOs were keen to offer reformulated products as a solution to the Minister's directive to remove HFSS foods from menus. Reformulation means changing the recipes of processed foods to make them healthier,

for example reducing salt in a chicken goujons and baking instead of frying it. This solution was discussed with the Technical Nutrition Subgroup as part of the revision of the Nutrition Standards but was considered not to be appropriate as we do not have the infrastructure and capacity to enforce use of reformulated products instead of standard products at this time.

- Some stated that menus and recipes developed by the Department would assist in clarifying many issues, other raised the point that their recipes are the only way in which they can compete with other FBOs as prices are set.
- A healthy eating education programme is required for children and parents to support the programme.

Chapter 6: Early Stakeholder engagement

Several stakeholders have been identified who are either directly or indirectly involved in the School Meals Programme (Table 8). Meetings have been held with a number of these stakeholders to understand each group or individual's perception of the programme, including concerns and possible solutions to emerging issues.

Table 9. Direct and indirect stakeholders

Direct stakeholders i.e. immediately involved in, benefit from, or implement the programme on a day-to-day basis
Primary school students
Parent(s)/Guardian(s)
Food Business Operators (FBOs) supplying school meals
School staff including principals, teachers, catering assistants
Government Departments; Department of Social Protection Department of Education and Youth Department of Health
Food Safety Authority
Food wholesalers and manufacturers
Indirect stakeholders
Other Government departments including; Department of Children, Disability and Equality

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Department of Agriculture, and Foods and the Marine Department of Finance Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation Department of Climate, Energy & the Environment
Safefood
Health Services Sector
Higher education institutions and researchers
Non-governmental organisations, philanthropic organisations or voluntary groups for example School Food Coalition and Irish Heart Foundation

6.1. Initial stakeholder discussion

Meetings with the following stakeholders were held between September and October 2025.

- School Food Coalition
- Health Service Executive and Irish Heart Foundation Healthy Weight for Children Policy Group.
- Clinical Specialist dietitian in Inherited Metabolic Disorders.
- School teacher with special interest in Nutrition.

The above stakeholders generally welcomed the Hot School Meals Scheme as an initiative, however all had issues that have been broadly summarised into four areas listed below. These stakeholders were experts in food policy, business, public health nutrition and clinical dietetics but, while aware of the Hot School Meals Scheme and issues raised in the public domain, did not generally have first hand, or direct operational experience of delivering hot school meals at scale.

Noting this, the key points of concern related to nutrition perceived by the group, on the Hot School Meals Scheme to date, were as follows:

1. Quality of meals

- Availability of unbalanced meals, HFSS foods and highly processed foods daily.
- Lack of enforcement of Nutrition Standards.
- False promotion of unbalanced meals as “healthy”.

2. Inequity

- Lack of menu options for children with special dietary needs.
- Lack of standard operating procedures and guidelines for children with special dietary needs.
- Children with special dietary requirements are at risk of exclusion from programme.

3. Environmental impact

- Food waste.

Stakeholders were strongly in favour of the appointment of a dedicated dietitian to oversee the review and enforcement of the Nutrition Standards, and all felt this was a positive development in the implementation of the school meals programme.

Reassuringly, proposed solutions to emerging issues, particularly those relating to nutrition, generally aligned with the objectives of the project work plan.

Chapter 7. Revision of Nutrition Standards

The dietitian has worked closely with the Technical Nutrition Subgroup, which is led by the Department of Health, to update the Nutrition Standards for School Meals. The Technical Nutrition Subgroup include representatives from the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute, Safefood, FSAI, HSE and Department of Health.

The purpose of this update was to remove the option to allow higher fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt foods once a week (see below relevant Standards in Figure 10) as per the Minister's directive. This is to ensure up to date Nutrition Standards are available in the public domain and to remove any ambiguity when FBOs are developing menu options. The standards will continue to be updated throughout the process of nutrition review, as required.

The Nutrition Standards for School Meals and Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals have been amalgamated into one to ensure consistency in implementation. The relevant sections have been rewritten and the revised Nutrition Standards are ready for publication.

Figure 10. Standards that needed to be removed from current iteration

- Fried and other high fat food products, such as chips, roast potatoes, fried potatoes, products fried in the manufacturing process, garlic bread, fried fish, or meal choices containing pastry, should only be served a maximum of one day per week.
- Processed meat or chicken products, fried foods, foods cooked in batter or breadcrumbs or foods containing pastry, should only be provided once a week maximum, if at all (for example bacon, ham, sausages, chicken nuggets and similar products).

Chapter 8. Summary

8.1. Findings

From menu analysis there were several key findings summarised below:

Compliance with Department of Health Nutrition Standards

- 59% met at least three of the five standards, of which 14% met four standards, while 7% met all five nutrition standards.
- 80% contained adequate carbohydrate (i.e. pasta, rice, potato, bread, wraps) and 82% did not include HFSS foods.
- 60% of meals contained the required one serving of protein foods (meat, chicken, fish, egg, cheese, beans, lentils). Vegetarian and vegan meals were less likely to contain the require one serving of protein foods (20% compliant vs 60% compliance in non-vegetarian meals).
- Meals were lacking in fruit and vegetables, with half of meals containing one full serving of fruit and vegetables (40-80g per meal) and 14% containing the required two servings of vegetables and fruit, of which one must be a vegetable.
- Interestingly, there was a positive association between centralised cook-fresh catering systems (i.e. hot drop service delivery model) and meals containing one full serving of vegetables, with meals being more likely to contain a full serving of vegetables compared to other catering models.

Nutrition analysis of recipes

- The typical fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt content of meals was acceptable, based on desktop analysis of recipes provided by FBOs.
- Fibre content of meals was found to be below the target for both 5-year-olds girls and 12-year-old boys.
- Some meals were too high in fat and salt, particularly for younger children.
- Energy (i.e. calorie) content was found to be low, particularly for older children.

Findings from school visits

- Of 335 meals inspected in schools, 50% contained fruit or vegetables or salad, and a carbohydrate food, and a protein food. 15% contained HFSS foods.
- On average, 85.4% of students in 151 classes audited were opting into the programme. Opt-in was highest amongst younger students (96.6%).
- On average, 18.9% of meals remained unopened after lunch. Absenteeism was responsible for nearly 8% of uneaten school lunches. 11.1% of meals were uneaten by children who were actually present that day.
- The average percentage of unopened meals and total waste was much higher in older classes (5th and 6th) (14.6%) compared to younger classes (Junior Infants to 1st class) (6.65%)
- Waste was lower in schools where the programme has been running for less than a year or more than 3 years, in small schools and in schools that are operating a “hot drop” service delivery model.

8.2. Conclusions

The majority of meals on offer are nutritious, in that they contain a carbohydrate food, some fruit or vegetables and a protein source. However, while most of the meals comply with the nutrition standards to include one serving of carbohydrate (80%) and one serving of protein (60%), the fruit and vegetable content of meals could be improved.

Calorie content of meals per serving is low relative to the target of supplying one third of the required daily calorie intake, particularly for older children. Servings are standard sizes i.e. the same size is served to all despite variations in nutritional requirements by age.

There is good compliance with the Minister's directive to remove all foods higher in fat, salt, and sugar from menus from September 2025. However, where this directive is not being followed, order numbers from FBOs shows children will opt for meals containing these foods over healthier alternatives.

Menu review needs to pay particular attention to reducing fat and salt content of certain meals, and to offer a more fruit, vegetables and wholegrains.

Key messages

- There have been efforts made by most FBOs to remove HFSS foods, as per the directive of the Minister of Social Protection.
- The availability and serving size of foods that contribute to a healthy diet such as vegetables, fruit or salad and wholegrain carbohydrates (i.e. brown rice/pasta/wraps, wholemeal/wholegrain bread) could be improved.
- Order numbers supplied by ten school meal suppliers show that the continuing availability of a minority of meals that contain HFSS, as well as "no vegetable" options, means children and/or their parents/guardians tend to choose these offerings over healthier alternatives, if available.
- The same portion size is served to all students despite variations in nutritional requirements by age. This means calorie content of meals per serving is low relative to the target of supplying one third of the required daily calorie intake, particularly for older children.
- Structures and processes are required to monitor and ensure compliance, while still allowing flexibility for children with special dietary requirements to ensure the programme continues to be inclusive.

- Average opt-in to the programme was high. There was a decline in opt in from younger to older classes.
- The average proportion of uneaten meals was 18.9% across all classes, with less waste seen in younger age groups. Absenteeism contributed significantly to total waste.
- Findings from this review would suggest a “hot-drop” delivery model produces the highest quality meals, particularly in hot drop models where meals are cooked fresh each day and delivered hot to schools.

8.3. Recommendations

Nutrition

1. The development of a standardised 3-week menu cycle should be prioritised to support school meals suppliers in providing meals and menus that are fully compliant with Nutrition Standards and produced within the allocated budget. This resource should be developed for implementation by the suppliers in September 2027, pending additional resource allocation (*Department of Health*)
2. Menus should be adapted for special schools and special classes, and children with special dietary requirements to ensure the scheme remains inclusive. This resource should be developed for implementation by the suppliers in September 2027, pending additional resource allocation. (*Department of Health*)
3. The Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals already contain a requirement for different size meals for different age groups. Clear instructions must be issued to suppliers to provide different size meals for different age groups, as soon as is practically possible. *(Department of Social Protection, Department of Health and Schools in consultation with Food Business Operators*
4. In the interim, recipes must be revised by all school meals suppliers with immediate effect to increase compliance with fruit and vegetable standards, and to increase wholegrain content of meals. The serving size of protein sources must be increased in vegetarian and vegan meals. Consideration should be given to how these foods are presented to promote their consumption. (Department of Social Protection and Department of Health in consultation with Food Business Operators)
5. As part of ongoing menu review, nutrients of concern such as fat, sugar, and salt content should continue to be monitored, particularly considering

the need to increase portion sizes. As serving size increases, so will fat, sugar and salt content in the absence of recipe redevelopment. Current capacity will allow for analysis, write up and feedback to five to seven suppliers within the next 12 months. *(Department of Health)*

6. Periodic revision of the nutrition standards is required throughout this process, taking into consideration existing and emerging evidence and national healthy eating guidelines. Enhanced guidance on provision of age-appropriate portion sizes would be beneficial. *(Department of Health)*

Communications

7. A Communications Strategy needs to be developed within the next six months in line with DSP's Strategy to disseminate findings of the report and communicate priorities with all suppliers including small suppliers. *(Department of Social Protection/Department of Health)*

Research & Audit

8. Research with students should be conducted, particularly in schools where particularly high levels of uneaten meals (i.e. lower uptake) was found. The dietitian will collaborate with the Oversight Group and Higher Education Institute members to develop and complete a qualitative study to address this evidence gap. This piece of work is anticipated to commence in Q4 2026. *(Department of Health/Department of Social Protection)*
9. Robust compliance audits of nutrition standards must be developed and a revised approach to monitor compliance with nutrition standards during the school year, should be developed and tested within the next 12 months for implementation the following school year in place by September 2027, if resources available. [3] (*Department of Health/Department of Social Protection)*
10. Due to resource constraints and the scale of the programme, analyses focused on compliance with five key nutrition standards to determine the nutritional value of meals offered within the programme. There is a requirement for future work to examine menu composition to determine

[3] For example, In Sweden, municipalities and school staff use a free, web-based self-audit tool called *SkolmatSverige* to assess the quality of their meals and to receive tailored feedback. Research has shown the effectiveness in driving improvements and compliance with guidelines. To note, this tool took two years to develop, and development began in 2010, 64 years after nutrition standards were legislated.

compliance with menu-related standards such as recommended provision of fish once a week, and red meat no more than 3 times per week. *(Department Health/Department of Social Protection)*

Infrastructure & Cross-sectorial Systems

11. There is a need for flexibility in ordering either a cold or hot lunch on any given day reflecting feedback from principals and teachers during school visits that this would contribute to waste reduction. . (Department of Social Protection/Department of Education and Youth)
12. Priority must be given to the development of a robust control procedure for dealing with suppliers who are non-compliant with the nutrition standards, and this must be communicated to both the schools and the (Department of Social Protection)
13. Food Business Operators providing school meals need to demonstrate steps they are taking to reduce food waste including regular audits and annual food waste reduction targets. *(Department of Social Protection in consultation with Food Business Operators)*
14. Food catering systems must be reviewed to see which system meets the nutrition standards in a consistent manner and a weighting system developed as part of the tender evaluation in the procurement process. (Department of Social Protection/Department of Education/Department of Health
15. Processes need to be developed for schools and suppliers to ensure appropriate meals are available for students with special dietary requirements. Specific consideration needs to be given to special schools, where a highly flexible catering system and delivery model is a priority to allow for modification of meals to suit children's dietary needs, as seen on school visits. *(Department of Social Protection /Department of Education and Youth /Department of Health)*
16. Schools, as the contract holders, must be proactive in relation to managing their contracts with their supplier to ensure it meets the needs of the students and the schools. *(Department of Education and Youth/Schools*

Health Promotion and Education Systems

17. There is a requirement to link existing healthy eating education (within the Department of Education and Youth's Social, Personal and Health

Education area of the curriculum and other programmes including Grow It Yourself and Incredible Edibles) with school meals to use them as a learning tool to teach children about healthy food, where it comes from and to create a supportive environment for healthy choices (Charlton et al, 2020) This should be done in collaboration with the Department of Health Obesity Policy and Action Plan Implementation Oversight Group and members of the Department of Health Healthy Eating subgroup. *(Department of Health/Department of Education and Youth/Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine)*

18. Consideration should be given to the development of a communication and/or education campaign for parents to encourage healthy eating and to foster an understanding of the underpinning ethos and guidelines influencing meal options available to pupils, working with the Department of Health Healthy Eating Subgroup. *(Department of Health)*

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Appendices

Appendix I: Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals

Nutrition standards only are listed below. For additional guidance and notes please see full standards on gov.ie.

Vegetables, salad and fruit

Standard

- Every meal should contain 2 servings from this group. This can be 2 servings of vegetables or 1 serving of vegetables and 1 serving of fruit or salad.
- Offer a variety of vegetables and fruit.

Potatoes, pasta and rice

Standard

- Every meal should contain 1 serving from this group.
- Pasta and rice must be offered at least once a week each.
- Don’t add salt to water when cooking rice, pasta or other starchy foods.
- Boil or steam potatoes. Do not add oil or butter.

Meat, poultry, fish, egg or beans

Standard

- Every meal should contain 1 serving from this group.
- Processed meat and processed chicken products, fried foods, foods cooked in batter or breadcrumbs or foods containing pastry, should only be provided once a week maximum, if at all (for example bacon, ham, sausages, chicken nuggets and similar products).
- Fish to be available at least once a week.

Fats, spreads and oils

Standard

- Use as little as possible and only mono or polyunsaturated oils.
- Limit mayonnaise and salad dressings and use only lower fat, light options.

Salt

Standard

- Table salt must not be available to add to food.
- Use low-salt options of gravy mixes or stock cubes.

Drinks

Standard

- Fresh drinking water, i.e. tap water, should be available every day.
- Children and young people in school should have easy access to free, fresh drinking water at all times. Funding must NOT be spent on sugar-sweetened drinks or juices.
- Milk and water are the best options for drinks as they are tooth friendly. If the school offers other meals or snacks as part of the School Meals Programme, fruit juice (unsweetened) should not be served more than once per day.

Appendix II: Catering Systems and Service Delivery Models

Catering systems	Possible Service Delivery Models[4]
Conventional Meals are cooked using ingredients on-site daily, for example where a canteen or kitchen is based in the school or on the same site as the school. Ingredients may be minimally processed, single ingredients, or could be fully prepared ingredients such as pasta or curry sauces.	• Meals Fully Prepared On-Site
Centralised Cook fresh A cook fresh catering service is where food is prepared in a central large commercial kitchen the morning of service.	• Meals Pre-Prepared Off-site and Delivered Ready to Eat
Centralised cook chill/freeze A central production catering service is when food is prepared in advance of service, and rapidly chilled or frozen at a facility.	• Meals Pre-Prepared Off-Site and Heated in the School by use of an External Pod or Mobile Catering Unit or • Meals Pre-Prepared Off-Site and Heated in the School's Designated Preparation and/or Servery Area or • Meals Pre-Prepared Off-site and Delivered Ready to Eat
Assembly Often called a "kitchenless kitchen", this food service model uses fully or partly pre-prepared meals or meal components to assemble meals in a production site.	• Meals Pre-Prepared Off-Site and Heated in the School by use of an External Pod or Mobile Catering Unit or • Meals Pre-Prepared Off-site and Delivered Ready to Eat or • Meals Pre-Prepared Off-Site and Heated in the School's Designated Preparation and/or Servery Area
Hybrid A hybrid catering service is where any of the above systems are combined	• Meals Pre-Prepared Off-Site and Heated in the School by use of an External Pod or Mobile Catering Unit or • Meals Pre-Prepared Off-site and Delivered Ready to Eat or • Meals Pre-Prepared Off-Site and Heated in the School's Designated Preparation and/or Servery Area

[4] Call For Tender: CFT Hot Meals Below 750k. Source: https://www.spu.ie/resources/hot-meals-below-750k (Page 4)

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Appendix III: Example of reformulated product

Reformulation and effect on energy, fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt content of breaded chicken product

Nutrients/100g	Standard goujon[1]	Reformulated goujon[2]	Change (%)
Energy (kcals)	242	171	- 30%
Fat (g)	14.1	3.27	- 77%
Saturated fat (g)	2.46	0.19	- 92%
Sugar (g)	0.5	0.53	+ 6%
Salt (g)	0.85	0.83	- 2%

[1]Data was sourced from a large supermarket website. [2]Data was provided by 3 FBOs using reformulated product from the manufacturer

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Appendix IV: School visit data collection forms

Form 1. Class Information

Field worker					
Date		**Time**		**Day of the week**	
Supplier name		**Provision model (tick box)**	**Delivered hot**		☐
			Delivered cold and reheated in school		☐
			Made fresh in kitchen in school		☐
Class (tick box)	☐ Junior Infants ☐ 3rd Class ☐ 6th Class Other: _____	**Comments:**			
Number of children in class*		**Cutlery (tick box)**	**Plastic**		☐
Number of children absent today*			**Wood**		☐
Total number of meals ordered today			**Metal**		☐

In the space provided, list <u>all</u> the meals provided.
Example:

- *Chicken curry and rice*
- *Lasagne and potato cubes*
- *Ham, potatoes, and vegetables*
- *Chicken Cheddar Melt*
- *Chicken goujons and potato cubes*
- *Vegetable rice*
- *Chargrilled chicken and pasta*

Name of Meal	Number ordered	Number unopened (after lunch)	Photo taken (tick if yes)
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			
11.			
12.			

Other comments *e.g. observations/ comments about how waste is managed/procurement/school policies*:

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Form 2 Meal Checklist

Complete a meal checklist for each different meal type noted down. For example, if there were 10 different meal types noted down, 10 Meal Checklists should be completed.

Field worker:	
Meal Name	
Does this meal meet special dietary requirements	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure
If yes, please circle the relevant condition/requirement:	☐ Coeliac (gluten-free) ☐ Nut allergy ☐Vegetarian ☐ Egg allergy ☐ Dairy allergy ☐ Cystic fibrosis ☐ Diabetes ☐ PKU ☐ Hallal ☐ Kosher ☐ Texture-modified diet i.e. Liquidised/blended, pureed, minced & moist, soft & bite-sized ☐ Other If you chose Other, please provide more detail:_____
Allergens clearly labelled:	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure
Container	☐ Plastic ☐ Alluminium ☐ Paper/Carboard ☐ Unsure
A visual inspection of this meal was completed	☐ Yes ☐ No
Photo of meal taken	☐ Yes ☐ No
Reason for no photo/visual inspection?	☐ **No leftovers/excess of this meal** ☐ **Leftovers brought home** **Other:_____**

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Fruit & vegetable food group		
The meal contains **vegetables:** e.g. Cooked peas, carrots, swede, parsnip, sweetcorn, corn on the cob, cooked peppers, onions, mushrooms, tomato *NOTE: Potatoes **do not** fall into this group, tomato sauce in beans/spaghetti hoops or on pizza does not count as a vegetable*	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure	**Comment:**
The meal contains **fruit** e.g. Apple, banana, orange, berries, melon, pineapple, pear, plum, raisins	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure	**Comment:**
This meal contains **salad** e.g. Cold, raw vegetables such as peppers, tomatoes, lettuce, carrot sticks, celery sticks	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure	**Comment:**
Starchy carbohydrates		
The meal contains a food from this food group e.g. Potato, sweet potato, pasta, rice, couscous, quinoa, bread, bread roll, wrap, pizza base, noodles	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure	**Comment:**
If yes, are wholegrain or brown varieties used? (for rice, pasta, bread, wraps, or pizza base) *If potato/sweet potato/couscous/quinoa tick N/A*	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure ☐ N/A	**Comment:**
Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, nuts, pulses, plant-based alternatives, cheese		
This meal contains a food from this food group. E.g. Chicken, beef, pork, lamb, fish, eggs, beans, nuts, lentils, chickpeas, cheese, tofu, tempeh, Quorn chicken, seitan	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure	**Comment:**
Foods high in fat, salt, and sugar		
The meal contains one of the following foods: Garlic bread, pastry, spice bag/spice box, corned beef, breaded or batter chicken e.g. goujons/nuggets or plant based version, bacon, sausage, sausage roll, wedges, chips, fried potato cubes	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure	**Comment:**
If yes, please name the food(s) e.g. sausage, chicken goujon		

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Form 3 Teacher Questionnaire

Number of Students in Class: ☐ mber absent today: ☐

Q.1. In your class, how long do children get to eat their hot meal? (Tick the relevant box)

Less than 5 minutes	☐
5-10 minutes	☐
10-15 minutes	☐
More than 15 minutes	☐

Q.2. Do most (over half) of your students bring in a packed lunch from home as well as order a free hot meal?

Yes	☐
No	☐
Unsure	☐

Q.3.0. Is fruit provided <u>every day for every child</u> in your class as part of lunch? (Tick the relevant box)

Yes	☐
No	☐

Q.3.1. If no, how often is fruit provided? (Tick the relevant box)

Less than twice a week	☐
Between 1-4 times a month	☐
Between 1-2 times a month	☐
Less than once a month	☐
Fruit is never provided	☐

Q3.2. How is the fruit served? (Tick the relevant box)

Whole fruit, individually handed out?	☐
Whole fruit, in fruit bowl in class, children responsible for taking a piece?	☐
Cut up, individually portioned and handed out?	☐
Cut up, served on fruit platter?	☐

Q3.3. Does all the fruit provided get consumed every day? (Tick the relevant box)

Yes	☐
No	☐

Q.3.4. If you answered no, does the school dispose of the fruit? (Tick the relevant box)

Yes	☐
No	☐

Q.4. Are students involved in collecting/handing out meals? (Tick the relevant box)

Yes	☐
No	☐

Q.5. Does your class partake in the Food Dudes/Incredible Edibles/Vegetable growing initiatives? (Tick the relevant box)

Yes	☐
No	☐

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Q.5.1. If you answered yes, do you link School Meals with education you provide as part of the above initiatives? (Tick the relevant box)

Yes	☐
No	☐
N/A	☐

Q.6. Please rate the meals provided on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being excellent and 1 being very poor?

1. Quality of meals

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very Poor	●	●	●	●	●	Excellent

2. Choice

Very Poor	●	●	●	●	●	Excellent

3. Portion Sizes

Very Poor	●	●	●	●	●	Excellent

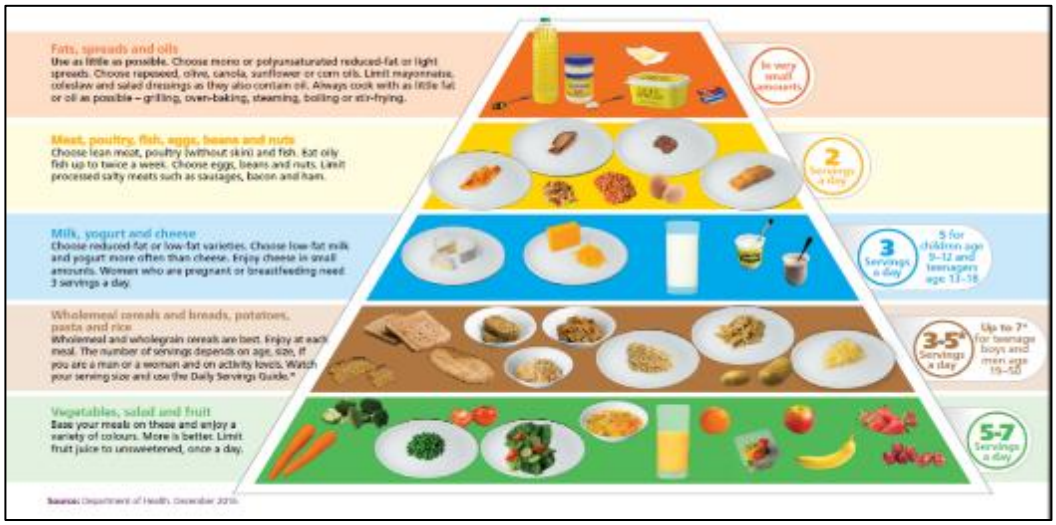
4. Considerate of dietary requirements

Very Poor	●	●	●	●	●	Excellent

5. Nutritional value*

Very Poor	●	●	●	●	●	Excellent

***Nutritional Value:** A way to describe the amount of nutrients or variety in a meal. Generally, a meal with foods from each food group in the food pyramid would be considered to have a high nutritional value.



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Q.7. Are there any further comments you may wish to make in relation the School Meals Programme?

_____
_____
_____
_____

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Form 4. Principal Questionnaire

Q.1. How long has your school been availing of the Hot School Meals Scheme? (tick relevant box)

Less than 1 Year	☐
1 to 2 Years	☐
2 to 3 Years	☐
More than 3 years	☐

Q.2. How does ordering work in your school?

The school orders on behalf of students' parents	☐
Parents order meals for their children via an app or website	☐
A combination of the above; the school and parents can order for students	☐

Q.3. When are school meals provided? (tick relevant box)

Breakfast	☐
Mid-morning (Snack/Small break)	☐
Lunch break (Big break)	☐
After school	☐

Q.4. Are there extras offered by suppliers at additional cost e.g. fruit, yogurt, crackers, etc? (tick relevant box)

Yes	☐
No	☐

Q.4.1. If yes, please list the types of foods on offer:

_____

Q.5. How many days a week are school meals provided? _____day(s)/week

Q.6. Can all students avail of the School Meal Programme? (tick relevant box)

Yes	☐
No	☐

Q.6.1. If not, why not?

_____

_____

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Q.7. Do students/parents or guardians contribute to the cost of the meals? (tick relevant box)

Yes ☐
No ☐

Q.7.1. If yes, what is the value of the contribution? _____

Q.8. Where are school meals provided to students? (tick relevant box)

Classroom ☐
Designated cafeteria/canteen ☐
Social area/communal break area ☐

If none of the above are applicable, please specify where meals are provided:

_____

Q.9. What happens to leftover meals? (tick all that apply)

They are taken to the staff room ☐
They are given to other students ☐
They are brought home ☐
The supplier arranges for their disposal on/off site ☐

Q.10. Please rate the meals provided on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being excellent and 1 being very poor? (tick relevant circle)

1. Quality of meals

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very Poor	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

2. Choice

Very Poor	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

3. Portion Sizes

Very Poor	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

4. Considerate of dietary requirements

Very Poor	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

5. Nutritional value*

Very Poor	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

6. Value for Money

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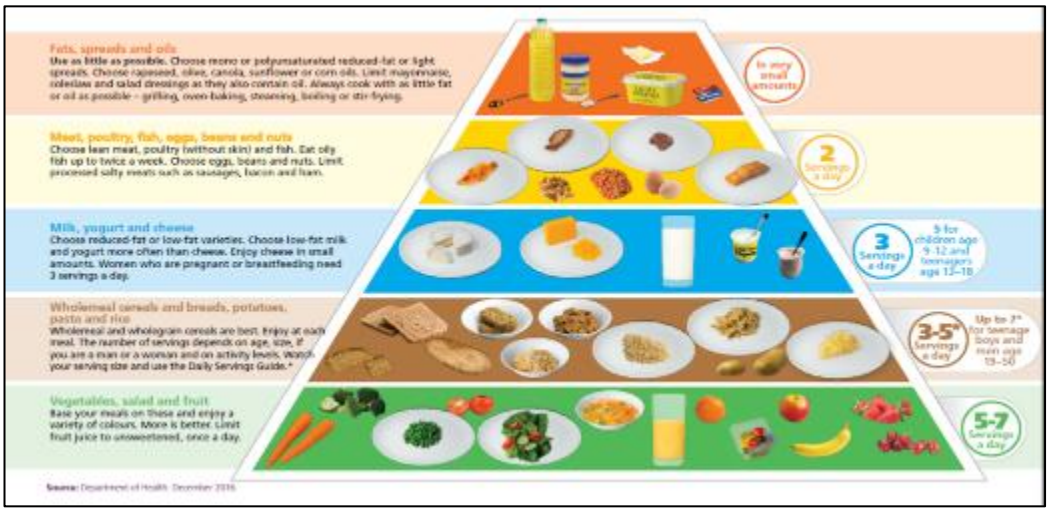
Very Poor ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Excellent

***Nutritional Value:** A way to describe the amount of nutrients or variety in a meal. Generally, a meal with foods from each food group in the food pyramid would be considered to have a high nutritional value.



Q.11. What has the impact of school meals been on children? Please rate the impacts below on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 being 'very positive' and 1 being 'very negative'. (tick relevant circle)

1. Attendance at schools

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very Negative	○	○	○	○	○	Very positive

2. Physical health

Very Negative	○	○	○	○	○	Very positive

3. Psychological wellbeing

Very Negative	○	○	○	○	○	Very positive

4. Participation during class time

Very Negative	○	○	○	○	○	Very positive

5. Interaction with other students

Very Negative	○	○	○	○	○	Very positive

6. Interactions with teachers & staff

Very Negative	○	○	○	○	○	Very positive

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7. Academic performance

Very Poor ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very positive

Q.12. Can you please rate the suppliers according to the issues below on a scale of 1–5 with 5 being 'excellent' and 1 being 'very poor'. (tick relevant circle)

1. Value for Money

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very Poor	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

2. Communication with Suppliers

Very Poor ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Excellent

3. Coordination of Suppliers

Very Poor ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Excellent

Q.13. Are there any further comments you may wish to make in relation the School Meals Programme?

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An Roinn Sláinte
Department of Health

Appendix V: Meals ordered of 10 FBOs (5 large, 5 small)

	All FBOs (N)	All FBOs %	FBO 1 %	FBO 2 %	FBO 3 %	FBO 4 %	FBO 5 %	FBO 6 %	FBO 7 %	FBO 8 %	FBO 9 %	FBO 10 %
Goujon and sausage meals*	80573	14.8	-	10.0	-	13.2	31.2	-	-	14.6	9.3	-
Beef dishes excluding lasagne & bolognese[1*]	72874	13.4	29.6	5.3	18.5	4.7	5.7	4.2	20.2	8.9	13.2	6.1
Chicken & rice dishes[2]	66360	12.2	13.7	19.9	23.9	16.2	6.8	32.3	-	1.2	16.1	28.2
Roast-style dinners e.g. roast chicken, mash, veg[3]	51800	9.5	14.8	5.2	9.9	3.7	8.7	11.2	20.8	1.4	-	29.7
Beef bolognese and beef lasagne*	48151	8.8	12.2	11.6	12.4	7.8	6.1	11.7	-	5.1	7.1	-
Plain pasta, rice, mash*	42240	7.8	10.5	10.6	7.8	1.1	7.0	-	-	9.1	-	-
Pasta with tomato or cheese or both[4*]	38028	7.0	14.3	-	4.3	1.7	1.4	6.3	20.8	28.7	8.9	-
Other[5]	33653	6.2	2.7	5.2	5.8	9.1	7.9	2.6	-	10.4	17.2	1.9
Hot sandwiches, rolls and wraps*	28903	5.3	-	15.7	-	16.3	3.0	9.7	20.8	10.7	-	23.4
Pizza meals	27200	5.0	-	-	-	-	12.7	17.3	-	-	-	-
Pasta dishes with chicken*	14437	2.6	-	3.3	14.3	5.4	2.7	2.7	-	-	-	1.7
Fish[6]	11947	2.2	-	-	-	1.5	5.3	-	17.5	-	7.6	-
Soup	11137	2.0	-	13.5	-	0.5	-	0.2	-	8.8	20.5	-
Plain pasta, rice, noodles with vegetables*	9879	1.8	-	-	0.5	17.2	0.3	1.7	-	-	-	9.0
Cottage pie*	7819	1.4	2.2	-	2.7	1.7	1.2	-	-	1.0	-	-

[1]Includes but not limited to meatballs and pasta, meatballs and mash, beef stew, savoury mince and rice, taco mince dishes. Includes gluten-free varieties.
[2]Includes but not limited to chicken curry & rice, plain chicken and rice, chicken and savoury rice chicken korma and rice, Thai chicken and rice.
[3]Includes roast ham, pork, chicken, and turkey with mash, roast potatoes with/without vegetables.
[4] Includes macaroni and cheese and gluten-free varieties
[5]Includes dishes such as vegetarian curry, vegetarian lasagne, vegetarian/vegan bolognese, vegetable stew, falafel bowl, vegetarian meatballs, chicken pie, pesto pasta, mash and beans, baked potato and beans, chicken and vegetables
[6]All fish dishes were breaded or battered products including fish fingers, fish burger, and fish goujons.
*Includes gluten-free varieties.

Appendix VI: Photos from school visits

Compliance was determined and colour-coded for easier interpretation as follows:

Colour	Green	Amber	Red
Meaning	Evidence of food group.	Evidence of food group but in very small amount or HFSS.	No evidence of food group.

Mainstream Schools

Hot Drop Service Delivery Model

(from Assembly, Cook-Chill/Freeze, Hybrid And Cook-Fresh Catering Systems)

Higher compliance

FIGURE 2 ROAST PORK, MASH, VEG (GRAVY ON SIDE)

FIGURE 1 CHARGRILLED CHICKEN, CARROTS, BAKED POTATO CUBES

Standards	Contains food group
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods[5]	Yes

FIGURE 3 CHICKEN CURRY & RICE (HIDDEN VEG)

FIGURE 4 BARBACOA BOWL

FIGURE 5 CHICKEN & VEGETABLE SOUP WITH ROLL (NOT PICTURED)

[5] **Examples of HFSS foods include:** Fried foods such as chips, roast potatoes, fried potatoes, garlic bread or food containing pastry; or processed chicken products or foods cooked in breadcrumb or batter such as chicken goujons or chicken nuggets and similar, sausages, hamburgers, bacon, ham

FIGURE 6 PASTA, CHICKEN & TOMATO SAUCE

FIGURE 7 SWEET & SOUR FALAFEL & RICE

FIGURE 8 COTTAGE PIE

Lower compliance

FIGURE 9. TOMATO SOUP

FIGURE 10 PESTO PASTA

Standards	Contains food group
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	No
No HFSS foods	Yes

FIGURE 11. 6 VEG MACARONI

FIGURE 12. CHICKEN CURRY (NO VEG)

FIGURE 13. PIZZA AND POTATO CUBES

Standards	Contains food group
Fruit/veg/salad	No
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	Yes

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FIGURE 14 TURKEY AND MASH

FIGURE 15 TURKEY BURGER

Meals containing HFSS

FIGURE 16. CHICKEN GOUJONS & POTATO CUBES

FIGURE 17. CHICKEN GOUJONS AND RICE

Standards	Contains food group
Fruit/veg/salad	No
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	No

FIGURE 18. CHICKEN GOUJONS AND BAGUETTE

Plain options

FIGURE 19. PLAIN PASTA

FIGURE 20. MASH

FIGURE 21. NOODLES

Cold Drop Service Delivery Model, regenerated on-site

(from Assembly, Hybrid, Cook-Chill/Freeze Catering Systems)

Higher compliance

FIGURE 22. MEATBALLS AND PASTA

FIGURE 23. PASTA BOLOGNESE

Standards	Contains food group
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	Yes

FIGURE 24. CHICKEN, MASH, VEG, GRAVY

FIGURE 25. CHEESE PIZZA, POTATO, VEG

FIGURE 26. TOMATO AND CHEESE PASTA

FIGURE 27. CHICKEN CURRY & RICE

FIGURE 28. QUORN AND VEGGIE RICE

FIGURE 29. PIZZA AND CORN

FIGURE 30. CHICKEN AND TOMATO PASTA

FIGURE 31. MEXICAN CHICKEN WRAP

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Lower compliance

FIGURE 32. CHICKEN CHORIZO PASTA BAKE

FIGURE 33. PIZZA AND POTATO CUBES

Standards	Contains food group
Fruit/veg/salad	No
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	Yes

FIGURE 34. BAKED POTATO AND BEANS

FIGURE 35. "CHARGRILLED CHICKEN" AND POTATO WEDGES

FIGURE 36. CHICKEN PESTO PASTA

FIGURE 37. HAM AND CHEESE WRAP

FIGURE 38. PESTO PASTA

Standards	Contains food group
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	No
No HFSS foods	Yes

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Meals containing HFSS foods

FIGURE 39. SAUSAGES, BEAN, POTATO CUBES

FIGURE 40. SAUSAGES AND MASH

Standards	Contains food group
Fruit/veg/salad	No
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	No

FIGURE 51. SAUSAGE SANDWICH

FIGURE 42. CHICKEN GOUJONS AND POTATO CUBES

FIGURE 43. CHICKEN GOUJONS AND PASTA

FIGURE 44. BBQ CHICKEN GOUJONS WRAP

Plain options

FIGURE 45. RICE

FIGURE 46. PASTA

Cooked fresh in on-site kitchen

Higher compliance

Standards	Compliant
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	Yes

FIGURE 48. ROAST CHICKEN, MASH, VEG, GRAVY

FIGURE 47. PASTA BOLOGNESE

Special schools

Hot Drop Service Delivery Model

(from Assembly, Cook-Chill/Freeze, Hybrid And Cook-Fresh Catering Systems)

Higher compliance

Standards	Compliant
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	Yes

FIGURE 49. ROAST CHICKEN, MASH, VEG, GRAVY (REGULAR ON LEFT, "BLENDED" RIGHT)

Lower compliance

FIGURE 50. TOMATO PASTA

FIGURE 52. TOMATO PASTA

Standards	Compliant
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	No
No HFSS foods	Yes

FIGURE 51. CHICKEN CURRY AND RICE (NO VEG)

Standards	Compliant
Fruit/veg/salad	No
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	Yes

Plain options

FIGURE 53. PLAIN PASTA

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Cold Drop Service Delivery Model, regenerated on-site

(from Assembly, Hybrid, Cook-Chill/Freeze Catering Systems)

Higher compliance

FIGURE 54. PASTA BOLOGNESE

FIGURE 55. CHICKEN CURRY NOODLES

Standards	Compliant
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	Yes

Meals containing HFSS

FIGURE 56. SAUSAGES AND RICE

FIGURE 57. FISH BURGER, VEG, MASH

FIGURE 58. CHICKEN CHUNKS, MASH, VEG

Standards	Compliant
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	No

Plain options

FIGURE 59. PLAIN PASTA

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Cooked fresh in on-site kitchen

Higher compliance

FIGURE 60. PORK STIR FRY, MASH, VEG

Standards	Compliant
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	Yes
No HFSS foods	Yes

FIGURE 61. CHICKEN CHASSEUR

FIGURE 62. CHICKEN CHASSEUR (BLENDED)

Lower compliance

FIGURE 63. MUSHROOM PROVINCALE

Standards	Compliant
Fruit/veg/salad	Yes
Carbohydrate	Yes
Protein food	No
No HFSS foods	Yes

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