

Consultation Response



Hungry for Success A Whole School Approach To School Meals In Scotland (Expert Panel on School Meals October 2002)

CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND

Children in Scotland is Scotland's national umbrella agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that relevant policies, services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society.

Children in Scotland represents over 300 members, including all the major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional associations and local authorities as well as many smaller community groups and children's services. Children in Scotland facilitates the National Early Years Forum, the Scottish Parenting Forum, the Special Needs Forum and a National Steering Group on Children infected/affected by HIV/AIDS. It works in partnership with the National Children's Bureau and Children in Wales, and is a member of the European Forum for Children's Welfare (EFCW).

RESPONSE

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the recommendations of the Expert Panel on School Meals. To consult directly with young people a website was established to investigate primary and secondary pupils' attitudes towards school meals across Scotland. The ***Tell us about School Dinners*** website is the first time that Children in Scotland has used the internet as a means of consulting with children and young people and it was found to be an extremely successful way of collecting a large number of views on a particular topic.

There were 681 replies to the ***Tell us about School Dinners*** website. Pupils from nineteen primary schools and sixteen secondary schools responded to the survey, which ran over a period of eight months from February until September 2002.

This report answers some of the key questions put forward in the Consultation Document *Hungry for Success*, by drawing on the responses of the school pupils to the website questionnaire.

There were 11 questions asked in all, focusing on whether the pupils liked school dinners or not, questioning what influenced their choices and what would encourage them to eat school dinners. See Appendix 1 for the full questionnaire. The responses

were split into two categories: those who eat school dinners 'always' or 'sometimes' (the 'yes' respondents n=517, 76%) and those who do not eat school dinners 'often' or 'never' eat school dinners (the 'no' respondents n=164, 24%).

We would like to thank the Directors of Education of all the Local Authorities who passed on the information to the primary and secondary schools in their areas. We would also like to extend our thanks to all the pupils who took part in the questionnaire, without whom this report would not have been possible.

Main Messages

From a survey of 681 pupils through a website questionnaire the main messages were:

- 1. The majority of pupils ate school meals: 34% always eat school meals; 48% sometimes eat school meals; 15% eat school meals but don't eat school meals very often; 11% never eat school meals.** There were slight differences between primary and secondary school pupils with primary pupils more likely to always eat school dinners than secondary pupils (35% compared with 27%).
- 2. 'Fast foods' such as pizza and hotdogs are the most popular school meals amongst Scottish pupils, whilst 'healthier' options such as pasta, fruit and vegetables are the least popular foods.** This would support the Panel's recommendation that presentation, marketing and pricing structures should be considered to encourage pupils to choose 'healthier' foods.
- 3. Pupils did not view furniture design and dining hall décor as a priority.**
- 4. Lunchtime should be given due consideration when planning the school day to allow all pupils to benefit from the social experience provided by school meals.**
- 5. The improvement of seating and queuing arrangements would provide positive encouragement to the uptake of school meals.**
- 6. Strategies to reduce queuing times would be appreciated by the majority of Scottish pupils who eat school meals.**
- 7. Consultation with pupils is an essential ingredient in improving the uptake of school meals in Scotland.**
- 8. The quality of the food was voted as the most influential factor in the uptake of school meals.**

Presentation and nutritional content of school meals

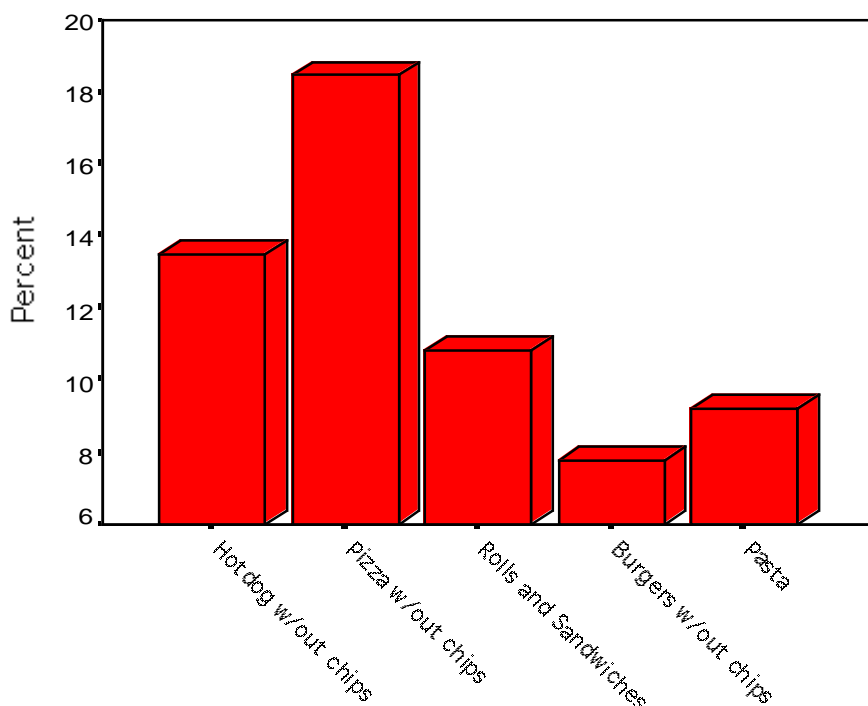
4. "The Panel also recommends that schools, education authorities and caterers should consider presentation, marketing and pricing structures to incentivise healthier choices. (paras 4.52 – 4.59)"

Do you support this recommendation? Yes 3 No In part Don't know

Both groups of respondents showed a preference for 'fast foods' above 'healthier' options.

Overall the questionnaire revealed that the top two choices for favourite school dinners were 'fast foods' such as pizza and hotdogs. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Favourite School Dinner from yes respondents



When asked about their **least** favourite school dinners the 'yes' respondents revealed a dislike for 'healthier' options, with pasta/noodles and curry receiving the most votes in this category.

The 'no' respondents particularly disliked fruit and vegetables, which was their least favourite food.

With pupils' preferences leaning towards more fatty foods, this would support the panel's recommendation that healthier choices should be presented and marketed to the pupils more effectively, encouraging the uptake of 'healthier' foods which are competitively priced with the 'fast food' on offer to them.

Increasing the uptake of school meals

6. "The Panel recommends that refurbishment of the dining room should be a priority for authorities in a review of their school estate. Furniture design, layout and usage, along with other factors such as décor and background music should be considered by all schools." (paras 4.60 – 4.66)

Do you support this recommendation? Yes No 3 In part Don't know

The 'no' respondents were asked what would make them eat school dinners more often. There were a large variety of answers with the majority focusing on the quality of the food (see Question 5, Appendix 1). Only one pupil replied that the layout was of importance when choosing whether to eat school meals. This finding suggests that refurbishment should not be a priority and that décor and background music are not the most important factors in increasing the uptake of school meals.

8. "The Panel recommends that when education authorities and schools are examining the structure of the school day, the lunchtime experience should be part of that consideration."

Do you support this recommendation? Yes 3 No In part Don't know

This question was not asked as part of the website survey. However, it was an issue that came up through consultation with young people as part of the National Debate on Education. This response can be downloaded from www.childreninScotland.org.uk. One particular issue raised by some pupils with disabilities is that lunch time and break time are often earmarked as times when care needs are also seen to. Many young people spent a considerable part of their break or lunch time waiting for these services. This then exacerbated the hurried nature of school meal provision, reduced the important social opportunities offered during lunch times, and at times, actually limited how much pupils were able to eat and drink.

The experiences of these pupils would support the panel's recommendation that lunchtime should be given due consideration when examining the structure of the school day.

9. "The Panel recommends that schools should examine their seating and queuing arrangements to ensure that the social experience of school meals is maximised."(paras 4.43 – 4.46)

Do you support this recommendation? Yes 3 No In part Don't know

The questionnaire revealed that 19.3% of those taking school dinners were influenced by their friends to do so and a further 8% cited that the best thing about school dinners was sitting with their friends. It would seem from these results that many pupils regard eating school meals as an enjoyable social experience. Re-designing seating and queuing to maximise this social experience may encourage more pupils to eat school meals.

10. "Having observed a number of effective working examples in schools, the Panel recommends that to address queuing difficulties and in any review of the

length of the lunch break, a number of factors should be considered, namely the introduction of multiple service points; more cash points in cash cafeterias; staggered arrivals of diners/separate sittings; pre-ordering facility; separate counter for collecting pre-ordered meals; delivery of pre-ordered meals to lunchtime clubs and examining the potential for an additional outlet elsewhere in the school." (paras 4.43 – 4.46)

Do you support this recommendation? Yes 3 No In part Don't know

Of the 'no' respondents 8% revealed that they did not eat school meals because of the length of time to queue. For those that did eat school dinners, 65% spent more than 5 minutes queuing. When there was no queue at all this was sometimes due to class rotation: "class rotation means no queues". This would suggest that such practices do have a positive effect on the length of time to queue and thus to the whole experience of school dinners. Furthermore, the fact that 33% of pupils reported that they had less than 50 minutes for their lunch break means that strategies to reduce queuing at lunch times would be very welcome.

Increasing the uptake of free school meals

14. "The Panel recommends that processes maximising anonymity for free meal recipients should be explored as a priority in all schools. Primary schools should review their ticket allocation practices to ensure anonymity for free school meals is maximised." (paras 4.31 – 4.42)

Do you support this recommendation? Yes 3 No In part Don't know

Of the 'no' respondents, 23% said that cost influenced their decision in not eating school meals suggesting that free or subsidised school meals may increase uptake.

The Quality of School Meals**Figure 2.** Why do you not eat school dinners?

19. The Panel recommends that schools should consult with pupils on a regular basis on the provision of school meals and design and ambience of the dining room. (paras 4.24 – 4.30 and 4.60 – 4.66)

Do you support this recommendation? Yes 3 No In part Don't know

The results of our questionnaire overwhelmingly support this recommendation. Consultation with the pupils themselves is essential to improving the uptake of school meals in Scotland. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that the Consultation document does not address what the survey revealed to be the most important factor in the uptake of school meals: quality of food.

The 'yes' respondents answered that the best thing about school dinners was the “good food”. The 'no' respondents also said that their dislike of the food was the principal reason why they did not eat school dinners. See Figure 2 above.

This also suggests that a greater variety of foods may be a way to improve uptake of school meals. The range of school meals and lunches enjoyed by both groups of respondents suggested that choice of food was very important to the pupils. When asked ‘What would make you eat school dinners?’ the 'no' respondents second most popular answer was ‘more variety’.

The overwhelming response was that the quality of the food itself was the most important factor influencing the uptake of school meals by primary and secondary school pupils.

For further information, please contact Ingrid Fitzsimons (Policy and Research Assistant, Children in Scotland), ifitzsimons@childreninscotland.org.uk

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Appendix 1

Questions from 'tell us about School dinners' website

Do you eat school dinners?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes, always	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not very often
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No, never

If the pupil answered 'not very often' or 'no, never' they were directed onto the following questionnaire:

First of all a few things about you...

<input type="checkbox"/>	Boy	<input type="checkbox"/>	Girl
<input type="checkbox"/>	Primary School	<input type="checkbox"/>	Secondary School

Age:

Name of School/Group:

1. Where do you go for lunch?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Shop	<input type="checkbox"/>	Café
<input type="checkbox"/>	Home	<input type="checkbox"/>	Packed lunch

2. What is your favourite lunch?

3. What is your least favourite lunch?

4. Why don't you have school dinners?

5. What would make you eat school dinners more often?

6. How long do you have for lunch (in minutes)?

7. Put these meals in order (1=healthiest, 4=least healthy)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Pizza, chips, beans	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cheese and pickle roll with salad
<input type="checkbox"/>	Chicken, potatoes and peas	<input type="checkbox"/>	Macaroni Cheese and roast potatoes

8. What makes you decide on what you eat for lunch? (You can tick as many as apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Cost	<input type="checkbox"/>	Parents
<input type="checkbox"/>	Choice	<input type="checkbox"/>	Healthy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other:

9. How much money do you spend on your lunch each day?

<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>

Nothing
Under £1.00
£1.00 - £1.50

<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>

£1.50 - £2.00
over £2.00

10. Create your ideal school dinner.

11. Do you like school dinners?

If the pupil answered 'Yes, always' or 'Sometimes' they were directed to the following questions:

First of all a few things about you...

<input type="checkbox"/>	Boy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Primary School

<input type="checkbox"/>	Girl
<input type="checkbox"/>	Secondary School

Age:

Name of School/Group:

1. What is your favourite school dinner?
2. What is the best thing about school dinners?
3. How long do you have for your lunch break?
4. How long do you have to queue for your school dinner?
5. What is your least favourite school dinner?
6. Put these meals in order (1=healthiest, 4=least healthy)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Pizza, chips, beans
<input type="checkbox"/>	Chicken, potatoes and peas

<input type="checkbox"/>	Cheese and pickle roll with salad
<input type="checkbox"/>	Macaroni Cheese and roast potatoes

8. What makes you decide on what you eat for lunch? (You can tick as many as apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Cost
<input type="checkbox"/>	Choice
<input type="checkbox"/>	Friends

<input type="checkbox"/>	Parents
<input type="checkbox"/>	Healthy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other:

9. How much money do you spend on your lunch each day?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Nothing
<input type="checkbox"/>	Under £1.00
<input type="checkbox"/>	£1.00 - £1.50

<input type="checkbox"/>	£1.50 - £2.00
<input type="checkbox"/>	over £2.00

10. Create your ideal school dinner.

11. Do you like school dinners?

Appendix 2

Analysis of responses to the 'Tell us about school meals' website

Summary

1. The majority of pupils ate school meals: 34% always eat school meals; 48% sometimes eat school meals; 15% eat school meals but don't eat school meals very often; 11% never eat school meals. There were slight differences between primary and secondary school pupils with primary pupils more likely to always eat school dinners than secondary pupils (35% compared with 27%). The proportion of girls and boys eating school dinners was roughly the same.
2. The majority of those who do not eat school dinner take a packed lunch to school (30.5%), with large numbers also going home (22%) or to the shops (17%). Only 8% eat in non-school cafes.
3. When asked why they did not eat school dinners, the most common answer was that they did not like the food (39.6%).
4. The most favorite food cited by the young people was pizza, either with or without chips (21%), and the least favorite lunch was pasta (17%).
5. For those who eat school dinners, the best thing about them is the good food, though a number (9%) stated that there was nothing good about school meals.
6. Though the most common length of lunchtime was between 50 and 59 minutes, a third of pupils reported that they had less than 50 minutes for their lunch break.
7. For the majority of those eating school dinners, queuing takes less than 5 minutes and less than 10 minutes for 83.9%. However, for 11.6% queuing takes over 10 minutes, which may amount to a large portion of their lunchtime.
8. The majority of young people knew that pizza, chips and beans was unhealthy (91.4%); however this did not affect their food choice as their favorite meal overall was pizza and chips.
9. The largest influence on young people's choice of food was their friends (65.2%), with only 14.4% influenced by healthy eating.
10. Most young people spent between £1.00 and £2.00 on their lunch (68%) with 10.3% spending over £2.00.