

Feeding Our Future – State of the Nations WALES*

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**This report accompanies the Peas Please Feeding Our Future report and provides further detail on the context in Wales.*

How much veg do Welsh children and young people eat?

Average number of vegetable portions eaten by children in Wales¹²:

	Wales
Secondary school (11-16 years)	1.6
Primary school (5-10 years)	1.5

School food in Wales is ...

... provided primarily by the catering services of Wales' **22 local authorities**. A small number of schools organise their own catering arrangements using contract caterers or catering staff employed directly by schools³.

... in **1,480 schools**⁴.

Wales currently does not monitor all school meals provided – free and paid-for - on a national basis or indeed the number of meals served on any particular day.

Provision of Free School Meals (FSM) in Wales

Nearly **129,000 school-age children** in Wales – 7 pupils in a classroom of 25 - are living below poverty line⁵.

The Welsh Government currently offers free school meals (FSM) to pupils based on eligibility criteria⁶. In 2020, **around 20% of the school population were eligible for FSM**, including 20% of primary and middle school pupils, 18% of secondary pupils and nearly half of pupils with special needs (45%). Most recently, eligibility was highest in the south Wales county of Blaenau Gwent (25%) and lowest in neighbouring Monmouthshire (12%)⁷.

At the 2019/20 Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) day, **take-up for FSM was approximately 77%** of those eligible across primary and secondary schools. Between 2003/04-2019/20, take-up on census day has decreased among primary pupils (84%-77%) and increased in secondary (71%-77%)⁸.

COVID-19 Impact: Increased FSM take-up

Catering managers across Wales have anecdotally observed that take-up of paid lunches is decreasing while FSM is increasing. Between March 2020 – March 2021, there was an approximate increase of 3,000 pupils eligible for FSM in Cardiff alone. By the end of May 2021, there were 14,538 pupils eligible for FSM in Cardiff, 26.4% of the pupil population. Catering teams expect this to continue to increase once the furlough scheme ends. (Cardiff Council, June 2021)

Campaigns to expand the provision of FSM are underway: The Child Action Poverty Group (CAPG) highlights gaps in FSM provision, estimating that over half of all children living in poverty (70'000) were not eligible, primarily due to the current eligibility threshold⁹.

The Welsh Government offers **free breakfasts** for all primary pupils in maintained schools if their school opts into the programme¹⁰. In 2020, the Welsh Government piloted free breakfast for Year 7 pupils eligible for FSM if their school runs a free breakfast programme.

In their 5-year *Programme for Government* announced in June 2021, the **Welsh Government pledged to continue to meet the demand for FSM resulting from the pandemic** and review eligibility criteria¹¹. In the *Final Budget 2020/21: A Budget to Build a More Prosperous, More Equal and Greener Wales*, the Welsh Government earmarked funding to expand the free breakfast provision to Year 7 pupils entitled to FSM¹². This enables students to start the day with a meal and leave sufficient funds for lunch. As with all breakfasts provided by the Welsh Government, it is an offer schools can take up.

COVID-19 Impact: From packed lunches to holiday provision

In response to the suspension of statutory education in schools in March 2020, local authorities initially provided packed lunches to be collected at schools. This evolved during 'lockdown' in response to changing guidance from Welsh Government, as well as local demands and circumstances¹³. Initially take-up was low with packed lunches collected from schools, but over time take-up of delivered food parcels, supermarket food vouchers or direct payments was high. On 21 March 2020, Welsh Government announced £7M for FSM during upcoming Easter holidays¹⁴. FSM have been provided during all school holidays since March 2020, and in December 2020 this commitment was extended through Easter holidays 2022¹⁵.

Vegetables served in Welsh schools

The *Healthy Eating in Schools (Nutritional Standards and Requirements) (Wales) Regulations 2013*¹⁶ require fruit and veg to be available in any place on school premises where food is provided during the school day. It stipulates the serving of fruit and veg as follows:

- at least **one portion** of fruit (including juice) **or vegetables** at breakfast



- at least **one portion of vegetables** (excluding potatoes) **or salad** for primary school lunches and **two portions** in secondary school lunches.

*The Healthy eating in maintained schools: Statutory guidance for local authorities and governing bodies*¹⁷, which provides practical advice to support schools in meeting the Regulations, states that:

- **Vegetables** are to be available at **every school meal**, encouraged through their visibility where food is served or sold,
- Recommends **seasonal vegetables**, and
- Clarifies that potatoes and canned pasta in tomato sauce do not count toward the standard.

According to the Welsh Local Government Association, policies around menus and service vary by local authority and by schools within local authorities, where school catering is organised by individual schools. Some schools and caterers go beyond the requirements. Service policies also vary per LA and school, with some requiring vegetables to be placed on pupils' plates regardless of preference and some allowing pupils to opt out at the service counter.

All LAs offer a vegetarian and vegan option for school lunches, with the former usually a choice on the published menu and the latter usually being provided upon request.

Wales' Veg Pledge

170 schools across Wales took part in VegPower campaign in 2021, one of these was Cwmaber Infant school in Caerphilly captured in [this video](#) for the #EatThemtoDefeatThem campaign. Cardiff Council offers two portions of veg with school lunches. The extra veg is provided in primary and secondary schools, with pupils receiving an extra portion free when they buy one portion. Food Cardiff and Cardiff's Healthy Schools Programme have developed Peas Please parents' and teacher toolkits for primary and special schools – with 65 involved so far! They have also created resources/videos promoting healthy lunchboxes.

6 individual schools have registered on the Veg Cities website, pledging actions such as building veg and healthy eating messaging into activities.

COVID-19 Impact: Reduced menus

Particularly in secondary schools, the food service was still limited to reduce kitchen capacity and enable the use of alternative dining areas at the close of the 2020/21 academic year. Hand-held lunch options were encouraged. Healthy Eating Regulations still applied, but there was no monitoring to check menus to ensure portions are compliant¹⁸.

Making healthy choices easier in schools

The Welsh Government's new strategy *Healthy Weight Healthy Wales (2020) (HWHW)*¹⁹ pledges far-reaching changes by 2030 to the food environment, including educational and community settings, and increased focus on prevention and early interventions. Within its 'Healthy



Settings' pillar, childcare and educational settings are asked to create the conditions where healthy options are more attractive, affordable, prominent and accessible. These settings are asked to help shape behaviours at this important stage in life and help to embed them into adulthood. This is supported by curriculum guidance on incorporating learning about health and well-being and health-promoting behaviours²⁰. By 2030, the policy pledges include:

- Opportunities to learn about food, physical activity, nutrition, and hydration within the new curriculum to enable learners to critically assess the impacts of healthy decisions and choices.
- A range of integrated programmes that promote healthy eating, physical activity, recreation, and school sport choices across the whole school environment.

A 2019 review found that the dining hall set-up and mealtimes in Wales do not always support healthy and balanced meals²¹: Not all schools, particularly secondary, have enough space for pupils to be seated for lunch while lunch breaks themselves are getting shorter²². This contributes to pupils opting for fast food options such as chips, bacon rolls, pizza slices, paninis, baguettes and pasta pots instead of fruit and vegetables. At the same time, it limits the social and emotional benefits of a meal with friends and the opportunity to be active.

'Food and Fun' – the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP)

The School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP), known to pupils and parents as 'Food and Fun', is a school-based education programme providing food and nutrition education, physical activity, enrichment sessions and healthy meals to children in areas of social deprivation during the school summer holidays in Wales²³.



SHEP was developed and piloted in 2015 by Cardiff Council, Cardiff & Vale Health Board, Sport Cardiff, and Food Cardiff. In 2020, SHEP was paused due to COVID-19 restrictions and funding was re-allocated to meet growing FSM needs due to COVID-19 and a Summer Holidays Activity Programme for vulnerable children and young people was delivered²⁴. Since 2021, SHEP has been 100% funded by the Welsh Government²⁵ with a commitment to expand the programme to support the recovery from the broader impacts of the pandemic, particularly in areas of social deprivation²⁶. See *Feeding Our Future*²⁷ for more details.

COVID-19 Impact: Staggered lunch, pre-ordering systems and more relaxed eating environments

A safe return to schools across 2020-2021 has required numerous changes to schools' catering provisions during 'lockdown' and return to school²⁸:

- **Staggered lunch hours** to manage smaller groups. Some now run approximately 10:30am – 2pm. In some cases, morning and lunch breaks have been combined. This is prompting schools to think differently about mealtimes in future.
- **Pre-ordering of main meals online** and cash-less systems is growing.
- **Alternative dining areas** are being used, i.e., classrooms and outside areas.

On alternative dining areas, pupils have commented on the more relaxed environment of eating in classrooms with less noise and greater social interaction²⁹.

The impact of such changes on the take-up of school meals and pupils' choices have not been reported publicly yet but are likely to be of interest to policy makers and catering services to inform future policies and operations. Break times are reviewed as part of the *Programme for Government* 5-year plan and it will be important for the impact of break times to be considered not only on school menus and nutritional quality of meals but also the dining environment and whether it supports eating balanced meals together.

Sustainability in the Welsh school food service

In 2015, the Welsh Assembly created the ***Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*** (the Act)³⁰, legislation that enshrines the rights of future generations beside current ones. The Act is an ambitious obligation on all public bodies to consider the long-term impact of decisions, to work better with communities, and to prevent persistent problems, including health inequalities. It requires work toward achieving seven goals, including 'A Healthier Wales', which aims to shift the agenda and spending to prevention and wellness. The 'Healthier Wales' goal paved the way for the *Healthy Weight Healthy Wales* strategy discussed above.

Furthermore, the 5-year *Programme for Government* includes the plan to develop a Wales Community Food Strategy, as part of the government's green transformation, creating the possibility to foster local supply chains for school meals. In Camarthenshire, the local council alongside local organisers are working on an experimental project to increase the number of local or regional food businesses supplying schools and the wider public sector. See *Feeding Our Future*³¹ for details.

Beyond the School Gates

As elsewhere in the UK, research in Cardiff in 2018 has found an association between deprivation, school location and hot food outlet density, with hot food outlets are more likely (78%) to be located near a school in areas of deprivation or higher childhood obesity³². In 2019, Cardiff Council's Food Strategy committed to produce a planning note around fast food planning restrictions and considering saturation limits for areas and exclusion zones around schools³³.

The *Healthy Weight Healthy Wales* strategy also pledges far-reaching changes over this decade including to the food environment, including educational and community settings. Plans include:



- A ban on advertising, sponsorship, and promotion of foods high in saturated fat, sugar, and salt in public spaces, including in and around schools.
- Limits placed on the establishment of hot food takeaways around schools and communities.
- An increase in the promotion of healthier food and drink across a range of community settings such as leisure, cinemas, and community centres.

Consultations on the Food Environment as part of the HWHW strategy are pending and likely to start in autumn 2021.

The wider policy environment for school food provision

The Welsh Government advocates a whole-school approach to healthy eating which recognises that simply providing healthy food and drink is not enough to change eating behaviours. Policies for school meal nutritional standards in Wales started their development in 2006 with the Appetite for Life Consultation which led to a two-year action research project and subsequent legislation³⁴:

- The **Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure 2009**³⁵ requires local authorities to promote healthy eating and drinking by pupils in maintained schools, encourage the take-up of school meals and FSM whilst ensuring that entitled pupils receive them and that their identity is protected.
- The **Changing of School Session Times (Wales) Regulations 2009**³⁶ govern the process by which schools can change times, including lunch breaks. The Welsh Government's 5-year *Programme for Government* announced in June 2021 committed to review and explore reform of the structure of the school day, allowing time for more nutritionally balanced meals rather than grab-and-go options.
- The **School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013**³⁷ places a duty on local authorities to provide free breakfast on school days for pupils in maintained schools if requested by the school. All pupils who request breakfast are entitled to receive it.

The Healthy Eating in Schools (Nutritional Standards and Requirements) (Wales) Regulations 2013³⁸ (the Regulations) set standards for breakfast clubs and school lunches as well as food and drink requirements throughout the school day. They also specify appropriate actions to promote healthy eating and drinking, and place healthy eating and drinking within the context of sustainable development. The Regulations are due to be reviewed as part of the commitments of the Government's Healthy Weight Healthy Wales strategy.

¹ It is worth noting that the sample sizes for children in Scotland and Wales are smaller than for England and Northern Ireland.

² NDNS, years 5-11 combined, 2012-2019. Waves were combined to increase sample sizes.

³ Thomas G. FSM responses to COVID-19 and the recovery of school catering services in Wales. Presentation delivered at the July 2020 LACA Wales meeting, Cardiff; 2021.

⁴ National Statistics. Schools' census results: as at January 2020 [Internet]. GOV.WALES. 2020 [cited 2021 Jun 1]. Available from: <https://gov.wales/schools-census-results-january-2020>

⁵ <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/wales-over-half-children-poverty-missing-out-free-school-meals>

⁶ Welsh Government. Developing new eligibility criteria for free school meals under Universal Credit-Summary of a Draft Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) Problem under consideration and rationale for intervention

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