National Institute for Health Research Policy Research Programme Project: Promoting healthier food in secondary schools: developing recommendations to enhance existing national school food policy: the ‘EPIC’ study

**NIHR reference number:** NIHR204247

**Date of original report submission:** 23rd February 2024

**Date of revised report submission:** 15th April 2024

**Appendix 1 amended:** 26th April 2024

**List of authors/contributors:**

Marie Murphy1, Alexandra Dobell1, Peymane Adab1, Jayne Woodside2, Emma Frew1, Suzanne Spence3, Clare Madden4, Miranda Pallan1

1Institute of Applied Health Research, Medical and Dental School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

2Centre for Public Health, School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences, Queen’s University Belfast, UK

3Population Health Sciences Institute, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Newcastle University, M1.151 William Leech Building, Framlington Place, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

4Public contributor

**Key words:** school food, adolescents, food standards, food policy, diet

This research is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Policy Research Programme (project reference NIHR204247). The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Contents

[**List of Tables** iii](#_Toc159590577)

[**List of Figures** iii](#_Toc159590578)

[**List of appendices** iii](#_Toc159590579)

[**List of Abbreviations** iii](#_Toc159590580)

[1 Plain Language Summary 1](#_Toc159590581)

[2 Executive summary 2](#_Toc159590582)

[3 Introduction / background 5](#_Toc159590583)

[4 Study Aims and Objectives 6](#_Toc159590584)

[5 Methods 6](#_Toc159590585)

[5.1 Study Design 6](#_Toc159590586)

[5.2 Stakeholder workshops 6](#_Toc159590587)

[5.2.1 Design and planning of stakeholder workshops 6](#_Toc159590588)

[5.2.2 Sampling and recruitment 6](#_Toc159590589)

[5.2.2.1 Secondary school pupils and parents/carers 7](#_Toc159590590)

[5.2.2.2 Other stakeholder groups 7](#_Toc159590591)

[5.2.3 Data collection 7](#_Toc159590592)

[5.2.3.1 Demographic surveys 7](#_Toc159590593)

[5.2.3.2 Workshop format 7](#_Toc159590594)

[5.2.4 Data analysis 10](#_Toc159590595)

[5.3 Policy Interest group meetings 11](#_Toc159590596)

[5.3.1 Sampling and recruitment 11](#_Toc159590597)

[5.3.2 Data collection 11](#_Toc159590598)

[5.3.2.1 Policymaker group meeting 1: Introductory meeting 11](#_Toc159590599)

[5.3.2.2 Interim task: Individual rating and prioritisation 12](#_Toc159590600)

[5.3.2.3 Policymaker group meeting 2: working towards consensus on priority action areas 12](#_Toc159590601)

[5.3.3 Data analysis 13](#_Toc159590602)

[6 Results 13](#_Toc159590603)

[6.1 Stakeholder workshops 13](#_Toc159590604)

[6.1.1 Sample description 13](#_Toc159590605)

[6.1.2 Qualitative analysis – generation of action areas 13](#_Toc159590606)

[6.2 Policy Interest group 25](#_Toc159590607)

[6.2.1 Policy Interest group participants 25](#_Toc159590608)

[6.2.2 Quantitative data 25](#_Toc159590609)

[6.2.2.1 Results of the interim task (rating and shortlisting) 25](#_Toc159590610)

[6.2.2.2 Results of the group prioritisation activity 25](#_Toc159590611)

[6.2.3 Qualitative analysis 28](#_Toc159590612)

[6.2.3.1 Funding for school food (action area 26) 28](#_Toc159590613)

[6.2.3.2 School leadership and governance (action areas 9-15) 28](#_Toc159590614)

[6.2.3.3 Priority of food within schools (action areas 20-25) 30](#_Toc159590615)

[6.2.3.4 Catering and procurement (action areas 1-8) 30](#_Toc159590616)

[6.2.3.5 Food environments beyond school (action areas 16-17) 31](#_Toc159590617)

[6.2.3.6 The food space and experience within schools (action areas 18-19) 31](#_Toc159590618)

[6.2.3.7 School food as a system 32](#_Toc159590619)

[6.2.3.8 Responsibility for school food 32](#_Toc159590620)

[7 Discussion 33](#_Toc159590621)

[7.1 Summary of findings 33](#_Toc159590622)

[7.2 Policy relevance 34](#_Toc159590623)

[7.3 Considerations for implementation 35](#_Toc159590624)

[7.4 Strengths and limitations 36](#_Toc159590625)

[8 Conclusions 36](#_Toc159590626)

[9 Patient and public involvement in the research (PPI) 37](#_Toc159590627)

[10 Addressing equality and diversity issues 37](#_Toc159590628)

[11 Dissemination 38](#_Toc159590629)

[11.1 Policy 38](#_Toc159590630)

[11.2 Communication and public engagement 38](#_Toc159590631)

[11.3 Academic 38](#_Toc159590632)

[12 Actual and anticipated impact 39](#_Toc159590633)

[13 Intellectual Property (IP) and commercial adoption 39](#_Toc159590634)

[14 Added Value Examples 39](#_Toc159590635)

[15 Acknowledgements 39](#_Toc159590636)

[16 References 39](#_Toc159590637)

**List of Tables**

[Table 1. Topics covered and focussed questions for each stakeholder group 9](#_Toc164069052)

[Table 2. EPIC study approach mapped on to Nominal Group Technique (NGT) stages 11](#_Toc164069053)

[Table 3. Stakeholder group workshop details 13](#_Toc164069054)

[Table 4. Characteristics of participants of the stakeholder workshops 15](#_Toc164069055)

[Table 5. Summary of 26 action areas identified in stakeholder workshops with illustrative quotes 16](#_Toc164069056)

[Table 6. Summary of PI group ratings on a scale of 0-10a (median and range) for the 26 action areas; 19 shortlisted action areas are shown in bold 26](#_Toc164069057)

[Table 7. Final 10 prioritised action areas by the Policy Interest group 28](#_Toc164069058)

**List of Figures**

[Figure 1. Overview of prioritisation activities with the Policy Interest group 12](#_Toc164069059)

**List of Appendices**

Appendix 1. Action area table generated from stakeholder workshop data and shared with the Policy Interest group

Appendix 2. Policy Interest group collated top five action areas (displayed in order of popularity) with summary of responses regarding rationale and responsibility.

Appendix 3. Table of findings from qualitative analysis of Policy Interest group meetings

**List of Abbreviations**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| APPG | All-Party Parliamentary Group |
| DfE | Department for Education |
| DHSC | Department for Health and Social Care |
| FSM | Free School Meals |
| LACA | LACA-the School Food People; organisation representing school caterers (formerly known as Local Authority Caterers Association) |
| LA | Local Authority |
| MAT | Multi-Academy Trust |
| NCMP  NIHR | National Child Measurement Programme  National Institute for Health and Care Research |
| Ofsted | Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills |
| PI group | Policy Interest group |
| PIL | Participant Information Leaflet |
| PPI | Patient and Public Involvement |
| REDCap | Research Electronic Data Capture |
| SAC | Study Advisory Committee |
| SFS | School food standards |
| SFP | School food plan |
| SMT | Study Management Team |
| SLT | Senior Leadership Team |

# Plain Language Summary

School food and support for healthy eating within schools are important. They can help to address obesity, poor health and food insecurity in children. Schools in England must follow national School Food Standards. These aim to ensure school food is healthy. Schools are also encouraged to follow School Food Plan guidance on supporting healthy eating. In previous research (the FUEL study), we explored how secondary schools put these policies in place. We found that secondary schools struggled to implement these policies. There is a need to improve school food policy and its implementation in secondary schools. In this study we aimed to develop recommendations to address this need.

First, we held workshops with people involved in secondary school food. This included students, parents, senior leaders, governors and caterers. We also invited people from Local Authorities, Multi-Academy Trusts and national charities/groups. We asked them to consider the key issues with school food and suggest possible solutions. From these workshops, we collated a list of 26 action areas on secondary school food. Second, we brought together a group of 10 expert representatives with an interest in school food policy. We asked the group to prioritise these action areas into a ‘top 10’ list.

Actions for government were given top priority. These were to increase funding for school food and for government to work together to champion school food. Other important actions related to school leadership, developing catering staff, and student engagement. Changing the food available to students and how it is served were thought to be crucial. The group also felt that improvements to the wider food system were needed.

We will share our findings with policy makers to inform future school food policy. We will hold an event in March 2024 to discuss how to take these actions forward in practice.

# Executive summary

**Study aims**

Using empirical research to inform discussions, we worked with stakeholders to co-develop recommendations for healthier school food policy, focusing on secondary schools. We gathered views from a wide range of stakeholders using participatory approaches and the resulting data informed discussions with a small group of stakeholder representatives who identified priority action areas.

**Background**

Current school food policy in England includes school food standards legislation which aims to ensure that the nutritional quality of school food is high, and non-statutory guidance (the School Food Plan) for schools to encourage a ‘whole school’ approach to healthy eating and increase school meal take-up. There is also the national Free School Meals (FSM) programme, which aims to improve the dietary quality and food security of children from low-income families. The success of the FSM programme is contingent on high nutritional quality of school food and school meal take-up, which are addressed through the school food standards and the School Food Plan.

School food standards are well complied with in primary schools and have a positive impact on the nutritional intakes of younger children, but there has been little evaluation of standards compliance or implementation of the School Food Plan in secondary schools. In response to this evidence gap, we conducted a National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)-funded study between 2019 and 2022 (the FUEL study; 17/92/39) in which we evaluated the implementation and nutritional impact of the school food standards and School Food Plan in secondary schools. A key finding was incomplete compliance with the school food standards, with the lowest compliance for standards restricting the provision of energy-dense foods and drinks high in fat and sugar. There was also low implementation of School Food Plan recommendations and a lack of leadership on food within schools. We did not find evidence of any positive nutritional impact from the existing national school food policy in secondary school pupils.

The FUEL study identified the need to improve school food policy to support healthy nutrition in secondary school pupils. Therefore, in the EPIC study (NIHR 204247) we sought to build on recommendations for actions on school food policy and its implementation, focusing on the secondary school context and involving key stakeholders.

**Methods**

*Phase 1*

We recruited people from six stakeholder groups to participate in a 1.5-hour workshop. These groups comprised: 1) secondary school pupils; 2) parents/carers; 3) school senior leaders and teachers; 4) school catering providers and managers; 5) Local Authority (LA) and multi-academy trust (MAT) representatives; and 6) national third sector organisations. To facilitate inclusivity, we recruited pupils and parents from two schools, and pupils from one youth group serving socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, and ran these workshops in-person. The remaining stakeholder workshops were held online.

We used findings from the FUEL study in the workshops to generate discussion in general and facilitated breakout sessions. We developed questions tailored to each stakeholder group to stimulate identification of potential solutions to the FUEL study findings. In each workshop, participants generated written notes, and verbal discussions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The written notes and transcripts were analysed thematically and 26 key action areas on secondary school food were identified.

*Phase 2*

We recruited key individuals representing national and local groups/organisations with expertise or interest in school food policy to form a ‘Policy Interest’ group. Group members attended two meetings, 4 weeks apart, and completed an individual interim task. In the initial meeting we presented the key action areas identified from the stakeholder workshop data and held a facilitated discussion with group members. Following this, through the individual task (including rating and prioritisation of potential actions) and the second meeting (group prioritisation), the group generated a ranked list of 10 priority action areas on school food policy and its implementation in the secondary school context.

*Public involvement*

Public involvement was embedded throughout the EPIC study, with youth and school senior leader representatives on the study management team, and three additional Public Advisory Groups (young people, parents, and school senior leaders, governors and caterers) providing input through quarterly meetings throughout the study.

**Results**

*Phase 1*

We held 13 workshops with 175 participants (45 school pupils; 33 parents; 13 school senior leaders/governors; 25 caterers; 34 Local Authority and MAT representatives; and 25 third sector representatives). Through analysis of the resulting data we identified 26 action areas, which we grouped into six broader areas based on a systems map for secondary school food: i) catering and procurement; ii) school leadership and governance; iii) food environments beyond school; iv) the food space and experience within school; v) the priority of food within schools; and vi) funding for school food.

*Phase 2*

The 10-member Policy Interest group comprised: 2 young people with involvement in school food campaigns/projects; 2 Local Authority representatives with a role in school food policy, a national school food charity representative; a national school catering representative; a senior academic in school food policy/systems; a representative from a national food education organisation; a school leader with involvement in developing national school food policy, and a parent representative. The group acknowledged that all 26 identified action areas were important, but that addressing the ten prioritised action areas first would likely have broader and more long-lasting effects to enable extensive positive change to secondary school food. They acknowledged that some identified actions (e.g. addressing the wider food environment, increasing funding for school food and national joined-up leadership) would be challenging to implement, and identified caterers, school leaders, Local Authorities and national government had as key agents for implementing actions within the prioritised areas.

**Key findings**

The 10 priority action areas and those identified as responsible for implementing changes are presented in the table below. This provides an evidence-informed starting point for policy makers to take action to effect positive changes to secondary school food.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Rank** | **Action** | **Description** | **Responsibility for implementing** |
| 1 | Review/ increase funding for school food provision | Protect school food budgets, review, and reform the Free School Meals programme and funding, and introduce further schemes to reduce food insecurity in students | Government (Department for Education), public health |
| 2 | National government to provide joined-up leadership on school food | National government to work together, champion school food, and develop a national strategy and programme to improve school food | Government (Department for Education), school leaders |
| 3 | Increase student engagement on school food | Provide a range of opportunities for engagement with students on school food, ensuring meaningful feedback mechanisms are in place and involving them in innovative ways, including engagement with caterers | Schools, school leaders |
| 4 | Support for senior leadership and governors on school food | Training and support for secondary school Senior Leadership Teams and governors on school food and school food standards compliance | Government, Ofsted, Local Authorities, schools |
| 5 | Adapt the food offer to increase quality and meet students’ needs | Adapt food provision to incorporate healthier and more sustainable foods, increase choice and cultural diversity, and meet students’ needs and preferences relating to attractiveness, value for money and hygiene of foods | Government, Local Authorities and public health, caterers, school Senior Leadership Teams |
| 6a | School food policies and rules | Dedicated policies and rules in schools designed to encourage healthy eating and restrict consumption of unhealthy foods | Government (Department for Education), Osted, school leader organisations, Local Authorities |
| 6b | Monitoring of school food standards compliance | Local and/or national systems for monitoring compliance with the school food standards, driving continuous improvement across all schools | Government (Department for Education, Food Standards Agency), Schools and caterers |
| 8 | Catering staff investment, training and skills | Investment in catering staff and their training; recognition of school catering as a career to enable better recruitment and retention of staff and provision of high-quality school food | Caterers, professional workforce standards |
| 9 | Address the wider food environment | Local Authorities/ government / communities to address the local food environment surrounding schools and the wider food system | Government, food companies, Local Authorities, third sector, NHS |
| 10 | Changing food service arrangements to promote healthy food uptake | Design food service arrangements to minimise queuing, allow flexible payment and dining, and incorporate attractive and varied outlet types which prompt healthy and nutritious choices | Caterers, schools |

Although not within the top 10 priority list, actions relating to food education, and improved food spaces and experiences were also perceived as important action areas.

**Conclusions**

Through this research, we have identified priority areas for improving secondary school food, incorporating the perspectives of key school food stakeholder groups. It was recognised that the two highest priorities of reviewing and increasing funding for school food provision, and national joined-up leadership on school food, will be challenging to implement and that strong political impetus is needed to take action in these areas.

**Dissemination and impact**

We plan to engage with policy makers, key stakeholder groups and organisations, the public and academics through presentations, visual outputs, briefing and academic papers, and a knowledge exchange event. We anticipate that, if taken forward by policy makers and wider school food stakeholders, our findings will lead to improved secondary school food and adolescent nutrition.

# Introduction / background

School food standards (SFS) aim to ensure that the food and drink provided to pupils whilst at school is balanced and nutritious, and contributes to improved overall dietary intakes in school-aged children (1). In England in 2015, new national SFS legislation (which applies to state-funded schools) was introduced following a review by the Department for Education (DfE) of the original SFS legislation that was introduced in 2006 (2). The SFS apply to foods and drinks provided to pupils on school premises up to 6pm, including: breakfast clubs, tuck shops, mid-morning break, lunch, vending machines and after school clubs (3). In addition to the national SFS, the School Food Plan (SFP) was launched in 2013, which provides a set of non-statutory recommendations for schools to increase the take-up of school meals and encourage a ‘whole school’ approach to healthy eating (1). Another important policy within this setting is the Free School Meal (FSM) programme, which aims to provide healthy school meals to disadvantaged pupils at no cost to their families. The intended consequences of the FSM scheme are to improve food security (access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food) and quality of nutrition, and support engagement in education (4). The success of the FSM scheme in achieving these benefits in disadvantaged pupils is contingent on the uptake of school meals, the overall nutritional quality of school food, and the additional support for healthy eating that schools provide. Therefore, successful implementation of the SFS and SFP in schools and the resulting positive dietary impact from these policies would support the government’s strategy to address food insecurity through the FSM scheme.

There has been little evaluation of how the SFS and SFP policies are implemented and their influence on the diets of children, particularly in secondary-school pupils. The originating study (the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)-funded Food provision, cUlture and Environment in secondary schooLs (FUEL) study; 17/92/39) for this Policy Research Programme-funded project aimed to address this research gap. In the FUEL study we evaluated the implementation and impact of the SFS and SFP in a secondary school context (5). Our findings indicated that secondary schools had difficulty in complying with the current SFS, with only 64% of standards typically being met. Standards aimed at limiting the availability of energy-dense foods and drinks high in fat and sugar were particularly problematic. We did not find any evidence that SFS legislation has positively influenced nutritional intakes in secondary school pupils. These findings add to those of other evaluations, which have reported lower compliance with SFS in secondary schools than in primary schools (6), and minimal impact of the 2006 SFS on nutritional intakes in this age group (7). In our research, we found that the actions for schools recommended in the SFP were also poorly implemented in this setting, with secondary schools implementing 41% of SFP actions on average, and no evidence of impact upon nutritional intakes of pupils.

Potential explanations for poor implementation and impact of the SFS and SFP include a lack of suitability for the secondary school context, where there is increased pupil autonomy over food selection and increased choice and flexibility in the food offer (8, 9). Our qualitative research with secondary schools in the FUEL study revealed that challenges to implementation included a lack of leadership on school food and oversight and monitoring of the SFS(5). In addition, catering teams found it challenging to balance the requirements of the SFS with concerns over meeting students’ needs and preferences to maximise school food uptake. Key drivers were minimising waste, meeting financial targets, and generating revenue. Coupled with rising costs, and concerns around the FSM allowance not keeping pace with inflation (10, 11), it appears increasingly difficult for schools to provide high-quality school food (12). Variation in food procurement models (e.g. in-house vs Local Authority vs private catering company provision) also contribute to inconsistent service delivery nationally and locally (13).

The government’s Plan of Action for Childhood Obesity (chapter 2, published in 2018) (14) included a renewed focus on school food provision and embedding of the government food buying standards within school food procurement, as well as a further update of SFS, however this update has since been paused (15). More recently, the government’s focus has shifted to improving the monitoring of compliance with the existing SFS, and a system of monitoring school compliance is currently being piloted by the Food Standards Agency in England (16). Alongside this, the government has committed to investing in training for school governing bodies on whole school approaches to food (14, 17, 18).

Despite these challenges, SFS have the potential to improve nutritional intakes and reduce obesity levels (19-21). School meals are typically healthier than packed lunches (22, 23), hence are an important tool for improving overall nutritional intakes and diet-related health outcomes. With obesity prevalence in 11-year-old children at 22.7% (24), the sub-optimal dietary intakes of adolescents (25) and the substantial increase in food insecurity seen in recent years (26), there is a need for policy action relating to secondary school food.

This research sought to use the evidence gathered in the FUEL study to identify actions to enhance national school food policy and its implementation in a secondary school context.

# Study Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study was to co-develop and prioritise with policy makers a set of recommendations for the modification and enhancement of national school food policy incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives.

To fulfil this aim, an initial objective had been to convene a national policymaker group, comprising Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Department for Education (DfE) representatives who work on the school food agenda. However, during discussions with DHSC and DfE colleagues in the initial months of the study, multiple factors were identified that prevented us from convening this policymaker group. In consultation with our Study Advisory Committee (SAC) and Study Management Team (SMT), our objectives related to convening this group were revised to broaden our membership/definition to those with a national or local policy interest in school food. Our DHSC and DfE colleagues remained engaged in the study as Study Advisory Committee members. An initial objective had also been to reach consensus within this group on recommendations for modifying existing school food policy. This was also revised to remove the objective of reaching consensus, as this was considered unachievable given the broadening of membership of the group. Our other objective (see objective 1) remained as planned.

Revised objectives:

1. Engage a range of stakeholders (including secondary school-aged children, parents/carers, school senior leaders and governors, catering managers, and representatives from Local Authorities, school networks, Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT) and third sector organisations) through participation in workshops to gain their perspectives on existing school food policy, considering the empirical research evidence and their own contexts.
2. Convene a Policy Interest group and use the perspectives of stakeholders and the empirical evidence to prioritise recommendations relating to secondary school food and healthy eating, that can be used by national and local policy makers and stakeholders to inform future directions for secondary school food policy and practice.

# Methods

## Study Design

The project comprised two participatory studies (27): 1) Stakeholder workshops and analysis/interpretation of outputs; and 2) Policy Interest (PI) group workshops to prioritise key recommendations for the modification of school food policy and practice.

## Stakeholder workshops

### Design and planning of stakeholder workshops

Draft workshop plans were designed by the research team and piloted with our Public Advisory Groups who represent key stakeholder groups (see section 9) between December 2022 and May 2023. In addition, the SMT and SAC reviewed and provided feedback on the draft plans. The workshop plans were adapted based on the piloting and feedback.

### Sampling and recruitment

We aimed to recruit representatives from six different stakeholder groups to participate in workshops: 1) Secondary school pupils; 2) Parents/carers; 3) School senior leaders (including school governors, and also referred to a ‘senior leadership teams’ (SLT) throughout this report) and teachers; 4) School catering managers, catering providers and LACA representatives (umbrella organisation for school caterers); 5) Local Authority, school network and MAT representatives; and 6) National third sector organisations (e.g. School Food Matters, Food Foundation, etc.). Recruitment to stakeholder workshops took place between March 2023 and September 2023.

#### Secondary school pupils and parents/carers

We aimed to recruit two secondary schools and invite parents and pupils from each school to attend a workshop (these were held separately for parents and pupils). We recruited schools in distinct geographical locations (the Midlands of England and London), serving populations with high socioeconomic disadvantage based on FSM eligibility (aiming for schools with over 20% FSM eligibility). After consultation with our Public Advisory Groups, we further sampled schools by rural-urban classification, aiming for one school in a major urban conurbation and one in another rural-urban classification group. We identified all eligible schools in the Midlands and not located within a major urban conurbation (n=68) and in the London Borough of Islington (a major urban conurbation; n=10) and sent a promotional flyer in March 2023. Schools were sent follow-up invitations by email in waves of recruitment, starting with those with the highest FSM eligibility. To ensure we captured a range of experiences from young people attending different schools, we also recruited a youth group in Birmingham to take part in the study whose membership includes young people from multiple schools. Schools/youth groups received £500 recompense for their assistance. We held an additional parent workshop online to allow for wider geographical representation of parents.

We aimed to recruit 10-15 participants per workshop and asked the schools/youth group to support recruitment of a range of participants in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and FSM status. Parent and pupil information leaflets were distributed in advance and parents were given the opportunity to opt their child out of participation in pupil workshops. Parents and pupils provided written consent/assent for their own participation and completed a short demographic survey in advance of or at the start of the workshop. Recruitment of parents and pupils were separate (i.e. did not involve parent-pupil pairs).

#### Other stakeholder groups

Recruitment to other stakeholder groups (school senior leadership teams and teachers, caterers, and representatives from Local Authorities, school networks, MAT and third sector organisations) took place in May 2023 through emails to appropriate individuals/organisations and existing contacts, social media posts, and word of mouth. Recruitment materials included the study website, posters, a short recruitment video and an email address for queries and expressions of interest. A participant information leaflet was sent to those expressing an interest. Participants were required to select a date for an online workshop, complete a short demographic survey tailored to the stakeholder group, and provide consent through a secure online REDCap form prior to participation. Once the participant had consented, they were sent a link to the online meeting, held using password-protected Zoom Meetings. We aimed to recruit 10-15 participants per online workshop.

All adult participants received a £25 shopping voucher (1.5 hour workshop) and young people a £20 shopping voucher (1 hour workshop) as a thank you for their time.

### Data collection

#### Demographic surveys

Participants completed demographic surveys which requested data on name of school/organisation (as relevant to group), gender and ethnicity (using Census categories). In the parent and pupil surveys, participants were also asked about child’s age/year group and FSM status. In the other stakeholder surveys, participants were asked for their job role. School senior leaders (SLT)/teachers and caterers were also asked for the address of their school or company. A location for each participant was identified from the address provided or the location of the Local Authority or organisation they were representing. Participants representing national organisations were classed as national representatives.

#### Workshop format

In-person workshops for pupils and parents took place at the school/youth group premises. This allowed participants to be in a familiar setting. Workshops were attended by four members of the research team, of which three acted as facilitators and one as an administrator and timekeeper. Online workshops were held on the online video platform Zoom. This allowed participation from diverse geographical locations in England, ensuring that those working in areas of higher deprivation and ethnic diversity were represented. Online workshops were facilitated by three members of the research team and three scribes were also present.

All workshops were digitally recorded following participant consent, for the purposes of transcription. Following individual introductions by the research team members and participants, an introduction to the EPIC study was provided, which included a short video of the FUEL study findings to highlight the current key issues for secondary school food and school food policy. A short group discussion was held for participants to discuss how the issues related to their own experiences. Following this, participants were divided into two or three breakout groups of equal size for group work. The research team members facilitated the group work and in the online workshops the scribes took additional notes during conversations. In each small group the facilitator asked a focussed question related to the key issues highlighted in the FUEL study (4). These questions covered topic areas that were tailored to the particular stakeholder group, as detailed in Table 1. Participants were given 1-2 minutes to write initial individual thoughts onto sticky notes (digital sticky notes/interactive whiteboards were used for online workshops). Following this time for silent generation of ideas, the participants were invited to share their thoughts verbally. At the end of the discussion, each group rotated to a different facilitator and question so that they had an opportunity to contribute to all three discussion topics. As groups rotated around topics, they added to the sticky notes already added by the previous group (i.e. the notes added from previous groups were visible throughout). During the online workshops, scribes could also add sticky notes based on verbal contributions of participants, to ensure key points from discussions were captured and displayed. Around 10-12 minutes were allocated for discussion of each topic. The workshop closed with all participants reconvening in one large group to share any final thoughts.

Table 1. Topics covered and focussed questions for each stakeholder group

| **Topic** | **Pupils** | **Parents** | **SLT/Teachers** | **Caterers** | **LA/MAT representatives** | **3rd Sector** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Foods and drinks** | What can schools do to encourage you to get your food from school? | What can schools do to encourage your child to get their food from school? |  |  |  |  |
| **Eating experience** | What would be your ideal dining area or eating space in school? |  |  |  |  |  |
| **School food standards** |  |  | What is needed for senior leaders, teachers and governors to become more engaged with school food and the school food standards? | What are the practical solutions needed to enable caterers to meet the school food standards? | How can schools be better supported to monitor compliance with the school food standards, school meal uptake and actions to support healthy eating? | How would you like to see national school food policy develop over the next 5-10 years? |
| **School food challenges** |  |  |  | What is your vision for food provision in secondary schools and what support is needed to achieve this? | What is your vision for food provision in secondary schools and what support is needed to achieve this? | What is your vision for food provision in secondary schools and what support is needed to achieve this? |
| **Food education** | How would you like to learn about cooking and healthy eating in school? | What elements of food/healthy eating education are important for young people to learn? | How can food and healthy eating become a greater focus within the curriculum? |  |  |  |
| **Whole school** |  | How should schools be monitoring and influencing the foods and drinks that young people bring into school? | How can schools be supported to create a healthy eating culture? | How can schools and caterers be supported to create a healthy eating culture? |  | How can schools be supported to create a healthy eating culture? |
| **Everything else** |  |  |  |  | How can LAs and MATs influence families, communities and the wider food environment to support healthy eating in secondary school pupils? |  |

SLT= Senior Leadership Team, LA= Local Authority, MAT= Multi-Academy Trust

### Data analysis

Digital recordings of workshops were transcribed verbatim by an external transcription service. Sticky note data (participant and scribe-generated) were extracted verbatim into an excel spreadsheet by a researcher and uploaded into NVivo 12 alongside associated transcripts, retaining details of stakeholder group/workshop number.

In the data analysis process, we aimed to identify groups of actions suggested by stakeholders for enhancing/modifying school food policy. Analysis was based on a modified Framework approach (28), comprising five key steps:

1) A process of familiarisation with data was undertaken by reading the sticky notes and transcripts for each discussion topic for each stakeholder group.

2) Free coding of the sticky note data was conducted, with codes reflecting the type of action proposed. Transcripts were also reviewed for any additional codes that were not already identified in the sticky note data. For the in-person workshops, as no additional scribes were present, transcripts were fully coded in the same way as the sticky note data, to fully capture workshop discussions in the analysis. Coding was carried out on all data by one researcher (AD) and independently on a subset of four workshops by a second researcher (MM). AD and MM met to compare codes for the data from the 4 workshops and agree a final coding framework.

3) Transcripts were recoded as necessary to align with the agreed framework.

4) Data were charted onto a matrix displaying codes in columns and stakeholder groupings in rows, with cells containing the data coded within each workshop and each code. At this stage, codes (actions) were presented to a Youth Advisory Group for sense-checking, and terminology was updated for additional clarity as required. This group also ranked their top 10 actions from the list produced, to be used during the Policy Interest group at a later stage (see section 5.3.2.3).

5) Findings were reviewed and interpreted by the research team (AD, MM, MP) during a one-day internal workshop. Before the workshop all team members ensured that they had familiarised themselves with the codebook and the data associated with each code. At the workshop, the research team reviewed and discussed the data matrix, and developed further themes/groupings using the existing codes, resulting in the identification of ‘action areas’ for school food. A table was produced that displayed a short title for each action area in the first column, a concise description of the action area in the second column and examples of relevant actions that were identified from the stakeholder data in the third column. In this column we also identified which stakeholder groups had suggested the examples listed. Any tensions or disagreements identified from the workshop data that related to an action area were noted within the final column of the table.

During the development of the action areas table, the team also considered the input of another advisory group of young people who attended a meeting in August 2023. This group were asked to review a sample of data excerpts from the stakeholder workshops and create their own codes. Where appropriate, the team mapped these codes onto the table of action areas, incorporating the terminology used by the young people.

The final step of analysis involved verification of the action areas identified by cross-referencing with existing relevant reports. The research team identified key reports relating to school food policy (n=22) and reviewed them to identify additional actions proposed by other professionals and stakeholders (6, 10, 13, 26, 29-46). These were mainly reports by campaign/advocacy groups, non-government organisations or academic institutions. The data from these reports were extracted verbatim and added to the action areas table by the researchers under the appropriate theme.

To display clearly which of the stakeholder groups had discussed each action area, a summary matrix was produced displaying the action areas in rows and stakeholder groupings in columns, using a tick to display whether actions relating to each area were discussed by those stakeholders.

## Policy Interest group meetings

### Sampling and recruitment

Recruitment to the Policy Interest (PI) group took place from July to October 2023. Advice and suggestions on potential members were sought from the SAC and SMT. Key individuals representing national and local groups/organisations with a policy interest in school food were identified and email invitations were sent to them, followed up a telephone call as necessary. An academic with expertise in school food, a parent representative and two youth representatives with experience in school food campaigning were also recruited to the PI group. We aimed for a range of perspectives (e.g. school catering, food education, school leadership) to be represented within the PI group, ensuring that one perspective was not over-represented. We recruited two young people to account for potential power imbalances within an adult professional group and to ensure the youth contribution was well represented. Invitees received a participant information leaflet, terms of reference for the group meetings, and a link to a REDCap consent form and short demographic survey. Once participants had consented to their involvement, they were sent a link to two online meetings held in October and November 2023.

### Data collection

We developed methods based on the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) (47) to enable PI group members to work together to prioritise key policy recommendations. NGT is a formal consensus development method, which addresses the problems associated with informal collective decision making, such as pressure to conform, failure to give due consideration to all options and dominance by some group members (48). NGT is a structured group discussion consisting of four stages: silent generation of ideas; round-robin recording of ideas; discussion; and voting on/ranking ideas. We adapted this technique in the final PI group meeting as detailed in Table 2. Although the aim of NGT is to reach consensus, we acknowledged in this study that we would be unlikely to reach full consensus within the PI group, given the range of perspectives represented, however, we used this technique to guide our methods to support discussion and prioritisation. We also drew on other prioritisation research to develop our prioritisation activities e.g. a ranking approach (49).

Table 2. EPIC study approach mapped on to Nominal Group Technique (NGT) stages

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **NGT stage** | **Adapted approach for EPIC** |
| Stage 1 – silent generation of ideas | Individual rating and prioritisation of action areas from the circulated ‘longlist’ (action areas table) |
| Stage 2 – round-robin recording of ideas | Presentation of collated individual prioritised action areas from stage 1 (shortlist) and summary of reasons for prioritisation |
| Stage 3 - discussion | Open discussion of shortlisted action areas |
| Stage 4 - voting on/ranking ideas | Live ranking activities to identify action areas with highest priority and development of a final list |

To facilitate our adapted NGT approach, the PI group met online on two occasions and completed an interim task between the meetings, as summarised in Figure 1 and described in the following section.

#### Policymaker group meeting 1: Introductory meeting

Prior to the first meeting, the following resources were sent to the group to facilitate familiarisation with the research: 1) a summary of the FUEL study findings (as a 7-minute video); 2) the action areas table generated from the stakeholder workshops (Table 1 in Appendix 1); and 3) the summary matrix (also from stakeholder workshops to supplement interpretation of the action areas table – see Table 2 in Appendix 1).

The first meeting started with an introduction of the researchers and group members. A summary of the EPIC study, a conceptual diagram indicating the key aims of school food policy, and a summary of the action areas identified through the stakeholder workshops were presented. The group were invited to ask questions about the research and the action areas presented and discuss their views and perspectives. The meeting finished with a summary of instructions for the interim task.

Figure 1. Overview of prioritisation activities with the Policy Interest group

**Pre-meeting viewing/reading**

1. Video summarising FUEL study findings
2. Action areas table generated from the stakeholder workshops
3. Summary matrix (indicating stakeholder contributions to action areas development)

**Introductory meeting**

1. Introductions and overview of the study
2. Summary of findings from stakeholder workshops
3. Discussion and clarification of action areas
4. Explanation of interim task

**Interim task**

1. Rating action areas (0-10 scale) on a) importance; b) support; and c) ease of implementation
2. Selection of top five priority action areas and rationale
3. Identification of who would be responsible for implementation

**Data analysis**

1. Collation of a ‘shortlist’ of action areas
2. Visual display of ratings (importance, support, ease of implementation) for shortlisted action areas

**Consensus building and prioritisation meeting**

1. Presentation of shortlisted action areas and members’ rationale for selection
2. Open discussion
3. Ranking activity 1 – Top 10
4. Presentation of ranking results and discussion
5. Ranking activity 2 – Final top 10 list

#### Interim task: Individual rating and prioritisation

Members were provided with a task sheet in which they were asked to review the action areas table and rate each action area on a Likert scale of 0 – 10 separately in relation to: 1) Importance of the action; 2) Support for the action; and 3) Ease of implementation. An additional column was provided for members to provide any further notes, thoughts and justification for their ratings given. PI group members were then asked to individually select their top five priority action areas (stage 1 of the NGT approach), and to note down the rationale for their choices and which actors would be responsible for the implementation of these action areas (e.g. school, catering provider, government etc.). Members had three weeks to complete the task sheet. Youth members of the PI group were offered additional support with completing the task over an online meeting prior to the second session if needed, however they did not take up this offer. The research team collated the data returned from members prior to the second online meeting. The median and range of ratings for importance, support, and ease of implementation were presented in a table format and colour coded as red, amber and green to provide a visual summary. A list of all action areas identified by individuals as their top 5 priority areas were collated, representing a ‘shortlist’ of prioritised action areas.

#### Policymaker group meeting 2: working towards consensus on priority action areas

Following a brief overview of the plans for the session, a presentation summarising the results of the interim task was given. The shortlisted priority action areas were then presented (stage 2 of the NGT approach). This was followed by a group discussion with members considering how the shortlisted actions might influence the different stakeholders and what this might mean for the existing national policy in terms of its content, implementation and monitoring processes. This open discussion was also an opportunity for group members to make a case for their priorities and areas that they felt were lacking support within the group (stage 3 of the NGT approach). A set of ranking activities were then carried out (stage 4 of the NGT approach) using the online tool Slido. Members were asked to individually choose and rank their top 10 of the shortlisted action areas. The overall ‘top 10’ action areas were then presented to the group. In addition, the researchers shared the findings from the ranking activity performed by the Youth Advisory Group (see section 5.2.4). Further time for discussion was allocated, ending with a round robin invitation to speak to ensure all group members had a chance to contribute. A second ranking activity was conducted after this discussion, allowing members to reconsider any of their prioritised actions following the discussion. The final ranked ‘Top 10’ list was presented back to the group. A short discussion followed focussing on who would be responsible for implementing the actions (e.g. government, Local Authorities, school leaders) and possible levers and obstacles. The meeting closed with short summary of the next steps for the study.

### Data analysis

In addition to the rating and ranking outputs generated in the PI group process, we also undertook qualitative data analysis of the transcripts from both meetings, which were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by an external transcription service, and the written notes made by participants in the interim tasks. NVivo v12 was used for the analysis. A two-stage approach was undertaken for qualitative analysis: 1) deductive thematic analysis was conducted by one research member (AD) to code the data relating to the action areas derived from the stakeholder workshops; 2) inductive thematic analysis was conducted by two researchers (MM and MP) to identify any additional themes arising from the data. Throughout the coding process the research team met to discuss the themes and data emerging from analysis. A matrix containing all deductively coded data within the action area codes was produced and a descriptive summary for each code was produced. A summary of the inductive thematic analysis was also produced. These were combined into a single narrative summary.

# Results

## Stakeholder workshops

We held 13 workshops between June and September 2023 (Table 3).

Table 3. Stakeholder group workshop details

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Stakeholder group** | **Number of sessions and type** | **Number of participants** |
| Secondary school pupils | 3 x in-person | 45 |
| Parents/carers | 2 x in-person, 1 x online | 33 |
| School senior leaders/teachers | 1 x online | 13 |
| School caterers | 2 x online | 25 |
| LA and MAT representatives | 2 x online | 34 |
| National third sector organisations | 2 x online | 25 |
| **Total** | **13 workshops** | **175** |

LA=Local Authority; MAT=Multi-Academy Trust

### Sample description

A total of 175 participants attended the workshops (young people n=45; parents n=33; Local Authorities n=34; caterers n=25; third sector n=25; SLT/teachers n=13). The two participating secondary schools in which workshops took place had FSM eligibility that was higher than the national average of 22.7% (50) (school 1 = 44.7%; school 2 = 25.2%). Participant characteristics are reported in Table 4.

### Qualitative analysis – generation of action areas

A total of 26 action areas were derived from qualitative analysis of all the stakeholder workshops, which were further grouped into six categories adapted from the secondary school food system map developed by The GENIUS School Food Network (51) as follows:

* catering and procurement
* school leadership and governance
* food environments beyond school (referred to as “social experiences, behaviours and attitudes” in the GENIUS school food systems map)
* the food space and experience in school
* priority of food within schools
* funding for school food (referred to as “financial” in the GENIUS school food systems map)

A table of the action areas was developed as described in section 5.2.4 (Appendix 1, Table 1), and a summarised version is presented in Table 5, along with illustrative quotes from the workshops.

Table 4. Characteristics of participants of the stakeholder workshops

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Demographics** | **All (n=175) (%)** | **Young people (n=45)** | **Parents (n=33)** | **SLT/Teachers (n=13)** | **LAs and MATs (n=34)** | **3rd Sector (n=25)** | **Caterers (n=25)** |
| Gender |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Male | 42 (24) | 16 (36) | 5 (15) | 4 (31) | 3 (9) | 7 (28) | 7 (28) |
| Female | 131 (75) | 29 (64) | 28 (85) | 9 (69) | 29 (85) | 18 (72) | 18 (72) |
| Prefer not to answer | 2 (1) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 (6) | 0 | 0 |
| Ethnicity |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| White | 126 (72) | 18 (40) | 21 (66) | 12 (92) | 31 (91) | 21 (84) | 23 (92) |
| Asian | 20 (12) | 12 (27) | 5 (16) | 1 (8) | 1 (3) | 1 (4) | 0 |
| Black/African/Caribbean | 16 (9) | 8 (18) | 6 (16) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 (8) |
| Mixed | 9 (5) | 5 (11) | 1 (3) | 0 | 0 | 3 (12) | 0 |
| Other | 2 (1) | 2 (4) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Prefer not to answer | 2 (1) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 (6) | 0 | 0 |
| FSM |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Yes |  | 13 (29) | 13 (39) |  |  |  |  |
| No |  | 32 (71) | 20 (61) |  |  |  |  |
| Year Group |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Year 7 |  | 10 (22) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Year 8 |  | 4 (9) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Year 9 |  | 8 (18) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Year 10 |  | 3 (7) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Year 11 |  | 6 (13) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Year 12 |  | 10 (22) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Year 13 |  | 4 (9) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Area of England |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| National representative | 31 (18) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 (9) | 22 (88) | 6 (24) |
| London | 34 (19) | 14 (31) | 13 (39) | 2 (15) | 3 (9) | 1 (4) | 1 (4) |
| Midlands | 64 (37) | 31 (69) | 20 (61) | 1 (9) | 8 (23) | 0 | 4 (16) |
| Northwest | 15 (9) | 0 | 0 | 4 (31) | 6 (18) | 0 | 5 (20) |
| Northeast | 10 (6) | 0 | 0 | 2 (15) | 3 (9) | 1 (4) | 4 (16) |
| Southwest | 13 (8) | 0 | 0 | 2 (15) | 8 (23) | 0 | 3 (12) |
| Southeast | 7 (4) | 0 | 0 | 2 (15) | 3 (9) | 1 (4) | 1 (4) |
| East Anglia | 1 (1) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 (4) |
| SLT=Senior Leadership Teams; LA=Local Authorities; MATs=Multi-Academy Trusts; FSM=Free School Meals | | | | | | | |

Table 5. Summary of 26 action areas identified in stakeholder workshops with illustrative quotes

| **Action area** | **Description** | **Examples of actions from participant data** | **Quotes** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Catering and procurement** | | | |
| 1. Catering staff investment, training, and skills | Investment in catering staff and their training; recognition of school catering as a career to enable better recruitment and retention of staff and provision of high-quality school food | * Provide investment and skills development to boost recruitment of catering staff * Improving caterers’ knowledge on compliance with the school food standards * Greater promotion of catering as a career * Sharing good practice e.g. menus and recipes * Bring professional chefs into school to share skills and inspire kitchen staff | *‘A lot of the caterers that I talk to at the moment are really struggling with recruitment… that chef’s role in a kitchen as being really valuable, getting that out so that people can see where the progression is for them and what… how great it is.’ (3rd sector)* |
| 1. Integration and valuing of catering teams within schools | Catering teams integrated, respected, and valued in schools, with involvement in food education and collaboration with school Senior Leadership Teams | * Greater value placed on school chefs’ role * Greater links between catering teams and school senior leadership * Opportunities for catering teams to interact with students, parents and school staff * Integrate food education into canteen offer * Caterers to provide cooking clubs | *‘Including the school kitchen staff as valued faculty members within the school, rather than it being like an us and them mentality, because I know a lot of chefs that don’t feel like they do belong to the school, they’re hired help, or they’re not given the same responsibility or respect as other members of staff might be.’ (3rd Sector)* |
| 1. Investment in catering facilities and equipment | Investment in school kitchens, facilities and equipment to enable high quality food to be efficiently prepared in sufficient quantities | * Modernise equipment * Increase preparation / kitchen space * Adequate food storage to reduce waste * Consider kitchens when expanding schools | *‘The schools aren’t looking at what storage is needed and things like that to allow us to showcase what we can do, because we haven’t got the… you can’t put extra staff into a kitchen if there’s nowhere for them to actually work and produce and prepare food in a safe hygienic manner.’ (Caterer)* |
| 1. Support schools in the procurement of school food | Training and support on school food procurement, including negotiating catering contracts and implementing in-house catering provision models | * Improve schools’ ability to procure better catering, including greater investment in Senior Leadership Team training on food procurement and business management * Support local economies through sustainably sourced school food * LACA (umbrella organisation for school caterers) promote healthy foods and suppliers | *‘But often secondary schools they’re not necessarily approved by anybody, so they’re going out themselves, and they’ve got to know what they’re asking for really. So, they almost need training of some degree, they need some guidance as to what needs to go in a contract in order to get a proper offer.’ (LA and MAT)* |
| 1. Reform school food catering provider models | Reform school catering arrangements to ensure equitable and sustainable provision of high-quality food nationally, removing the focus on profits | * A system run in the public interest to facilitate healthier, equitable and more sustainable provision * Remove profit motive * Reinvest profit into school food provision * Consider alternative models of provision e.g. Local Authority-managed catering provider, in-house * A baseline quality standard of catering provision (e.g. within contracts) * Updated Government Buying Standards for Food with mandatory standards for healthy food procurement | *‘There’s an interesting thing about the way profits work with [Service Level Agreements], which is it is more profitable to undersell or underprovide, lose contracts and move onto new contracts than it is to deliver at the level that you should be delivering at, and legally within the law one of the legal requirements of a CEO is to look after the profits of the company. And providing high quality food, other than food standards there’s no legal requirement for that, but there is a legal requirement that says maximise profits with the company.’ (3rd sector)* |
| 1. Adapt the food offer to increase quality and meet students’ needs | Adapt food provision to incorporate healthier and more sustainable foods, increase choice and cultural diversity, and meet students’ needs and preferences relating to attractiveness, value for money and hygiene of foods | * Modernise menus and incorporate greater cultural diversity * Make grab and go items healthier options * Default offer of vegetables; more variety of fruit options * Presentation of creative and colourful meals * Meet students’ needs around school food e.g. portion sizes, feeling full, food presentation and affordability, catering for dietary requirements * Adapt food offer to school population * Reduce availability of processed foods; Gradual removal of less heathy items * Greater focus on sustainably sourced food * Wider choice of healthier versions of foods | *‘I remember we used to have fruit pots… I used to get one every day, I never used to get dessert, but they stopped it for some reason. They don’t do it anymore. I would like to see the fruit pots come, I enjoy them. There was a range of grapes, mango, watermelon, apples, all of it in one. Some strawberries maybe, and I felt it would be good for my diet.’ (Young person)*  *‘Should try and challenge stereotypes around healthy food as well, that it can’t be filling, or just vegetables. Depending on the calorie count and the nutritional value, it doesn’t have to be just salad. You can have chicken but maybe not fried.’ (Young person)* |
| 1. Changing food service arrangements to promote healthy food uptake | Design food service arrangements to minimise queuing, allow flexible payment and dining, and incorporate attractive and varied outlet types which prompt healthy and nutritious choices | * More space, equipment and serving stations * Attractive outlet types to mimic the wider food environment * Increased use of takeaway packaging to allow main meal takeaway * Food position to make healthy choices easier; Better marketing of healthy food * Increase healthy vs unhealthy options * Improve access to clean water fountains; Providing water as the default drink; refillable bottles; jugs on tables * System of pre-ordering to allow preparation of high-quality food * Staggered lunchtimes * Labelling food in a more visible way * More flexible and faster payment systems * School policies on what can be purchased; System to ensure Free School Meal allowance is spent on nutritious food / balanced meals * Lunchtime activities to encourage students to use school canteen and opt for a school meal | *‘I think there should be more serving stations maybe, at least three or four, to ensure that there’s [not] a really long queue in one of them, we shouldn’t have to wait maybe 20 minutes just to go there and see there’s hardly any options left for them. So I feel like that would help with the whole queuing situation.’ (Young person)*  *‘Replicate the high street offer a bit more within a school, and a lot of caterers are doing that, and that’s why we see the ‘grab and go’ offer becoming so big in secondary schools, and it has grown over the last ten years and will continue to grow, because that’s what the children want.’ (LA and MAT)* |
| 1. Reform breaktime offer | Reform the breaktime offer so that students do not have breaktime food instead of lunch | * Provide healthy substantial snacks (e.g. breadsticks, hummus, cheese dunkers, chopped fruit, peppers); widen gap between break time and lunch time * More variety of healthy snack items | *‘I think it’s important that they provide more snacks that aren’t just a piece of fruit, because a lot of kids aren’t just going to go I’m going to go for that apple, they’ll go for the sausage roll, so instead of having just a boring snack, try and find something that’s going to inspire them, and maybe something like a little rice pot, that sort of thing. Just something that’s healthy but a bit more substantial than an apple.’ (Parent)* |
| **School leadership and governance** | | | |
| 1. School food policies, restrictions, and regulations | Dedicated policies and rules in schools designed to encourage healthy eating and restrict consumption of unhealthy foods | * Rules and monitoring of foods/drinks brought into school * Student/parent/staff pledge to sign up to healthy eating * Whole school food policy and community engagement * Packed lunch policy * Off-site policy-students stay in school at lunch * Having a food champion | *‘It would be really good for there to be some sort of clear school pledge that both parents and pupils can sort of buy into and sign up to in terms of healthy eating, and then at least even if pupils decide that they want to go elsewhere it’s very, very clear that the school is providing a healthy nutritious alternative and [is] committed to supporting that healthy eating culture.’ (3rd Sector)* |
| 1. Support for Senior Leadership Teams and governors on school food | Training and support for secondary school Senior Leadership Teams and governors on school food and school food standards compliance | * Training for Senior Leadership Teams and governors to support understanding of their role in school food and healthy eating * Training for senior leaders and governors on the school food standards and self-monitoring of adherence * School nutritionist role to support menu planning * Support / templates for developing school food policy and actions on school food * Put metrics in place to evaluate the impact of actions on school food | *‘Main vision is that senior leaders in the schools really prioritising healthy food, so the senior management team and the governors being aware of the importance of healthy food, and also getting the contracts right.’ (LA and MAT)* |
| 1. Local Authority support for all schools | Local Authority to provide support to all schools through specialist school food teams and public health teams, sharing best practice and targeting schools most in need of support | * Dedicated roles in Local Authorities to support school food * Targeted support for implementation of national school food policy * Incorporate more metrics to monitor the correlation of school food with student outcomes and provide an evidence base to support actions * Monitoring of Free School Meal uptake and Local Authority support for schools with low uptake * Recognise well-performing schools * Opportunities for sharing best practice * Greater strategic direction from Local Authorities on school food | *‘I think it’s really important that it’s not just about monitoring and accountability, but also about the support, so recognising if a particular part of the policy isn’t being upheld at the moment understanding why, and in [region] they’ve got a school food improvement officer who actually is part of those checks and then works with schools where they might be struggling to make certain changes to actually bring in support.’ (3rd Sector)* |
| 1. National government to provide joined-up leadership on school food | National government to work together, champion school food, and develop a national strategy and programme to improve school food | * More cohesion across government departments on school food * A national strategy and lead on food education * Convene an expert group to create specific guidance for secondary schools in developing a positive school food ethos and culture * Develop clear best practice guidelines for schools * Introduce a DfE-audited continual cycle of school food improvement * Clearer direction and leadership from government regarding the school food standards and food education, creating more awareness in secondary schools * Child-centric, outcomes-focused policy * The DfE and the National Governors Association to jointly re-issue guidance for governors on responsibilities for school food * ‘Research review’ for nutrition and cookery lessons | *‘We can all put in little bits and pieces, but it needs to be a holistic from the top government led down through Local Authorities, through the MATs, everybody needs to be working together, and we’re just needing to put children’s health first, because at the moment we don’t put children’s health first.’ (LA and MAT)* |
| 1. Adapt and update school food standards | Adapt school food standards and update to address processed foods and sustainability | * Incorporate greater restriction of processed foods into standards * Remove meat requirement from standards; consider sustainability * Two portions of vegetables to be included in each meal * Change standards so more in-line with secondary school, include young people in their design * School food standards should be more practical to implement within limited budgets * Greater clarification on school food standards and allow for some flexibility for caterers | *‘The school food standards I think [are] very old and in need of a bit of a change to fall in line with what’s happening actually around the world, and I’m not sure how these things are written by the government or who’s involved, but maybe they actually do get kids involved in it, and they get a group of secondary school children involved in writing these standards and exactly what it is they’re eating on a day to day basis, and what they want.’ (Caterer)* |
| 1. Monitoring of school food standards compliance | Local and/or national systems for monitoring compliance with the school food standards, driving continuous improvement across all schools | * Monitoring / inspection of school food standards to ensure adherence; set targets for improvement * governors / senior leadership to be involved in monitoring to increase their engagement with school food standards * Publish performance on school food standards alongside exam results * Ensure compliance assessment is based on the full school day offer * Implement a robust framework supported by sufficient resource for schools / caterers | *‘Setting targets for measuring the baseline of where schools are, where academy chains are, where LAs are currently so that they’ve got a real vision for improvement against the standards that they’ve been set, and then that can be reportable, and it gives the governors something to talk about, it gives Ofsted something to talk about, and the school themselves a measure to meet.’ (3rd Sector)* |
| 1. Increase the role of Ofsted in monitoring school food | An explicit role of Ofsted in school food monitoring, including monitoring of school food standards compliance and the eating experience | * Ofsted to monitor compliance with school food standards and food quality and acknowledge healthy schools accreditation * Ofsted national lead for school food * Ofsted to give greater consideration to food education in inspections * Ofsted to monitor eating experience and nutritional health of students * Ofsted should ensure that inspectors have the appropriate skills and competence | *‘So there is no Ofsted for school food policy, so that’s the main… the first thing I mentioned, having some sort of monitoring for it by some sort of organisation that makes it important, because school food standards are compulsory, but as you already mentioned they don’t really get followed by schools for some reason at the moment.’ (3rd sector)* |
| **Food environments beyond school** | | | |
| 1. Education and guidance for parents / families | Provide educational opportunities, guidance and resources for parents on preparing and providing healthy food for children and families | * Education, guidance, and resources for parents / families on cooking * Educational and practical food preparation skills workshops for parents / families | *‘I used to send students home with the recipes or post the recipe from the school website, again that passing on those healthy eating messages so that students were taking food home, and then the recipes could be recreated or could it share it with family, friends, neighbours, whoever.’ (SLT/Teachers)* |
| 1. Address the wider food environment | Local Authorities/ government / communities to address the local food environment surrounding schools and the wider food system | * Link school food with Public Health and other Local Authority departments to address the wider food environment * Cohesive / whole systems approach to the food system and food culture * Scheme for voluntary sign up of food outlets to provide healthy options around schools; healthy zones around schools * School food as an opportunity to improve local food economies * Greater protection of school food supply chains | *‘So thinking about planning, spatial planning, thinking about the travel planning, thinking about the voluntary sector, thinking about head teachers meetings, talking to parents, governors and pupils, and actually having that rounded approach.’ (LA and MAT)* |
| **The food space and experience within schools** | | | |
| 1. Provide longer lunch breaks and protect time to eat | Extend lunch breaks and have dedicated time to enable students enough time to choose and consume healthier food options, and have social time together when eating | * Longer lunch breaks to provide more opportunity for catering staff-student interaction * More time for eating to help students to develop positive relationships with food and social eating opportunities * Greater valuing and protection of mealtimes as a part of the school day * Support for schools to implement longer lunch breaks; external monitoring of length of school lunch | *‘I think the length of the lunchbreak is absolutely crucial to the students being able to access the hot balanced meal, which is important, particularly for the students who might not get much food at home, but for all of them really, because when I’m being told is in a 30-minute lunchbreak … I’ve only got anecdotal evidence, but it seems to be increasingly the norm… you don’t want to do the queuing for the hot meal, and that’s the place where you’re more likely to get the veg.’ (3rd sector).* |
| 1. Dedicated, appealing and sociable eating spaces | Provide dedicated dining spaces that are clean, spacious and appealing to students, and that are designed to encourage social opportunities to sit and eat with friends | * Creation of calm, attractive and spacious dining areas to encourage sociable eating opportunities * Allowing students with packed lunches and school dinners to eat together * Wider variety of dedicated eating spaces for dining only * Consideration of dining spaces when planning school extension * Student-centred design in the dining room * Opportunities for staff and students to eat together * Improve cleanliness of dining spaces * National funding to improve school dining spaces | *‘It’s really busy, you spend all your time in the queue, then you can’t get a seat. It’s noisy, it’s not how I’d choose to spend my lunch to try and downtime and be in the best shape to learn in the afternoon. You want slightly more peaceful.’ (Parent)*  *‘I guess in our school that if you get school lunch there’s a certain area you have to sit, but if you don’t you sit in a completely different space, and for people who may just have one singular friend that can be a bit daunting, especially in a really loud and noisy canteen. I don’t think it’s that great, because you just need to sit separately, and I don’t really like that idea of doing that.’ (Young person)* |
| **Priority of food within schools** | | | |
| 1. Support healthy schools accreditation in secondary schools | Provide funding and support for schools and school communities to engage with accreditation schemes relating to healthy food, aiming for all schools to achieve accreditation | * Funding and Local Authority / Multi-Academy Trust support for schools to achieve accreditation * Adapt accreditation schemes to better suit secondary schools * Require schools to join accreditation schemes * Schools work with students, parents, staff, and the wider community towards accreditation * Accreditation acknowledged in external inspection * Accreditation schemes linked with training and support for leaders and staff | *‘I actually sat down and did an annual healthy schools audit…I had an advisor come in and she used to work with me, and we had to work towards certain standards, a bit like a flagship status, and then the school could display the logo as they do on the school letterhead…all of a sudden that disappeared, it just the bronze, silver and gold thing went. But I think it would be lovely to reintroduce something like that, that actually the students, the student voice, student council, could actually work together with the canteen staff, the food technology department or whatever, and actually become a whole school with parents and community and everybody actually working towards a school standard.’ (SLT/Teachers)* |
| 1. Redesign food lessons and increase emphasis within the curriculum | Design and deliver inspiring, practical food education across all year groups which aims to develop life skills and food literacy, ensuring equitable access to all students by providing ingredients without cost and sufficient facilities within schools; provide routes to further qualifications and careers in food | * Greater valuing, status and time for food education e.g. mandatory food technology across all year groups * More (ring-fenced) funding for improved food education teaching facilities and equipment * Free ingredients to improve access to food education for all and reduce stigma * Interactive, creative, and practical teaching; Teach easy, affordable, quick, and healthy recipes * Develop food literacy as a competency, with more purposeful life skills development * More opportunities for learning about food growing in secondary schools * Redesign the food curriculum with a route to providing vocational qualifications * Reinstate Food A-Level | *‘I’ve been thinking about what food literacy means, and I think growing and eating and cooking food, there’s that whole length as well as breadth, and in primary school we grow some sunflowers, or some broad beans and then throw them away before they get to harvest, and at secondary school I don’t think we do very much outside of science. The idea that food is just compartmentalised into a little bit of science, a little bit of PSHE, and a little bit of art, whatever the craft and the… you do DT one week, and then cooking the next, and then the week after you’re doing woodwork. So an actual food education that encompasses the whole of food would be a curriculum that we could look at as well rather than it being pushed around into all the different bits of curriculum.’ (3rd Sector)* |
| 1. Consistent food and nutrition messaging and cross-curricular education | Integrate teaching on food and healthy eating across the curriculum and beyond, ensuring messages are consistent, and linking to wider health determinants and outcomes | * Incorporate education on nutrition and healthy eating across curriculum and in non-curricular activities; ensure consistent messaging on healthy eating across school * Improve teaching on wider mental wellbeing outcomes related to diet (and food growing); link diet to development, growth and long-term health outcomes * Focus on diet-related elements that are relevant to young people e.g. sports performance, menstrual cycle, skin * Incorporate information on additives, processed foods, sugar, energy balance * More positive framing of food beyond ‘healthy’/’unhealthy’ * Teaching on how food systems impact on their food choices and on how food / health relates to wider determinants of health * School cookery clubs and field trips on food * Celebrations less focused on sweet foods | *‘Important that the messages are reinforced through the curriculum…and also important that they’re consistent as well, the consistent messaging to children and young people, and the consistency of messaging around what a healthy diet is, and practising what we preach.’ (3rd sector)*  *‘I think link into lots of other different areas, so PHSE, as well as food tech, perhaps even in English or history, or even geography, other departments perhaps have got their role to play in trying to spear…trying to fit this into their curriculum.’ (SLT/Teachers)* |
| 1. Invest in educators to deliver food and healthy eating education | Invest in more food education specialists, teachers, and technicians, and provide teaching and resources for food education to all school staff | * Have Food Education Specialists at Multi-Academy Trust level * More investment in specialist food teachers and food technicians * Specialist Post Graduate Certificate in Education qualification in food * Develop professional development courses to support the delivery food teaching in schools * Structured teaching resources * Teach school staff about the importance of nutrition; provide training on extracurricular activities and a whole school approach to food | *‘There’s also a national shortage of food teachers, again partly because a decision was taken back in the early 2000s to remove the A-level in food, that you cannot actually do an A-level in food and nutrition at all, so consequently a lot of teachers chose not to come into the profession, and we can’t find teachers nationally anymore.’ (3rd sector)* |
| 1. Increase student involvement on school food | Provide a range of opportunities for engagement with students on school food, ensuring meaningful feedback mechanisms are in place and involving them in innovative ways, including engagement with caterers | * Opportunities for students to feed into menus and school food provision and articulate their ideas * Provide anonymous feedback mechanisms * Opportunities for students to taste new dishes / menus * Encourage good relationships between students and catering staff * Involve young people in designing and implementing school food policies; monitoring school food * Teachers as role models * Engage students in school food in interesting ways e.g. activities week, competitions | *‘Being the norm to consult students on the menu in school, and making sure there are lots of easy opportunities for them to feed in and just continually checking the menu with them, to making sure it’s stuff that they want to eat I think.’ (3rd sector)* |
| 1. Increase family / parental engagement on school food | Increase information for parents on school food and provide meaningful opportunities for parents to engage with schools on school food provision | * Better communication with parents and provide opportunities to experience school food and feedback * Schools pledge to parents and students on what they aim to achieve regarding food * Framework for interaction between caterers, parents, families, students, teachers, and schools; empowering parents to advocate for change in school food * Parent access to school food menus and prices, e.g. through an app * Promoting school meals to parents as the healthiest choice | *‘For me in terms of schools engaging, families and the wider community, it’s just got to be first and foremost capturing their voice as to what they need in terms of healthy eating, and gathering that baseline in terms of where our local community is at, where our families are at and what they say they need and they would like, and working from there.’ (LA and MAT)* |
| **Funding for school food** | | | |
| 1. Review/ increase/ ring-fence funding for school food provision | Protect school food budgets, review and reform the Free School Meals programme and funding, and introduce further schemes to reduce food insecurity in students | * Free School Meals for all to drive up food quality, address child hunger, attainment inequalities, and reduce stigma * Ring-fence the Free School Meals budget and spending on school food * Consistent, transparent Free School Meals funding allocation * Widen eligibility for Free School Meals or provide subsidies for those not eligible * More regular review of Free School Meals funding in-line with inflation; increase Free School Meals allowance * Free School Meals for year 7s to boost uptake of school food * Remove barriers to Free School Meals registration; raise awareness of eligibility and benefits of Free School Meals to parents * Consistent cost of school meal across schools / caterers * Increase school role in supporting family food security * More substantial breakfast offer; universal / targeted free breakfast offer * Extend free fruit to secondary school students; provide free/subsidised healthy food items * Remove stigma around Free School Meals e.g. remove restrictions on what can be bought and when allowance can be used * Provide further statutory guidance to schools on how debts related to school food should be dealt with, to ensure that students have access to school lunches | *‘I think in support of widening and making access more straightforward, auto-enrolment mechanisms I know is something that some Local Authorities and regions have been exploring, in recognition of the fact that there’s just massive inefficiencies and administrative burdens in the current registration processes, so even before thinking about an expanded eligibility threshold, trying to dismantle some of the current barriers that even exist to those that are currently eligible to being able to take up their access to Free School Meals.’ (3rd sector)*  *‘The funding for Free School Meals goes directly to schools, if the pupils don’t take up the meals the school just keeps the money. It’s not ringfenced, so actually the incentive is not to encourage the pupils to take up the meals because then that money can just go towards other areas of need in the school. So, the entire service is not valued.’ (Caterer)* |
| LA=Local Authority; MAT=Multi-Academy Trust; DfE=Department for Education; SLT=Senior Leadership Team; PSHE=personal, social, health and economic education; DT=Design & Technology | | | |

## Policy Interest group

### Policy Interest group participants

The PI group comprised 10 members as follows: young people with prior involvement in school food campaign / research projects (n=2); Local Authority representatives with a role in developing local school food policy (n=2), a national school food charity representative (n=1); a national school catering representative (n=1); a senior academic in school food policy/systems (n=1); a representative from a national food education organisation (n=1); a school leader with involvement in developing national school food policy (n=1), and a parent representative (n=1). 50% were female and 40% were from minority ethnic groups (groups other than White British).

### Quantitative data

#### Results of the interim task (rating and shortlisting)

The medians and ranges of ratings for importance, strength of support and ease of implementation for the 26 action areas are presented in Table 6. Colour coding was used to categorise medians into high (≥7; shown in green), medium (4-6.9; shown in yellow), low (<4; shown in red). All 26 action areas, apart from actions 11 and 16, had high median ratings for importance. Twenty-two action areas had high median ratings for support, with the remaining action areas having medium median ratings for support. Finally, five action areas had high ratings for ease of implementation (2, 9, 14, 16 and 24 – see Table 6) and two had low median ratings for ease of implementation (17 and 26 – see Table 6).

Data collated from the individual prioritisation activity in the interim task resulted in 19 shortlisted action areas. These are shown in bold in Table 6 with a summary of participant responses relating to who would be responsible for their implementation. Further information on the 19 shortlisted action areas, including the rationales provided by participants are provided in Appendix 2.

#### Results of the group prioritisation activity

The final ranked list of the Policy Interest group’s top 10 priority action areas is presented in Table 7, along with the mean rank score for each action area. The rank score was generated within the ranking software, with a score of 10 being assigned to position 1, and a score of 1 for position 10, and a mean was calculated across all ten participants. Since two action areas scored the same mean rank score in position 10 (action areas 7 and 15), resulting in eleven actions in the final list, one additional round of ranking of these two tied action areas was undertaken with the group. Two action areas also received the same mean rank score in position 6, so these have been listed as 6a and 6b in the table. Results from the first ranking activity are not presented, however all top 10 actions from the first ranking activity appeared in the final top 10 generated in the second ranking activity, with some changes to the mean rank score and ordering of top 10.

Table 6. Summary of PI group ratings on a scale of 0-10a (median and range) for the 26 action areas; 19 shortlisted action areas are shown in bold

| Action | Importance rating  Median  (range) | Support rating  Median  (range) | Ease rating  Median  (range) | Responsibility for implementation | Number of participants placing in top 5 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |
| **1. Catering staff investment, training and skills** | **8 (5-10)** | **8 (5-10)** | **5 (1-8)** | Caterers, professional workforce standards | 1 |
| 2. Integration and valuing of catering teams within schools | 7 (3-10) | 7 (5-10) | 7 (4-8) |  | 0 |
| **3. Investment in catering facilities and equipment** | **7 (3-8)** | **7 (5-8)** | **6 (1-10)** | School administration, government | 2 |
| **4. Support schools in the procurement of school food** | **7 (2-8)** | **7 (5-9)** | **6 (3-7)** | Local school districts | 1 |
| 5. Reform school food catering provider models | 8 (3-10) | 8 (5-10) | 5 (1-10) |  | 0 |
| **6. Adapt the food offer to increase quality and meet students’ needs** | **9 (7-10)** | **9 (7-10)** | **6 (4-10)** | Government, Local Authority and public health, caterers, SLT | 2 |
| **7. Changing food service arrangements to promote healthy food uptake** | **8 (7-10)** | **9 (5-10)** | **6 (3-9)** | Caterers/ schools | 2 |
| 8. Reform breaktime offer | 8 (5-10 | 8 (5-10) | 7 (5-9) |  | 0 |
| **9. School food policies and rules** | **9 (5-10)** | **8 (5-10)** | **6 (2-10)** | Government (DfE), Ofsted, school leader organisations, Local Authority | 1 |
| **10. Support for senior leadership and governors on school food** | **7 (5-10)** | **8 (5-10)** | **6 (2-8)** | Government, Ofsted, Local Authority, schools | 2 |
| 11. Local Authority support for all schools | 6 (5-9) | 7 (5-10) | 5 (3-7) |  | 0 |
| **12. National government to provide joined-up leadership on school food** | **9 (7-10)** | **8 (5-10)** | **4 (1-7)** | Government (DfE), school leaders/educators | 6 |
| **13. Adapt and update school food standards** | **7 (5-10)** | **8 (5-10)** | **6 (4-9)** | Government (DfE and DHSC), schools | 2 |
| **14. Monitoring of school food standards compliance** | **7 (4-10)** | **8 (5-10)** | **7 (2-9)** | Government (DfE, working with Food Standards Agency and others), schools, caterers | 2 |
| **15. Increase the role of Ofsted in monitoring school food** | **7 (1-10)** | **5 (1-10)** | **5 (0-9)** | Government (DfE), Ofsted | 1 |
| 16. Education and guidance for parents | 5 (3-9) | 5 (3-9) | 7 (5-9) |  | 0 |
| **17. Address the wider food environment** | **8 (3-10)** | **9 (3-10)** | **3 (0-6)** | Government, food companies, Local Authority, Non-Government Organisations, NHS | 2 |
| **18. Provide longer lunch breaks and protect time to eat** | **9 (7-10)** | **10 (5-10)** | **6 (2-10)** | Government, school leaders | 5 |
| **19. Dedicated, appealing and sociable eating spaces** | **9 (7-10)** | **8 (5-10)** | **6 (2-10)** | Government, Local Authority, schools | 2 |
| **20.** **Support healthy school accreditation in secondary schools** | **7 (2-10)** | **6 (5-10)** | **6 (2-10)** | Government (DfE), Local Authority public health | 1 |
| **21. Redesign food lessons and increase emphasis within the curriculum** | **8 (6-10)** | **8 (5-10)** | **6 (3-10)** | Government (DfE), Ofsted | 1 |
| 22. Consistent food and nutrition messaging and cross-curricular education | 8 (6-10) | 8 (5-10) | 6 (3-10) |  | 0 |
| 23. Invest in educators to deliver food and healthy eating education | 9 (3-10) | 8 (5-10) | 5 (2-10) |  | 0 |
| **24. Increase student engagement on school food** | **8 (6-10)** | **7 (5-10)** | **8 (5-10)** | School, school leaders | 1 |
| 25. Increase parental engagement on school food | 7 (5-8) | 6 (3-10) | 6 (3-10) |  | 0 |
| **26. Review/ increase funding for school food provision** | **10 (8-10)** | **10 (3-10)** | **3 (1-10)** | Government (DfE), Local Authority public health | 8 |

a0 indicates low importance/support/ease; 10 indicates high importance/support/ease

Table 7. Final 10 prioritised action areas by the Policy Interest group

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Rank** | **Action** | **Mean Rank Score** |
| 1 | 26. Review/ increase funding for school food provision | 9.2 |
| 2 | 12. National government to provide joined-up leadership on school food | 6.4 |
| 3 | 24. Increase student engagement on school food | 4.8 |
| 4 | 10. Support for senior leadership and governors on school food | 4.7 |
| 5 | 6. Adapt the food offer to increase quality and meet students’ needs | 4.6 |
| 6a | 9. School food policies and rules | 3.0 |
| 6b | 14. Monitoring of school food standards compliance | 3.0 |
| 8 | 1. Catering staff investment, training and skills | 2.7 |
| 9 | 17. Address the wider food environment | 2.5 |
| 10 | 7. Changing food service arrangements to promote healthy food uptake | 1.7 |

Note: Colours have been assigned based on initial grouping of action areas into the categories – see section 4.1.2 and Table 5

### Qualitative analysis

A total of 26 codes relating to the each of the action areas presented in Table 5 were generated from the qualitative data, which have been further grouped within the six categories of the school food systems map described earlier (see section 6.1.2). Due to the nature of the discussions within the PI group meetings, some actions had more detail than others, as the discussion within these meetings was not specifically directed to every action area. Analysis of these discussions and the written comments resulting from interim task provides reasoning for the actions included in the top 10 list of priority action areas, possible barriers and facilitators to implementation, and PI group experience of issues related to the actions. These results are presented in full in Appendix 3. The findings are summarised below alongside two additional themes identified through the inductive thematic analysis (described in section 5.3.3). These were: school food as a system, and responsibility for school food.

#### Funding for school food (action area 26)

There was only one action area within this category, and it was ranked in position 1 in the prioritised list, and prompted much discussion. Although this was a standalone action area, centred around protecting school food budgets and reviewing/reforming the FSM programme, the group felt that all action areas have cost and resource implications. However, it was suggested that positive changes within this action area would be very impactful upon the ability to achieve other actions and engage school leaders on school food. The group felt it was difficult to see what could be done without reforming funding for school food, e.g.

*“Capital investment, both immediate to create facilities and spaces, and ongoing to maintain over time, is vital if school leaders are to welcome change.”* (Senior leader)

Ultimately it was recognised that funding increases were *“politically dependent”* (Academic representative) within a funding system that was *“complex”* (Charity representative) and it was perceived that there is currently a major lack of *“policy incentive or interest”* (Food Education representative) for politicians to act.

#### School leadership and governance (action areas 9-15)

Four action areas within this category featured in the top 10 list (ranking positions 2, 4, 6a and 6b). Owing to the political dependency of actions and incentives the group believed that joined up approaches and leadership by those at government level was needed as a priority action (action area 12, ranked in position 2), e.g.

*“National Government need to make child health and school food a priority”* (Young person)

*“without that we’re going to have people who will obfuscate…we’ll have people that can hide, people that will find other priorities, so leadership is important”* (Senior leader)

The group felt government leadership and support was required to enable schools to prioritise food and healthy eating, but they perceived that a major barrier to action in this area was that government did not see school food as a political priority, e.g.

*“I think everyone would agree on the importance of these actions but getting governments to agree and fund seems like a huge barrier.”* (Parent representative)

The group discussed the importance of influencing policy makers and of advocacy work in building momentum around school food, to move it up the priority list for those in power e.g.

*“But I guess it’s about how we can influence with political parties that kind of thing going into manifesto or government commitments…we could get them to be thinking about this kind of topic as we’re approaching the next general election I guess. But neither parties have made it a priority at the moment.”* (Catering representative)

*“Could the fact that neither parties made it a priority at the moment [be] because there’s not the volume both in terms of numbers and amount of people advocating for it…the only way policy changes is if, and this could be me just being cynical, is if politicians believe they’re going to get a vote out of it. So how can you make the public psyche that will influence them to think that this is something that needs to be addressed?”* (Senior leader).

*“we need to build momentum and make this something that’s everyone’s business, and people care about it.”* (Academic representative).

For school food to become a greater priority, it was felt there was a need to *“tie it into the other parts of core business of school’* (Local Authority representative). Senior leaders and governors need support (action area 10, ranked in position 4) to develop greater *“responsibility and accountability”* (Senior leader) for good leadership and knowledge on school food, with potential barriers to the development of this centred around school capacity. A focus on a broader range of metrics for measuring the impact of school food may support greater prioritisation by school leaders:

*“The moral argument is won in schools what is less understood is the increased impact on social and learning behaviours, improved pupil outcomes and wellbeing”* (Senior leader).

Local Authorities (action area 11) were also seen to have an important role in supporting school leaders to develop this capacity, e.g.

*“the role of the Local Authority in opening up capacity for schools…supports schools to deliver basic admin around school food”* (Local Authority representative).

However, this action area was not ranked in the top ten priority list.

More widespread development of individual school food policies (action area 9, ranked in position 6a) was also highlighted as a key school-level action and the PI group believed that this was *“physically feasible but requires buy-in from all stakeholders”* (Academic representative) and would result in *“an instant improvement in a school’s food culture”* (Charity representative).

A system of monitoring of the SFS (action area 14, ranked in position 6b) was also deemed necessary to drive continuous engagement and improvement on school food, e.g.

*“you can have the best of intentions, but if you don’t measure it, it won’t happen”* (Local Authority representative).

The group also saw a role for Ofsted in supporting monitoring of the SFS and providing motivation for greater prioritisation of food in schools if incorporated more broadly into monitoring frameworks. However, this action area was ranked 11th by the group and so is not included in the top 10 list of prioritised action areas. Some members felt that there were barriers or tensions related to this action area e.g.

*“Ofsted inspectors do not have the time or technical capability to include food provision in their inspection regimes”* (Catering representative)

Monitoring the SFS was also seen as priority above adapting and updating SFS (action area 13, ranked in position 14). It was felt that the full impact of the current SFS has yet not been realised due to low compliance, and that the SFS may show greater impact when compliance improves.

*“in my view schools that are delivering the standards are delivering well, and actually it is working.”* (Catering representative)

#### Priority of food within schools (action areas 20-25)

Within this category, the PI group recognised the particular importance of student engagement (action area 24, ranked in position 3), e.g.

*“youth view is important because they’re at the centre of whatever we try to provide and whatever policy direction it’s going in”* (Catering representative).

However, family and parental engagement was not discussed by the group.

There was a sense, particularly from the Food Education representative, that something must be done to improve the status and provision of food education once again in schools, in particular greater investment in educators to deliver food and healthy eating education (action area 23, ranked in position 17b) and increased emphasis within the curriculum (action area 21, ranked in position 16):

*“A big recruitment shortage of teachers currently teaching food, and it’s been cut back in the timetable essentially”* (Food Education representative)

*“but also the promotion of the whole concept of healthy mental and physical wellbeing having a much higher priority in school, and that includes the education piece around this as well…is so diminished at the moment, particularly in our secondary schools”* (Food Education representative).

Despite discussion on the importance of action in these areas, they were not prioritised within the top 10 by the group. This was deemed to be partially due to the separation of food education into action areas (action areas 21-23) distinct from wider school food provision. It was felt that conceptualising/encompassing school food provision and the experience of eating within schools as ‘food education’ with *“additional social, emotional and wellbeing benefits”* (Senior leader) would be a better route forward for meeting the objective of healthier diets for young people.

*“having been on part of many projects along the way, thinking how we can strengthen what’s been talked about and not isolating what appears to being presented as a service done to children, as in giving them school food, and seeing it from the students’ point of view about what their whole school day is like around the whole education piece that sits within that too, and it always seems that it becomes much more weaker… weakened what we’re trying to say here when we separate those two things out, and this ranking seems to have caused that really uncomfortably for me.”* (Food Education representative)

#### Catering and procurement (action areas 1-8)

The PI group felt that critical elements of school food were the food offered and ensuring that students’ needs were met (action area 6, ranked in position 5), and the food service arrangements (action area 7, ranked in position 10). These needed to be fundamentally changed to improve school food, e.g.

*“11 different types of cake on sale on one day…and then the fruit bowl was just tucked into the back”* (Young person).

The *“food would have to be right in the first place”* (Parent representative) to ensure both student and parent buy-in to the school food service. To increase schools’ motivations around food provision and service, other potential priorities such as sustainability and the FSM-offer were suggested as possible levers to this action, e.g.

*“We have been shocked to learn of some schools throwing away up to 2000 plastic drinks bottles per day! This links to costs and health. Why are schools still selling sugary drinks? Water-only schools (with investment to provide clean, accessible water) would mean that FSM children don't have to spend their allocation on drinks (often as part of a meal deal) too”* (Academic representative).

Investment in school food, catering staff and their skills (action area 1, ranked in position 8) was also prioritised from this category. This was thought to be an important step to enable other actions to be achieved through allowing *“innovation, creativity, and if you like, measured risk taking”* (Senior leader) within school food, e.g.

*“investment in the people back of house that are making sure that the standards are fully met, and that are met in a way that provides food that young people want to eat and can afford to buy’* (Catering representative)

Finally, supporting schools in their food procurement (action area 4, ranked in position 15) was seen as an important step, despite not making it into the top 10 priority list:

*“I think quite often school food contracts are commissioned in Local Authorities or in schools by people who are not well trained in school food management, or even commissioning, because sometimes they over rely on DfE procurement frameworks.”* (Local Authority representative).

Consideration of challenges to implementation of this procurement support were clear, e.g.

*“upskilling business teams is somewhat feasible, but implementation (sourcing local, sustainable food at scale and cost) is very challenging”* (Academic representative).

The group also discussed the need for more capital funding for catering facilities and equipment (action area 3, ranked in position 13) but noted that the funding implications would be vast:

*“schools won’t be able to pay for it they really… the capital equipment is phenomenal*” (Senior leader)

#### Food environments beyond school (action areas 16-17)

One major factor which the PI group recognised as particularly hard to implement but critical to improving school food was addressing the wider food environment (action area 17, ranked in position 9), e.g.

*“If we could address the wider food environment and make it better, it would have one of the biggest influences on improving school food systems”* (Local Authority representative).

The group appreciated the challenges but also benefits this would entail:

*“addressing the wider food system is a big task and there's many cogs in that system but its impact on child health would be huge. It requires systemic change to our food system and more than just one group (e.g. government) have a role to play”* (Young Person).

#### The food space and experience within schools (action areas 18-19)

Although action areas within this category were not included in the prioritised list, the topics featured widely in discussions within the PI group, and action on providing longer/protected lunch breaks (action area 18) and improved eating spaces within schools (action area 19) were considered impactful:

*“to reduce stress caused by busy canteen...mealtimes should be associated with enjoying the food and socialising with friends in a non-stressful environment”* (Parent representative)

One of the key reasons for the non-prioritisation of these action areas related to a strong sense that the current school system is at odds with potential actions to improve the food space and experience within schools. School food was seen to sit within an educational system that was under a lot of pressure and school funding arrangements prevented greater financial investment in solutions within these actions areas. One way to increase the focus on school food that was discussed was to frame it within how school food can support educational outcomes, and as a *“school improvement tool”* (Senior leader).

*“You will never meet a school leader that doesn’t say that school food should a) be reformed, b) improved, and c) is important. But then you have that transition from all of those moral arguments into the pragmatic. A system that has not been designed to see food as a priority needs not just the moral imperative, but it needs the pragmatic changes to the curriculum, the design of the day, the food spaces, the relationship with food, food suppliers, producers and caterers. So there’s a fundamental…so I think there’s a bridge that needs…no, there’s a ravine which needs bridging between the moral argument and how the expectations of the core business of the school can and should be endorsed and favoured, and improved by a greater understanding of how food can impact on what leaders see as their core brief is to churn out educated people who are good citizens, social beings. Food does both of that, it will change not only academic and skilled outcomes, so pupil outcomes as demanded by society, employers and parents, but will also create employable and social beings which will have an impact on the civil and the civic society that we wish to create. There’s that gap that needs to be articulated in order to get school leaders to…but people then need to give school leaders the tools, the space, and the ability to make those changes.”* (Senior leader)

#### School food as a system

In addition to discussion around the specific action areas detailed above, there was a broader discussion on the idea of school food as a difficult problem to tackle due to its nature as a complex system. There were seen to be many interacting elements, and therefore many barriers.

*“these things interconnect a little bit don’t they’re co-dependent on each other”* (Academic representative)

Activities within all 26 action areas were seen to have a place within this system, but group members rationalised their prioritisation decisions based on action areas that appeared most influential, i.e. that could impact upon other elements within the system; or that appeared to be most important to the student experience around school food:

*“Monitoring and compliance, though it's there as its own entity, I think that covers all of the aspects of the school food system if you’re doing it properly. So it’s not just about school food standards or procurement standards, it’s bigger than that.”* (Local Authority representative)

*“I think all of the action areas are important, but I think it’s quite easy to prioritise things around training or things like that for catering, and stuff like that, which is of course important as a whole school food system, but it's very good to see that students have been a priority. So increasing funding for school food provision, ensuring every child gets food at school through Free School Meals, and increasing student engagement, making sure they get to have a say, adapting the food offer to increase and meet students’ needs, and then addressing the wider food environment. These are all the things that I think are specifically impacting students the most as opposed to some…the training would have a greater impact on catering short term, long term on the students. But yeah I guess from me and my perspective it’s good to see that students are still very much the priority voice that we’re advocating for here.”* (Young person)

#### Responsibility for school food

There was also some discussion around where the responsibility for implementation of actions on school food lies, given the systemic nature of school food. Caterers, schools, Local Authorities and national government were all seen to have an important role. Within Local Authorities, school food spans multiple departments which can make joined up working difficult. Collaborative working within Local Authorities was seen to improve action on school food:

*“So I think that bit’s quite key, because as many other people have identified schools don’t feel like they have the capacity to deliver good school food, they’re stretched in so many ways, and we’ve been able to bridge that gap in a way, and I think that role sits across public health and education. The bit that I found interesting as what I do as part of my public health team probably crosses over quite a lot into what an education team would do at my other Local Authority.”* (Local Authority representative)

*“Public Health in local government can influence the Education and Health and Wellbeing and Planning agenda too.”* (Local Authority representative)

Likewise, it was felt that there was not always a clear leader for school food at a school level, with some discussion around the varying roles and responsibilities of school leaders and catering providers. The presence of external catering providers sometimes made accountability challenging and led to wide variation in how school food is delivered at the school-level, e.g. in terms of the amount spent on school food, or who was ultimately responsible for ensuring compliance with the SFS:

“*when you have a catering company in a school, or within a multi-academy Trust, there tends to be an abdication sometimes, and therefore that adherence and the responsibility for it’s easy to displace that to somewhere else within a school based system.”* (Senior leader)

*“we’re learning more about of course the implications of the catering contracts on this, and the variation between how much money is spent per meal for different types of catering…we have seen some areas where schools are actually managing somehow to get extra funding to top up on school meals, but equally we’ve been to some where we know that the caterers are making meals for 50% of the money that they should be using.”* (Academic representative)

# Discussion

## Summary of findings

Through extensive stakeholder engagement, we have identified and summarised a wide range of actions within 26 areas that could be taken to improve the food provision, culture, education and environment in secondary schools, with the ultimate aim of improving the dietary intakes of young people. All action areas were considered important for improving school food, however, through prioritisation activities with a group of people with expertise/interest in school food policy who represented a range of school food stakeholders, 10 action areas were identified for immediate focus, relating to both the day-to-day experience of school food and setting the scene for more extensive, long-term change to the school food system in secondary schools. Future development of national and local school food policy should incorporate these recommended actions to maximise its impact in secondary schools.

The two most important action areas were considered to be a review and increase of school food funding (including ring-fencing of school food budgets), and national joined-up leadership on school food. These were felt to have wide-ranging impacts and be crucial for the effective implementation of other action areas. However, both action areas were rated relatively low in terms of ease of implementation due a perceived lack of political interest or impetus, despite being considered highly important. In addition, actions on developing leadership and governance on school food ranked highly in the prioritisation activities, e.g. enhancing support for senior leadership and governors; support for developing school-level food policies and rules; and monitoring of school food standards compliance. Action on leadership and governance was believed to be the route to improve the knowledge, skills, capacity and motivation required for school leaders to take a whole school approach to school food. At a catering-level, investment in catering staff, training and skills was also prioritised as key area of focus to improve school food. This was seen to enable improvement in the school food offer in terms of student appeal (and so take-up of school food), compliance with the SFS and supporting healthy choices by students.

Action areas centred around improving the immediate day-to-day experience of school food were also prioritised. These included adapting the food offer to increase quality and meet students’ needs, and changing food service arrangements to promote healthy food uptake, as well as increasing student engagement on school food. It should be noted that actions in these areas were consistently seen as important by all stakeholder groups. Providing a range of opportunities for engagement with students on school food was considered to be easy to implement by the PI group, so may be an achievable short-term action for schools to take forward.

Beyond the school gates, actions to address the wider food system were also considered crucial to meeting the objective of improving the dietary intakes of young people, alongside actions on school food. The PI group acknowledged the difficulty in implementing changes at this level, giving it the lowest rating of all action areas in terms of ease of implementation.

Actions on food education and parental engagement were notably absent from the prioritised list of recommendations. Education and guidance for parents and parental engagement on school food had the lowest median ratings in terms of perceived support for implementation, and education and guidance for parents had the lowest median rating for importance. This may be reflective of a perception of a reduced role of parents in school food for pupils of secondary school age (8). The rationale for the absence of food education-related action areas in the priority list was more complex. The three identified action areas were redesign of food lessons and increased emphasis within the curriculum; consistent food and nutrition messaging and cross-curricular education; and investing in educators to deliver food and healthy eating education. These were all rated as important and had high levels of support, however, their division into three standalone items within the list of 26 action areas may have resulted in split opinions and reduced their overall ranking scores (see section 6.4). Likewise, action areas on improving the food space and experience within schools (providing longer lunch breaks and protecting time to eat; creating dedicated, appealing and sociable eating spaces) were not prioritised, despite their consistent presence in stakeholder discussions and having high ratings in terms of importance and support for implementation. The absence of these action areas from the prioritised list appeared to be due to the perceived shift in the educational system and culture that would be required for these actions to be feasible, as it was felt there would need to be a reframing of school mealtimes as an educational activity within the school day, with benefits for educational, behavioural and social outcomes.

## Policy relevance

Some of the actions identified within this research have been highlighted or recommended within other reports or research on school food (see Appendix 1) or are already in the process of being tested or adopted. For example, in their 2022 ‘Levelling up the United Kingdom’ white paper (52), the government committed to improving the monitoring of school food through a pilot programme involving Local Authorities assuring school compliance with the SFS. The pilot programme is currently ongoing (53). In relation to school leadership, in the same white paper, the government set out plans to invest £200,000 in a pilot training programme for school governors and academy trusts on a “whole school approach” to food. The government also outlined their vision for a “school cooking revolution” with the aim that every child leaving secondary school should know at least six basic recipes that will support healthy living into adulthood. They have planned to achieve this by investing up to £5m in food curriculum development and teacher training/leadership bursaries. A review of the SFS for England was planned in 2019 (14), following calls by an All-Party Parliamentary Group on school food led by Member of Parliament Sharon Hodgson (54) but this review was paused during the COVID-19 pandemic and has not been reinstated (15). Despite these commitments from the government on school food within the white paper, the PI group felt that there was a lack of political impetus for the large-scale changes needed to transform the school food system.

Actions on the wider food system need to be addressed within broader national and local policy for improving food systems, reducing obesity and improving health. There was endorsement from the PI group for actions on reforming the school food system, some of which are outlined in the Government Food Strategy (55) (e.g. widening the scope of the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services; greater support in procuring high quality and value for money food in schools through a ‘Get Help Buying for Schools’ service, and a review of the current School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme). There was also support from stakeholders in our research for continued action on commitments that are already laid out in obesity prevention policy (14, 56, 57), particularly reviewing the school food standards and those addressing wider determinants of health behaviours and food environments (i.e. action area 17) e.g. improved advertising restrictions on foods and drinks high in fat, sugar or salt.

This research clearly demonstrates the perception of school food stakeholders that further government policy action on the school food system is needed. Some policy action areas that were identified in this study align with recommendations featured in independent reviews. For example, in the independent National Food Strategy, published in 2021 (58), a suite of actions relating to food education (linked to food provision) were proposed: an “Eat and Learn” initiative for schools, incorporating an accreditation scheme (action area 20); a food/cooking curriculum review (action area 21); more comprehensive inspection of food and cooking lessons by Ofsted (action area 15); and greater funding for cooking lessons and recruitment of food teachers (action area 23). The strategy also included recommendations of extending eligibility for Free School Meals (action area 26) and cross-departmental work within government (action area 12). FSM policy in the UK is receiving much focus currently, with regional and local examples of extended eligibility and universal FSM policies, although many of these apply to primary schools (59). Given that the expansion of FSM policy in these ways were included in action area 26, which was given highest priority, specific consideration should be given to FSM policy change at a national level. Regarding cross-departmental working, a report by the Food Research Collaboration identified 16 departments involved in setting food policy in England (60), so cross-departmental work may be challenging. A recent review of the literature on secondary school food policy highlighted additional learning that could be achieved from policy implementation in devolved UK nations e.g. in Scotland, school food policy is centrally located within and connected to Scottish environment, education, economic and health domains (61).

The recently released report on Good Food for Children by the Faculty of Public Health (62) also outlined recommendations to address food insecurity and nutritional inequality through school food policy. These included introducing auto-enrolment for FSM and extending support for food insecurity e.g. free breakfast provision (featured as examples in action area 26), and incorporating evaluation of the impact of food programmes on health, education, and socioeconomic inequality across a child’s lifetime (featured in action area 11).

Overall, this study adds value to these existing reports and strategy documents by providing a clear set of priorities for school food policy action, driven by key stakeholders and with a focus on secondary schools, which are known to have poorer quality food provision and more complex food environments than primary schools (6, 22).

The next step regarding this research in terms of school food policy development is for the key identified action areas to be considered by those responsible for implementation at a national and local policy level. This will enable wider discussion on their feasibility and likelihood of adoption. In terms of responsibility for implementation, the research has highlighted actions which are required at multiple levels: national and local government (including cross-departmental work across public health, social care and education), Multi-Academy Trusts, schools and governing bodies and school catering providers. Our plans for dissemination (see section 11) will provide opportunities to engage with these agencies and enable greater consideration of policy implementation through ongoing knowledge exchange. Also important for the school food agenda is the development of policy action on the wider food system, which will involve action by a much wider group of stakeholders, including food companies, non-governmental organisations and communities.

## Considerations for implementation

Through engagement with our PI group, this research has highlighted potential barriers and enablers for progression on these actions. Our findings echo those of a recent systematic review in which sufficient funding, reviewing policy compliance, improved policy communication and collaborative work between agencies were identified as enablers of school food policy implementation (63). Some similar barriers, such as reduced profit/revenue, the cost of equipment and facilities, supplier difficulties, a lack of support and training for school staff on policy implementation, a lack of accountability on implementation and the influence of the wider food environment (outside of school/home) were also highlighted. One key barrier to effective policy implementation identified in the systematic review was the lack of consultation with stakeholders. This highlights the importance of the work undertaken within the EPIC study for future policy development.

Although the findings from the EPIC study are focused within the English policy context, it also contributes to a growing global literature on barriers and enablers for school food policy implementation. For example, in the systematic review mentioned (63), staff concerns for children’s health were viewed as an enabler for school food policy implementation, however, the experiences of the stakeholder representatives who took part in our prioritisation activities suggested that a more impactful enabler within the English context maybe the linking of school food with educational and school improvement outcomes. This was deemed to be more meaningful within a stretched education system where there are multiple existing pressures and financial constraints, and where the “core business” of schools is viewed as attainment. This approach may be suited to other settings in which school leaders feel overwhelmed by the increasing demands placed upon the educational system (64).

This research has also enabled us to construct a more comprehensive picture of secondary school food as a complex, adaptive system, building on the work of the GENIUS School Food Network (65) and the CONNECTS-Food Study (66). As part of our analysis from the stakeholder workshops, we mapped the resulting 26 action areas onto an existing secondary school food systems map developed by the GENIUS School Food Network. Overall, these action areas mapped well onto the school food system categories, but our analysis suggests that the categories entitled ‘Social experience, behaviours, and attitudes’ and ‘Financial’ be reframed within our own findings as ‘food environments beyond school’ and ‘funding for school food’, respectively. Additional elements of the school food systems map were also identified through our research, including the level of integration of catering teams within schools, catering provider models, food service arrangements, and student and parent involvement on school food. Qualitative analysis of data from PI group supported the framing of school food as a complex system, characterised by *“interdependent elements within a connected whole”* (67). This work has highlighted, from the perspectives of expert stakeholder representatives, the system elements that should be a focus for improving school food through their interactions within the system. The PI group also highlighted the fact that the school food system sits within a broader education system. As a result, there are competing demands upon schools resulting in de-prioritisation of school food. Qualitative research with English secondary school headteachers and chairs of governing bodies on the role of schools in obesity prevention (68) drew similar conclusions, with perceived pressures from national government to focus on academic achievement. The PI group argued that a reframing of food as a *“school improvement tool”* is required for school leaders to re-prioritise school food. Johnston et al. (69) conceptualised this type of change as a ’paradigm’ shift, which influenced perceptions of responsibility and policy support/engagement. Changes to the paradigm were seen to be very effective at generating change within a system but were also the most difficult type of change to achieve.

## Strengths and limitations

Key strengths of this work include the extensive engagement with multiple stakeholders with a role in school food, via both face-to-face and online methods, ensuring inclusion of a wide range of participants with varied geographies. Presentation of the findings on the FUEL study (5) to participants allowed discussion based on up-to-date evidence and within the context of the current secondary school food system. This was supplemented with a review of key reports on school food improvement to identify any additional actions/recommendations not captured in the FUEL study. This approach contributed to a comprehensive list of actions on school food grounded in the evidence base. In addition, we used a structured approach to our prioritisation activity, adapted from a tried-and-tested consensus development method (NGT). The use of a two-phase approach (i. development of potential actions for improving school food from the perspectives of stakeholders; and ii. prioritisation by a group with school food policy expertise/interest) built our understanding of the full range of potential actions, but also those that might be most impactful and require attention before others. For example, although the stakeholder groups identified the action of reviewing and updating the SFS to improve school food, the PI group highlighted that a monitoring system would provide more immediate gains through enabling comprehensive implementation and testing of the current SFS, which could lead on to review and adaptation of the SFS. In addition, despite stakeholder workshop participants consistently discussing actions to improve the food space and experience within schools, the PI group provided insights into the feasibility of these actions, emphasising that they would be extremely challenging to achieve. It was felt by the PI group that wider action on the framing of school food within the broader education system, which would facilitate greater investment in dedicated facilities and conceptualisation of mealtimes as an educational opportunity, was required to enable action within this area. By acknowledging the potential issues that could prevent successful implementation of actions, this research can better inform the direction of policy change and action.

A limitation of this research is the absence of co-development of recommendations to enhance national school food policy with policy makers within government, which was originally planned, but was not possible to undertake. However, despite not being involved in a co-development process, policy representatives from the DHSC and DfE sat on the Study Advisory Committee for the duration of the study and provided advice on study design (including the composition of the PI group) and the interpretation of the findings. In addition, these representatives advised on suitable approaches for engaging with policy makers for meaningful dissemination of the findings.

The prioritisation of actions was based on groupings into ‘action areas’ as interpreted by the research team from the stakeholder workshops. These could have been grouped, described or summarised in a different way, which may have impacted upon how they were prioritised. In addition, the PI group comprised stakeholder representatives with school food policy expertise/interest, who were selected and invited by the research team, following discussion with the SMT and SAC. Results of the prioritisation activities may have been different with a different membership, or if the group was structured in a different way. For example, there were two youth representatives and two Local Authority representatives, but only one representative from Catering, Food Education and School Leadership. The over-representation from youth members was considered important due to their position as the key beneficiaries/stakeholders of action on school food. Group dynamics could have also shifted decision-making, e.g. items considered important by vocal members may have been given prominence.

# Conclusions

The findings of this research contribute to building a comprehensive understanding of the priority areas for improving school food, from the perspectives of multiple school food stakeholder groups. The top priorities identified were reformed and improved school food funding, and national joined-up leadership on school food to enable further action on school-food policy and practice. However, there was also recognition of the challenges related to ease of implementation for these action areas, and it was felt that this is more likely to be achieved through a stronger political impetus around school food and the building of a narrative of school food as a tool for overall school improvement. The findings will inform policy makers in developing and enhancing national and local school food policy, to maximise its impact in secondary schools, and lead an improvement in the diets of young people.

# Patient and public involvement in the research (PPI)

Public involvement was crucial to the design and delivery of this research and was embedded at several levels and multiple time points throughout the research.

Five public representatives (a school senior leader and four youth representatives) were embedded in our SMT, attending monthly online meetings. A Parent Advisory Group (parents of secondary school aged children; n=14) and Schools Advisory Group (secondary school teachers, senior leaders, governors, and caterers; n=8) were established. We also engaged with two established Youth Forums, carrying out three in-person meetings (approximately 9 per meeting) and one online meeting (n=10). We met with the other Public Advisory Groups on three occasions via online meetings. We carried out additional activities with other stakeholder representatives, including pilots of our stakeholder workshops with parents (n=4) and pupils (n=~15); and engagement with a group of students aged 16-17 years of age to support analysis/interpretation of data.

All groups provided valuable information about what would support recruitment and identified practical issues e.g. appropriate timings for meetings. Public representatives piloted the workshops relevant to their stakeholder group and provided the team with feedback, including wording of questions to enhance comprehension, use of technology in the online workshops, and providing sufficient time. All groups were provided with an opportunity to comment on the proposed action areas from the workshop data analysis. Young people additionally had the opportunity to provide their top 10 action areas following the workshop analysis (see section 5.2.4). This information was used in the PI group meetings to inform the group’s decisions. Finally, each group provided comments and thoughts about the study’s dissemination plans.

Following the public advisory input, members were asked to complete reflection forms about their experience being part of the PPI group and provide demographic information. This allowed us to make improvements to the delivery of our public engagement activities and to constantly review the composition of the groups based on key demographic characteristics such as ethnicity and gender, and undertake additional recruitment as needed. All PPI groups were well recruited to and generally reflected good diversity across society and school food. This was achieved through strong relationships with existing groups such as the Birmingham Youth City Forum, Young Persons’ Advisory Group and Sandwell Council SHAPE forum, and through use of engagement with national/ local school networks e.g. West Midlands Schools Research Network, social media, and communication via schools that were involved in previous research. Our youth representatives within the SMT were supported during meetings by a dedicated Youth Worker. We also provided training to all public advisors. As a result, we received positive feedback from public advisors on their understanding of the study and their role. All public advisors were paid according to NIHR recommendations, ensuring appropriate reimbursement for their time. One of the main challenges was ensuring PPI participants consistently attended, especially our parent group members. This highlighted the need for more regular engagement with PPI representatives, potentially using newsletters or email updates.

# Addressing equality and diversity issues

Our research aligns with the NIHR principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), both in our research methods and our engagement with a diverse range of public advisors. Our sampling approach and recruitment methods aimed to achieve to a diverse participant sample, particularly aiming for inclusion of children from low-income families, living in a deprived area and/or from minority ethnic groups. We recruited schools with higher-than-average FSM eligibility and from two geographically distinct areas (Islington, London and the West Midlands), both of which have high ethnic diversity and a wide range of deprivation levels. We held an additional youth workshop to increase the diversity in our sample, working with the Birmingham Youth City board. For our other stakeholder workshops, we used social media, word of mouth and existing connections to recruit from as wide a group as possible, aiming for broad geographical reach within England.

We asked our public advisors to review our participant information to check that the language was appropriate and made participant information available in accessible formats on our study webpages. We took an inclusive approach to data collection, consulting our public advisors on the timings and format (offering both online/face-to-face workshops). We built in opportunities to contribute through verbal or written format during workshops and time in each online workshop to demonstrate how to use tools such as the collaborative whiteboards. We collected data on gender and ethnicity (all participants) and FSM status (young people and parents) to inform our ongoing sampling approach. All participants were remunerated for their contribution and were able to claim travel/childcare expenses for attending the workshops, facilitating wide participation.

Our public involvement activities also demonstrated our commitment to EDI. Our youth engagement was supported through links with the SHAPE forum (Sandwell) and Birmingham Youth City Board, both of which have an ethnically diverse membership and are in deprived areas of England. We asked public advisors to complete a questionnaire including demographic questions (sex, location, ethnicity, FSM status) and feedback on the PPI activities to allow ongoing evaluation of EDI in our approach to public involvement.

Actions for addressing dietary inequalities and food insecurity e.g. increasing funding for FSM, and for more inclusive practices in school food e.g. increasing cultural variety in the food offer, featured strongly in our research findings, contributing towards the evidence base on the role of school food in addressing health inequalities.

# Dissemination

Currently the research has not been disseminated in any format, apart from sharing results with our PI group, Public Advisory Groups, SMT and SAC. We have prepared a comprehensive dissemination strategy, which is designed to attract the attention of multiple audiences and stakeholders.

## Policy

Following advice from our policy representatives on the SAC, we are planning to hold an online meeting with policy makers from the DfE and DHSC in which we will present our findings. These meetings will highlight the two phases of the research, with the focus on the prioritised actions proposed by the Policy Interest group. We are also planning other meetings with the APPG for School Food, the School Food Review team, the School Food Plan Alliance and LACA (the organisation representing catering providers) to communicate our research findings. In addition to the meetings, we will prepare a short briefing paper reporting the prioritised actions for government policy makers and organisations with an interest in school food policy.

## Communication and public engagement

The research team are currently organising a knowledge exchange event to be held in central Birmingham on 20th March 2024. This event will be used to communicate our findings to the public and school food stakeholders. Research participants will be invited to this event, along with all members of the public and study advisory groups. The event will also be advertised to the public and through school food networks. The event will focus on both sharing the findings from the study and discussing the next steps for action from the multiple perspectives of the attendees.

In addition to this event the research group have engaged with a visual scribe throughout the project to produce a ‘rich picture’. The aim of this is to share the findings of our research with the public, including young people, parents, and schools, in an engaging and informative format. Decisions related to the design of this output have been guided by our Public Advisory Groups. This output will be shared on social media, on the study website and at our knowledge exchange event.

## Academic

Our publication strategy includes three academic papers from this study. The first will focus on stakeholders’ views on actions to improve secondary school food and will present data from the stakeholder workshops undertaken as part of this research. The second paper will focus on the prioritisation of actions to improve secondary school food and will present the Policy Interest group phase of this study, detailing reasoning for prioritisation of actions by the group and a critical discussion around this. The third paper will report our approach to public involvement and engagement in research processes, especially related to informing future policy relevant to young people. The research team feel this is an important contribution to the literature given the success and use of PPI within this research, especially in relation to engaging young people and those from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, we are planning to present the research findings at the UK Society for Behavioural Medicine (UKSBM) and the Society for Social Medicine annual meetings in 2024. An abstract titled ‘Promoting healthier food in secondary schools: Stakeholder views on actions for enhancing school food policy and practice’ has been submitted to UKSBM and accepted for an oral presentation at the annual meeting in March 2024.

# Actual and anticipated impact

This research has identified actions that should be prioritised, from the perspectives of stakeholders, to enhance school food policy and maximise its impact in secondary schools. Our continued engagement and planned dissemination with policy makers, national charities/groups, Local Authorities, school leaders and caterers, parents and young people, will enable consideration of how our findings can be taken forward at national/local government and school-levels, and inform ongoing research and campaign work. The anticipated impact will arise from the implementation of the prioritised actions, which should then lead to a positive impact on nutrition and food security in secondary school children.

# Intellectual Property (IP) and commercial adoption

There are no existing IP outputs that have arisen, but we anticipate the following as detailed in section 9: 1) A short briefing paper reporting the prioritised actions for government policy makers and organisations with an interest in school food policy; 2) A visual summary of the findings for a public audience; and 3) Three academic papers.

# Added Value Examples

These will be supplied once dissemination activities are completed.

# Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge funding for this study from the NIHR Policy Research Programme (NIHR204247) and would like to thank the schools and all individuals who participated in the study. We would also like to acknowledge the administrative and research staff who contributed to the study: Katie Youngwood, Estera Sevel, Sophie Clohessy, Nathanael Leaf and Marisha Russell. We would like to thank the young people who served as Study Management Team members and youth advisors, and members of the parent and school staff/governor advisory groups. In addition, we thank Charlene Peart and Juliet Faulkner from Birmingham City Council, Neesha Patel from Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, the West Midlands Clinical Research Network Young Person’s Advisory Group and the University of Birmingham School, who provided support for our youth PPI activities. Finally, we thank the members of our external Study Advisory Committee: Dougal Hargreaves (Chair), Sean Turner, Vanessa Mynard, Elizabeth Tydeman, Tracey Eckersley and Yumna Hussen.

# References

1. The School Food Plan. The Independent School Food Plan 2019 [Accessed on 5th June 2019]. Available from: <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/>.

2. Hope P. Statutory Instrument 2006 No. 2381 The Education (Nutritional Standards for School Lunches) (England) Regulations. London; 2006.

3. Legislation.gov.uk. Statutory Instruments 2014 No. 1603 The Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014. 2014 [Accessed on 15th April 2024]. Available from: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/1603/made/data.pdf>.

4. Oostindjer M, Aschemann-Witzel J, Wang Q, Skuland SE, Egelandsdal B, Amdam GV, et al. Are school meals a viable and sustainable tool to improve the healthiness and sustainability of children´s diet and food consumption? A cross-national comparative perspective. Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition. 2017;57(18):3942-58.

5. Miranda Pallan MM, Breanna Morrison, Irina Pokhilenko, Alice Sitch, Emma Frew, Clare Rawdin, Rachel Adams, Ashley Adamson, Suzanne Bartington, Alexandra Dobell, Rhona Duff, Tania Griffin, Kiya Hurley, Emma Lancashire, Louise McLeman, Sandra Passmore, Vahid Ravaghi, Suzanne Spence, Peymane Adab 17/92/39 An evaluation of the implementation of national school food standards in secondary schools and their impact on the school food environment and pupil intake of free sugars: a mixed methods study. 2023.

6. Guy's and St Thomas' Charity. Serving up children’s health. 2020.

7. Adamson AJ, White M, Stead M. The process and impact of change in the school food policy on food and nutrient intake of children aged 4-7 and 11-12 years both in and out of school: a mixed methods approach: Public Health Research Consortium; 2012.

8. Neufeld LM, Andrade EB, Ballonoff Suleiman A, Barker M, Beal T, Blum LS, et al. Food choice in transition: adolescent autonomy, agency, and the food environment. The Lancet. 2022;399(10320):185-97.

9. Ensaff H, Russell J, Barker ME. Meeting school food standards–students’ food choice and free school meals. Public health nutrition. 2013;16(12):2162-8.

10. Cribb J, Farquharson C, McKendrick A, Waters T. The policy menu for school lunches: options and trade-offs in expanding free school meals in England. London; 2023.

11. Hansard - UK Parliament. School Meals: Impact of Inflation 2023 [Accessed on 24/10/2023]. Available from: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-05-09/debates/F93BF7AB-97CB-4E2E-BD23-5F41E39C5A66/SchoolMealsImpactOfInflation>.

12. Hacking V. School Food Report. Impact of food cost on school meals. Stretford; 2022.

13. FixOurFood. Public Sector Food Procurement Supply Chains leading to School Meals: The Case of Yorkshire. 2022.

14. Department of Health and Social Care. Childhood obesity: a plan for action, Chapter 2 London; 2018.

15. Long R, Danechi S. Research Briefing. School Meals and Nutritional Standards (England). London: House of Commons Library,; 2023.

16. Food Standards Agency. School Food Standards compliance pilot underway in 18 local authorities across England 2022 [Accessed on 10th November 2023]. Available from: <https://www.food.gov.uk/news-alerts/news/school-food-standards-compliance-pilot-underway-in-18-local-authorities-across-england>.

17. HM Government. Levelling Up the United Kingdom. 2022.

18. Davies S. Time to Solve Childhood Obesity. 2019.

19. Pineda E, Bascunan J, Sassi F. Improving the school food environment for the prevention of childhood obesity: What works and what doesn't. Obes Rev. 2021;22(2):e13176.

20. Micha R, Karageorgou D, Bakogianni I, Trichia E, Whitsel LP, Story M, et al. Effectiveness of school food environment policies on children’s dietary behaviors: A systematic review and meta-analysis. PloS one. 2018;13(3):e0194555.

21. Durão S, Wilkinson M, Davids EL, Gerritsen A, Kredo T. Effects of policies or interventions that influence the school food environment on children’s health and nonhealth outcomes: a systematic review. Nutrition Reviews. 2023:nuad059.

22. Haney E, Parnham JC, Chang K, Laverty AA, von Hinke S, Pearson-Stuttard J, et al. Dietary quality of school meals and packed lunches: a national study of primary and secondary schoolchildren in the UK. Public Health Nutrition. 2023;26(2):425-36.

23. Parnham JC, Chang K, Rauber F, Levy RB, Millett C, Laverty AA, et al. The Ultra-Processed Food Content of School Meals and Packed Lunches in the United Kingdom. Nutrients. 2022;14(14).

24. NHS Digital. National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2022/23 School Year 2023 [Accessed on 5th January 2024]. Available from: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2022-23-school-year>.

25. Bates B, Collins D, Jones K, Page P, Roberts C, Swan G. National Diet and Nutrition Survey Rolling programme Years 9 to 11 (2016/2017 to 2018/2019). Public Health England and the Food Standards Agency; 2020.

26. Hartgen-Walker S, Lally C. POSTnote 704. Child food insecurity and Free School Meals. London: UK Parliament POST; 2023.

27. Vaughn L, Jacquez F. Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process. Journal of Participatory Research Methods. 2020;1.

28. Gale NK, Heath G, Cameron E, Rashid S, Redwood SJBMRM. Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research. BMC Medical Research Methodology. 2013;13(1):117.

29. Hackney School of Food. Create your own School of Food: A Toolkit for Schools. 2023 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://chefsinschools.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2023/02/162_Toolkit_221214.pdf>. .

30. The Health Foundation. Food insecurity – what can local government do? 2023 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.37829/HF-2023-HL02>.

31. Feeding Britain. A Hunger Trap? Eligibility criteria for free school meals in England 2022 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/A-Hunger-Trap-Eligibility-criteria-for-free-school-meals-in-England.pdf>.

32. Association for Public Service Excellence. APPG on School Food Report. Impact of food cost on school meals. 2022 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/_api/render/file/?fileID=C0ED6D45-71C0-496F-B090D83C42BE1F8>.

33. Child Poverty Action Group. Improving Secondary School Food Provision: Barriers and Solutions 2023 [Accessed on 23rd June 2023]. Available from: <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/Improving%20secondary%20school%20food%20provision%20-%20barriers%20and%20solutions.pdf>.

34. Storr F, Higham-Smith C. School Food Update: A review of the history and evidence relating school food in England, whole school approaches to health and nutrition and the implications of the impact of the current cost of living crisis on school food. 2022 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://foodactive.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/School-Food-Update-FA-Nov-22.pdf>.

35. Storr F, Higham-Smith C. Free School Meals: What are the barriers to uptake among primary and secondary school children? 2022 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://foodactive.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Barriers-to-FSM-uptake-report-FA-Nov-22.pdf>.

36. The Food Foundation in conjunction with Birmingham Public Health. Creating a Healthy Food Economy: A Policy Audit Tool for Local Authorities. 2020 [Accessed on 15th October 2023]. Available from: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/Food-Policy-Audit-Tool_Final.pdf>.

37. Devine LD, Hill AJ, Gallagher AM. Improving adolescents' dietary behaviours in the school-setting: challenges and opportunities. The Proceedings of the Nutrition Society. 2023;82(2):172-85.

38. Dimbleby H. National Food Strategy: Chapter 16. 2021 [Accessed on 23rd June 2023]. Available from: <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/National-Food-Strategy-Chapter-16.pdf>.

39. Dimbleby H. National Food Strategy: The Recommendations in Full. 2021 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/National-Food-Strategy-Recommendations-in-Full.pdf>.

40. Parent Pay, Cypad, LACA. 2022 School Meals Report 2022 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://www.parentpay.com/cypad/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/07/2022-School-Meal-ReportCypadParentpay.pdf>.

41. English A, Hughes I. Policy Brief 4: How can policymakers boost fruit and vegetable production and consumption? 2022 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/SHEFS_Fruit%20and%20Veg%20Policy%20Brief%20Series_Brief%204_FINAL_2023.pdf>.

42. Walton S, Hughes I. Sustainable and Healthy Food Systems. Research Synthesis Report 2022 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://shefsglobal.lshtm.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SHEFS_Research-synthesis-report.pdf>.

43. The Food Foundation. The Broken Plate 2023: The State of the Nation’s Food System. 2023 [Accessed on 28th June 2023]. Available from: <https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/TFF_The%20Broken%20Plate%202023_Digital_FINAL..pdf>.

44. Child Poverty Action Group. The Cost of the School Day in England: Pupil’s Perspectives 2022 [Accessed on 23rd June 2023]. Available from: <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/The%20Cost%20of%20the%20School%20Day%20in%20England-%20Pupils%27%20Perspectives.pdf>.

45. Chefs In Schools. Universal Free School Meals Toolbox: Tips, Hints and Tricks for a Whole School Approach to Delivering UFSM 2023 [Accessed on 25th August 2023]. Available from: <https://chefsinschools.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/UFSM-Delivery-Toolbox-Chefs-in-Schools.pdf>.

46. Jamie Oliver Foundation. A report on the food education learning landscape. 2017 [Accessed on 2nd November 2023]. Available from: <https://www.akofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2_0_fell-report-final.pdf>.

47. Dunham R. Nominal group technique: a users' guide. Madison:: Wisconsin School of Business; 1998.

48. Murphy MK, Black NA, Lamping DL, McKee CM, Sanderson CF, Askham J, et al. Consensus development methods, and their use in clinical guideline development. Health Technology Assessment. 1998;2(3):i-iv, 1-88.

49. Lynch EA, Lassig C, Turner T, Churilov L, Hill K, Shrubsole K. Prioritizing guideline recommendations for implementation: a systematic, consumer-inclusive process with a case study using the Australian Clinical Guidelines for Stroke Management. Health Research Policy and Systems. 2021;19(1):85.

50. National Statistics. Academic year 2022/23. Schools, pupils and their characteristics. 2023 [Accessed on 26/09/2023]. Available from: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>.

51. Woodside JV, Adamson A, Spence S, Baker T, McKinley MC. Opportunities for intervention and innovation in school food within UK schools. Public Health Nutrition. 2021;24(8):2313-7.

52. HM Government. Levelling Up the United Kingdom 2022. London; 2022.

53. Food Standards Agency. School Food Standards Compliance Pilot: Discovery and Feasibility Research 2024 [Accessed on 26th January 2024]. Available from: <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/innovative-regulator/school-food-standards-compliance-pilot-discovery-and-feasibility-research#:~:text=The%20purpose%20of%20this%20pilot,Standards%20alongside%20food%20hygiene%20inspections>.

54. Parallel Parliament. School Food APPG 2023 [Accessed on 24th January 2024]. Available from: <https://www.parallelparliament.co.uk/APPG/school-food>.

55. Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs. Government food strategy 2022 [Accessed on 23rd January 2024]. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-food-strategy>.

56. HM Government. Childhood obesity: a plan for action 2017 [Accessed on 23rd January 2024]. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childhood-obesity-a-plan-for-action/childhood-obesity-a-plan-for-action>.

57. Department of Health & Social Care. Tackling obesity: empowering adults and children to live healthier lives 2020 [Accessed on 23/01/2024]. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-obesity-government-strategy/tackling-obesity-empowering-adults-and-children-to-live-healthier-lives>.

58. Dimbleby H. National Food Strategy: The Plan (Part Two: Final Report) - An Independent Review for Government.

. 2021.

59. The Food Foundation. New data: Labour and Conservative voters overwhelmingly back giving Free School Meals to more children 2023 [Accessed on 20th February 2024]. Available from: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/new-data-labour-and-conservative-voters-overwhelmingly-back-giving-free-school-meals>.

60. Parsons K. Who makes food policy in England? A map of government actors and activities London: Food Research Collaboration; 2020 [Accessed on 23rd February 2024]. Available from: <https://foodresearch.org.uk/publications/who-makes-food-policy-in-england-map-government-actors/>.

61. Lalli G, Smith K, Woodside J, Defeyter G, Skafida V, Morgan K, et al. A brief review of Secondary School Food Policy (SSFP) approaches in the UK from 2010 to 2022. Nutrition & Food Science. 2024;ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print).

62. Faculty of Public Health. Good Food for Children 2024 [Accessed on 24th January 2024]. Available from: <https://www.fph.org.uk/media/zehhk0dg/good-food-for-children-full-report.pdf>.

63. Ronto R, Rathi N, Worsley A, Sanders T, Lonsdale C, Wolfenden L. Enablers and barriers to implementation of and compliance with school-based healthy food and beverage policies: a systematic literature review and meta-synthesis. Public Health Nutrition. 2020;23(15):2840-55.

64. Reeve E, Thow AM, Bell C, Engelhardt K, Gamolo-Naliponguit EC, Go JJ, et al. Implementation lessons for school food policies and marketing restrictions in the Philippines: a qualitative policy analysis. Globalization and Health. 2018;14(1):8.

65. Adamson A, Baker T, McKinley MC, Spence S, Woodside JV. Opportunities for intervention and innovation in school food within UK schools. Public Health Nutrition. 2021;24(8):2313-7.

66. Bryant M, Burton W, O’Kane N, Woodside JV, Ahern S, Garnett P, et al. Understanding school food systems to support the development and implementation of food based policies and interventions. International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity. 2023;20(1):29.

67. Rutter H, Savona N, Glonti K, Bibby J, Cummins S, Finegood DT, et al. The need for a complex systems model of evidence for public health. The Lancet. 2017;390(10112):2602-4.

68. Booth E, Halliday V, Cooper R. Headteachers’ and chairs of governors’ perspectives on adolescent obesity and its prevention in English secondary school settings. Journal of Public Health. 2021;43(2):e213-e23.

69. Johnston LM, Matteson CL, Finegood DT. Systems Science and Obesity Policy: A Novel Framework for Analyzing and Rethinking Population-Level Planning. American Journal of Public Health. 2014;104(7):1270-8.

**Appendix 1**

**Table 1. Areas for action on school food, description, example actions and tensions/alternative views**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Action area** | **Description** | **Examples of actions** | **Tensions and**  **alternative views** |
| **Catering and procurement** | | | |
| 1. Catering staff investment, training, and skills | Investment in catering staff and their training; recognition of school catering as a career to enable better recruitment and retention of staff and provision of high-quality school food | 1. Provide investment and face-to-face opportunities for skills development to boost recruitment of catering staff and provide consistency of quality (C, LA, TS, LR) 2. Improving caterers’ knowledge on compliance with the school food standards and portion sizes / make training mandatory (C, TS, LR) 3. Greater promotion of catering as a career, including higher wages, and demonstrate clear pathway to career progression – to better increase and retain number of staff (C, LA, TS, LR) 4. Sharing good practice e.g. menus and recipes of what tasty, nutritious and sustainable dishes look like and how they are made (TS, LR) 5. Bring professional chefs into school to share skills and inspire kitchen staff and school chefs (LA, TS) |  |
| 1. Integration and valuing of catering teams within schools | Catering teams integrated, respected and valued in schools, with involvement in food education and collaboration with school Senior Leadership Teams | 1. Greater value placed on school chefs’ role and integration / sense of belonging in the school (C, TS, LR) 2. Greater links between catering teams and school senior leadership (C, TS) 3. Provide opportunities for catering teams to work / interact with students, parents and school staff e.g. menu design; parents’ evenings; tasting opportunities (C, TS, LR) 4. Integrate food education into canteen offer e.g. link up menus with food technology teaching; use dining room as a learning space / lunch as an educational opportunity; cooking clubs; exploring healthy options (C, LA, TS) 5. Caterers to provide cooking clubs to students/parents(C) | 1. No time for caterers to become involved as educators (C) |
| 1. Investment in catering facilities and equipment | Investment in school kitchens, facilities and equipment to enable high quality food to be efficiently prepared in sufficient quantities | 1. Modernise equipment (C) 2. Increase preparation / kitchen space (C) 3. Adequate food storage to reduce waste (C, LA) 4. Consider impact on kitchens as part of school expansion planning (C) |  |
| 1. Support schools in the procurement of school food | Training and support on school food procurement, including negotiating catering contracts and implementing in-house catering provision models | 1. Improve schools’ ability to procure better catering, challenge inadequate provision / non-compliance with school food standards, including greater investment in Senior Leadership Team training on food procurement and business management and provision of resources / toolkit to support (TS, LR) 2. Support local economies, producers etc. through sustainably sourced school food (LA, TS) 3. LACA (umbrella organisation for school caterers) to showcase / support promotion of healthy foods / suppliers of healthy foods / drinks (C) 4. Monitoring of items marketed as ‘school compliant’ (TS) |  |
| 1. Reform school food catering provider models | Reform school catering arrangements to ensure equitable and sustainable provision of high-quality food nationally, removing the focus on profits | 1. An integrated school system run in the public interest to provide a more equitable system and facilitate healthier and more sustainable provision, with consideration of climate issues (LA, TS, LR) 2. Remove profit motive e.g. compulsory competitive tendering (C, LA, TS) 3. Reinvest profit into school food provision (C, LA, TS) 4. Consider alternative models of provision e.g. local authority-managed catering provider; all in-house; national provider (LA) 5. A baseline quality standard of catering provision (e.g. within contracts) / addressing under-performance, potentially at national level (LA, TS) 6. Updated Government Buying Standards for Food with mandatory standards for healthy food procurement; Adapt the school food procurement guidance to give greater value towards nutritional quality of food as well as cost (TS, LR) | 1. Profit margins in schools are tight (LA) 2. Recognition that one size doesn't fit all - flexibility in catering model is required (LA) |
| 1. Adapt the food offer to increase quality and meet students’ needs | Adapt food provision to incorporate healthier and more sustainable foods, increase choice and cultural diversity, and meet students’ needs and preferences relating to attractiveness, value for money and hygiene of foods | 1. Modernise menus and incorporate greater cultural diversity into offer e.g. street food (St, SLT, C, LA, TS) 2. Work on making grab and go items healthier options (St, C, LA) 3. Default offer of vegetables e.g. salad in sandwiches, side dishes (C) 4. Love and care in the cooking and presentation of creative and colourful meals (St, Pa, C, LA, TS) 5. Meet students’ needs around school food e.g. portion sizes, feeling full, keeping food hot, food hygiene, quality, flavour, visual appeal, and affordability / value-for-money (St, Pa, LR) 6. Inclusive menus / options, including better catering for dietary requirements e.g. allergies, religious restrictions, vegan, vegetarian (St, TS) 7. Caterers to adapt food offer to school population (C) 8. Reducing availability of processed foods; more variety of fruit options e.g. chopped fruit; more fresh food (St, Pa, TS, LR) 9. Greater focus on sustainably sourced food (C, LA, TS) 10. Wider choice of healthier versions of foods; more variety on menus (St, C, LR) 11. Slow and gradual removal of less heathy items from school menus (LR) | 1. Need to focus on feeding hungry children before focusing on nutritional content (C) 2. Hiding healthy foods in recipes versus not hiding – hiding provides added value to standard dishes e.g. pasta sauce (St, Pa TS) 3. Less choice but focus on a small number of equitable, affordable nutritious options that are all the same price (C) 4. Concerns over high levels of waste associated with increasing the number of healthy items available (TS) |
| 1. Changing food service arrangements to promote healthy food uptake | Design food service arrangements to minimise queuing, allow flexible payment and dining, and incorporate attractive and varied outlet types which prompt healthy and nutritious choices | 1. Provide more space and equipment and serving stations in food service areas to minimise queueing (St, C) 2. A variety of attractive outlet types to mimic wider the food environment e.g. street food / food courts, coffee shop style (St, SLT, C, LA, TS) 3. Increased use of takeaway packaging to encourage students to select a main meal and be able to take it away (C, TS) 4. Consider positioning of food to make a healthy choice the easiest choice and increase exposure to unfamiliar items (St, LA) 5. Consider number of healthy vs unhealthy options available and create a better balance (TS) 6. Improve access to clean, functioning water fountains (St, TS) 7. Better marketing of food to appeal to young people (C) 8. Provide more information on food options in advance and have system of pre-ordering to reduce queue times (e.g. using mobile phones), allowing better preparation of high-quality food (St, Pa, C, LR) 9. Staggered lunchtimes to reduce queues (St, Pa, LR) 10. Labelling food in a more visible way, including calorie labelling, ingredients, price etc. (St, Pa) 11. More flexible and faster payment systems (St) 12. System to ensure FSM allowance is spent on nutritious food / balanced meals (C, TS) 13. Providing water as the default drink; restrict sales of fizzy drinks, flavoured water, and fruit juices/smoothies in schools (e.g. water-only policy) (Pa, TS) 14. Removing bottled drinks, provide refillable bottles, jugs on tables (Pa) 15. School policies / restrictions on what can be purchased e.g. that cakes can only be bought alongside other items (Pa, LA) 16. Lunchtime activities to encourage students to use school canteen and opt for a school meal (LR) | 1. Increase offering of traditional hot, fixed, sit-down meals (e.g. 2 courses), restrict provision of grab and go style dining (to reduce waste costs associated with disposable packaging) (C, LA) 2. Concerns that limiting Free School Meal spend to nutritious foods/balanced meals may increase stigma associated with Free School meals (see Action Area 26, example l) |
| 1. Reform breaktime offer | Reform the breaktime offer so that students do not have breaktime food instead of lunch | 1. Provide healthy substantial snacks; not a replacement for lunchtime meal; widen gap between break time and lunch time to avoid filling up at break (Pa, C, LA, TS) 2. More variety of healthy snack items e.g. breadsticks, hummus, cheese dunkers, chopped fruit, peppers (St) | 1. More choice needed at breaktime (St) vs need to reduce breaktime food offer |
| **School leadership and governance** | | | |
| 1. School food policies, restrictions, and regulations | Dedicated policies and rules in schools designed to encourage healthy eating and restrict consumption of unhealthy foods | 1. Rules and monitoring relating to foods/drinks being brought into school (Pa) 2. Student/parent/staff pledge to sign up to healthy eating; teachers role modelling healthy eating (SLT, C, TS) 3. Whole school food policy including community engagement (TS) 4. Packed lunch policy (Pa) 5. Off-site policy, e.g. students need to stay in school at lunch (St, Pa, C, LA, LR) 6. Having a food champion (C, TS) | 1. Policing foods could lead to embarrassment / stigma / fear / anxiety; better to provide guidance to parents rather than have school rules (Pa) |
| 1. Support for senior leadership and governors on school food | Training and support for secondary school Senior Leadership Teams and governors on school food and school food standards compliance | 1. Training for senior leadership and governors; governors need support understanding their role in school food and on healthy eating; development of ‘health and wellbeing core competencies’ for headteachers (C, LA, TS, LR) 2. Training on the school food standards / self-monitoring of adherence to the school food standards; simplified and accessible resources for senior leaders / governors to support their implementation (SLT, C, LA, TS) 3. School nutritionist role to support menu planning, students, and parents (TS) 4. Support / templates for developing school food policy and actions on school food (TS) 5. Greater support from Multi-Academy Trusts on implementation of school food standards and leadership on school food e.g. designated role at Trust level (C) 6. Put metrics in place to evaluate the impact of actions on school food (SLT, LA, TS) | 1. Headteachers take on many roles and this presents and additional burden (LA) |
| 1. Local Authority support for all schools | Local Authority to provide support to all schools through specialist school food teams and public health teams, sharing best practice and targeting schools most in need of support | 1. Dedicated roles in Local Authorities to support school food including school food Local Authority / Multi-Academy Trust special advisors on food education, and involvement of registered dieticians (LA, TS) 2. Targeted support for implementation of national school food policy e.g. matching schools with low compliance with the school food standards to schools with higher compliance; link school national child measurement data and target schools with the highest obesity levels; review school food to identify improvements (LA, TS) 3. Incorporate more metrics to monitor the correlation of school food with student outcomes and provide an evidence base to support actions e.g. track cohorts of students with school meal uptake, what they eat (potentially using purchasing systems), attainment / success, student views etc. (LA) 4. Routine monitoring of Free School Meals uptake with Local Authorities working to support schools with low uptake (LR) 5. Reward / recognise well-performing schools (LA, TS) 6. Provide opportunities for sharing best practice / case studies (C, LA) 7. Greater strategic direction from Local Authorities on school food, including integration of school food into existing local policies (LA) | 1. Local Authorities have limited capacity to provide support, so national government support is needed (C, TS) |
| 1. National government to provide joined-up leadership on school food | National government to work together, champion school food, and develop a national strategy and programme to improve school food | 1. More cohesion across government departments on school food; Interdepartmental policy, with health, food, education, social support involved (TS) 2. Having a national strategy and lead on food education, e.g. Department for Education ambassador or Ofsted national lead (TS) 3. Convening an expert group to create specific guidance for secondary schools in developing a positive school food ethos and culture; and make recommendations on food education qualifications in schools e.g. vocational courses (LR) 4. Develop clear best practice guidelines for schools and examples to follow - make it easier to embed a progressive approach to food and nutrition (TS) 5. Introduce a Department for Education-audited continual cycle of school food improvement with publication of school food policy, annual review, planning and reporting to the Department for Education, with parents and students involved in evaluation (TS) 6. National policy applying to all schools including academies\* (TS) 7. Clearer direction and leadership from government regarding the school food standards and food education; more marketing from the government to create awareness of the standards in secondary schools and consider how adherence to the school food standards can be better measured to ensure schools are providing healthy meals for students (SLT, C, LA, LR) 8. Child-centric, outcomes-focused policy (TS) 9. The Department for Education and the National Governors Association to jointly re-issue guidance for governors on their responsibilities for school food, and consider placing a ‘health and wellbeing’ statutory duty of care onto governors (LR) 10. ‘Research review’ for nutrition and cookery lessons as has been done with other subjects (LR) |  |
| 1. Adapt and update school food standards | Adapt school food standards and update to address processed foods and sustainability | 1. Greater restriction on high fat / sugar / salt foods and drinks and processed meat; incorporate greater restriction of processed foods into standards (Pa, C, LA, TS) 2. Remove meat requirement from standards; adapt for vegan / vegetarian diets and consider sustainability (C, LA, TS) 3. Change standards to be more in-line with secondary school provision, include young people and other school stakeholders in their design (C, LA) 4. Introduce a requirement for two portions of vegetables to be included in each meal (as is already the case in Scotland) (LR) 5. School food standards should cover all food consumed when at school; and all schools, including academies\* (LA, TS, LR) 6. School food standards should be made more practical, specific and realistic to implement within limited budgets (e.g. standard on oily fish seen as unrealistic) (C) 7. Provide greater clarification on school food standards e.g. food groups; provide examples of menus and allow for some flexibility to allow caterers to choose what works for them (C, TS) | 1. Need to be mindful of different student circumstances and nutritional requirements when restricting the availability of foods (Pa) 2. Some backlash from parents on meat-free days (C) |
| 1. Monitoring of school food standards compliance | Local and/or national systems for monitoring compliance with the school food standards, driving continuous improvement across all schools | 1. Monitoring / inspection of school food standards (and potentially the School Food Plan) to ensure adherence and provide impetus to schools to adhere. Potential models include via Ofsted, local Environmental Health teams, Local Authorities e.g. traded monitoring service, nutritionists, self-audit (SLT, C, LA, TS, LR) 2. Measure baseline adherence to the school food standards and set targets for improvement; continuous measurement (LA, TS) 3. Governors / senior leadership to be involved in monitoring to increase their engagement with school food standards; link this with school food take-up monitoring (C, SLT, TS) 4. Publish performance on school food standards alongside exam results (TS) 5. Ensure compliance assessment is based on the full school day offer and not just published menus (LA, TS) 6. Following the ongoing pilot with the Food Standards Agency, government should swiftly implement a robust framework supported by sufficient resource to support schools / caterers (LR) | 1. Focus on supporting schools before monitoring (TS) 2. Local Authority enforcers don't have the time to review menus in schools (C, LA) 3. External verifiers of school food standards compliance will create additional costs - not worth it with tight budgets (SLT) |
| 1. Increase the role of Ofsted in monitoring school food | An explicit role of Ofsted in school food monitoring, including monitoring of school food standards compliance and the eating experience | 1. Ofsted to monitor compliance with school food standards and food quality (SLT, C, LA, TS) 2. Ofsted to acknowledge healthy schools accreditation (TS) 3. Having an Ofsted national lead for school food (TS) 4. Ofsted to give greater consideration to food education in inspections; Cookery and Nutrition lessons should be inspected by Ofsted with the same rigour as Maths or English lessons (SLT, LA, TS, LR) 5. Ofsted to monitor eating experience (e.g. monitoring lunch breaks) and nutritional health of students (TS, LR) 6. Ofsted should ensure that inspectors have the appropriate skills and competence in health and wellbeing to be able to assess appropriately (LR) | 1. Using Ofsted risks putting more pressure on schools and may create negativity around school food standards due to current perceptions of Ofsted; some elements of school food are out of the control of the school, but rating will be affected, so it may be seen as unfair (SLT, TS) 2. School food is not valued by Ofsted and not seen as part of their role; Ofsted officers are not trained to assess school food (SLT, C) |
| **Food environment beyond schools** | | | |
| 1. Education and guidance for parents / families | Provide educational opportunities, guidance and resources for parents on preparing and providing healthy food for children and families | 1. Education, guidance, and resources for parents / families on cooking e.g. website with recipe cards / recipes in newsletters; guidance on what to provide in a packed lunch (St, Pa, SLT, C, LA, TS, LR) 2. Educational workshops for parents / families and staff; practical food preparation skills workshops for parents / families (St, Pa, C, LA) | 1. In the past there has been mixed uptake of cooking workshops for parents (SLT) |
| 1. Address the wider food environment | Local Authorities/ government / communities to address the local food environment surrounding schools and the wider food system | * 1. Link school food with Public Health departments; wider food environment needs to be addressed e.g. planning, advertising – link with other Local Authority departments (LA, TS)   2. Scheme for voluntary sign up of food outlets to provide healthy options around schools; healthy zones around schools; restricted advertising of certain foods/drinks around schools / on public transport (St, LA, TS, LR)   3. School food as an opportunity to improve local food economies; greater engagement with local communities on school food (TS, LR)   4. Cohesive / whole systems approach to the food system and food culture (LA, LR)   5. Greater protection of school food supply chains - Support caterers to obtain better pricing from suppliers for healthier foods; address food inflation and other issues associated with supply chain e.g. lorry driver availability (C, TS) |  |
| **The food space and experience within schools** | | | |
| 1. Provide longer lunch breaks and protect time to eat | Extend lunch breaks and have dedicated time to enable students enough time to choose and consume healthier food options, and have social time together when eating | 1. Longer lunch breaks to provide more opportunity for catering staff to interact with students and encourage healthy choices (Pa, C, LA) 2. More time for eating to help students to develop positive relationships with food and social eating opportunities (Pa, C, LA, TS, LR) 3. Greater valuing and protection of mealtimes as a part of the school day and consideration of position in timetable e.g. Staff should not hurry students through lunch (St, Pa, C, TS, LR) 4. Support for schools to implement longer lunch breaks e.g. funding for schools to expand the school day to have longer breaks; external monitoring of length of school lunch (C, LA, TS) |  |
| 1. Dedicated, appealing and sociable eating spaces | Provide dedicated dining spaces that are clean, spacious and appealing to students, and that are designed to encourage social opportunities to sit and eat with friends | 1. Creation of calm, attractive and spacious dining areas to encourage sociable opportunities to sit down and eat with friends, including sufficient seating for the number of students (St, Pa, SLT, TS, LR) 2. Allowing students with packed lunches and school dinners to eat together, and those with different types of school food e.g. hot and cold (St, Pa) 3. Dedicated dining spaces for dining only i.e. not the school hall (St, C) 4. Wider variety of eating spaces e.g. study areas, outdoor areas, quiet areas, multi-sized tables / circular tables (St) 5. Consider the impact on dining spaces as part of school expansion planning (C) 6. Student-centred design in the dining room e.g. student art (C) 7. Opportunities for staff and students to eat together (Pa, LA) 8. Improve cleanliness of dining spaces and encourage students to respect them e.g. more bins (St) 9. National funding to improve school dining spaces (C) | 1. Dedicated dining spaces vs a wider variety of eating spaces, including study areas (to allow students to eat and study at the same time (St)) |
| **Priority of food within schools** | | | |
| 1. Support healthy schools accreditation in secondary schools | Provide funding and support for schools and school communities to engage with accreditation schemes relating to healthy food, aiming for all schools to achieve accreditation | 1. Funding and Local Authority / Multi-Academy Trust support for schools to achieve accreditation e.g. Food for Life, Healthy Rating Scheme, local healthy schools schemes (C, LA, TS, LR) 2. Adapt accreditation schemes to better suit secondary schools (LA) 3. Make it a requirement for schools to join accreditation schemes; link accreditation to additional funding (LA, TS, LR) 4. Schools to work with students, parents, staff, and the wider community towards accreditation (SLT, LA) 5. Accreditation acknowledged in external inspection (TS) 6. Accreditation schemes linked with training and support for leaders and staff (LR) | * + 1. Local authorities do not have the budget to commission / support accreditation schemes (LA) |
| 1. Redesign food lessons and increase emphasis within the curriculum | Design and deliver inspiring, practical food education across all year groups which aims to develop life skills and food literacy, ensuring equitable access to all students by providing ingredients without cost and sufficient facilities within schools; provide routes to further qualifications and careers in food | 1. Greater valuing, status and time for food education e.g. offer food technology across all year groups (mandatory) and deliver more consistently across the year rather than on rotation; longer food technology lessons (St, Pa, SLT, C, TS) 2. More (ring-fenced) funding for improved food education teaching facilities and equipment (SLT, TS) 3. Free ingredients to improve access to food education for all and reduce stigma (St, Pa, SLT, TS) 4. Ensure food teaching is interactive, creative, and practical (St, Pa, SLT) 5. Develop food literacy as a competency, with more purposeful life skills development in food lessons (Pa, TS) 6. Ensure recipes taught in food technology are easy, affordable, quick, and healthy, including savoury / basic main meals and breakfast, plant-based recipes, and resources, and increase exposure to global diets/foods and appeal to diverse cultures (Pa, St, Pa, SLT, TS) 7. More opportunities for learning about food growing in secondary schools, including a school garden (St, Pa, TS) 8. Redesign of the existing mandatory food education in the curriculum with a route to providing vocational qualifications; provide inspirational food education that encourages pursuit of catering and horticultural careers (TS) 9. Reinstate Food A Level (TS, LR) | 1. Food education should not be where energy is focused - focus on affordable healthy eating (TS) |
| 1. Consistent food and nutrition messaging and cross-curricular education | Integrate teaching on food and healthy eating across the curriculum and beyond, ensuring messages are consistent, and linking to wider health determinants and outcomes | 1. Incorporate education on nutrition and healthy eating across curriculum and non-curricular activities e.g. into Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education, science, maths, geography, Physical Education (PE) and assemblies and ensure consistent messaging on healthy eating across school (St, Pa, SLT, TS) 2. Improve teaching on wider mental health / wellbeing outcomes related to diet (and food growing), eating disorders and links to development and growth and long-term health outcomes e.g. cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease (St, Pa, TS) 3. Understand the perspectives of young people – what elements are important/relevant to them? e.g. food and sports performance, menstrual cycle, skin, career development, current news stories (St, Pa, TS) 4. Incorporate information on additives and sweeteners, processed foods, sugar, energy balance, special diets (St, Pa) 5. More positive framing of food beyond ‘healthy’/ ’unhealthy’ (TS, Pa) 6. Improve students’ knowledge of food systems and the impact on their food choices (Pa, C, LA, TS) 7. Teaching on how food / health relates to wider determinants of health (St) 8. Cookery clubs in schools and field trips on food (St, C) 9. Celebrations should be less focused on sweet foods e.g. celebration breakfast (SLT) | 1. Curriculums are full and teachers and students are stretched (SLT) |
| 1. Invest in educators to deliver food and healthy eating education | Invest in more food education specialists, teachers, and technicians, and provide teaching and resources for food education to all school staff | 1. Have Food Education Specialists at Multi-Academy Trust level (LA) 2. More investment in specialist food teachers and food technicians, including sufficient training places, bursaries, and recruitment strategies in place to address the current shortage of food teachers in secondary schools (SLT, TS, LR) 3. Specialist Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) qualification in food (TS) 4. Develop professional development courses to support the delivery of effective food teaching in schools (LR) 5. Access to existing resources for teaching / more structured Key Stage 3 schemes of work (TS) 6. Teach school staff about the importance of nutrition, provide training on extracurricular activities and a whole school approach to food, e.g. a specific initial teacher training ‘health and wellbeing module’ should be included as part of wider initial teacher training routes (C, LR) |  |
| 1. Increase student involvement on school food | Provide a range of opportunities for engagement with students on school food, ensuring meaningful feedback mechanisms are in place and involving them in innovative ways, including engagement with caterers | 1. Inclusion of young people / opportunities for students to feed into menus, food provision, empower students (surveys) and opportunities for anonymous feedback (St, Pa, SLT, C, LA, TS, LR) 2. Provide opportunities for students to taste new dishes / menus (St, Pa, C, LA) 3. Allow students to articulate their ideas and listen to them (SLT, C, TS) 4. Encourage good relationships between students and catering staff; opportunities for students to meet catering companies (Pa, SLT, C, TS) 5. Involve young people in designing and implementing school food policies (LA, TS) 6. Engaging students in school food in interesting ways e.g. activities week, competitions, incentives / rewards, food workshops and field trips (St, Pa, SLT, C, LA, TS) 7. Teachers as role models (TS) 8. Involve students in monitoring school food e.g. mystery shoppers (LA) | 1. Involving students in discussions does not always work, some students may not like to engage in this way (C) 2. Lack of time for caterers to provide tasting opportunities (C) |
| 1. Increase family / parental engagement on school food | Increase information for parents on school food and provide meaningful opportunities for parents to engage with schools on school food provision | 1. Engaging parents and families in school food: better communication (menus) and opportunities to experience school food and feedback e.g. catering team in parents’ evenings (serving food and speaking to parents) (St, Pa, C, LA, TS, LR) 2. Schools pledge to parents and students on what they are aiming to achieve regarding food (TS) 3. Interactions between caterers, parents, families, students, teachers, and schools, supported by a framework for interaction; empowering parents to advocate for change in school food (SLT, C, TS) 4. Access to school food menus and prices, e.g. through an app; information that reassures parents - including on special diets and allergens (Pa, LA, TS, LR) 5. Promoting school meals to parents as the healthiest choice (LR) |  |
| **Funding for school food** |  |  |  |
| 1. Review/ increase funding for school food provision | Protect school food budgets, review and reform the free school meals programme and funding, and introduce further schemes to reduce food insecurity in students | 1. Free school meals for all to drive up quality and nutritional standards, address child hunger and inequalities in education / attainment, and reduce stigma (C, LA, TS, LR) 2. Ring-fence the Free School Meals budget and/or spending on school food (C, SLT, TS) 3. Reform Free School Meals funding - a more transparent, consistently applied, straightforward Free School Meals funding allocation (C, TS, LR) 4. Widen eligibility for Free School Meals (e.g. to all families on universal credit) or provide subsidies for those not currently eligible (St, SLT, TS, LR) 5. More regular review of Free School Meals funding in-line with inflation to address the funding gap; increase Free School Meals allowance, particularly in relation to age (St, Pa, C, LA, TS, LR) 6. Free School Meals for year 7s to boost uptake of school food (SLT) 7. Removing barriers to Free School Meals registration e.g. auto-enrolment; raising awareness of eligibility and benefits of Free School Meals to parents and caregivers (LA, TS, LR) 8. Consistent cost of school meal across schools / caterers so schools don’t have to make up a funding gap (LA) 9. Increase school role in supporting family food security e.g. food banks / pantries; redistribution of left-over food (St) 10. More substantial breakfast offer (Pa), universal / targeted free breakfast offer (prioritising stigma-free approaches) (St, Pa, TS, LR) 11. Extend free fruit to secondary school students and provide free salad with meals; subsidise the healthiest items / healthy meal deals (St, Pa, TS, LR) 12. Remove remaining stigma around Free School Meals e.g. remove restrictions on what can be bought, being able to buy food throughout the day with allowance; clear pricing; ‘meal deals’; more options (St, Pa, LA, LR) 13. Provide further statutory guidance to schools on how family debts related to school food should be dealt with, to ensure that students do not miss out on access to school lunches (LR) | 1. Need investment in infrastructure for universal Free School Meals to work e.g. kitchens, staffing (SLT) |

\*Currently, the School Food Standards are mandatory for all Local Authority-maintained schools, academies and free schools, and apply to foods and drinks provided on school premises up to 6 pm, including breakfast clubs, tuck shops, mid-morning break, lunch, vending machines and after school clubs.

**Table 2. Matrix of action areas cross-referenced with source of data**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Action areaa** | **Students** | **Parents** | **SLT/**  **Teachers** | **Caterers** | **LAs/MATs** | **3rd sector** | **Lit reviewb** |
| **Catering and procurement** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Catering staff investment, training, and skills |  |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 2. Integration and valuing of catering teams within schools |  |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 3. Investment in catering facilities and equipment |  |  |  | Y | Y |  |  |
| 4. Support schools in the procurement of school food |  |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 5. Reform school food catering provider models |  |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 6. Adapt the food offer to increase quality and meet students’ needs | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 7. Changing food service arrangements to promote healthy food uptake | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 8. Reform breaktime offer | Y | Y |  | Y | Y | Y |  |
| **School leadership and governance** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9. School food policies and rules | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 10. Support for senior leadership and Governors on school food |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 11. Local Authority support for all schools |  |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 12. National government to provide joined-up leadership on school food |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 13. Adapt and update school food standards |  | Y |  | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 14. Monitoring of school food standards compliance |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 15. Increase the role of Ofsted in monitoring school food |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| **Food environment beyond schools** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 16. Education and guidance for parents | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 17. Address the wider food environment | Y |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| **The food space and experience within schools** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 18. Provide longer lunch breaks and protect time to eat | Y | Y |  | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 19. Dedicated, appealing, and sociable eating spaces | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| **Priority of food within schools** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 20. Support healthy school accreditation in secondary schools |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 21. Redesign food lessons and increase emphasis within the curriculum | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |  | Y |
| 22. Consistent food and nutrition messaging and cross-curricular education | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |  |
| 23. Invest in educators to deliver food and healthy eating education |  |  | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 24. Increase student engagement on school food | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 25. Increase parental engagement on school food | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| **Funding for school food** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 26. Review/ increase funding for school food provision | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| aNote that topics discussed and sample size varied across stakeholder groups; bLiterature review | | | | | | | |

**Appendix 2. Action areas identified as in the ‘top 5’ by Policy Interest group members (displayed in order of popularity), with responses regarding rationale and responsibility**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Action** | **Votes** | **Rationale** | **Responsibility** |
| 26. Review/ increase funding for school food provision | 8 | Much of the barriers for implementation of all of the actions relate to lack of funding. | National government to increase funding to local authorities |
| The funding system is very complex, inefficient, and is built around unhelpful incentives. Lots of other improvements could come from reforming funding (e.g. with conditions of grants) | Department for Education, Treasury |
| An emphasis on providing high-quality, healthy food for students and removal of unhealthy options from menus. This will cost more money, hence the need to review/increase funding. | Government to properly fund school food and for supply of food not to be focussed on profit. Free breakfast and fruit options available for all students. |
| Adequate funding is crucial for implementing other actions effectively. | Government authorities. |
| Ensuring every single child to have access to health, nutritious and tasty food every single day is of upmost importance. | Government |
| Without a simple, fully funded in Perpetua funding system where is the incentive for school leaders who are strapped for cash to engage? Without ongoing capital and revenue funding, auto-enrolment and ring fencing of funds little progress can be made | Government |
| Remove expectations from schools that they should be making a financial gain from operating catering services – allowing caterers focus on quality provision rather than bottom line returns to schools | Central government / DfE/ Public Health |
| 12. National government to provide joined-up leadership on school food | 6 | Entire system needs reform – difficult to see how this would happen without joined-up working. What happens when there is no collaboration? Look at the lack of FSM auto-enrolment. | Prime Minister, Cabinet office |
| Understanding the role that systems play in school food means that much of the barriers or lock-ins come from a lack of buy-in at central level. This action would enable consistent cross-government activity, which should increase budgets, provide improved monitoring systems, widen FSM entitlement, and support schools to develop policies and curriculum, advocate for food as a key part of Ofsted, and encourage whole school approaches to food (including advocating that adequate time is provided for school lunches). | National government - minister for education (though cross-party agreement would be needed) |
| Vision, innovation and tangential thinking with creative solutions which enhance schools core business of educating and preparing for the next stage of learning and life is essential | A coalition of school leaders and educators with lived experience, academics and foodies to create a flexible and manageable plan with adaptable creative pathways |
| School settings and local authorities need to be empowered to create impact on the school food environment, this requires resourcing from central government to allow schools to fund and prioritise school meals. | National government / global policy levers |
| Encourage (enforce?) publication of Food Policy and Accreditation Standards on school websites and in school prospectus | Central government / DfE/ Public Health |
| 18. Provide longer lunch breaks and protect time to eat | 5 | ‘Time’ is cited as a factor that influences food and consumption in all of our research and it comes from all stakeholders (including parents). This has become even worse since COVID and is something that we should be able to do (though links to achievement, so not necessarily ‘easy’) | National government (DfE highlighting importance of food alongside grades/curriculum), Schools - to alter time tables |
| To reduce the stress associated with eating in school (e.g. preferred options not available, pressure to eat quickly to enable clubs to be attended, separation from friends due to busy canteen environment). | Government should state a minimum lunch break duration allowing time to eat and socialise, school should ensure time to eat and take part in activities. |
| Longer lunch breaks and ensuring adequate time to eat are essential for students to enjoy their meals and make healthier choices. | School administration |
| A major reason especially since COVID that pupils are not able to have a hot lunch is there being no protected time to eat – protecting time to eat would indicate that meals are a high priority. | National government / SLT / local government |
| Young people often do without lunch or grab fast food options due to shortened school day and issues around catering facility availability/queues | Central government / DfE/ Public Health |
| 10. Support for senior leadership and governors on school food | 3 | Although I scored this lower than policies and rules, our evidence suggests that if you are able to influence the way that school leaders prioritise food, many of the other actions will follow (e.g. local policies). | Schools - support staff and find ‘time’ to attend training. Local government - support / source training, National government - funding |
| SLT and governors need a capacity to prioritise school food, if they are not supported to prioritise it then school food will fall down the list of priorities. | National government / OFSTED / local gov |
| 3. Investment in catering facilities and equipment | 2 | Investing in better facilities and equipment can lead to substantial improvements in the quality of school food. | School administration |
| Schools and caterers need the tools to be pioneers of a new school food revolution | Government money but ….. school leaders and foodie innovation to meet curriculum, logistical and school food standards needs. |
| 6. Adapt the food offer to increase quality and meet students’ needs | 2 | The food needs to be more healthy, meet the students’ nutritional needs and be appealing. | Government to devise Standards, Local Authority and Public Health teams to help with implementation, schools to demand caterers provide healthy options and caterers who order and prepare meals. |
| Ensuring that the food within schools itself are healthy, affordable and accessible for every child is important, but also placing the healthy options into the spotlight. | Schools and caterers |
| 7. Changing food service arrangements to promote healthy food uptake | 2 | Reducing queues for food by pre-ordering food and staggering lunchtimes would help students to make healthy choices and reduce stress around the busyness of canteens and having enough time to eat with friends. | Schools to implement systems to allow greater organisation of mealtimes, caters to embrace new systems such as pre-ordering. |
| Lots of food produced by caterers is not healthy but for many kids is the only opportunity to eat a balanced meal per day – school food must be seen as not just an emergency response but as improving health across the life course for children. | Caterers / schools |
| 13. Adapt and update school food standards | 2 | Updating and adapting school food standards is crucial to improving the nutritional quality of school meals. | Government Health and Education Departments |
| Ensuring that school food standards are up to date, easy to implement, and ensure a level playing field where every child gets access to healthy, affordable food at school regardless of where in the country they live. | Government and schools |
| 14. Monitoring of school food standards compliance | 2 | No point doing any of it if nobody knows what’s on the plate. If I could be cheeky, I’d join this up with (15), as schools pay attention to Ofsted so it should be involved in any monitoring. | Department for Education, working with FSA and others. Schools and caterers on a day-to-day basis. |
| Monitoring compliance to ensure that these SFS are being upheld as they currently are not by a large majority of schools. | Government and schools |
| 17. Address the wider food environment | 2 | The wider food environment surrounding schools but also the wider food system targeting children’s health needs to be addressed. | Government and food companies |
| School food alone as a policy lever will not improve the outcomes identified – reduction of poverty, reduction of ill health, increase in sustainable food environments… school food must be addressed as one lever as part of a wider food system which exists locally and nationally. | Multiple stakeholders – national and local government, NGOs, NHS |
| 19. Dedicated, appealing and sociable eating spaces | 2 | To reduce stress caused by busy canteen – some schools have limited space for students to actually sit down to eat their food inside. Mealtimes should be associated with enjoying the food and socialising with friends in a non-stressful environment. | Government/LA to fund schools to have dedicated eating spaces with sufficient room. Schools to devise ways that students can eat together. |
| School rarely have dedicated spaces or appropriate environments conducive to good food provision | Government funding, educator design |
| 15. Increase the role of Ofsted in monitoring school food | 2 | All of the Head teachers that we speak to tell us that, if it is in Ofsted, we take it seriously. However, we know that this is going to be a long battle! | DfE (though likely to need advocacy from multiple organisations) |
| 1. Catering staff investment, training and skills | 1 | Equip workforce with skills and knowledge of their responsibility to provide good healthy and nutritious food that students will want to eat and can afford. | Caterers underpinned by enforcement of Professional Workforce Standards as a minimum expectation |
| 4. Support schools in the procurement of school food | 1 | Supporting schools in procuring healthier food can have a direct and positive impact on the quality of school meals. | Local school districts |
| 9. School food policies and rules | 1 | If implemented properly, these could make an instant improvement in a school’s food culture. | Department for Education, Ofsted, School leaders’ organisations, Local authorities |
| 20. Support healthy school accreditation in secondary schools | 1 | Ensure that schools have to publish their accreditation and that students and parents are aware of the school rating. | Central government / DfE/ Public Health |
| 21. Redesign food lessons and increase emphasis within the curriculum | 1 | Food education is being increasingly diminished with the removal of A-Level and prioritisation of other subjects. It needs to be given importance too. | Department for Education, Ofsted |
| 24. Increase student engagement on school food | 1 | Young people have the immediacy of understanding what will work for them socially and culturally and will engage because they are involved. | Schools led by a great programme of mutual advantage for school leaders |
| 23. Invest in educators to deliver food and healthy eating education | 1 | None provided | None provided |

**Appendix 3. Table of findings from qualitative analysis of Policy Interest group meetings**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Action area** | **Thematic/qualitative Summary** |
| **Catering and procurement** |  |
| 1. Catering staff investment, training, and skills | The policy interest group raised concerns the pay that dinner supervisors received was *‘the bare minimum’*, meaning that the ability to *‘provide good and well qualified and trained staff, to make the customer journey for young people really acceptable’* (Senior leader) was affected.  Some members (Parent representative) believed that implementing staff investment and training would be an expensive task and that the group median scores didn’t represent their own feelings on ease of implementation for these actions.  The catering representative felt that *‘**investment in the people back of house that are making sure that the standards are fully met, and that are met in a way that provides food that young people want to eat and can afford to buy’ (*Catering representative) was important and should be the top of many people’s agendas. An investment in people to help meet the standards before or even needing to change the school food standards, was a clear message. The catering representative believed this action could lead to a better whole school ethos around school food policies, education, and investment in facilities.  Investment in catering staff could lead to ‘*innovation, creativity, and if you like measured risk taking’* (Senior leader representative), which could help to meet the needs of school pupils, however *‘probably for all the reasons of finance, catering, procurement, a whole range of other stuff’* (Senior leader) investment in catering staff is not made. |
| 1. Integration and valuing of catering teams within schools | This area was not discussed at all in the Policy Interest group meetings. Interim task analysis comments showed that some actions within this category would be easier to implement such as *‘sense of belonging’* than *‘[catering] staff involvement in teaching’ (*Academic representative*)*. Comments also highlighted the need for *‘Senior leader representative teams in Trusts and School to recognise the value added that catering staff can bring when they feel wanted and needed’* (Senior leader). |
| 1. Investment in catering facilities and equipment | Concerns around the funding to pay for investments in catering facilities and equipment were raised in the Policy Interest group: ‘*who pays for that, schools won’t be able to pay for it they really… the capital equipment is phenomenal*’ (Senior leader) and ‘*from parents’ perspectives things like catering staff investment, training, skills and investment in catering facilities and equipment, and making the eating spaces dedicated and appealing, I would have thought would have been quite cost intense in terms of huge costs to the schools or to the Local Authority or the government or whoeve*r’ (Parent representative)  Capital revenue and investment for external caterers were discussed and commented on in the interim task: ‘*In my Trust that I’ve just left we spent £4.2 million on new capital equipment, just to encourage caterers to come in, and part of the contract was that we would provide and fit and improve the catering facilities in order to allow the caterers to create food’* (Senior leader representative), *‘This needs to be fully funded both capital and revenue and ongoing while being ringfenced only for food’* (Catering representative).  Away from funding the young people felt that ‘*Investing in better facilities and equipment can lead to substantial improvements in the quality of school food’* (young person), which also was reflected by ‘*Schools and caterers need the tools to be pioneers of a new school food revolution’* (Senior leader); new and better facilities would better encourage this action. |
| 1. Support schools in the procurement of school food | This action was not discussed in great depth but Policy Interest group members did add some elements of their own experience to the discussion: ‘*I’ll just give you an example of this whereby obviously there’s lots of different types of catering contracts, but I’m working quite closely with a few local authorities, and in one of them where I’m really embedded in the team we found out this week that the finance manager was tendering for catering and they didn’t know about it. So, it was only just by chance that I was introduced to the finance manager that I found out that this was happening at a local authority level. So, I think that is an absolute pivotal moment in that tendering process where the catering and the procurement can go one way or the other*’ (Academic representative). This experience shows the current set up of procurement in many schools but also the difficulties of understanding school food procurement and the contracting around this area. This was echoed again: ‘*I think quite often school food contracts are commissioned in local authorities or in schools by people who are not well trained in school food management, or even commissioning, because sometimes they over rely of DfE procurement frameworks. So I think support for schools in procurement is provided through commercial frameworks that already exist*’ (Local Authority representative).  Interim task comments provided a wealth of different viewpoints from ‘*Upskilling business teams is somewhat feasible, but implementation (sourcing local, sustainable food at scale and cost) is very challenging’* (Academic representative), to highlighting that ‘*Competition from catering consultancies is enormous’* (Catering representative).These views demonstrate the challenge of implementing this action at the current time. |
| 1. Reform school food catering provider models | Members of the Policy Interest group demonstrated a strong interest in reforming the current catering models that can be observed in England at the current time, and felt that ‘*to reduce burdens on schools, and also to make it easier to create stringent policy around school food, that centralised commissioning is something we’re really interested in*’ (Local Authority representative).  Reforming the food catering model for schools could result in fairer funding throughout the country, as well as considering ‘*health over profit, reinvesting into school food provision, more level playing field of food quality for students*’ (Young person), but many mentioned the ‘*Problems with this are big economic issues e.g., compulsory competitive tendering’* (Charity representative) and *‘a lot of systems change needed’* (Academic representative). |
| 1. Adapt the food offer to increase quality and meet students’ needs | Although this area was not discussed in great detail, it was felt other actions could feed into the change in foods for young people. The parent representative presented firsthand concerns over the current food offering in their child’s school and the need for it to align with what they would offer their child ‘*So my son ended* *up eating pizza and chicken nuggets every day, which isn’t something that we would have provided him with in a home environment, so that really put us off. So, I think for us to think about going back to using the school meal provision,* *the food would have to be right in the first place, because I know there’s just so many competing things in terms of time that the school’s got to focus on, things like lessons, and all that sort of thing’* (Parent representative).  Linking this area to other areas such as sustainability in schools and FSM offer was suggested as a possible lever to improve the likelihood of this action being implemented: ‘*environmental sustainability and climate change as part of the wider food system? We have been shocked to learn of some schools throwing away up to 2000 plastic drinks bottles per day! This links to costs and health. Why are schools still selling sugary drinks? Water only schools (with investment to provide clean, accessible water) would mean that FSM children don't have to spend their allocation on drinks (often as part of a meal deal) too’* (Academic representative).  Interim task comments related this area to student engagement (action 24): ‘*Co-engineering and student voice essential if the invitation to eat on site is to be compelling*’ (Senior leader), while others mentioned the benefits they perceived from meeting student’s needs: *‘Increasing number of healthier options at school in all varieties (grab and go, hot meals), more inclusivity for all students, reducing processed foods, gradual removal of less healthy options’* (Young person). |
| 1. Changing food service arrangements to promote healthy food uptake | There was little discussion directly related to this action area, however, the young people offered firsthand experience to the food environments they have experience in school: ‘*I remember going into my school canteen and seeing I think it was* *11 different types of cake on sale on one day, which is just mental to think about the fact that many unhealthy options are there on one day, and then the fruit bowl was just tucked into the back, into the corner out of the spotlight’* (Young person), giving a real context to the current issues in school food provision and need for change.  Other comments from the interim activity offered Policy Interest group insight into possible changes to be made: ‘*Students pre-ordering food would reduce waste’* (Parent representative), ‘*putting healthier options in the spotlight with positioning, creating better balance of healthy vs unhealthy (priority should eventually be more healthy), healthy marketing, clearer labelling- needs transparency and to be very clear, water as default drink, lunchtime experience*’ (Young person). While others offered insight into why this action could be very important: ‘*Lots of food produced by caterers is not healthy but for many kids is the only opportunity to eat a balanced meal per day - school food must be seen as not just an emergency response but as improving health across the life course for children’* (Local Authority representative). |
| 1. Reform breaktime offer | The group did not discuss this area during the meetings. Through interim task comments the group showed support for this action so that it would *‘be much easier for students to make healthy choices’* (Parent representative). The free school meal allowance was also highlighted as it ‘w*ould also be good to specifically consider those of FSM at breaktime - as there are often restrictions to spending at break’.* (Academic representative) |
| **School leadership and governance** |  |
| 1. School food policies, restrictions, and regulations | This was not discussed in detail by the Policy Interest group. Interim task comments showed that the action was *‘physically feasible but requires buy-in from all stakeholders’* (Academic representative), and that policies, regulations and restrictions put into place could carry cost implications. However, there was strong support that ‘i*f implemented properly, these could make* *an instant improvement in a school’s food culture’* (Charity representative), perhaps suggesting that if well supported, this was an ‘easy win’.  Some worried that rules and regulations would create more stigma (e.g. rules about foods/drinks being brought into school) and divert people away from healthy options at school: ‘*Agree with a school wide policy and wanting to ensure healthier food is being brought to school’* (Young person). |
| 1. Support for senior leadership and governors on school food | A general sense of ‘abdication’ of adherence and responsibility checks by SLT when a school use external catering services within their schools was identified by the group, *‘So it’s about* *responsibility and accountability within senior leaders’ (Senior leader).*  Comments around ‘*capacity*’ of schools to deliver the actions needed around healthy school food were discussed, and Local Authorities were thought to have a role in supporting this: ‘*is the role of the Local Authority in opening up capacity for schools… supports schools to deliver basic admin around school food. So things like template letters to send out to parents and carers, notifying them about new free school meal offer, application forms, ringing school business managers and talking them through, things like till systems, and contracts with their caterers*.’ (Local Authority representative)  The senior leader representative felt that more needed to be done to link school food to behavioural and educational outcomes, to gain the support of SLT in prioritising school food: ‘*The moral argument is won in schools, what is less understood is the increased impact on social and learning behaviours, improved pupil outcomes and wellbeing’* (Senior leader). Understanding how school food can helps schools to ‘*churn out educated people who are good citizens, social beings. Food does both of that, it will change not only academic and skilled outcomes, so pupil outcomes as demanded by society, employers, and parents, but will also create employable and social beings which will have an impact on the civil and the civic society that we wish to create*.’ (Senior leader). Giving school leaders the understanding and tools to achieve this were thought to be key to the school leader representative.  However, the changes at the school-level were vast: ‘the curriculum, the design of the day, the food spaces, the relationship with food, food suppliers, producers and caterers’ (Senior leader). |
| 1. Local Authority support for all schools | The group did not discuss this area specifically during the meetings, although the role of LAs in supporting specific action areas was discussed (and highlighted in the appropriate action area). Through interim task comments the group showed support for Local Authority leadership: ‘*Public Health in local government can influence the Education and Health and Wellbeing and Planning agenda*’ (Local Authority representative), but quickly identified that ‘*Many schools have academised to escape LA intervention which many see as a costly SLA[Service Level Agreement]’* (Catering representative), with most mentioning *‘funds’* and being *‘very stretched’*. |
| 1. National government to provide joined-up leadership on school food | The Policy Interest group felt that this action was important to the success of changing school food as a whole, because *‘without that we’re going to have people who will obfuscate… we’ll have people that can hide, people that will find other priorities, so leadership is important’ (*Senior leader). However, the recognition of geographical variation e.g. *‘completely different scenarios from entirely across the country’* (Young person) brought concern around this action area being achievable without major discussions at governmental level.  *‘National government need to make child health and school food a priority****’*** (Young person) was highlighted as being a key change needed to make this action a reality. The group collectively felt that this was not high on the government agenda or ‘*high on political party priorities’* (Senior leader) which added to the difficulty of implementing this action. However, the group did recognise that *‘it’s about how we can influence with political parties that kind of thing going into manifesto or government commitments. I guess that we’re not going to get that in the current government, we’re not going to get them to suddenly change tack. But we could get them to be thinking about this kind of topic as we’re approaching the next general election’* (Catering representative).  There was identification that school food was put *‘in one of two causes, and one of them is a perceived cost-of-living COVID recovery, emergency food provision basket, and the other one is the public health intervention, healthy nutrition basket. But I think if school food is to* *be sustainable, we need to tie it into the other parts of core business of school’* (Local Authority representative). By having the government value school food at a higher level and show coordinated leadership/championing of school food, the ideas and notions around school food would hopefully change. |
| 1. Adapt and update school food standards | The group did not discuss this in depth within the Policy Interest group meetings, but a consensus seemed to be that the approach should be that the current school food standards are kept: *‘let’s meet these ones before we prioritise changing* them’ (Catering representative). It was perceived that *‘it will feel to many like moving the goalposts’* (Charity representative) if the standards were also to be changed during other plans of implementation.  Enforcing and accountability for meeting the SFS were mentioned as key actions within this area. However, some disagreed with this notion, and felt that *‘updating and adapting school food standards is crucial to improving the nutritional quality of school meals’* (Young person). |
| 1. Monitoring of school food standards compliance | The Policy Interest group pointed out that *‘monitoring and compliance though it's there as its own entity I think that covers all of the aspects of the school food system if you’re doing it properly. So, it’s not just about School Food Standards or procurement standards, it’s bigger than that’* (Local Authority representative). This suggests that school food standards monitoring should be part of a larger process of monitoring school food systems. The need for monitoring was highlighted: *‘you can have the best of intentions, but if you don’t measure it, it won’t happen*’ (Local Authority representative).  Some also felt that before bringing in better measures of compliance, *‘from a responsible service provider’s perspective there needs to be* *that investment in the people back of house that are making sure that the standards are fully met, and that are met in a way that provides food that young people want to eat and can afford to buy. So it was just everybody shouted a reform of the Schol Food Standards, but a lot of what we’re talking about here is based on a cohort that aren’t engaged with the School Food Standards, and I think that then a school that is engaging with the School Food Standards and engaging with the whole ethos of that are in the right place in terms of their school food policies and the wider education piece that they’re delivering, and that then brings the investment in their facilities’* (Catering representative). This indicates that these actions can’t typically happen in isolation and perhaps multiple factors need to be in place first. |
| 1. Increase the role of Ofsted in monitoring school food | The Policy Interest group had limited discussion about the role of Ofsted. The Academic representative member also involved in school food research presented the point *that ‘head teachers in the room that were saying, “Put it as something we need to monitor otherwise we will ignore it.”’* (Academic representative*)*, demonstrating the influence of monitoring school food through Ofsted. However, they were quick to mention that inclusion of monitoring through Ofsted *‘is going to be a long battle!’* (Academic representative).  Others had concerns that *‘Ofsted inspectors do not have the time or technical capability to include food provision in their inspection regimes’* (Catering representative) and it could likely reduce the quality of inspection and thus have limited impact. |
| **Food environments beyond school** |  |
| 1. Education and guidance for parents / families | The Policy interest group felt this was of lower priority compared to other action areas and it was not discussed in the two meetings. The group recognised the *‘effects of the wider food system makes options unavoidable for families. Knowing how to cook healthy dinner doesn’t mean you’re able to’* (Young person). Although resources could be provided to parents, such as ‘*Provide Food Tech lesson info and recipes to parents’,* (Parent representative), if wider change didn’t happen it would be a big struggle, especially selling *‘what is in it for them?’* (Senior leader). |
| 1. Address the wider food environment | Some of group felt that this action was very important to school food improvements and changes in young people’s behaviours: ‘*If we could address the wider food environment and make it better, it would have one of the biggest influences on improving school food systems’* (Local Authority representative). However, the group appreciated the challenges that this type of change would entail: ‘*addressing the wider food system is a big task and there's many cogs in that system but its impact on child health would be huge. It requires systemic change to our food system and more than just one group (e.g. government) have a role to play’* (Young person).  Some of the group rated this action’s importance relatively low within the interim task, which surprised other members of the group ‘*As a young person that’s not long left school now, has friends and family still within school food environments, but also as a young person living in this food system, and dealing with food every single day within all of the spaces that I engage with as a young person, whether that’s online, out and about on the street, at university, at school, those kind of things, it surprises me that some of those importance ratings are so low. Especially around for example addressing the wider food environment. I think we’re all here for a reason, and we all would agree that there is fundamentally something wrong with the system, and that needs to change’* (Young person).  ‘*School food alone as a policy lever will not improve the outcomes identified - reduction of poverty, reduction of ill health, increase in sustainable food environments… school food must be addressed as one lever as part of a wider food system which exists locally and nationally*’ (Local Authority representative). |
| **The food space and experience within schools** |  |
| 1. Provide longer lunch breaks and protect time to eat | The young people felt like having longer lunch breaks was essential to them enjoying and using the lunch time experience appropriately: ‘*I have 30 minutes only for lunch, and in may seem enough for year seven and year eight maybe, but you realise as you go up the years the timing just becomes even more and more stressful. Because especially in year 11, during your lunch is I guess a time for you to relax down, or just have that mental space where you’re just relaxing, not thinking about anything else, and then just being with your friends for a little while, and just trying to eat your food. Also, sometimes it’s a time where you do some revision or complete assignments or whatever* *it may be. But then what you realise is you’re having to either sacrifice your lunch, or your homework, or your revision to replace with whatever it may be. So yeah, the timing can be a big issue, and it ranges from individual to individual*.’ (Young person). They also commented on how this affected their behaviour after school due to not eating, such as ‘*stuffing myself, or just trying to eat as much as I can*’ (Young person) when they returned home.  Others in the group thought the lack of time available for mealtimes in schools showed low commitment to school food but others felt that ‘*the pressures on school leaders to deliver other things, and where are they unable to understand that good school food actually enables them to deliver the other things’* (Senior leader) were barriers to increasing school lunchtime periods. Building a stronger case for links with behavioural and educational outcomes (see 10) could improve action in this area.  Finally, the parent representative was surprised by the fact time for lunch had not been considered as a ‘top 10’ action by many within the group, ‘*So I just thought that was quite interesting, because as a parent of a child at secondary school it’s the social stuff that they mention when they talk about school food, and I think obviously all the policy and rules and compliance will feed through. But on a day-to-day basis I suppose it’s the time and the space that is quite important as well*’ (Parent representative). |
| 1. Dedicated, appealing and sociable eating spaces | The Senior leader representative member felt that *‘a degree of not necessarily naivety but gentle ignorance’* (Senior leader representative) was apparent in this proposed action. They felt the reality for many schools is ‘*The physical environments are really tricky…in terms of eating provision… historically catering facilities have been taken out of schools and those areas used for other areas. Building schools for the future programme in the 2000s and the public finance initiative didn’t really create dedicated food spaces, so therefore you’ve got multiuse spaces, which then have an impact on curriculum design, curriculum delivery, and that time and space*’ (Senior leader). To change the narrative around this feature could be tricky and action in this area is potentially costly.  Interim task comments highlighted concerns from the group about the funding: ‘*This is potentially very costly to improve’* (Parent representative) and ‘*No policy incentive or interest’* (Food Education representative), but also the benefits: ‘*To reduce stress caused by busy canteen - some schools have limited space for students to actually sit down to eat their food inside. Mealtimes should be associated with enjoying the food and socialising with friends in a non-stressful environment*’ (Parent representative). |
| **Priority of food within schools** |  |
| 1. Support healthy schools accreditation in secondary schools | This area was not discussed in the two Policy Interest group meetings. Interim task analysis comments showed the group felt that schools and *‘Senior leadership have so many issues pressing for attention, as food is a non-Ofsted area it falls down list of priority in many school improvement plans’* (Catering representative). Schools do not have to demonstrate their competency in this area, therefore the cost to implement healthy school food is not high on their agenda. |
| 1. Redesign food lessons and increase emphasis within the curriculum | Although this was not discussed in depth by the Policy Interest group, the members did mention how they thought this action could be implemented and be effective if considered with other actions: ‘*it’s important that mealtimes and social eating is supposed to be an educational experience too if done properly, and that it could be tied to the recent curriculum requirements for healthy eating education*’ (Local Authority representative), and the correct action could be ‘*Essential as this empowers young people to be independent food thinkers*’ (Senior leader). But they appreciated that parts of the action were easier to implement than others: ‘*Inspiring lessons should be easy to implement, supplying ingredients for all, more challenging to implement’* (Parent representative).  The group felt that the priority of healthy food education had been significantly diminished in secondary school settings: ‘*But also the promotion of the whole concept of healthy mental and physical wellbeing having a much higher priority in school, and that includes the education piece around this as well, which is so diminished at the moment, particularly in our secondary schools*’ (Food Education representative). |
| 1. Consistent food and nutrition messaging and cross-curricular education | This area was not discussed in the two Policy Interest group meetings. Interim task analysis comments showed that this is not a priority for schools, due to *‘Training costs’* (Local Authority representative) *and ‘many [other] issues pressing for attention’* (Catering representative).  Some Policy Interest group members agreed with the actions and stated it *‘enables pupils to make causal links’* (Senior leader), which could be important in influencing their food choices. |
| 1. Invest in educators to deliver food and healthy eating education | The Food Education representative felt that this area required more attention: ‘*We’ve got* *a big recruitment shortage of teachers currently teaching food, and it’s been cut back in the timetable essentially’ (*Food Education representative*).* While the group recognised that *‘This will help to solidify the importance of school food provision in schools’* (Senior Leader), the ‘*Senior leadership [of schools] have so many issues pressing for attention, as food is a non-Ofsted area it falls down list of priority in many school improvement plans*’ (Catering representative). However, there were good examples of best practice: ‘*caterers such as [name of catering company] have introduced award winning cross curricular food based cross curricular topics in their Beyond the Kitchen Toolkit*’ (Catering representative). |
| 1. Increase student involvement on school food | The Policy Interest group recognised the importance of ‘*co-design with young people, because otherwise they’ll vote with their feet’* (Senior leader), when approaching school food engagement: ‘*I think that to get youth view is important because they’re at the centre of whatever we try to provide and whatever policy direction it’s going in’* (Catering representative). Representing school food not as ‘*a service done to children, as in giving them school food, and seeing it from the students’ point of view about what their whole school day is like around the whole education piece that sits within that too*’ (Food Education representative). The elements could be key driver in seeing young people’s diets improve within school. Crucially, the group recognised this action as one of the key elements in a host of actions, and an action that could be influential in how other actions to improve school food are implemented. |
| 1. Increase family / parental engagement on school food | Not discussed in any elements of the Policy Interest group meetings or interim task. |
| **Funding for school food** |  |
| 1. Review/ increase funding for school food provision | As the top-rated area for action, this was discussed in depth by the group: ‘*it’s really good the median of the importance of increasing funding for school food provision, that was eight to ten, and so that was really, really strong and really positive and so that’s clear to see where everyone is in agreement*’ (Young person). The group recognised why the action of review funding may have received such high support: ‘*funding becoming higher [in the rankings] because lots of the other suggestions or ideas are interchangeable or interconnected, whereas funding is in of itself*’ (Charity representative).  The young people mentioned that ‘*literally if you talk to anyone about school food, everyone will point out that school food the prices have been raised unnecessarily, and also quite annoyingly, because the quality is still the same and the quantity is either lower or still the same*’ (Young person). This highlights the reality young people are experiencing due to the lack of funds to provide not only heathy food but a good quality and quantity of food.  The group discussed the disparity in funding across the devolved nations: ‘*English school food has got the lowest funding level coming from central government devolved through either schools or local authorities to caterers’* (Catering representative), however they were quick to highlight the possible contextual differences leading to disparities, and the need for this to be addressed: ‘*quite often those schools in Scotland may be much smaller schools and therefore the cost per head of running a service is comparatively greater than perhaps in England. But in England we’ve got a single price, and many local authorities with lots of smaller type schools, whether they be primary or secondary school, struggle to fund the service in those schools*.’ (Catering representative).  Conflicting points were made by the Senior leader representative about the ‘*notion… that schools shouldn’t expect to make a profit. Schools only try, I don’t think they expect, I think they only try to make a profit because of a lack of funding and also the need to do other things. So, I think there’s something around funding which means and requires an insistence on an increase*’ (Senior leader), which did challenge the views of some of our workshop stakeholders. Again, this then linked back to understanding the school food system, such as school food procurement and the minimum funding amount for school food.  Recognition of the school food system being influenced by multiple stakeholders when it comes to budget, including the schools, caterers, local and national government were discussed: ‘*if we’re going to focus on this funding and profits it’s more really at the level of the caterers than the schools, and we have seen some areas where schools are actually managing somehow to get extra funding to top up on school meals, but equally we’ve been to some where we know that the caterers are making meals for 50% of the money that they should be using*’ (Academic representative). The group also provided insight into sector campaigns that already existed and supported this action: ‘*There is a campaign that’s about to be relaunched that’s called the ‘Sums Don’t Add Up’ campaign which is about funding, and it comes on the back of the campaign that LACA has been leading in terms of the ‘If Not Now When’ campaign that was about introducing wider access to free food, extending free meals to those on universal credit and all of those things. But the underfunding that’s going into the sector at the moment isn’t keeping pace with inflation. So, what was already a squeezed pot is becoming ever tighter’* (Catering representative).  Ultimately it was recognised that funding increases were ‘*politically dependent*’ (Academic representative) around *a ‘funding system [that] is very complex’* (Charity representative) and currently there is a major lack of ‘*policy incentive or interest’* (Food Education representative) for politicians to act. |