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WORKING PAPER

# School Meals Case Study: Northern Ireland

Prepared by the Research Consortium for School Health and  
Nutrition, an initiative of the School Meals Coalition

**Submitted by:**

Dr Sinéad Furey, Ulster University

Professor Jayne Woodside, Queen's University Belfast

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# Country Profile

## Population and economics

Table 1 : Key data on population and economic indicators

Total population	Total number of population aged 5-19	Proportion of population employed in agriculture sector	Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita
1,903,100 <sup>1</sup>	364,600 (19.16% of population) <sup>2</sup>	2.1% of population <sup>3</sup>	30,363 USD <sup>4</sup>

## Education

In Northern Ireland (NI) there is government-funded pre-school attendance on a part-time basis. NI pupils then attend primary school from years 1-7 and post-primary school from years 8-12, when they complete GCSEs. Those who want to go on to study for A-levels attend post-primary school for a further two years (years 13-14), or they can choose to study the more vocationally centred, applied advanced level exams or BTecs, usually at further education colleges.<sup>5</sup> The education system and national curriculum in NI is similar to England and Wales but does have some important differences, e.g. religion still plays a large part, there are no SATs, the year descriptions and age cut-offs for year group allocation differ and there is academic selection for post-primary schools.<sup>6</sup>

There are **172,325** pupils in primary schools (years 1-7) and **151,901** pupils enrolled in post-primary schools. There are approximately **29,400** pupils in sixth forms in schools, which represents **64%** of all 16–17-year-olds in NI.<sup>7</sup> The overall attendance rate for primary, post-primary and special schools in the 2020/21 academic year was **94.6%**.<sup>8</sup> A total of **91%** of three-year-olds are enrolled in funded pre-school education.

## Food security, nutrition and health

### ➤ Stunting

*NI-specific data not available – see England case study which reports UK data*

### ➤ Obesity

Department of Health Survey (NI) 2019/20<sup>9</sup> found that:

- 20% of children (ages 2-15) were overweight
- 6% of children (ages 2-15) were obese

### ➤ Micronutrient deficiency

*NI-specific data not available – see England case study which reports UK data*

<sup>1</sup> NISRA, 2022. Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/population/mid-year-population-estimates>

<sup>2</sup> NISRA, 2022. [Available here.](#)

<sup>3</sup> DAERA, 2021. [Available here.](#)

<sup>4</sup> ONS, 2022. [Available here.](#)

<sup>5</sup> NISRA, 2022. [Available here.](#)

<sup>6</sup> NI Assembly, 2016. [Available here.](#)

<sup>7</sup> NISRA, 2022. [Available here.](#)

<sup>8</sup> NISRA, 2022. [Available here.](#)

<sup>9</sup> NI Department of Health, 2020. [Available here.](#)

- **Food insecurity:** 18% of respondents in the Food and You 2<sup>10</sup> survey were food insecure (i.e. had low or very low food security) in NI. This was higher in households with children but data were only given for the whole UK sample, not by region.

## Design and implementation of school feeding programmes

### Programme objectives

School meals are acknowledged to play a pivotal role in maintaining and improving child health and wellbeing.<sup>11</sup> England established compulsory food standards in April 2001, but it was not until 2007 that nutritional standards were fully in place in NI (see Legal Framework and Policy Evolution section). Every school is required to have a school food and nutrition policy which adopts the principle of consistency to reinforce healthy eating and healthy lifestyle policies. The Department of Education (DE) in NI published whole school food policy guidelines in 2013, intended as an overarching policy advocating a ‘whole-school approach’ to all food provided and consumed in schools and developing knowledge and skills in relation to healthy eating and lifestyles.<sup>12</sup> The Policy also recognised the possibility that, for some children, the school meal represented perhaps the only, or main, meal received that day. Alongside this, DE provided additional funding to increase the minimum expenditure on the food content of meals, provide equipment for healthier cooking methods, and provide training and support to catering staff as more nutritious meals cost more to produce. The focus is now moving towards the integration of health and sustainability concerns into school meal policies.

### Targeting and coverage

Meals in all grant-aided schools in NI are provided by the Education Authority’s Catering Service. The service produces 180,000 meals daily, with meals served to children of all ages from pre-school to post-primary and for those attending special schools. Meals are freshly cooked in schools each day and special dietary requirements are catered for where possible. The meals are planned by catering supervisors with oversight from the Food in Schools Co-ordinator and therefore there is regional variation across schools. Some schools have School Councils and children and pupils may have some input into menus.

In respect of free school meal (FSM) entitlement, children are eligible to receive FSM if their parents are in receipt of a means-tested benefit such as Income Support; Income Based Jobseeker’s Allowance; Income Related Employment and Support Allowance; Guarantee Element of State Pension Credit; Child Tax Credit or Working Tax Credit with an annual taxable income of £16,190 or less; Universal Credit and have net household earnings not exceeding £14,000 per year. Where parents are Asylum Seekers supported by the Home Office Asylum Support Assessment Team (ASAT); or if their child has a statement of special educational needs and is designated to require a special diet their children are also eligible to receive FSM.<sup>13</sup>

The most up to date data for school lunch uptake were published in 2021 based on data from 6 November 2020 (a single Census Day is conducted each year). These data showed that school meal

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<sup>10</sup> Food Standards Agency, 2022. [Available here.](#)

<sup>11</sup> NI Department of Education, 2013. [Available here.](#)

<sup>12</sup> NI Department of Education, 2013. [Available here.](#)

<sup>13</sup> Education Authority, 2022. [Available here.](#)

uptake level by pupils present for lunch on census day was 52.3%. Pupils from the least affluent schools (as measured by FSM entitlement) were more likely to take a school meal, rather than make other lunch arrangements, with uptake increasing as the level of FSM entitlement increased. The overall percentage of children entitled to FSM in 2020-21 was 28.4%, with uptake of FSM in those who are eligible standing at 74.9%.<sup>14</sup>

The Departments of Education and Health provide a supporting framework to oversee implementation of the Food in Schools Policy. This is led by the Food in Schools Forum and supported by a regional Food in Schools Co-ordinator.

## Meal type

Schools in NI provide lunch every teaching day,<sup>15</sup> defined as a meal which is adequate in quantity and quality so as to be suitable as the main meal of the day for a pupil. In addition, there may be food in schools other than lunch, including provision of breakfast, vending machines, tuck shops and after-school club meals. Nutritional Standards apply to all meal and food provision, although non-lunch provision is guided via a different policy.<sup>16</sup> Children are allowed to bring their own food into school in the form of a pack lunch, and guidance exists on what it should contain, although the level of monitoring varies between schools.<sup>17</sup>

## Nutritional norms

NI's nutritional standards were realized in the framework: *Catering for Healthier Lifestyles*<sup>18</sup> wherein the recommendations were based on the categories of the then "*Balance of Good Health*" (now *Eatwell Guide*).<sup>19</sup> This broadly means ensuring the provision of a balanced diet with plenty of variety and enough energy for growth and development; plenty of starchy (carbohydrate-containing) foods such as bread, rice, pasta and potatoes; plenty of fruit and vegetables; moderate amounts of milk products; moderate amounts of meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein; not eating too many foods containing a lot of fat, especially saturated fat; and not having sugary foods and drinks too often. Essentially, the NI school lunch standards are food-based standards that regulate the minimum and maximum frequency with which foods should be served on school lunch menus with accompanying cooking and serving tips and recommended portion sizes.

Compliance with the Nutritional Standards for School Meals means that the vast majority of meals offered to pupils are freshly cooked using fresh, traceable local produce. They further require that children should have access to a variety of foods from each food group over each week's menu with associated minimum and maximum allowances: *Bread, Potatoes, Rice, Pasta, Noodles and Cereals; Fruit and vegetables; Milk and milk products; Meat, fish and alternatives; Foods containing fat and foods containing sugar*; and access to free, fresh drinking water as a healthy alternative to sugary drinks.

The standards were rolled out to schools from the autumn term of 2005 after a successful pilot in 2003-2004 across 100 schools and finalised nutritional standards introduced in 2007.<sup>20</sup> There was a consultation regarding updating the nutritional standards in January 2020,<sup>21</sup> although this has yet to pass into law.

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<sup>14</sup> NI Department of Education, 2022. [Available here](#).

<sup>15</sup> Public Health Agency, 2009. [Available here](#).

<sup>16</sup> Public Health Agency, 2009. [Available here](#).

<sup>17</sup> Public Health Agency, 2009

<sup>18</sup> NI Department of Education, 2002

<sup>19</sup> Public Health England, 2016

<sup>20</sup> Public Health Agency, 2009. [Available here](#).

<sup>21</sup> NI Department of Education, 2020. [Available here](#).

## Food procurement

School meals procurement in NI is bound by public sector procurement rules and as such all requirements are tendered and publicly advertised via eTenders NI. The *Procurement Principles* include Accountability; Competitive supply; Consistency; Effectiveness; Efficiency; Fair-dealing; Integration; Integrity; Informed decision-making; Legality; Responsiveness; and Transparency.<sup>22</sup>

The Education Authority in NI has 12 food contracts that cover 640 production kitchens across NI. These allow kitchens to purchase a broad range of products to freshly prepare the nutritionally balanced meals, compliant with the Nutritional Standards. Procurement policy requires a combination of quality and value – more recent tenders include a weighting for social value. The NI Executive has approved this Policy which mandates that from 1 June 2022 tenders must include a minimum of 10% of the total award criteria to social value. In practice, this means that the Education Authority is looking at having more small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in its supply chain and improving the sustainability of the supply chain. This can be done by developing sourcing strategies which are aimed at shortening supply chains; and encouraging the use of alternative products which are manufactured/produced locally. For example, the school meals' meat supplier is a NI SME and all fresh red meat is from the island of Ireland.<sup>23</sup>

## Legal framework and policy evaluation

School meals in NI are legislated under Articles 58 and 59 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, as amended.<sup>24</sup> This Order requires the Education Authority for all grant-aided schools and Boards of Governors of Voluntary Grammar Schools and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools to provide milk, meals and other refreshments and the facilities to consume them, in accordance with arrangements approved by DE. Milk shall be provided free of charge or subsidised and school food must comply with the Nutritional Standards for school lunches and other food and drink in schools.<sup>25</sup> A cross-Departmental taskforce, Fit Futures,<sup>26</sup> reported its concern over childhood nutrition and childhood obesity rates in NI in 2006 and stated the importance of healthy school settings, calling for a Food in Schools programme to be established - a resourced, inspected programme introducing food-based standards for all food in schools. Its successor, the obesity prevention framework, A Fitter Future for All, launched in 2012 and was updated in 2019, re-iterating the importance of monitoring and implementing the Food in Schools Policy, alongside other initiatives to increase the uptake of school meals, and healthy breaks schemes in schools.<sup>27</sup>

Nutritional Standards were piloted in NI in 2003/4 and made mandatory from autumn 2005 in their original guise as Catering for Healthier Lifestyles.<sup>28</sup> In 2007 this was succeeded with Nutritional Standards for School Lunches School Food: Top Marks<sup>29</sup> and its counterpart, Nutritional Standards for Other Food and Drinks in Schools<sup>30</sup> in 2008. There was a consultation on updating the Nutritional Standards in January 2020, although this has yet to pass into law.

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<sup>22</sup> NI Department of Finance, 2022. [Available here](#).

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication from Emma Hollywood, Procurement Lead in Education Authority (21.10.22)

<sup>24</sup> NI Department of Education, 2022. [Available here](#).

<sup>25</sup> NI Department of Education, 2017. [Available here](#).

<sup>26</sup> NI Department of Health, 2006. [Available here](#).

<sup>27</sup> NI Department of Health, 2019. [Available here](#).

<sup>28</sup> NI Department of Education, 2001. [Available here](#).

<sup>29</sup> Public Health Agency, 2009. [Available here](#).

<sup>30</sup> Public Health Agency, 2009. [Available here](#).

The Food in Schools Policy guidelines<sup>31</sup> originated in 2013, intended as an overarching policy advocating a ‘whole-school approach’ to all food provided and consumed in schools and developing knowledge and skills in relation to healthy eating and lifestyles.

## Costs, benefits and budgeting

### Cost of implementation

The NI school year has 200 days (40 weeks), including five staff training days.<sup>32</sup> The average cost of a school meal is between £2.50 (\$2.87) and £2.80 (\$3.21) per day<sup>33</sup> and the actual cost of the raw ingredients to produce the meal is around 70p (\$0.80). The vast majority of the cost is made up of staffing costs and maintenance of school canteens.<sup>34</sup> FSMs are funded from the block grant, the amount given by the UK Treasury to fund public services in NI. Over 98,800 pupils in NI are entitled to FSM, which represents around 30% of all pupils. Since the Coronavirus pandemic, there has been the extension of a direct cash transfer to support families in receipt of a FSM outside of the school term at a cost of £26.7 million per year.<sup>35</sup>

### Financing

School meals in NI are legislated under Articles 58 and 59 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, as amended, wherein it states that the charge for a school lunch to a paying pupil should be sufficient to fully recover the variable costs and make a contribution towards fixed costs. The charge is to be determined by the Education Authority, with standardisation of prices across all regions and any relevant targets set by DE. Where the Education Authority operates a cafeteria system in a post-primary school the maximum monetary value of a free meal shall be determined by the Authority.<sup>36</sup> FSM entitlement changed throughout the UK with the implementation of Universal Credit. In NI, the net earnings threshold is £14,000 (NI Direct 2020) which is higher than the rest of the UK and the Food Foundation (2020) has called for the extension of FSM by applying the income threshold of £14,000 per year used in NI to the rest of the UK to allow more children to qualify.

More recently (during Covid-19 restrictions including school closures), DE in NI announced blanket coverage of a cash substitute paid directly to parents’ bank accounts to replace FSM entitlement during term-time lockdown and the school summer holidays. This approach has been lauded as progressive, with no restrictions on use. Families received £2.70 per child per day for each day of term the schools were closed, payable on a fortnightly basis, with first payments reaching 96% of eligible families by end of March 2020. Most recent data confirm that families in receipt of FSM (102,000 children - 30% of school children) received "holiday hunger" payments of £27 each fortnight over the 2022 school summer holidays and it has been confirmed that this payment will continue until March 2023.<sup>37</sup>

## Monitoring and evaluation

School food standards have been monitored variously by school inspectors, Nutritional Associates, school meal advisors, catering staff and the Public Health Agency (PHA) in NI. The newly introduced nutritional standards were first monitored by the Education and Training Inspectorate in 2007,

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<sup>31</sup> NI Department of Education and Department of Health. [Available here.](#)

<sup>32</sup> NI Direct, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/school-terms-and-school-closures>

<sup>33</sup> Education Authority, 2022

<sup>34</sup> NI Department of Education. [Available here.](#)

<sup>35</sup> NI Assembly, 2022. [Available here.](#)

<sup>36</sup> NI Department of Education, 2022. [Available here.](#)

<sup>37</sup> BBC News, 2022. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-63321546>

concluding that, whilst a majority of schools were making good, or very good, progress towards achieving the food-based nutritional standards, in number of important areas of menu planning standards were not being met e.g. frequency of availability of fried potato products and garlic bread, and the extent to which menus were balanced nutritionally.<sup>38</sup> A later evaluation of progress towards the revised nutritional standards for school lunches (introduced 2007) and standards for other food and drinks in schools (2008) implementation reported that, whilst most schools were making outstanding, or very good, progress towards achieving aspects of the standards, a number of concerns still remained, e.g. high frequency and availability of deep-fried foods or other high fat products; availability of lower-fat desserts with high fat foods; use of high fat/sugar toppings; and the need for competitive marketing and attractive presentation of healthier options on days when meat products are available.<sup>39</sup>

From 2010, monitoring of nutritional standards was delegated to the Education Authority. A 2014 study concluded that compliance with standards around food and drinks sold in vending machines and tuck shops was much weaker than in canteens, and more regular monitoring of school activity in this area needed to be introduced, considering the role of school catering service and what additional sanction (if any) could be applied to schools that contravene standards. A further evaluation found that compliance with the nutritional standards for school lunches increased from 66% in 2008 to 69% in 2012; while compliance with the nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in schools had increased from 41% in 2008 to 52% in 2012.<sup>40</sup> A lack of effective monitoring was also reported, with no external body responsible for ensuring schools adhered to the nutritional standards. Those who participated in focus groups reiterated the importance of monitoring in order to maintain the momentum of progress to date.

In terms of children's and parents' involvement in evaluating school food policies, parents' opinions on food in school policies was explored in 2016. Almost all participating parents (94%) supported healthy eating rules in school; 80% of parents agreed that schools should only provide healthy meals and snacks for pupils. A similar number (77%) believed there should be no fizzy drinks in school, although only 43% believed that schools should have an outright ban on confectionery. Only 33% had heard of the nutritional standards for school lunches, and 27% knew about nutritional standards for other food and drinks sold in schools. Parents of primary school-aged children were more likely to know (78%) that there were general restrictions on certain foods within their child's school compared to just 48% of parents of post-primary children.<sup>41</sup>

## Lessons learned and best practices

- Food in Schools Forum allows inter-departmental dialogue
- Covid-19 pandemic provision (agility and direct cash transfer mechanism)
- FSM eligibility threshold higher than rest of UK
- Food in Schools policy promotes Whole School Approach to food
- Updating of nutritional standards

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<sup>38</sup> Education and Training Inspectorate, 2007, pp.2-4

<sup>39</sup> Education and Training Inspectorate, 2010 pp2-4

<sup>40</sup> Public Health Agency, 2016. [Available here.](#)

<sup>41</sup> Public Health Agency, 2016. [Available here.](#)



## Challenges

- Procurement (flexibility)
- Sustainability/food waste
- Limited (independent) monitoring/data collection
- Encouraging leadership to prioritise school food (variation in quality of offering/culture)
- Rising food costs/funding constraints
- Encouraging uptake of school meals in general/FSM
- Implementing Whole School Approach policy
- Inequalities (FSM extension to eligibility/universal?) and security of FSM outside of school terms funding to reduce holiday hunger and learning loss

## Related resources

- [Department of Education, 2001 Catering for Healthier Lifestyles](#)
- [Department of Education, 2013 Healthy Food for Healthy Outcomes](#)
- [Department of Education, 2022 School Milk and Meals Background](#)
- [Public Health Agency, 2019 Are You Packing a Healthy Lunch?](#)
- [Public Health Agency, 2009 Nutritional Standards for School Lunches - A Guide for Implementation](#)
- [Public Health Agency, 2009 Nutritional Standards for Other Food and Drinks in Schools - A Guide for Implementation](#)

# Corresponding authors

**Dr Sinéad Furey**

Ulster University Business School

[ms.furey@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:ms.furey@ulster.ac.uk)

**Professor Jayne Woodside**

Centre for Public Health

Queen's University Belfast

[j.woodside@qub.ac.uk](mailto:j.woodside@qub.ac.uk)

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