

School Meals Scrutiny Review

Parents Responses to Request for Feedback on School Meals

There were 17 responses received from parents/grandparents of at least 35 children, assuming two children in the family if respondents referred to their children but did not give a number. 8 of these families have three or more children. 4 families (approximately 10 children) either were currently in receipt of free school meals or had been at some point. Replies include the views and experiences of children as well as parental perceptions and preferences for the content and organisation of school meals. 10 primary schools were identified, 3 secondary and 2 respondents did not name the schools.

As schools make their own arrangements as to how their school meals service runs, and provision can vary according to the size of school, there was a wide range of topics covered. However, the main themes were about choice and flexibility:

- Cost: nearly half (8) of the replies found meals unaffordable, rather than too expensive (4). Some were willing to pay for two or three meals each week but could not afford any more. Most children generally liked the meals provided (9). Requiring lump sum payment in advance was identified as a barrier by three respondents at two primary schools, requiring one month and half a term respectively. Two of the three respondents on secondary schools felt secondary prices were too high.
- Choice: irrespective of whether someone was paying for a meal, parents and their children wanted to be able to have a real choice of food if it is advertised. Insufficient provision of popular choices was mentioned by 6 respondents. Whilst parents wanted children to be encouraged to make healthy choices (3) and eat unfamiliar vegetables (2), parents did not want their children to be distressed by a meal that they did not like, did not agree with them or would be wasted. One parent who had been in receipt of free meals wanted the optional element to be highlighted. Sandwiches as a default choice in primaries were suggested (4).

- Secondary lunchtime arrangements: 2 of the 3 responses on secondary schools highlighted long queues and therefore insufficient time to eat, which was also an issue at the third school which only had a small dining area. Expense was an issue at two secondary schools, with parents feeling obliged to give money for drinks and breaks as well as dinner money.
- Primary lunchtime arrangements: lunch is seen as being a sociable time for children: not being able to sit with friends who do not have a school meal was identified as a barrier (3) at two primary schools, and a deterrent to having a free school meal (1). One (paying) parent described not being able to sit with friends as a “huge issue... many arguments”. Not having a sandwich option in some primary schools for free meals was also a barrier if children were allowed to eat their sandwiches outside in the summer (1). Sandwich options were requested as a pre-selectable choice (4). Some parents (3) who had mentioned affordability objected to schools not allowing daily or weekly flexibility with meals – either having to choose when to have a meal a month or half a term in advance (3), have a meal every day or not at all (1) and therefore miss out on Christmas lunch or theme days.
- Online/top up card payments: respondents wanted this method in 6 schools for convenience and security but did not have it. The three secondary schools had cashless, with some (2) liking the anonymity it gave for free school meals and the other objecting that the school did not use their cashless system for school meals.

One respondent suggested publicising the benefits of registering for free school meals in that older children may get assistance with buying course books and travel to universities, as well as the pupil premium benefit to the school.

All responses have been replied to, thanking them for their feedback and responding to their issues, which will be raised with the named schools.