



UK Government

School food standards: updating the legislative framework

Government consultation response

September 2026

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Introduction

School food plays a vital role in supporting children and young people's health, wellbeing and readiness to learn. Right now, we know that children are not having the healthy diets they need – with evidence showing children are consuming double the recommended amount of sugar, only one in ten children are getting enough fibre¹ and a third are leaving primary school overweight or obese². For many children, school dinners may be the most important meal of the day. As access to before school breakfast provision expands, it is equally important that children can access a healthy and nutritious breakfast, supported by clear and consistent standards.

Since the School Food Standards were last updated, nutritional evidence has evolved and concerns about children's diets, obesity and oral health remain significant. Over 10.5% of children aged 4-5 start school with obesity. By the end of primary school this rises to 22.2%, and to almost 30% in the most deprived areas³. There is some evidence that excess weight in childhood is associated with school attendance and attainment, as well as increased risk of ill health in later life. What pupils eat during the school day can support healthier diets and the development of healthy habits that will help set them up to learn and succeed. That is why this government is updating the School Food Standards to ensure that all pupils have access to healthier food and drink throughout the school day, which fuels them with the energy they need in the classroom to thrive.

As part of this commitment, on 13 April 2026 the government launched a public consultation on updating the legislative framework for the School Food Standards in England. The consultation sought views on proposals including new breakfast standards, increasing fibre, reducing sugar and foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt (HFSS), changes to protein requirements, and improving access to drinking water, and healthier drinks. The consultation also invited views on implementation, compliance and wider practical considerations for schools and catering providers. This consultation was developed by the Department for Education in collaboration with the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID).

The consultation received 5,216 responses, including 250 responses to the easy read version. The easy read version presented the same proposals in a simpler and more

¹ The National Diet and Nutrition Survey reports that fibre intake for young people is lower than it should be. Only 14% of primary aged children and 4% of secondary aged children are meeting the dietary recommendations on fibre. [National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2019 to 2023: report - GOV.UK](#)

² <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2022-part-2>

³ [National Child Measurement Programme \(NCMP\) annual report, academic year 2024 to 2025, England - GOV.UK](#)

accessible format. A detailed breakdown of responses is published in the supplementary annexes.

We thank everyone who contributed evidence and insight, including Bite Back, which surveyed 563 children and young people between April and June 2026, and Sustain, and Survation, which together surveyed 1,020 parents of schoolchildren in England between 5 and 12 May 2026. Their findings have helped ensure that the perspectives of children, young people and families are reflected in our consideration of the proposals.

This document summarises the responses received and sets out the government's decisions on the future legislative framework for the School Food Standards. The government intends to lay regulations in October 2026 which will apply from September 2027 subject to Parliamentary approval. Schools that are ready to adopt the revised School Food Standards earlier will be encouraged to do so.

As now, revised standards will not apply to food provided at parties or celebrations including fund-raising events, or for use in teaching food preparation and cookery. These decisions will remain with schools. We are also strengthening schools' discretion by enabling teachers and school staff to make occasional exceptions under the regulations. To support implementation of the School Food Standards, the government will introduce a national compliance framework from September 2027. The framework will strengthen accountability and openness in relation to school food provision. Alongside this, the government is developing a national system for monitoring compliance with the School Food Standards. This will sit within a broader package of guidance, training and practical resources designed to support schools, governing bodies and caterers, improve transparency for parents and pupils, and promote healthier food provision.

Executive summary

Consultation scope

The consultation sought views on proposals to update the School Food Standards in England for the first time in over a decade⁴, ensuring they reflect the latest nutritional guidance and support the government's wider ambitions to improve children's health and wellbeing.

The proposals focused on increasing fibre through greater provision of wholegrains, fruit, vegetables and pulses; reducing sugar through tighter restrictions on desserts, sweetened foods and drinks; and limiting foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt, including processed meats, deep-fried foods and foods containing cheese-based meals. The consultation sought views on dedicated breakfast standards, phasing in some changes for secondary schools, removing separate lunch standards for maintained nursery schools in favour of EYFS nutrition guidance, strengthening school food governance and transparency, through a lead governor role and the publication of food policies and menus online. It also sought views on practical delivery, equality considerations and environmental impacts.

Together, these proposals aim to create a clearer and more consistent framework for school food, improve the nutritional quality of food and drink provided in schools, and support healthier eating habits for children and young people that can contribute to better health and educational outcomes.

Who we heard from

The consultation analysed 5,216 responses. Individuals accounted for 83.8% of respondents, with parents the largest respondent group. Organisations accounted for 16.2% of responses and included schools, trusts, local authorities, caterers, suppliers, academics, public health bodies and charities. Schools accounted for 53.1% of organisational responses.

The government also undertook targeted engagement across the education, health, catering, faith, farming and food sectors. A detailed breakdown of respondents and engagement is provided in the supplementary annexes.

⁴ [School-food-standards-updating-the-legislative-framework-government-consultation](#)

Overall response

Overall, respondents supported the aim of improving the nutritional quality of food and drink provided in schools. A clear majority believed the proposed changes would improve nutritional quality, and many highlighted the important role schools can play in supporting healthier eating habits, concentration, wellbeing and readiness to learn.

Support was strongest for proposals to increase fibre, fruit and vegetables; strengthen drinks standards; introduce dedicated breakfast standards; increase the use of pulses; revise protein and dairy or plant-based requirements; restrict foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt; and strengthen school food governance and transparency through stronger oversight and the publication of school food policies and menus.

Views were more mixed on proposals relating to honey, cheese, desserts, processed meat and the phased introduction of some requirements in secondary schools. Responses reflected a balance between supporting healthier school food and recognising the importance of pupil choice, menu appeal, practical delivery and maintaining school meal take-up.

Across the consultation, respondents frequently raised questions about implementation. Schools, caterers and local authorities were concerned about the potential impact on ingredient, labour, energy and equipment costs, and whether these could be accommodated within existing budgets. Some respondents highlighted risks to catering viability, particularly where restrictions could affect popular or higher-margin products.

Respondents also raised concerns about pupil acceptance. Many noted that reducing familiar options or changing menus too quickly could affect meal take-up, increase food waste, encourage pupils to bring packed lunches or purchase food outside school, or result in some pupils not eating a school meal. These concerns were particularly prominent in relation to secondary pupils and proposals affecting drinks, desserts, cheese, wholegrains and pulses.

Schools, caterers and local authorities highlighted wider operational challenges, including staffing, skills, procurement, contracts and supply chains. Respondents emphasised the importance of clear guidance, practical tools, model menus, recipes, procurement support, sufficient lead-in time and proportionate monitoring arrangements to support successful implementation.

There was also strong emphasis on ensuring the revised standards remain inclusive. Respondents highlighted the importance of flexibility for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), neurodivergent pupils, those with sensory needs, and pupils with medical, allergy, faith-based, cultural, vegetarian or vegan dietary requirements. Many stressed that implementation should support inclusion and reasonable adjustments while maintaining the overall ambition of healthier school food.

Some respondents also expressed concern that the proposals placed too much emphasis on additional restrictions. These respondents argued that schools should continue to promote healthy eating through education, choice and moderation alongside any changes to the standards.

Government decisions

Having considered the consultation responses, the government will proceed with the majority of the proposed reforms, while making practical refinements in response to stakeholder feedback. Compared with the current School Food Standards, the revised standards place greater emphasis on fruit, vegetables, fibre and wider range of healthy protein sources, alongside stronger restrictions on free sugars, sweeteners, foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt, and processed meat. Together, these changes are intended to improve the nutritional quality of food and drink provided in schools and help children and young people develop healthier eating habits.

The revised standards will:

- Introduce dedicated breakfast standards, so that food and drink provided before the school day supports a healthier, lower-sugar and higher-fibre offer.
- Strengthen fruit and vegetable requirements across the school day, including requiring fruit or vegetables with starters and desserts, and requiring all main items to contain or be served with vegetables or salad.
- Strengthen fibre requirements, including stronger expectations for bread and wholegrain provision, while retaining flexibility for schools and caterers to manage pupil acceptance and product availability.
- Strengthen protein requirements by requiring all main items to contain a protein source and broadening recognised protein options.
- Provide an updated list of permitted drinks, continued access to free drinking water, and measures to support healthier choices across the school day.
- Phase some secondary requirements, including changes relating to healthier drinks, cheese, and pulses, to support deliverability, procurement planning, pupil acceptance, and meal uptake.

Changes made following consultation include:

- Requiring all pasta dishes served on at least one day each week must contain at least 50% wholewheat pasta.
- Increasing the minimum fibre requirement of bread to 4g per 100g and no more than 5g fat per 100g.
- Allowing vegetables or salad to be incorporated within all main items, including in grab-and-go dishes.
- Greater flexibility on processed meat being permitted once per week in secondary schools, either at breakfast or across the school day.

- Removing the proposed fruit-only dessert day in primary schools.
- Permitting two sweetened desserts or baked products a week in secondary schools.
- Adding yoghurt and plant-based versions that meet the requirements of the dairy and plant-based versions food group, and houmous to the permitted snacks list.
- Adding permitted fortified pea drinks and plain unsweetened fermented milk drinks.
- Allowing permitted drinks to be included in meal deals.

Implementation

The government intends to lay regulations in October 2026. Subject to Parliamentary approval, the revised School Food Standards will apply from September 2027. This will give schools, caterers, suppliers, and local authorities time to prepare. Schools that are ready to adopt the revised standards earlier will be encouraged to do so.

Subject to Parliamentary approval, most changes will apply to both primary and secondary schools from September 2027. Some secondary school requirements, including changes relating to healthier drinks, cheese and pulses, will apply from September 2028. This phased approach reflects consultation feedback about the particular challenges of implementing changes in secondary schools, including procurement cycles, existing contracts, menu planning, pupil acceptance, and the risk of unintended consequences such as lower meal uptake or increased food waste.

The government will publish guidance and practical support to help schools, trusts, local authorities, and caterers implement the revised School Food Standards. This will include clear information about the requirements, the implementation timetable, school food governance, and transparency. It will also cover the expectation that schools appoint a lead governor for school food and publish school food policies and menus online. Further information on compliance and support for the sector will be set out in guidance.

What respondents told us

Overview of cross-cutting themes

Overall, the findings indicate strong support for the proposed changes, with 72% of respondents believing they would improve the nutritional quality of school meals. This included 38% who felt nutrition would improve to a great extent and 35% who thought it would improve to some extent. In contrast, 13% believed the changes would improve nutritional quality only to a limited extent, while 8% felt they would not improve it at all.

The highest level of agreement was for requiring a portion of vegetables and/or salad with all grab-and-go main meals (question 15), with 81% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing, including 53% strongly agreeing, making it the most strongly supported proposal overall. This was followed by higher fibre requirements for starchy foods (question 14), with 76% agreement, and the proposed list of permitted drinks in primary schools (question 17), with 76% agreement. Respondents largely viewed these changes as practical ways to improve children's health, nutrition, and long-term eating habits.

Respondents raised a number of themes across multiple consultation questions. These themes have informed the final policy decisions and the government's approach to implementation, including the decision to refine some proposals and phase some secondary school requirements. Across the consultation, respondents often supported the overall health aims while raising questions about the pace, cost, and practicality of implementation. This was particularly evident where proposals would affect popular or familiar items, require changes to procurement or staffing, or rely on pupils accepting fewer familiar foods.

In contrast, views were most divided on question 12, which considered whether honey should no longer be permitted at breakfast. Views on honey were mixed, with more respondents opposing than supporting the proposed restriction. Forty-three per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that honey should not be permitted, compared with 28% who agreed or strongly agreed. Other proposals that generated particularly mixed views included the restriction of cheese (question 23), where 31% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and the staged restriction of cheese in secondary schools (question 24), where 28% disagreed or strongly disagreed. These responses suggest respondents were generally less supportive of restrictions on foods perceived as traditional, nutritious, or acceptable in moderation.

Support for healthier standards

Respondents supported the ambition to make school food healthier and more consistent across the school day. Many saw the proposals as a way to reduce pupils' exposure to

sugar and less healthy foods, increase access to fibre, fruit, and vegetables, and strengthen the role of schools in promoting healthier eating habits.

Support was strongest where respondents saw a clear link between the proposed changes and better health outcomes for children. This included proposals on fibre, fruit and vegetables, drinks, breakfast standards, pulses, protein and dairy or plant-based requirements, and restrictions on foods high in saturated fat, sugar, and salt.

There was also support for clearer governance and transparency, including school food policies, published menus and named responsibilities. Some respondents argued that the proposals should go further, particularly on sugar, ultra-processed foods, processed meat, drinks, and plant-rich menus, and called for a stronger whole-school approach to food culture and food education.

The consultation received 2,273 responses through a campaign organised by Plant-Based Schools. These responses broadly called for greater flexibility for schools to provide plant-based options and increased access to plant-rich meals. The government recognises these views and notes that plant-based options have been incorporated throughout the revised standards, including the expansion of permitted fortified plant-based drinks, greater use of pulses as a recognised protein source, and strengthened requirements to support vegetarian and plant-based menu choices while ensuring meals remain nutritionally balanced.

Deliverability, funding, and implementation

The most common concerns related to whether schools, caterers and local authorities would have the resources, staffing, equipment, supply chains, and procurement flexibility needed to implement the revised School Food Standards successfully. Respondents frequently supported the principle of healthier standards but emphasised that delivery would depend on practical support and sufficient lead-in time.

Funding and catering viability: Schools, caterers and local authorities raised concerns about higher ingredient, labour, energy, and equipment costs. Some respondents were concerned that standards could place pressure on catering and school budgets without sufficient support, particularly where restricted food and drinks are popular with pupils. Respondents suggested that both adequate funding and practical support were essential to ensuring the sustainability of some catering options.

Procurement, contracts, and workforce: Respondents noted that menu changes can be difficult where schools are tied into existing contracts, framework arrangements, or supplier agreements. They also highlighted workforce capacity, kitchen skills, equipment, and training as important factors in successful implementation.

Compliance and accountability: There was broad support for clearer governance and transparency, including a named governor lead for school food and publication of school

food policies and menus. Respondents also called for monitoring arrangements that are proportionate, consistent, and practical for schools and caterers.

Pupil acceptance, take-up and food waste

Concerns about pupil acceptance were most prominent where proposals would affect familiar or popular items, including drinks, desserts, cheese, honey, processed meat, wholegrains, and pulses. Respondents highlighted that the success of the revised School Food Standards will depend not only on nutritional content, but also on whether pupils choose and eat the food provided.

Schools, caterers, parents and children and young people warned that if menus are perceived as less appealing, pupils may choose packed lunches, buy food outside school, skip meals, or leave food uneaten. These concerns were particularly prominent in relation to secondary schools, where pupils generally have greater autonomy and may have access to food outside school.

Food waste was raised both as a practical and environmental concern. Respondents argued that health and sustainability benefits could be undermined if pupils reject revised menus, and called for phased implementation, pupil engagement, taste testing, recipe development, and communication with families to support behaviour change.

Equality, inclusion, and dietary needs

Respondents highlighted three main inclusion issues: ensuring reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities; maintaining safe and suitable provision for allergies, medical diets, and faith-based requirements; and avoiding unintended impacts on disadvantaged pupils if school meal uptake falls.

SEND, neurodivergence and sensory needs

Parents, health professionals and advocacy groups highlighted that some pupils, including those with restrictive eating needs, rely on a limited range of familiar or safe foods. Respondents warned that removing or restricting familiar items without appropriate flexibility could lead to distress, refusal to eat, reduced meal uptake or poorer wellbeing for some pupils. Respondents also expressed concerns that restrictive menus, strong “good versus bad” food messaging, and weight-focused rhetoric could exacerbate avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID), other eating disorders, body image pressures, and food-related anxiety, particularly among vulnerable pupils and girls.

Medical, allergy, faith and cultural diets

Respondents highlighted the need for clear guidance on how schools should meet the School Food Standards while continuing to provide safe, suitable and inclusive meals for

pupils with allergies, medical needs, religious requirements, cultural preferences, or vegetarian and vegan diets.

Health inequalities

Some respondents viewed stronger School Food Standards as an opportunity to reduce health inequalities, particularly where pupils rely on school food for a significant part of their diet. Others cautioned that if meals become less appealing or less filling, disadvantaged pupils could be disproportionately affected.

Respondents called for guidance to explain how schools can implement the standards while making reasonable adjustments and maintaining inclusive provision. They also asked for practical examples for schools and caterers, rather than relying only on general statements of flexibility.

Environmental considerations

Many respondents raised environmental considerations alongside health and nutrition. Respondents who supported more plant-rich menus highlighted potential benefits for sustainability as well as health, including increased use of pulses, vegetables and plant-based options and reduced reliance on some meat-based products.

However, others cautioned that these benefits would depend on pupil acceptance and effective implementation. If revised menus increase food waste, packaging or reliance on less familiar substitutes, the environmental benefits could be reduced. Respondents therefore argued that sustainability should be considered alongside affordability, procurement, nutrition, and menu appeal.

Some respondents called for stronger alignment between School Food Standards and wider environmental objectives, including more emphasis on local, seasonal, and British sourcing, sustainable procurement, reduced packaging, and food education.

Guidance, support, and next steps

Across the consultation, respondents emphasised that successful implementation will depend on clear guidance and practical support. Schools, caterers, and local authorities asked for accessible guidance, model menus, recipes, product examples, procurement support, staff training and clear communications for parents and pupils. Respondents highlighted the importance of realistic lead-in times, particularly where schools need to change menus, contracts, supply arrangements, kitchen practice, and pupil communications. Many respondents also welcomed phasing where it supports deliverability, while others cautioned that lengthy phasing should not dilute the health ambition of the reforms.

Government response

This section sets out the government response to the consultation by policy area. It summarises what was proposed, what respondents said, what the government has decided, what has changed following consultation, and the implementation timetable. The detailed technical requirements will be set out in the revised regulations and guidance.

Breakfast standards

What we proposed

The consultation proposed dedicated standards for food and drink provided before the start of the school day. These would apply to breakfast provision in primary and secondary schools unless otherwise stated, reflecting the expansion of breakfast provision and the need for a consistent, healthier offer. They are intended to support healthier choices, align with the wider School Food Standards, and reflect the important role breakfast clubs play in supporting attendance, concentration and readiness to learn.

Following the passage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act (2026), all state-funded schools with primary-age pupils will be required to offer a free breakfast club. We will be rolling out the new clubs in stages with further details of the rollout to be confirmed in due course. This means more children will have access to a school meal before the formal school day, and the introduction of separate breakfast standards reflects this growth.

The proposed standards set out a permitted list of breakfast foods and drinks, including requirements for cereals, breads, fruit and vegetables, dairy and plant-based products, and protein foods. The consultation also proposed restrictions on sugar, honey, syrups, chocolate spreads, low or no-calorie sweeteners, and processed meat. Fresh drinking water would continue to be available, and drinks provided at breakfast would need to align with the wider permitted drinks standards.

In developing the proposal, the government sought to balance the nutritional purpose of breakfast provision with the need for a practical offer that schools, trusts and caterers can deliver in a range of settings, including for primary schools on the free breakfast club programme, at privately funded school-led provision and externally delivered provision.

What respondents said

Respondents were broadly supportive of introducing dedicated breakfast standards, with 73% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the proposed rules for foods and drinks offered at breakfast. Many welcomed the focus on lower-sugar, and higher-fibre options, and highlighted the importance of breakfast in supporting pupils to concentrate and participate in learning.

A number of respondents also noted that schools may face practical constraints when serving breakfast in schools, including time, staff capacity, and physical space, which may affect implementation and flexibility. Some respondents noted that overly restrictive rules could increase breakfast costs, reduce take-up of breakfast food or limit the ability of schools to offer familiar foods to pupils who may otherwise arrive at school hungry.

Views on honey were mixed, with more respondents opposing than supporting the proposed restriction. Forty-three per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that honey should not be permitted, compared with 28% who agreed or strongly agreed. Many parents and caterers argued that honey is a natural or less processed sweetener and could be used in small portions to encourage pupils to eat foods such as porridge or wholegrain toast. Others, particularly local authorities, academics and public health stakeholders, argued that honey should be treated consistently with other sources of free sugars which are being reduced. Their view was that despite being a natural product, honey still contributes to children's overall sugar intake.

Views on processed meat at breakfast were also mixed. Many respondents raised health concerns about salt, saturated fat, and additives, and considered processed meat unnecessary at breakfast given the availability of alternative protein foods. Others argued for limited flexibility, particularly where occasional provision could support pupil choice, menu appeal or take-up.

Government response

We will introduce dedicated breakfast standards. These will permit a defined list of healthier breakfast foods and drinks, while restricting added sugar, honey, syrups, sweet spreads, low or no-calorie sweeteners and processed meat. In revising the School Food Standards, we have balanced the objective of reducing sugar and increasing fibre with the role free breakfast clubs play in supporting attendance, concentration, and food security.

While we recognise that many respondents supported allowing limited use of honey at breakfast, we have decided to retain the proposed restriction on honey, syrups, chocolate spreads, and other sweet spreads (with the exception of low-sugar jam). Honey is a free sugar and is classified in the same way as added sugars like table sugar, and permitting its use would be inconsistent with the objective of reducing pupils' exposure to free sugars. Creating an exception for one source of free sugars while continuing to restrict others would also reduce clarity and make the School Food Standards more difficult to communicate and implement consistently. Retaining the restriction therefore supports the aim of promoting healthier dietary habits and reducing the health risks associated with excessive sugar consumption.

We have amended the approach to processed meat for secondary schools. Rather than prohibiting processed meat at breakfast entirely, as we are doing for primary, processed meat from the specified products list may be served once per week either at breakfast or

across the whole school day. A portion served at breakfast will count towards the weekly maximum of one portion. This provides limited flexibility while retaining a clear restriction on processed meat consumption.

In addition, we are adding a requirement that a starchy carbohydrate, for example bread or cereal, must be offered to make the minimum standard for a breakfast clearer. The requirement to provide fruit or vegetables at breakfast remains unchanged.

Changes made following consultation

We have:

- Increased the permitted sugar level for breakfast cereals slightly from 5g per 100g in the consultation proposal, to 5.5g per 100g to support product availability while maintaining a lower-sugar breakfast offer.
- The bread standard has been strengthened by increasing the minimum fibre requirement from 3g to 4g per 100g for manufactured breads, with new requirements that homemade bread must contain at least 50% wholemeal flour. All breads must have no more than 5g fat per 100g.
- We have introduced a new requirement that a starchy carbohydrate must be offered as part of any breakfast provision, including breakfast clubs, establishing a clearer minimum standard for before school provision.
- On two days a week one of the following bakery goods can be served: teacakes, crumpets, and unsweetened pancakes.
- Added cream cheese as a permitted breakfast item up to twice weekly.
- Clarified that processed meat can be served once per week at either breakfast or during the school day in secondary schools and will not be permitted in primary schools.
- Retained the restriction on honey and other sweet spreads or additions after preparation (excluding low-sugar jam).

Implementation and guidance

Subject to Parliamentary approval, these requirements will apply from September 2027. Schools that are ready to adopt this earlier will be encouraged to do so. The government will publish guidance explaining how the breakfast standards interact with wider school food provision.

The guidance will include practical advice on product selection, portion sizes, cereal and bread requirements, permitted spreads, plant-based options, and management of the weekly processed meat limit across breakfast and lunch. This will be particularly important where different providers are responsible for different parts of the school day.

Whole school day standards

What we proposed

The consultation proposed changing the structure of the School Food Standards so that there would be separate but aligned standards for breakfast provision and for food and drink provided across the rest of the school day. The aim was to make the standards clearer, close perceived gaps in provision beyond lunchtime, and support healthier school food environments across all relevant occasions.

The proposals recognised that food is provided in schools in many different ways, including lunch, snacks, breaktime provision, breakfast clubs, after-school activities, vending, tuck shops and grab-and-go offers. The consultation therefore sought views on how to apply requirements across the whole school day in a way that was clear, consistent, and deliverable.

The consultation also included proposals on main items, meal deals, snacks, drinking water, and how standards should apply where multiple providers operate on the same school site.

What respondents said

Respondents generally supported applying standards more consistently across the school day. Public health stakeholders, local authorities, charities, academics, and many parents argued that healthier lunch standards could be undermined if pupils had access to less healthy foods and drinks at other times. They saw whole-day coverage as important for reducing loopholes and promoting a consistent food culture.

At the same time, respondents asked for clarity about what separate standards would mean in practice. Some schools and caterers were concerned that separate breakfast and whole-day standards could create complexity, particularly where different providers manage breakfast, lunch, vending, snacks, or after-school provision. Respondents asked for clear guidance, worked examples and simple definitions.

Schools, caterers, and local authorities highlighted operational challenges, including staffing, contracts, facilities, supplier arrangements, and the need to coordinate provision across multiple points in the day. Some respondents also raised concerns about occasional events, fundraising, religious or cultural celebrations, and the relationship between statutory standards and wider school policies.

Children and young people were generally positive or neutral about healthier provision across the day, but emphasised the importance of choice, autonomy and food that feels appealing. Some older pupils were concerned that stricter standards could reduce available options and increase the likelihood of pupils bringing food from home or purchasing food outside school.

Government response

We will adopt a structure that includes dedicated breakfast standards and a distinct set of standards covering the rest of the school day. This reflects consultation feedback that breakfast provision has a different purpose and operating model, while ensuring that the wider school food environment supports healthier choices throughout the day.

The revised School Food Standards will use clearer terminology for main items, including traditional meals, sandwiches, baguettes, paninis, salad boxes, and other savoury options. Requirements will apply to main items whenever they are served, rather than only to traditional lunch plates, to ensure that grab-and-go provision and other modern service models are covered consistently.

We will reaffirm the requirement that all schools must provide access to free, fresh drinking water at all times. This remains a core part of the School Food Standards and is essential in supporting healthier drink choices across the school day.

Changes made following consultation

We have:

- Retained separate breakfast standards and a distinct set of standards for the rest of the school day.
- Replaced references to grab-and-go items in relevant areas with the broader concept of main items, to improve clarity and reflect modern service models.
- Retained the requirement for free, fresh drinking water to be available at all times.
- Added yoghurt and plant-based versions that meet the requirements of the dairy and plant-based versions food group, and houmous to the permitted snacks list.
- We will set out further scope and application detail in guidance, including where multiple providers operate on one school site.

Implementation and guidance

Subject to Parliamentary approval, these requirements will apply from September 2027, except where specific secondary school requirements are phased to September 2028. The government will publish guidance with worked examples showing how the standards apply in primary schools, secondary schools, schools with external caterers, schools with multiple providers, and schools offering breakfast, breaktime, and after-school provision.

Guidance will also explain how schools can oversee provision across the whole day, including where responsibility is split between school staff, catering providers, clubs, suppliers, or other partners. This will be important for accountability, contract management and consistent communication with parents and pupils.

The revised School Food Standards apply across the whole school day, including all school food outlets such as vending machines and tuck shops. Consistent with the current approach, the standards do not apply to food provided as part of rewards, celebrations, fundraising activities, or other exempt occasions.

Fibre, fruit and vegetables

What we proposed

The consultation proposed strengthening requirements on fibre, fruit and vegetables. This included increasing the fibre content of starchy foods, requiring a greater proportion of wholegrain pasta and rice, strengthening requirements for bread, and requiring vegetables or salad to be served with main meals and grab-and-go options.

The consultation also proposed that primary schools should have at least one day each week where fruit is the only dessert option. More broadly, the proposals sought to increase the presence of fruit and vegetables across meals and desserts, and to support healthier eating habits by making fruit and vegetables a routine part of school food.

These proposals were intended to address low fibre intake among children, improve nutritional balance and support the development of healthier long-term dietary habits. They also reflected the role schools can play in normalising fruit, vegetables and higher-fibre foods as part of everyday meals.

What respondents said

Respondents strongly supported increasing fibre, fruit and vegetables. Seventy-six per cent agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed changes to fibre requirements for starchy foods. Many respondents linked higher-fibre foods to improved health, fullness, concentration and long-term eating habits.

Eighty-one per cent agreed or strongly agreed with requiring vegetables or salad with grab-and-go options. Respondents viewed this as a practical way to improve the nutritional balance of meals and ensure pupils are routinely offered vegetables. Many parents, local authorities and public health stakeholders were particularly supportive.

However, respondents raised concerns about pupil acceptance, choice, hunger and food waste. Schools and caterers warned that wholegrain products and vegetables may be provided but not eaten if introduced too quickly or without attractive preparation and presentation. Children and young people were more likely to emphasise choice and enjoyment, and some preferred encouragement rather than compulsory provision.

Views on the primary fruit-only dessert proposal were broadly supportive, with around 69% agreeing, but respondents also raised practical concerns. Some wanted more ambitious fruit-led dessert policies, while others highlighted the importance of maintaining appeal, supporting dairy provision, managing cost and avoiding waste.

Government response

We will strengthen fibre, fruit and vegetable requirements. Daily provision of starchy foods will be retained, alongside the requirement to provide a range of starchy foods across the week. The revised School Food Standards will strengthen fibre expectations

by requiring all pasta dishes served on at least one day each week to contain at least 50% wholewheat pasta.

We will strengthen bread requirements by increasing the minimum fibre requirement for all breads from 3g to 4g per 100g or to be at least 50% wholemeal flour and no more than 5g fat/100g. We will also clarify which specified bread products are exempt from the fibre requirement. These changes respond to strong support for higher-fibre provision while providing clearer rules for schools and caterers.

We have amended the vegetable requirement so that vegetables can count where they are included within a dish, as well as served as an accompaniment. This retains the aim of increasing vegetable provision while giving schools and caterers more flexibility to offer vegetables in innovative ways.

Changes made following consultation

We have:

- Increased the minimum fibre requirement for bread from 3g to 4g per 100g.
- Clarified that all pasta dishes served on at least one day each week must contain at least 50% wholewheat pasta.
- Allowed vegetables to count when incorporated within a dish, rather than only when served as a side or accompaniment.
- Amended the primary fruit-only dessert proposal so other permitted items such as yoghurt or custard can also be served alongside fruit each day.
- Removed the proposed 50% raw weight requirement for fruit or vegetables to be included within sweetened baked products and desserts. This has been replaced with a requirement for fruit or vegetables to be contained within the dessert (primary 40g, secondary 80g). Where the fruit or vegetables does not equate to a full portion within the item, additional fruit or vegetables must be served alongside the dessert to make up the full portion.
- Clarified specified bread product exemptions from the fibre requirements, including crumpets, pizza bases and tea cakes. These products have been exempted because higher-fibre equivalents are not widely available or routinely used within school catering, and applying the fibre requirement to them could create unnecessary implementation challenges without materially impacting overall fibre provision.

Implementation and guidance

Subject to Parliamentary approval, these requirements will apply from September 2027. The government will publish guidance with practical examples of compliant higher-fibre products, including approaches to introducing wholemeal products gradually, improving pupil acceptance and reducing waste.

Guidance will cover homemade bread, pasta and rice requirements, exempt bread products, and how to count fruit and vegetable portions within dishes. It will also support schools to make fruit and vegetables appealing, including through recipe development, salad bars, crudites, integration into main dishes and pupil engagement.

Sugar and drinks

What we proposed

The consultation proposed strengthening restrictions on sugar and drinks. This included tighter rules on permitted drinks in primary and secondary schools, removing fruit juice and combination drinks from school meal services, restricting sugar, honey and syrups from being added to food or drinks after preparation, and limiting sweetened products.

The proposals were intended to reduce pupils' exposure to free sugars, support oral health, and promote water and milk-based drinks as the default school drinks offer. The consultation proposed changes to secondary school drinks in stages, recognising that secondary schools may need more time to adapt provision and manage pupil choice.

We proposed expanding the list of permitted drinks for secondary schools to recognise that older pupils typically have greater autonomy in their drink choices while still supporting healthier consumption patterns. Alongside water, milk and fortified plant-based drinks, the proposals allowed sugar-free flavoured still water and fruit-flavoured still drinks with no added sugar (and no more than 0.5g sugar per 100ml when diluted). This would provide a wider range of lower-sugar options for secondary pupils, help schools transition away from fruit juice and juice-based drinks, and support the nutritional realities of secondary school food environments, particularly where grab-and-go provision is common.

The consultation also considered the role of plant-based drinks, flavoured drinks, tea and coffee, no- or low-calorie sweeteners, and the need for clear rules that schools and caterers can apply consistently.

What respondents said

Respondents generally supported tighter drinks requirements, particularly in primary schools. Around 76% agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed list of permitted drinks in primary schools. Many parents, local authorities, health professionals and public health stakeholders supported restricting sugary, fizzy and less healthy drinks, and emphasised the importance of water and plain milk as healthier default options.

Respondents also supported reducing free sugars across the school day. Many linked sugar reduction to oral health, obesity, health inequalities and the need to establish healthier habits. There was support for restricting sweetened drinks, syrups, chocolate spreads and sugary cereal options, particularly where pupils could otherwise consume sugar at multiple points in the school day.

However, views were more mixed on some details. Some respondents argued for greater flexibility in secondary schools, including on no-added-sugar flavoured still drinks, tea and coffee without syrups or extras, and options that older pupils would view as acceptable alternatives to drinks sold outside school. Some children and young people felt stricter secondary school drinks rules could be too restrictive.

Respondents also raised questions about plant-based drinks, fermented milk drinks and product availability. Some respondents wanted greater clarity on which drinks would be permitted, how sweeteners would be treated, and how schools should communicate changes to pupils and families.

Government response

We will tighten drinks requirements and retain the core principle of reducing free sugars. Free, fresh drinking water must be available at all times. The revised School Food Standards will support water and milk, including permitted dairy and fortified plant-based options, and will reduce access to sugary drinks across the school day.

We will retain restrictions on honey, syrups, chocolate spreads and other sweet spreads as spreads or for addition to food or drinks after preparation. This is necessary to maintain a clear and consistent approach to free sugars, reduce confusion and support healthier school food environments.

We are retaining the recommendation not to permit fruit juice because, although it can contain vitamins and minerals, it is still a source of free sugars and can contribute significantly to pupils' overall sugar intake. Allowing fruit juice would also make the School Food Standards harder to communicate and apply consistently, particularly alongside wider restrictions on sugary drinks.

Although no- or low-calorie sweeteners are useful in reducing intakes of free sugars, we will restrict no- or low-calorie sweeteners in foods and drinks in primary settings and in foods in secondary. There is some concern that long-term sweetener intake may increase the risk of weight gain and some health conditions such as type 2 diabetes. As a precaution, government recommends that intakes of sweeteners should be minimised.

Changes made following consultation

We have:

- Reinstated plain, unflavoured and unsweetened fermented milk drinks.
- Added fortified pea drinks to the list of permitted plant-based drinks, alongside unflavoured, unsweetened or no sugar soya and oat drinks.
- Retained the restriction on fruit juice and combination drinks in school meal services.
- Retained restrictions on sugar, honey and syrups being added to food or drinks after preparation.

- Phased relevant secondary school drinks requirements to September 2028.
- Retained the requirement for plain unsweetened and unflavoured semi-skimmed, skimmed, 1% or lactose free milk to be available for drinking at least once a day during school hours. An exemption will be applied for faith schools that are unable to comply with the serving of milk for religious reasons.

Implementation and guidance

Subject to Parliamentary approval, Primary school drinks requirements will apply from September 2027. Relevant secondary school drinks requirements will apply from September 2028. This recognises concerns about pupil choice, existing contracts, vending, product supply and the risk that pupils could otherwise shift to drinks bought outside school.

The government will publish guidance with a clear permitted drinks list, examples of prohibited drinks, advice on plant-based drinks and fermented milk drinks, and worked examples for breakfast, lunch, vending and other school-day provision. It will also support schools to communicate changes to pupils and families.

Foods high in saturated fat, sugar and/or salt, cheese and desserts

What we proposed

The consultation proposed strengthening restrictions on foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt. This included no longer permitting deep-fried foods, setting limits on certain products such as processed meat, alternative products to meat and fish, pastry and breadcrumb-coated foods, restricting cakes and biscuits, and tightening limits on condiments and spreads.

The consultation also proposed restrictions on cheese as a main ingredient and changes to the frequency of sweetened baked products and desserts. These proposals sought to reduce exposure to foods high in saturated fat, free sugars and/or salt while retaining a school meal offer that remains appealing and practical to deliver.

For secondary schools, the consultation proposed phasing some requirements, including those relating to cheese and desserts, to support implementation and reduce the risk of unintended consequences for meal uptake.

What respondents said

Respondents generally supported reducing foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt and limiting products such as deep-fried foods, processed meat, pastry products and sweetened items. Public health stakeholders, local authorities, charities and many parents saw these changes as important for improving nutritional quality and supporting healthier habits.

Views were more mixed on cheese. Many respondents recognised that cheese can be high in saturated fat and salt but also highlighted its contribution as a source of calcium

and protein and its importance in vegetarian meals and familiar menu items. Caterers and schools were particularly concerned that strict limits could reduce menu flexibility and affect meal uptake.

Dessert proposals also generated mixed views. Some respondents supported tighter restrictions on sweetened desserts and baked products, and some argued that the proposals did not go far enough. Others raised concerns about pupil acceptance, portion control, perceived value for money, and the role of occasional desserts in maintaining balanced and attractive menus.

Respondents repeatedly emphasised that restrictions on popular foods need to be managed carefully. Schools and caterers warned that if popular items are removed too quickly, pupils may reject school meals, choose packed lunches, buy food outside school or leave meals uneaten.

Government response

We will maintain and clarify restrictions on foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt. Deep-fried foods will no longer be permitted. Limits on pastry products, breadcrumb-coated foods and processed meats will be retained and clarified, with no more than two portions from this group served across the week.

We will retain restrictions on foods containing cheese but clarify the standard so that it applies consistently across main items. Cheese will be added to the protein food group, reflecting the nutritional contribution it can make. However, its use as a main ingredient will continue to be limited to manage saturated fat and salt, encourage variety in protein sources, and avoid cheese becoming the default route for meeting vegetarian or protein requirements.

We will revise dessert requirements to retain the health objective while addressing deliverability and meal uptake concerns raised in the consultation responses. Primary schools will remain limited to one portion of sweetened baked products or desserts each week. In response to consultation feedback on the practical role these products can play, secondary schools will be permitted to serve two portions per week on an ongoing basis. All sweetened baked products or desserts must contain a portion of fruit or vegetables.

Changes made following consultation

We have:

- Retained the limit of no more than two portions of food including cheese each week, with a one-year secondary school transition allowing up to three portions per week in the 2027/28 academic year.
- Added cheese to the protein food group and clarified it can count towards the protein and dairy requirement. Foods containing cheese remain limited to two portions per week (three during the secondary transition year). Optional topping cheese on jacket potatoes and pasta are excluded from the weekly limit, and topping cheese alone does not count as meeting the protein source requirement.
- Allowed secondary schools to serve two sweetened desserts or baked products per week on an ongoing basis, rather than moving to a single weekly allowance.
- Retained the primary school limit of one sweetened dessert or baked product per week.
- Replaced the proposed requirement for sweetened baked products and desserts to contain at least 50% fruit or vegetables by raw weight. Instead, these must partially or fully include a portion of fruit or vegetables, supplementing this as an accompaniment where necessary to provide a full portion.
- Retained and clarified restrictions on deep-fried foods, pastry products, breadcrumb-coated foods and processed meats.

Implementation and guidance

Subject to Parliamentary approval, primary school requirements in this area will apply from September 2027. For secondary schools, the related phased requirements will apply from September 2028. During the transition period from September 2027 to August 2028, secondary schools will be allowed up to three portions of foods containing cheese per week before moving to the limit of two portions per week from September 2028.

The government will publish guidance covering pastry products, breadcrumb-coated foods, processed meats and sweetened baked products and desserts.

Protein and pulses

What we proposed

The consultation proposed updating protein requirements so that school menus include a wider range of healthy protein sources and make greater use of pulses. The proposals included requiring at least one portion of pulses, not including baked beans, within or alongside all menu options on one day each week, and expanding the ways schools can meet requirements for serving protein on three or more days each week.

The consultation included proposals relating to meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy, plant-based options and meat alternatives. The intention was to encourage nutritionally balanced menus, and ensure that vegetarian, and plant-based options meet appropriate nutritional standards.

Some protein-related requirements were proposed for phased implementation in secondary schools, recognising concerns about pupil acceptance, procurement and menu change where pulses or plant-based dishes are less familiar.

What respondents said

Respondents generally supported increasing opportunities for children to consume pulses and other plant-based protein sources. Public health stakeholders, local authorities, academics and charities often highlighted the nutritional benefits of pulses, including their contribution to protein, fibre and micronutrient intake, as well as their potential to support long-term health and dietary variety. Environmental sustainability was also a common consideration, with many respondents noting the lower environmental impact of pulses compared with meat.

Many respondents supported regular provision of pulses, and some viewed weekly provision as a minimum expectation while advocating more frequent inclusion as part of broader plant-protein approaches. However, views among parents and pupils were more mixed. While some welcomed greater availability of plant-based options to meet cultural, religious, ethical, allergy-related or environmental preferences, others raised concerns about taste, satiety and pupil acceptance, particularly where children are unfamiliar with these foods.

Views on meat alternatives were similarly mixed. Some respondents considered them a useful way to increase choice and inclusion, while others raised concerns about levels of processing, salt content and nutritional quality.

Schools and caterers emphasised the importance of practical implementation. Respondents raised concerns about pupil acceptance, food waste, dietary preferences, allergens, SEND requirements and operational capacity. They also highlighted challenges relating to sourcing, recipe development, kitchen skills, product availability and the need for flexibility in menu planning. Many stressed that changes should be introduced gradually, supported by clear guidance and consistent definitions within the School Foods standards.

Respondents repeatedly highlighted the importance of education and exposure in supporting dietary change. Schools, caterers and local authorities emphasised the value of whole-school food education, tasting opportunities and appealing recipes to build familiarity with pulses and other plant-based foods, helping to encourage acceptance and minimise food waste.

Government response

We will strengthen the protein requirements within the School Food Standards and support a wider range of healthy protein sources. All main items must contain a protein source whenever served. This supports balanced meals and helps ensure that pupils receive meals that are filling and nutritionally appropriate.

Cheese will be added to the protein food group, reflecting its nutritional contribution, although its use will remain subject to the separate cheese restrictions set out above. Baked beans will also be added to the protein food group, although they will continue to be treated differently from pulses and do not count as a vegetable.

We will retain the objective of increasing pulses, while recognising the need for phased implementation in secondary schools. This approach supports nutritional and environmental aims while giving schools and caterers time to develop menus, test recipes and build pupil acceptance.

A portion of meat, poultry or pulses will continue to be required on three or more days each week, and at least one vegetarian main item will be required to include a portion of pulses on three days each week. This approach supports nutritional and environmental aims while giving schools and caterers time to develop menus, test recipes and build pupil acceptance.

Changes made following consultation

We have:

- Retained the requirement for pulses to be included alongside all main menu items at least once each week. A one-year secondary school transition requiring pulses at least once every two weeks in the 2027/28 academic year.
- Clarified that all main items must contain a protein source whenever served.
- Added cheese to the protein food group and allowing this to count as a protein and dairy, while retaining separate limits on main items containing cheese.
- Retained the requirement of a portion of meat, poultry or pulses on three or more days each week. This includes beans, lentils, chickpeas. This does not include baked beans.
- Retained the requirement that at least one vegetarian main item includes a portion of pulses on three days each week.
- Added baked beans to the protein food group, while continuing to treat them differently from pulses.

Implementation and guidance

Subject to Parliamentary approval, Primary school protein and pulse requirements, and most wider protein requirements, will apply from September 2027. Relevant secondary school pulse requirements will apply from September 2028. This reflects consultation feedback about deliverability, pupil acceptance, food waste and the time needed for menu development in secondary settings.

The government will publish guidance with examples of compliant protein provision across primary and secondary menus, including meat, fish, eggs, dairy, cheese, baked beans, pulses, vegetarian dishes, vegan options and plant-based meat alternatives. Guidance will also include examples of familiar dishes that incorporate pulses and

approaches that support pupils with allergies, religious dietary requirements, vegetarian or vegan diets, and sensory needs.

Compliance, governance and implementation

What we proposed

The consultation sought views on how to strengthen compliance, governance and implementation of the revised School Food Standards. Proposals included strengthening school-level accountability, clarifying governance responsibilities, encouraging publication of school food policies and menus, and seeking views on practical measures schools and government could take to support compliance.

The consultation also sought views on the practical challenges schools may face when implementing the revised School Food Standards. These included funding, staffing, procurement, contracts, product availability, pupil acceptance, inclusion, monitoring and enforcement.

Subject to Parliamentary approval, the government proposed implementation from September 2027, with some secondary school requirements applying from September 2028. This was intended to give schools, trusts, caterers, suppliers and local authorities time to prepare.

What respondents said

Respondents strongly emphasised that successful implementation will depend on more than regulations. The most common practical challenges identified were funding and affordability, pupil rejection of healthier menus, food waste, reduced choice, staffing and skills, procurement and contractual constraints, and the need to meet pupils' dietary and inclusion needs.

Respondents generally supported clearer accountability. Around two-thirds agreed or strongly agreed that having a governor with explicit responsibility for school food would help ensure schools follow the standards. Parents and local authorities were particularly supportive while schools and caterers were generally positive but more cautious about workload and the need for flexibility.

Respondents also supported schools publishing their school food policy online, with around two-thirds agreeing or strongly agreeing that this would help ensure schools meet the standards. Many saw the publication of policies and menus as a way to increase transparency, support parent and pupil engagement, and make it easier for school communities to understand provision.

When asked what practical methods schools and government could take, respondents highlighted communication with parents and communities, structured menu planning, internal checks, external audits, contract management, procurement support, staff training, food education, pupil voice and clearer national guidance. Many respondents

also called for adequate, protected funding and a monitoring system that is robust but proportionate.

Government response

We will strengthen school food governance and transparency. Guidance will be updated so that schools appoint a lead governor with responsibility for school food and publish their school food policy and menus on their websites. These measures will support clearer accountability, improve transparency for parents and school communities, and help schools meet the revised standards.

We recognise that compliance cannot rely only on individual schools interpreting requirements in isolation. The implementation approach will therefore combine clear statutory requirements, practical guidance, sector engagement, appropriate governance and proportionate monitoring.

Subject to Parliamentary approval, the revised standards will apply from September 2027. Relevant secondary school requirements, including changes relating to healthier drinks, cheese and pulses, will apply from September 2028. This reflects consultation feedback about procurement cycles, existing contracts, menu planning, pupil acceptance and the risk of unintended consequences if changes are introduced too quickly.

To ensure schools meet the School Food Standards, the government is launching a new national compliance framework to be introduced from September 2027. This will include strengthening governance and transparency around school food, by expecting every school to appoint a lead governor for school food, and to publish their menus and school food policies online. As part of this compliance framework government is also taking forward the development of a national monitoring system on school food drawing on the Food Standards Agency's expertise in food regulation and assurance, and its commitment to supporting access to healthier food. We will work with Ofsted so that relevant information from this monitoring can also be provided to inspectors. Inspectors will not grade schools on school food or compliance with the standards, but the information can form part of wider conversations inspectors have about leadership and governance at a school. School food monitoring will form part of a wider package of resources, training and guidance accessible to all schools that increases visibility on the food offer for parents and pupils, and provides more support to schools, governing bodies and caterers to improve the healthiness of what is served.

Changes made following consultation

We have:

- Added clearer expectations on governance and transparency through a lead governor for school food and publication of school food policies and menus.
- Retained the September 2027 implementation date for the revised standards overall.

- Retained phased implementation to September 2028 for specified secondary school requirements.
- Refined several individual policy proposals to support deliverability, including on processed meat, drinks, desserts, cheese, fibre and protein requirements.
- We are continuing to develop the national compliance monitoring system with relevant partners.

Implementation and guidance

The government intends to lay regulations in October 2026. Subject to Parliamentary approval, the main implementation date will be September 2027. The phased secondary school requirements will come into force from September 2028. Schools that are ready to adopt the revised standards earlier will be encouraged to do so.

The government will publish guidance to support schools, trusts, local authorities, caterers and suppliers. This will include clear explanations of the revised requirements, practical examples, advice on procurement and contracts, support for communicating changes to pupils and parents, and guidance on inclusion and reasonable adjustments.

Guidance will address provision for pupils with SEND, neurodivergence, sensory needs, allergies, medical diets, faith-based requirements, cultural dietary needs, and vegetarian or vegan diets. Respondents repeatedly emphasised that implementation must support inclusion as well as nutritional improvement.

We will continue to work with sector partners on implementation. This will include engagement with schools, trusts, local authorities, caterers, suppliers, public health stakeholders, parents and pupils to ensure the guidance is practical and supports consistent implementation. We will also provide further detailed guidance and implementation support to help stakeholders prepare for and deliver the changes effectively.

To ensure schools meet the School Food Standards, the government is introducing a new national School Food Standards compliance framework from September 2027, supported by enhanced governance, greater transparency, and a package of guidance, training and resources for schools and caterers.

Equality, inclusion and reasonable adjustments

What respondents said

While respondents were generally supportive of stronger nutritional standards, there was consistent concern that a "one-size-fits-all" approach could negatively affect some pupils unless schools retain flexibility and make reasonable adjustments. A consistent theme being to ensure flexibility within the standards, including reasonable adjustments or exemptions where appropriate. Across multiple questions, respondents highlighted the needs of pupils with SEND, sensory sensitivities, Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), allergies, medical conditions, restricted diets and faith or cultural

dietary requirements. Concerns centred on the potential loss of familiar or "safe" foods, which some pupils rely on, and the risk that removing these foods could result in pupils eating less, refusing meals or experiencing distress, as well as food waste. Examples included:

- The importance of familiar foods, such as cheese-based meals, for some SEND pupils and restrictive eaters.
- The need to ensure vegetarian and vegan options remain appealing, affordable and nutritionally appropriate.
- Concerns that some restrictions could reduce access to familiar or recognised "safe foods" relied upon by some pupils.
- Potential challenges for pupils who cannot tolerate particular food types or textures such as fruit-only dessert days potentially excluding pupils who cannot tolerate fruit textures.
- Mandatory vegetables or salads increasing food waste where pupils have sensory aversions.

What respondents wanted

- Flexibility within the School Food Standards, including reasonable adjustments or exemptions where appropriate, and recognition that health or medical needs may sometimes require departures from standard menus.
- Recognition of the needs of pupils with SEND, medical conditions and restricted diets, including access to appropriate alternatives and protection for familiar or "safe" foods where necessary.
- Clear guidance for schools and caterers on inclusive implementation, including specialist SEND guidance and how Section 100 duties and medical needs interact with the School Food Standards.
- Continued availability of diverse, culturally and religiously appropriate meal options, with clear consideration of faith and cultural dietary requirements when designing menus.
- Greater emphasis on inclusion, equality and pupil needs alongside nutritional objectives, rather than compliance alone.

Government response

The government has considered the equalities impacts of the proposals throughout policy development and has completed an equality impact assessment⁵. The revised School Food Standards propose to retain flexibility for schools and include changes designed to support inclusive provision, including greater use of pulses and fortified plant-based

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/school-food-standards-updating-the-legislative-framework>

alternatives. This includes provision for schools that are unable to meet the drinking milk requirement for religious reasons.

We also recognise that unforeseen events can arise, for example where normal catering arrangements are disrupted. We will set out in guidance how schools can respond appropriately in these exceptional situations while maintaining the overall aims of the standards.

Implementation and guidance

We will also consider what further support may be required through guidance to help schools meet the individual needs of their pupils while delivering the School Food Standards.

Implementation and next steps

Overview

The revised School Food Standards will be introduced in stages to give schools, trusts, local authorities, caterers, suppliers and other delivery partners time to prepare. The government recognises that successful implementation will depend not only on the revised regulations, but also on clear guidance, practical support, effective communication and proportionate accountability arrangements.

Respondents to the consultation broadly supported the ambition to improve the nutritional quality of school food. They also raised practical concerns about funding, catering viability, staff capacity, procurement, contract cycles, product availability, pupil acceptance, meal uptake, food waste, and the need for inclusive provision for pupils with SEND, neurodivergence, sensory needs, allergies, medical diets, faith-based requirements and cultural dietary needs. These concerns have informed the implementation timetable and the planned support for the sector.

The government will therefore take a phased and supported approach. Subject to Parliamentary approval, the main revised standards will apply from September 2027. A limited number of secondary school requirements will apply from September 2028, reflecting consultation feedback that secondary schools can face particular challenges around pupil choice, existing contracts, vending and grab-and-go provision, and the risk of pupils purchasing food or drink outside school.

Implementation timetable

The government intends to lay regulations in October 2026. The policy direction is set out in this consultation response, with the detailed legal requirements set out in the regulations and accompanying guidance. This is intended to give the sector sufficient time to plan for changes before the revised standards come into force.

Autumn 2026: Regulations will be laid, subject to Parliamentary approval, in October. The government will also publish accompanying guidance.

September 2027: The revised School Food Standards will apply to schools. This will include the new breakfast standards and the revised requirements across the school day for primary schools and majority of the requirements for secondary schools, alongside the new governance and transparency requirements.

September 2028: Specified secondary school requirements will come into force after a transition year. These include relevant changes relating to healthier drinks, cheese and pulses. This additional time is intended to support procurement, menu development, contract changes, pupil engagement and product availability in secondary settings.

Schools that are ready to adopt any of the revised standards earlier will be encouraged to do so. The government will work with the sector to support early adoption where schools and caterers are able to implement changes ahead of the statutory deadlines.

Guidance and support

The government recognises that schools and caterers will need practical support to implement the revised School Food Standards. Respondents asked for clear guidance, worked examples, model menus, recipes, product information, procurement support, training materials and communications resources for pupils and parents. The government will provide further guidance to help schools, trusts, local authorities, and caterers understand and apply the revised standards. Guidance will also help schools and caterers understand how to support meal uptake, minimise food waste and make healthier choices appealing to pupils, particularly where menus change significantly.

We will co-develop supporting materials with schools, caterers and other stakeholders during Autumn 2026, and work with sector partners to support understanding of the new requirements across the supply chain. This collaborative approach will help ensure that guidance is practical, deliverable and responsive to operational challenges while supporting successful implementation of the reforms.

The support offer will focus on helping schools and caterers translate the School Food Standards into day-to-day menu planning. It will bring together practical implementation advice, menu planning examples, procurement prompts, communication materials and case studies.

The guidance package will include a range of tools and resources to support implementation of the updated standards. These resources will help schools and caterers manage weekly frequency limits, apply the standards consistently across breakfast provision and the wider school day, and increase pupil acceptance while maintaining the nutritional ambition of the reforms. Further materials will be made available over the next academic year.

Working with the sector and communicating the changes

The government will continue to work with schools, trusts, local authorities, caterers, suppliers, public health stakeholders, parents, pupils and other partners as the revised standards are implemented. This engagement will help ensure that guidance is practical, implementation risks are understood, and examples of good practice can be shared across the sector.

Clear communication will also be important to successful implementation. Schools and caterers will be supported to explain changes to pupils and families, particularly where menus change or familiar products are replaced. Communications will set out the

purpose of the reforms, the implementation timetable and the support available to schools and the wider sector.

Communications should emphasise that the revised standards are intended to improve children's health, wellbeing and readiness to learn while ensuring that meals remain appealing, inclusive and practical for schools and caterers to deliver. Schools will be encouraged to communicate with parents and pupils about menu changes, the reasons for the revisions and how pupils can provide feedback.

Review and next steps

The government will keep implementation under review through considering feedback from schools, trusts, caterers, local authorities, suppliers, parents and pupils as the sector prepares for the revised standards and once they come into force.

Following publication of this response, the government intends to lay regulations in October 2026, subject to Parliamentary approval, and prepare implementation guidance for the sector. The government will continue to work with delivery partners to support schools, trusts, local authorities, caterers and suppliers ahead of the September 2027 implementation date and the September 2028 phased secondary school requirements.



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