



Department
for Education

School food standards – updating the legislative framework

Equality impact assessment

September 2026

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Summary

This publication provides the Department for Education's consideration of the public sector equality duty during the consultation of the proposed changes to the school food standards regulations.

Who this publication is for

This equality impact assessment is for:

- State-funded schools, trusts, academies and free schools and their governing bodies

Introduction

This document records the analysis undertaken by the Department for Education to enable ministers to fulfil the requirements placed on them by the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) as set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010.

The PSED requires the minister to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not; and
- foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

These aims are also known as the three limbs of the PSED.

Brief policy outline

In July 2025, the government committed to updating the school food standards as part of the Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan for England¹.

School food in England is regulated through The Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014, commonly referred to as the school food standards. These standards set requirements to ensure that schools provide children with healthy food and drink options, supporting them to obtain the energy and nutrients required across the school day. The school food standards also restrict the provision of foods and drinks that are high in fat, salt and sugar.

In July 2015, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition² (SACN) recommended that free sugars should account for no more than 5% of total daily energy intake, effectively halving the previous recommendation, and advised increasing dietary fibre intake. The 2014 school food standards have not been updated to reflect this, so we are updating the regulations to align with this latest nutritional guidance.

Updating the school food standards means increasing fibre by ensuring schools offer more wholegrains, vegetables, pulses and fruit across the school day. It means reducing sugar by limiting sweetened breakfast items, desserts and drinks, and by lowering the added sugar content of everyday menu options, like yoghurt. It means restricting foods that are higher in fat, sugar and salt, such as deep-fried items, processed meats, and ensuring these appear less often or in controlled portions.

It will also replace the existing requirement to serve meat or poultry at least three times per week with a more inclusive requirement to serve meat, poultry or pulses on at least three days each week. This change increases flexibility for schools to accommodate a wider range of religious and dietary requirements while maintaining the nutritional aims of the school food standards.

For secondary schools, we propose phasing in some of these changes to give schools and caterers more time to adapt.

Governing bodies play a central role in shaping the quality and nutritional value of school meals, and the Department for Education recommends they work with senior leaders to develop a whole school food policy covering food provision, food education, the role of the catering team and plans to increase lunch take-up. We are proposing schools appoint a lead governor for school food and publish their food policies and menus online, which would strengthen accountability and improve compliance.

¹ [Fit for the future: 10 Year Health Plan for England](#)

² [SACN's sugars and health recommendations: why 5%? - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Proposal and rationale

Childhood obesity remains a significant public health concern.

In England in the academic year 2024 to 2025, 1 in 3 children left primary school either overweight or living with obesity, with 1 in 5 living with obesity. Obesity rates among reception-aged children have not declined and remain consistent with pre-pandemic levels³. Diets high in calories and saturated fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) are associated with an increased risk of obesity and chronic diseases.

Summary of proposed changes

To support this ambition, we have completed a full review of each school food standard to ensure that the proposed school food standards remain nutritionally balanced and aligned with current public health advice.

The updated school food standards aim to improve overall dietary quality by increasing fibre intake, promoting fruit and vegetable consumption, and further reducing exposure to foods high in fat, sugar and salt. Key proposed changes include:

- ensuring all bread served is a source of fibre, through the provision of higher-fibre breads
- requiring all pasta dishes served on at least one day each week must contain at least 50% wholewheat pasta
- requiring salad or vegetables to be included as part of all main meal items, including grab and go items
- introducing beans or pulses in main meals on at least one day per week
- reducing access to foods high in fat, sugar and salt, including limiting the frequency of battered or breadcrumbed foods, pizza, pastry and processed meat products
- restricting items where cheese is the main protein source to reduce saturated fat intake
- reducing sugar by limiting sweetened baked products and desserts to once per week in primary and twice per week in secondary, with a requirement that these contain a portion of fruit or vegetables, and ensuring lower-sugar options and fruit or vegetables are offered on remaining days
- limiting drinks to healthier options only
- revising the existing requirement to serve meat or poultry at least three times per week, replacing it with a requirement to serve meat, poultry or pulses on a minimum of three days each week, allowing for more inclusive dietary provision

³ [National Child Measurement Programme 2024 to 2025 school year - Accredited official statistics announcement - GOV.UK](#)

Implementation timetable

We are planning to update regulations in Autumn 2026 with the aim that new school food standards:

- will come into force for primary schools from September 2027
- will be phased for secondary schools, coming into force from September 2027, with the full set of requirements in place by September 2028

What are you hoping to achieve by making these changes?

High-quality, nutritious food drives higher attainment⁴, improved behaviour⁵, better health outcomes⁶, and higher lifetime earnings. Updating the school food standards offers a compelling economic case: it strengthens outcomes for children and maximises the value of the government's £1.5 billion annual investment in free school meals, as well as the contributions made by parents. However, the extent to which this update reduces inequalities will depend significantly on the level of uptake across schools and families.

The revised school food standards play a central role in delivering key government priorities, including:

- the opportunity mission pillar - supporting children to achieve and thrive; and
- improving attendance, health, and wellbeing both in and beyond the school environment.

Further contextual information

The government encourages all schools to promote healthy eating and provide healthy, tasty and nutritious food and drink. Compliance with the school food standards is mandatory for maintained schools, trusts, academies and free schools. This includes maintained nurseries and nursery units attached to primary schools, pupil referral units and sixth forms that are part of secondary schools. Information and guidance on the school food standards is available from gov.uk at [School food standards](#).

The school food standards define the foods and drinks that must be provided, which foods are restricted, and those which must not be provided. They apply to food and drink

⁴ Findings from the [Department for Education Universal FSM pilot](#)

⁵ [A 2018 by the Education Policy Institute](#) reported that teachers felt pupils' readiness for learning improved because of UIFSM.

⁶ The EPI report found that UIFSM improves diet, with children eating more fruit and vegetables: [Evaluation of Universal Infant Free School Meals - The Education Policy Institute](#) The EPI report found that UIFSM improves diet, with children eating more fruit and vegetables: [Evaluation of Universal Infant Free School Meals - The Education Policy Institute](#)

provided to pupils on school premises and during an extended school day (up to 6pm), including breakfast clubs, lunch service, sixth forms, tuck shops, mid-morning break, vending and school clubs.

Schools are responsible for their school meals service and how and where they choose to buy their produce. The school food standards allow school cooks creative freedom to adapt to the preferences of the children at their school, source seasonal or local food, take advantage of price fluctuations, and create dishes that suit their particular talents, which they can be confident are also nutritionally sound. With the continued food-based approach, parents are more easily able to know if the food served to their children meets the school food standards.

A number of Department for Education policies are expected to make a direct contribution to reducing the incidence of childhood obesity and the school food standards apply to universal infant free school meals, benefits-based free school meals, free breakfast clubs in primary schools and the holiday, activities and food programme. We estimate an additional 500,000⁷ children will have access to nutritious free school meals from September 2026 as a result of the free school meals expansion to all on universal credit.

This equality impact assessment reflects the Department for Education's commitment to ensure that ongoing policies continue to provide adequate support for all eligible pupils, and that the scope of school settings within it remains appropriate.

⁷ [Release home - Estimate of additional children claiming Free School Meals following expansion of eligibility - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

Consideration of the protected characteristics identified in the Equality Act 2010

Table 1: Impact summary table

Protected characteristic	Limb 1 – eliminate unlawful discrimination harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act	Limb 2 – advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not	Limb 3 – foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not	Other impacts/ intersectional analysis
Age	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
Disability	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
Gender reassignment	Neutral	N/A	N/A	Neutral
Race	Positive	Positive	Neutral	Positive
Religion/belief	Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive
Sex	Neutral	Positive	Neutral	Neutral
Sexual orientation	No impact	No impact	No impact	No impact
Pregnancy & Maternity	No impact	No impact	No impact	No impact
Marriage & civil partnership	No impact	N/A	N/A	N/A

Further detail

Age – neutral impact

We have not identified any impacts for this protected characteristic under limb 1, limb 2 or limb 3.

Part 3 of the Equality Act 2010, which applies to the Secretary of State's decision-making, does not apply to the protected characteristic of age in relation to people under 18. Chapter 1 of Part 6 of the Act, which concerns discrimination in the exercise of a function relating to the provision of education, benefits, facilities or services to pupils by schools, also does not apply to age. Discrimination on the grounds of age is therefore not prohibited in the exercise of schools' functions, nor is age a "relevant protected characteristic" for the purposes of these functions.

The Department for Education does not hold data on the age of parents and some data on the school workforce⁸ and we have not identified any further impacts.

Disability – neutral impact

We have identified neutral impacts under limbs 1, 2 and 3 for this protected characteristic.

For the purposes of the Equality Act 2010, a person has a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

There is no difference in overall nutritional needs between children with a disability and those who do not share this protected characteristic. However, at an individual level, the nature of a child's specific disability or condition may affect their nutritional needs. The school food standards mandate the food that is offered but do not place any requirement on what an individual pupil must eat.

Consultation responses highlighted that some pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including those with autism, sensory needs or avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID), rely on a limited range of familiar or "safe" foods. Consultation responses also highlighted broader concerns relating to neurodivergent pupils, pupils requiring texture-modified diets, those with swallowing difficulties, gastrointestinal conditions and pupils whose wellbeing or emotional regulation may be affected by changes to familiar foods and routines. Respondents emphasised the importance of flexibility, reasonable adjustments and gradual implementation to ensure these pupils remain able to access school meals on an equitable basis. These responses

⁸ [Release home - School workforce in England - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

indicate a potential risk that if commonly accepted items are removed or restricted at a system level, some pupils may be unable to access the school meal offer at all, which could place them at a disadvantage compared to their peers.

We recognise that some children with SEND and/or sensory needs may require reasonable adjustments or additional dining-room support in order to increase their take-up of school meals. From September 2027, schools should publish their school food policies and menus online, helping families understand what is on offer and enabling schools to identify and support children and young people's individual dietary and medical needs.

Children and young people with medical conditions frequently need support to enjoy and participate in a full education including school meals. Schools must "make arrangements for supporting" pupils with medical conditions; in some cases, these may constitute a "reasonable adjustment" (where a medical condition is considered a disability) or an anticipatory adjustment under the Equality Act 2010. This should include a policy which should be easily accessible for school staff and parents/carers. Schools may consider the use of the supporting pupils with medical needs guidance when considering how to support pupils with restrictive eating.

The school food standards are designed to be sufficiently flexible to allow schools to make menu choices based on local circumstances and needs including for those children and young people entitled to free school meals. Individual medical needs will always take precedence.

Allergies

It is possible for an individual's allergy to meet the definition of disability under section 6 of the Equality Act 2010. For example, a severe nut allergy may constitute a physical impairment with a substantial and long-term adverse effect on normal day-to-day activities. In addition, Section 100 of the Children and Families Act 2014 places a duty on governing bodies of maintained schools, proprietors of academies and management committees of pupil referral units to make arrangements for supporting pupils at their school with medical conditions – which may be food-related, for example a pupil may have a food allergy.

Consultation respondents highlighted concerns that greater use of ingredients such as pulses, legumes, soy products and composite dishes may require careful management for some pupils with allergies, intolerances or other medical dietary requirements. Respondents emphasised the importance of maintaining suitable alternatives, clear allergen information and robust processes to prevent cross-contamination. Existing statutory requirements and school duties relating to medical conditions and allergy safety will continue to apply.

Given the complexity and individual nature of food allergies, it would not be appropriate for the Department for Education to prescribe in legislation how all dietary requirements should be met. Schools should ensure they are aware of any pupils with food allergies and have appropriate processes in place to manage these needs at an individual level including how the school will manage the risk of food allergy and provide clear information on allergens in food provided. New statutory allergy safety guidance⁹ for schools was published on 6 July 2026.

Schools and caterers must also follow allergen regulations¹⁰ such as the rules on the provision of food labelling.

The Department for Education does not hold data on parents and holds some data on the school workforce¹¹ who have a disability. While we acknowledge that some members of the catering workforce may have a disability and require reasonable adjustments, these matters are expected to be addressed through employment terms and conditions rather than through the school food standards, which relate to the provision of food for pupils.

While the proposed mitigations, including flexibility within the standards, publication of menus and existing duties relating to reasonable adjustments and medical needs, are expected to reduce potential adverse impacts, we recognise that some pupils with highly restrictive diets may continue to find aspects of the revised school food offer less acceptable. The Department will continue to engage with stakeholders and monitor implementation to understand whether any additional support or guidance may be required.

Therefore, we find that the updated school food standards do not have a disproportionate impact on those with the protected characteristic of disability.

Gender reassignment – no Impact

We have not identified any impacts for this protected characteristic under limbs 1, 2 or 3.

Young people who have undergone or are undergoing gender reassignment are likely to represent a very small cohort within the school population. Some individuals receiving hormone therapy may experience physical changes similar to a second puberty. Individuals aged 18 and over may apply for a Gender Recognition Certificate, and

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/allergy-safety-in-schools>

¹⁰ [Allergen guidance for food businesses | Food Standards Agency](#)

¹¹ [Release home - School workforce in England - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

surgical interventions are limited to adults. Some available data for young people aged 16 to 24 may include a small number of pupils in school sixth-form settings¹².

While guidance relating to gender dysphoria and hormone treatment highlights the importance of maintaining good overall nutrition, no specific additional nutritional requirements have been identified that would necessitate changes to the school food standards.

The school food standards are designed to be sufficiently flexible to allow schools to make menu choices based on local circumstances and need. The school food standards mandate the food that is offered but do not place any requirement on what an individual pupil must eat. Where pupils have medical needs relating to food, eating, or medication, these should be managed on an individual basis in accordance with the statutory guidance “Supporting pupils with medical conditions at school”. Individual medical needs will always take precedence.

The Department for Education does not hold data on parents or the school workforce in relation to this protected characteristic, and no further impacts have been identified.

Therefore, we find that the updated school food standards do not have a disproportionate impact on those with the protected characteristic of gender reassignment.

Race (including ethnicity) – positive and neutral impact

We have identified positive impacts under limb 1 and 2. No impacts have been identified under limb 3 for this protected characteristic.

The Eatwell Guide¹³ underpins the school food standards and applies to the majority of the population, regardless of weight status, dietary preference (including vegetarian diets), or race or ethnic origin. Individuals with specific medical needs may require adaptations and should seek appropriate medical or nutritional advice.

For individuals of the Jewish and Sikh faiths, we have identified a positive impact under limb 1 and limb 2 as a result of the changes outlined in more detail within the religion or belief section below. Existing requirements relating to meat, poultry and dairy have been made more flexible through the introduction of pulses and nutrient-enriched plant-based alternatives, including an exemption allowing specified fortified plant-based drinks where compliance with the milk requirement would conflict with religious practice.

¹² [Gender identity: age and sex, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/genderidentityageandsex/englandandwales)

¹³ [The Eatwell Guide - NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/eatwellguide/)

The National Child Measurement Programme¹⁴ data shows that children from Black and some Asian ethnic groups have a higher prevalence of obesity compared to children from White British ethnic backgrounds. In both Reception and Year 6, the prevalence of children living with obesity is highest among Black children¹⁵.

Children from Black Caribbean, white and Black Caribbean backgrounds, as well as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and traveller of Irish heritage, also have higher eligibility for free school meals (FSM, see table 2)¹⁶. Children eligible for FSM are more likely to consume a school-provided lunch than those who are not eligible, 81% of pupils eligible for FSM have a school lunch, compared to 55% of those not eligible¹⁷. This means that improvements to the nutritional quality of school meals are more likely to benefit these groups directly.

¹⁴ [National Child Measurement Programme \(NCMP\) annual report, academic year 2024 to 2025, England - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁵ [National Child Measurement Programme \(NCMP\) annual report, academic year 2024 to 2025, England - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁶ [Release home - Schools, pupils and their characteristics - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁷ [Parent, pupil and learner voice: December 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

Table 2: FSM eligibility by ethnicity 2025/26

Ethnicity	% of pupils
White - Traveller of Irish heritage	69
White - Gypsy/Roma	63
Black - Black Caribbean	48
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	47
Any other ethnic group	44
Any other Black background	40
Asian - Bangladeshi	39
Mixed - White and Black African	37
Asian - Pakistani	32
Black - Black African	31
Unclassified	31
Mixed - Any other Mixed background	30
White - White British	25
Any other Asian background	24
Mixed - White and Asian	24
White - Any other White background	22
White - Irish	21
Asian - Indian	7.6
Asian - Chinese	7.6

Source: [Release home - Schools, pupils and their characteristics - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

The Department for Education does not collect race or ethnicity data for parents and some data on the school workforce¹⁸. Although members of the catering workforce may be from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds, there is no evidence to indicate that the

¹⁸ [Release home - School workforce in England - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

proposals would result in differential treatment or impact, and no further impacts have been identified.

Overall, the proposed updates to the school food standards are expected to have a positive impact under limb 2 by supporting improved dietary outcomes for children from ethnic groups that currently experience higher levels of obesity and higher reliance on school-provided meals. Given the universal application of the Eatwell Guide¹⁹ and the absence of evidence indicating differential treatment or adverse effects, no impacts have been identified under limb 3 for this protected characteristic.

Religion or belief – positive impact

The proposed updates to the school food standards are expected to have a positive impact across all three limbs of the equality duty. This is particularly relevant given the scale and diversity of faith schools in England, and the importance of ensuring that statutory food requirements do not place unnecessary barriers on schools seeking to meet faith-based dietary needs.

Faith schools represent 31% of the state-funded school system in England (6,800 out of 21,500). Of these, 49% have converted to academies, and 21% of mainstream free schools are faith schools. Faith schools are more prevalent in the primary phase (37% of primary schools) than in the secondary phase (18%)²⁰.

As of July 2026²¹

- 68% are Church of England
- 29% are Roman Catholic
- 1% are other Christian faiths
- 1% are Jewish
- 1% are Muslim
- Less than 1% of schools are Hindu and Sikh

Around 4,600 are Church of England state funded schools. Of these over 2,070 are academies, around 2,500 are local authority maintained schools and around 40 are free schools.

Around 2000 are Catholic state funded schools, of these around 1200 are academies, and around 750 are local authority maintained schools.

There is also a strong rural dimension: 41% of primary faith schools are rural, compared to 21% of non-faith schools, rising to 54% for primary Church of England schools. For

¹⁹ [The Eatwell Guide - NHS](#)

²⁰ <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>

²¹ <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>

secondary schools, 13%-14% of faith, non-faith and Church of England, secondary schools are rural²².

The presence of a substantial faith school sector means that a significant number of pupils are educated in settings where school food provision may be influenced by religious dietary practices. We have therefore considered both the impact on individual pupils who hold religious beliefs and the practical implications for schools seeking to provide nutritionally balanced meals that are consistent with the needs of their communities.

Evidence and impact on pupils

The current school food standards apply across maintained schools, academies and free schools. However, some requirements may unintentionally disadvantage certain faith schools, particularly Hindu and Sikh schools that may wish to offer only vegetarian or vegan meals and Jewish schools that may choose not to serve meat and dairy in the same meal service, in line with their religious beliefs.

For pupils attending non-faith schools, the school food standards do not prescribe the foods that individual children must eat. Schools are able to offer a range of foods that enable pupils to make choices consistent with their religious beliefs and dietary requirements, including halal, vegetarian and other faith-sensitive options where appropriate. The proposed changes maintain this flexibility and are not expected to reduce the ability of pupils with religious dietary requirements to access a nutritious school meal.

We have also considered the position of pupils who attend faith schools but do not themselves share the faith designation of the school. The proposed school food standards continue to set nutritional requirements that apply to all pupils and are designed to ensure that meals remain balanced and nutritionally appropriate regardless of the faith character of the school. We therefore do not consider that the increased flexibility provided by the proposals would disadvantage pupils who do not share the school's religious beliefs.

Current requirements include:

- meat or poultry served at least three times per week
- oily fish served at least once every three weeks
- a portion of dairy included at lunch every day
- milk must be made available on every school day

The introduction of pulses and nutrient-enriched plant-based drinks in the proposed standards is a key mitigating measure. Pulses provide a nutritious, affordable and

²² <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>

versatile source of protein that supports vegetarian and vegan diets, including those followed on the basis of religion or belief. The availability of nutrient-enriched plant-based drinks and the inclusion of pulses within the protein requirements will reduce reliance on meat and dairy products being served at the same meal, increasing flexibility for Jewish schools that separate meat and dairy in accordance with kosher requirements. In addition, where schools are unable to comply with the daily requirement to make milk available for religious reasons, we propose permitting specified fortified plant-based drinks as an alternative. The standards also operate across the school day, allowing schools greater flexibility to separate meat and dairy between meal occasions. Taken together, these changes are expected to have a positive effect across all three limbs of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Engagement and stakeholder insight

We have engaged with:

- The Department for Education's faith school provider group, representing providers of state funded schools designated as having a religious character. Members include the Church of England National Society, the Catholic Education Service, the Association of Muslim Schools UK, The Board of Deputies of British Jews, The Partnership of Jewish Schools, The National Sikh Organisation, Avanti Schools Trust and other members representing minority faith groups.
- Faith-based catering representatives (including Hindu/Sikh and Jewish caterers are represented on the external school food standards update advisory board)
- The Department for Education faith team
- The Office for Equality and Opportunity

These discussions highlighted the challenges some schools face in complying with existing school food standards, while also demonstrating how well-planned vegetarian menus can fully meet nutritional requirements. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of flexibility, particularly where religious dietary rules intersect with cost and availability constraints. Representatives of Jewish schools highlighted challenges relating to the provision of dairy products in schools operating meat kitchens. Engagement identified that permitting fortified plant-based drinks as an alternative to milk, where required for religious reasons, would address this issue while maintaining the nutritional intent of the school food standards.

Consultation respondents also emphasised the importance of maintaining culturally appropriate and faith-sensitive meal provision, including kosher, halal and other religious dietary practices. Respondents highlighted that inclusive menu design can support participation and help ensure children from diverse backgrounds continue to access school meals. The school food standards do not specify food requirements in terms of cultural and religious needs and schools will continue to retain flexibility to reflect the needs of their local communities.

Following consultation, further discussions were held with representatives of Jewish schools to understand the practical implications of the proposals and identify proportionate mitigations where religious dietary requirements could be affected.

Specific faith considerations

For Jewish schools, the proposed changes would ease pressure on sourcing kosher-compliant animal products. Greater flexibility to serve alternatives such as beans and pulses, which are subject to fewer kosher restrictions, supports both compliance and sustainability. Some stakeholders raised concerns about the availability and cost of kosher-certified plant-based alternatives which meet the proposed sugar and fortification requirements. However, engagement indicated that plant-based drinks are generally acceptable from a kosher perspective and no evidence was provided to demonstrate significant barriers to obtaining compliant products. We therefore consider the risk of adverse impact to be low.

Veganism

Under the proposed new school food standards, individual pupils who follow a vegan diet will continue to be accommodated - pupils may choose to eat only vegan options where available.

Consultation respondents representing vegan and plant-based interests highlighted the importance of ensuring continued access to nutritionally appropriate plant-based options and suitable alternatives to animal-derived foods. The school food standards retain sufficient flexibility for schools to accommodate individual dietary requirements and philosophical beliefs while meeting nutritional objectives.

Guidance from the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities indicates that, while more challenging, it is possible to meet nutritional needs on a fully plant-based diet with appropriate planning. Existing guidance on vegetarian menus will be expanded to include advice relevant to vegan diets.

While ethical veganism has been recognised in case law as a protected philosophical belief, we are not aware of any schools identifying as fully vegan, nor of current proposals to establish them.

Cultural events

Cultural events are currently and will continue to be exempt from the school food standards in England. This ensures that schools can continue to support family and community functions linked to religious or cultural observance without restriction.

Impact on parents

Parents may have religious beliefs that influence the types of food they consider appropriate for their children, regardless of whether their child attends a faith or non-faith school. The school food standards do not prescribe individual meal choices and allow schools flexibility to provide menus that meet a range of dietary and religious requirements. The proposed changes increase that flexibility through the wider use of pulses and provision for fortified plant-based alternatives in limited circumstances, helping schools to continue providing suitable options for pupils from different faith backgrounds.

For parents whose children attend faith schools, the additional flexibility is expected to support schools in delivering menus that are consistent with the school's ethos while continuing to meet nutritional requirements.

Impact on the workforce

While some members of the catering workforce may have religious or belief-based views about handling certain foods, these issues are more appropriately managed through employment terms and conditions rather than through the school food standards themselves. The standards focus on what food is offered to pupils, not on workforce deployment.

Overall, we consider the proposals are likely to have a positive impact for individuals who share the protected characteristic of religion or belief. The updated school food standards increase flexibility for schools and pupils to observe religious dietary practices while maintaining the nutritional objectives of the school food standards. No evidence has been identified that the changes would reduce access to nutritious food for pupils who do not share those beliefs.

Sex – positive and neutral impact

We have identified a neutral impact under limbs 1 and 3, and a positive impact under limb 2, for this protected characteristic.

The school food standards apply equally to all pupils regardless of sex and are therefore not expected to result in differential treatment between male and female pupils. The evidence indicates that boys are more likely than girls to be overweight or living with obesity, particularly by Year 6. As a result, improvements to the nutritional quality of school meals may have a greater potential health benefit for boys, supporting a positive impact under limb 2 (advancing equality of opportunity). No impacts have been identified under limbs 1 and 3.

Data in table 3 shows the number of pupils in primary and secondary school who are covered by the school food standards regulations. The data demonstrates that there are similar numbers of female and male pupils in scope of the policy. As the school food

standards apply to all pupils regardless of sex, this supports the advancement of equality of opportunity.

Table 3: Headcount²³ for ‘Pupil characteristics – number of pupils by national curriculum phase and sex’ in England for 2025/26 (state-funded schools)

National curriculum phase	Female	Male
Pupils of all ages	4,090,038	4,269,417
Reception	279,654	293,259
Primary (years 1–6)	1,840,974	1,930,004
Secondary (years 7–14)	1,816,039	1,887,329

Source: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/a53a5069-670f-434b-8570-08df0e426dad>

While there may be some variation in nutritional requirements between males and females across the life course, the school food standards are designed to provide an appropriate balance that meets the needs of school-aged children overall. Food served in schools is the same for all pupils, with no distinction by sex, which supports equality of opportunity between pupils who share the protected characteristic and those who do not.

The National Child Measurement Programme²⁴ data shows that boys are more likely than girls to be living with overweight or obesity, particularly by year 6. This suggests that improvements to the nutritional quality of school meals may deliver greater health benefits for boys, supporting a positive impact under limb 2 (advancing equality of opportunity).

There is evidence that iron intake among teenage girls is lower than recommended. While red meat is an important source of dietary iron, other foods such as pulses, fortified cereals and leafy vegetables also contribute to iron intake. The proposed changes do not remove meat from school menus, and guidance will continue to remind schools of the importance of providing balanced, nutritious meals, including iron-rich foods where appropriate. The proportion of pupils potentially affected is expected to be small, and no adverse impacts have been identified.

²³ Pupils recorded as "not followed" have been excluded from the table because the category is very small and does not materially affect interpretation of the data. Year groups have been aggregated into Primary (Years 1–6) and Secondary (Years 7–14) to align with the structure of the school food standards.

²⁴ [National Child Measurement Programme \(NCMP\) annual report, academic year 2024 to 2025, England - GOV.UK](#)

The Department for Education does not hold data on the sex of parents and has some data for the school workforce²⁵. No differential impacts have been identified for these groups.

Therefore, we conclude that the updated school food standards are not expected to have any adverse or disproportionately negative impacts on individuals who share the protected characteristic of sex and may have a positive impact under limb 2 through improved health outcomes for boys.

Sexual orientation – no impact

We have not identified any impacts for this protected characteristic under limbs 1, 2 or 3.

The Department for Education does not collect data on the sexual orientation of school-aged pupils, parents, or the school workforce. Sexual orientation does not affect nutritional requirements.

On this basis, we conclude that the updated school food standards do not have a disproportionate impact on individuals who share the protected characteristic of sexual orientation.

Pregnancy and maternity – no impact

We have not identified any impacts for this protected characteristic under limb 1, 2 or 3.

We envisage that very few, if any, primary school aged pupils will be pregnant or will have recently had a baby. Some data exists on conception rates for those aged under 16 years²⁶, although data at a school level is not collected. In 2024/25 there were 11,640 deliveries for mothers aged 15 to 19 and 92 deliveries for mothers aged 14 and under²⁷ and some of these young people are likely to be at school although that cannot be quantified. There is an additional calorie requirement in the final trimester of pregnancy, and for mothers who are breastfeeding, but this is a requirement spread throughout the day, not just at lunch time. This is unlikely to make a significant difference to the average calorie requirement calculated in the proposed changes, therefore, the proposed policy will have little impact on pupils who share this protected characteristic.

We do not hold data on parents or the workforce and have not identified any impacts for this protected characteristic. Therefore, we find that the updated school food standards

²⁵ [Release home - School workforce in England - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

²⁶ [Public health outcomes framework](#)

²⁷ [NHS Maternity Statistics, 2024-25 - NHS England Digital](#)

do not have a disproportionate impact on those with the protected characteristic of pregnancy and maternity.

Decision making

As a result of the analysis, we conclude that updating the school food standards is not expected to result in any adverse or disproportionately negative impact on people who share a protected characteristic. Although socio-economic disadvantage is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, the Department has also considered the potential impact on disadvantaged pupils. Children eligible for free school meals are more likely to consume a school-provided lunch, and disadvantaged pupils are more likely to experience poorer diet-related health outcomes. Improvements to the nutritional quality of school meals may therefore deliver particular benefits for disadvantaged pupils, supporting the government's wider ambitions to reduce health inequalities and improve outcomes for children.

The proposals take proportionate and reasonable steps to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations, particularly for pupils whose faith requires adherence to vegetarian diets.

While some Jewish stakeholders highlighted challenges associated with both sourcing kosher-compliant products and the requirement to provide milk in schools operating meat kitchens, the introduction of pulses, greater flexibility across the school day and the proposed use of fortified plant-based drinks where required for religious reasons are expected to mitigate those impacts.

Consultation responses nevertheless indicated that the extent to which the policy advances equality of opportunity will depend in part on pupil uptake of school meals. If pupils do not find the offer acceptable, they may choose not to take school meals or consume less food, potentially leading to hunger, reduced concentration and unequal access to the intended nutritional benefits. Respondents noted that these risks could be more pronounced for some groups, including pupils with SEND, neurodivergent pupils, those with allergies or other medical dietary needs, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and pupils whose cultural, religious or ethical dietary requirements differ from those of the majority population. The Department for Education has carefully considered these concerns in developing the proposals.

The school food standards retain flexibility for schools and catering providers to adapt menus to the needs and preferences of their communities, and schools remain subject to existing duties relating to reasonable adjustments, equality and the support of pupils with medical needs.

We therefore consider the proposals to be compatible with the public sector equality duty and intend to proceed with the update to the school food standards.

Monitoring evaluation and action plan

As set out, some datasets are not currently collected. In developing the policy, we have tested our thinking with a wide range of stakeholders who are experts in school food.

The Department for Education will continue to engage with representative organisations, schools and stakeholders to understand implementation impacts for pupils who share protected characteristics. Consideration will be given to emerging evidence relating to pupils with special educational needs, medical dietary requirements, allergies, cultural and religious dietary needs and equitable access to school meals. Consultation responses have highlighted the importance of ongoing monitoring to ensure that all groups are able to benefit equally from the updated school food standards.

We have shared the equality impact assessment with officials who have a cross-cutting policy interest to ensure their views are reflected in the assessment, where appropriate. This assessment will be kept under review throughout the policy development process and updated at key stages, including each occasion on which advice is submitted to ministers.



Department
for Education

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