EPIC
Food Study

# Promoting healthier food in secondary schools

AUTHORS: M MURPHY, A DOBELL, M PALLAN
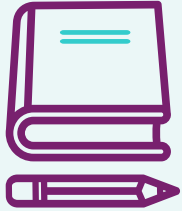DATE: MAY 2024

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

National school food policy is in place in England to support school children to have healthy diets.

- **The school food standards (SFS) aim to ensure the food and drink provided to students at school is well balanced and nutritious. Schools are required to comply with these standards.**
- **The School Food Plan (SFP) provides recommendations for taking a whole school approach to food and healthy eating. Schools can voluntarily follow these recommendations.**

Little was known about how these national policies are followed in secondary schools, so we conducted a research study (the FUEL study) to assess the implementation of the SFS and SFP. Our findings showed that schools struggle to meet the SFS and to prioritise actions recommended by the SFP. Specifically we found that secondary schools:



- **are not meeting the SFS throughout the day, especially at breakfast and breaktime**
- **struggle most to implement standards relating to the restriction of foods and drinks that are high in fat and sugar**
- **find it challenging to serve healthy food choices and meet students preferences, leading them to worry about the financial viability of the food service**
- **often have rushed and busy lunchtimes in crowded canteens, resulting in negative eating experiences for students**
- **do not give much focus to food education in a busy curriculum**
- **lack leadership on school food.**

The FUEL study identified a clear need to improve school food policy and its implementation to support healthy nutrition in secondary school pupils.

To address this need we conducted the EPIC Study. In this we aimed to co-develop and prioritise recommendations for healthier school food policy and practice in secondary schools.

## WHAT WE DID

### > PHASE 1: IDENTIFYING ACTIONS TO IMPROVE SECONDARY SCHOOL FOOD

We held 13 workshops with six stakeholder groups:

- **Young people**
- **Parents**
- **School senior leadership team members and teachers**
- **Voluntary and community sector representatives**
- **School caterers**
- **Local authority (LA) and multi-academy trust representatives**

We shared FUEL study findings and participants discussed the key issues. They then identified possible actions through written and verbal contributions.

Data from the workshops were analysed to identify areas for action on school food.

### > PHASE 2: PRIORITISING ACTIONS

We convened a group of 10 representatives with a policy or campaign interest in school food (including youth, parent, catering, school leadership, LA, charity, and academic representatives). We worked with this group to prioritise the areas for action to improve secondary school food that were identified from the workshops.

- **1ST GROUP MEETING:** Identified areas for action were discussed.
- **INTERIM INDIVIDUAL TASK:** Each group member rated the areas for action based on their importance, level of support, and ease of implementation. They then selected their top five areas which contributed to a 'shortlist'.
- **2ND GROUP MEETING:** Ratings and shortlisted actions from the interim task were presented and discussed. The group then undertook a ranking activity to identify the 'Top 10' priority areas for action.

## WHAT WE FOUND



We identified 26 areas for action on food in secondary schools through analysis of the workshop data from phase 1, supplemented by recommendations from existing reports on school food, (see annex for detail).

The areas for action were categorised into six different school food system elements:

1. **Catering and procurement**
2. **School leadership and governance**
3. **Food environments beyond school**
4. **The food space and experience within schools**
5. **Priority of food within schools**
6. **Funding for school food**

The 10 areas for action that were prioritised in phase 2 are summarised below.

---

**Top 10 ranked recommendations for action to achieve healthier food policy and practice in secondary schools**

**Note:** two action areas were ranked joint sixth

| 1 | Review/increase funding for school food provision |
| 2 | National government to provide joined-up leadership on school food |
| 3 | Increase student engagement on school food |
| 4 | Provide support for school senior leadership teams (SLT) and governors on school food |
| 5 | Adapt the food offer to increase quality and meet students' needs |
| 6 | Encourage schools to implement food policies and rules |
| 6 | Monitoring of school food standards compliance |
| 8 | Catering staff investment, training and skills |
| 9 | Address the wider food environment |
| 10 | Change food service arrangements to promote healthy food uptake |

National and local government, school leaders, school caterers, the private sector and NGOs all have a role in implementing these prioritised actions.

## POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

This research provides an evidence-informed starting point for action to effect positive changes to secondary school food. Examples of specific actions for key stakeholders that were identified by participants in phase 1 are presented on the next page.

This research also has implications for national policy, as the areas for action prioritised by participants in phase 2 link to some key school food policy areas. These are:

- The funding available for secondary school food and how this is administered, and the coverage of the free school meals scheme and the national school breakfast scheme.

- The planned pilot training programme for school governors / multi-academy trusts[1] to school senior leadership teams. There is opportunity to include training on school food standards and procurement, and creating a healthy school food culture, and supplement training with access to resources (such as best practice guidance specific to secondary schools) and local and national government support.

- The planned national SFS monitoring programme[1]. There is opportunity to include assessment of all foods and drinks offered in school in this programme, and embed it as part of a cycle of continuous school food improvement.
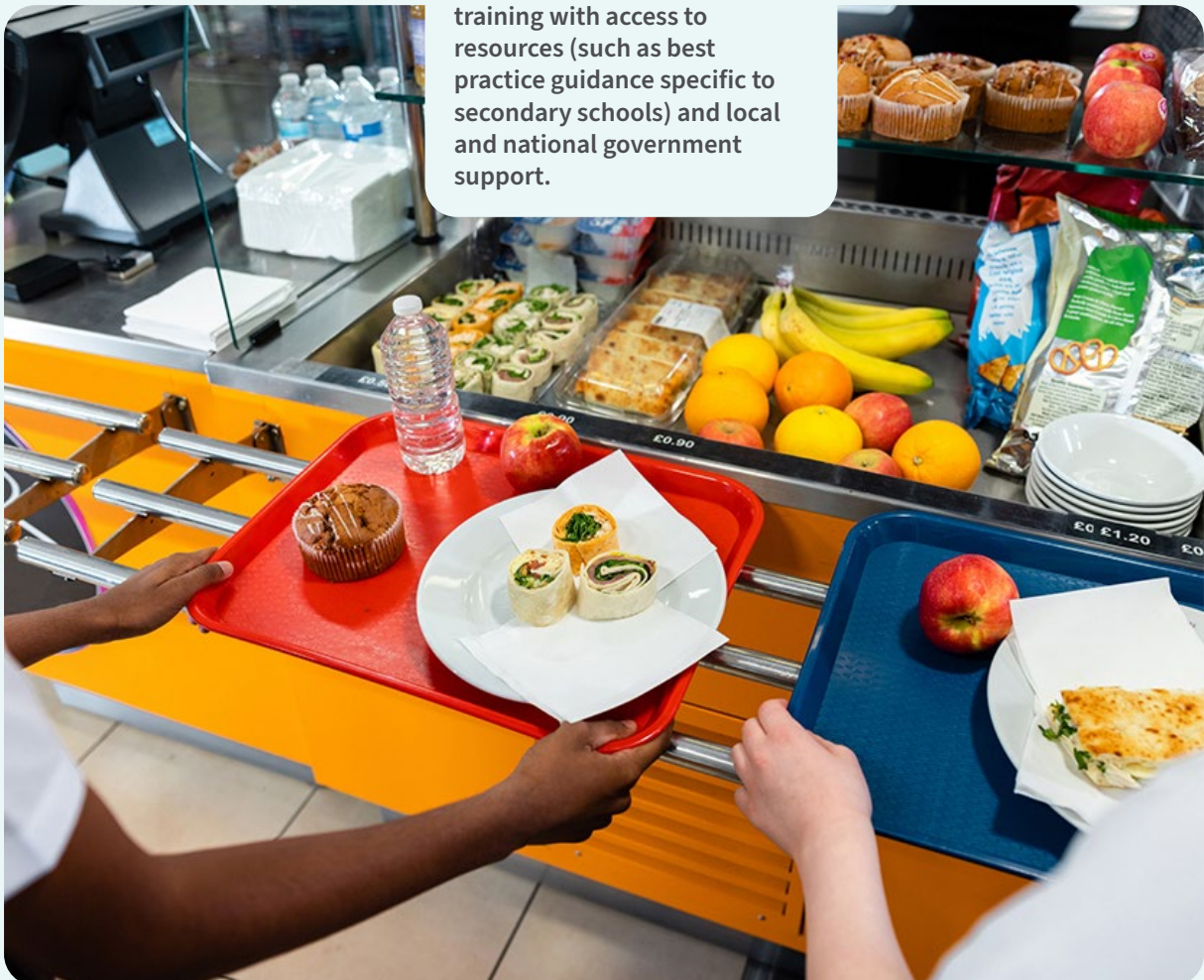


[1] Levelling Up White Paper 2022

## EPIC Food Study

# Top 10 recommendations: what actions can stakeholders take?

**Actions identified by stakeholders who took part in the research**

## Department for Education

**1 FUNDING FOR SCHOOL FOOD PROVISION**
- Free school meals: Increase allowance, extended eligibility, auto-enrolment
- Ringfence school food budgets
- Extend subsidy schemes e.g. breakfast programmes or free fruit & vegetable scheme

**2 JOINED-UP LEADERSHIP ON SCHOOL FOOD**
- National strategy & lead on food/food education
- Best practice guidance for secondary schools

**4 SUPPORT FOR SLT/GOVERNORS**
- Training on SFS and procurement
- Professional support and resources e.g. developing policies

**6 MONITORING SCHOOL FOOD**
- Audited cycle of school food improvement
- National system for monitoring SFS

## Local Authorities

**1 FUNDING FOR SCHOOL FOOD PROVISION:**
- Extend eligibility for Free School Meals
- Auto-enrolment for Free School Meals registration
- Increase school role in supporting family food security
- Support schools to deliver a nutritious free breakfast programme
- Extend free fruit to secondary school students
- Guidance to schools on handling school food debt

**4 SUPPORT FOR SLT/GOVERNORS:**
- Training on SFS and procurement
- Professional support / resources e.g. developing policies

**6 MONITORING SCHOOL FOOD:**
- Local systems for monitoring SFS

**9 WIDER FOOD ENVIRONMENT**
- Link school food with Public Health departments
- Voluntary 'healthy food provision' sign up scheme for food outlets around schools
- Restricted food advertising around schools
- Link school food to local economies and engage communities

## Private sector

**9 WIDER FOOD ENVIRONMENT**
- Voluntary 'healthy food provision' sign-up scheme for food outlets around schools
- Restricted food advertising around schools

## School caterers

**5 ADAPT THE FOOD OFFER:**
- Increase cultural diversity of menus & cater for dietary needs
- Meeting students' needs i.e. portion sizes, food hygiene, quality, flavour, visual appeal, and value-for-money
- Increase healthy food offer e.g. healthy grab & go options, default vegetable offer
- Gradual removal of 'unhealthy' food items
- Sustainably sourced food

**10 CHANGING FOOD SERVICE ARRANGEMENTS:**
- Redesign food service areas to minimise queuing
- Incorporate attractive and varied outlet types
- Environmental cues to prompt healthy choices
- Improved marketing and labelling of healthy food options

**8 CATERING STAFF INVESTMENT, TRAINING AND SKILLS:**
- Skills and SFS training, career development opportunities
- Inspire school cooks e.g. share good practice, professional chefs in schools

## School leaders

**3 INCREASE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT ON SCHOOL FOOD:**
- Range of meaningful opportunities for engagement on food (menus, service, policies), including engagement with caterers
- Effective feedback mechanisms

**6 SCHOOL FOOD POLICIES:**
- Dedicated policies to encourage healthy eating and restrict consumption of unhealthy foods
- Whole school food policies and food champions

**6 MONITORING SCHOOL FOOD:**
- School leadership and governors to monitor SFS

**10 CHANGING FOOD SERVICE ARRANGEMENTS:**
- Improve access to clean, functioning water fountains
- Advance menus and pre-ordering
- Staggered lunchtimes
- More flexible and faster payment systems
- Lunchtime activities to encourage canteen use

## All national government departments

**2 JOINED-UP LEADERSHIP ON SCHOOL FOOD**
- More cohesion across departments

**6 MONITORING SCHOOL FOOD**
- National system for monitoring SFS

**9 WIDER FOOD ENVIRONMENT**
- Address food environments surrounding schools
- Protection of school food supply chains and linking with local food economies
- Action to address the wider food system and culture

**FURTHER INFORMATION**
**www.birmingham.ac.uk/epic-study**
**epicfoodstudy@contacts.bham.ac.uk**
**𝕏 @EPICfoodstudy**

FUNDED BY
**NIHR** | National Institute for
Health and Care Research

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM