

STUDENTS' VOICES
ON THE SCHOOL
FOOD STANDARDS





About Bite Back 2030

Bite Back 2030 is a youth-led movement campaigning to transform the food system to put child health first. That means healthy schools, healthy screens and healthy streets for every child, no matter where they live. Our mission is to halve childhood obesity by 2030, and to close the inequality gap that sees children from the most deprived areas more than twice as likely to be living with obesity as those from the least deprived areas.



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Executive summary

Young people spend 190 days of the year in school, and what they eat there is incredibly important. School meals significantly improve educational outcomes and they provide access to nutritious meals for the millions of children experiencing food insecurity.¹²³ School is also the ONLY place where we can make absolutely certain all children, no matter where they live, are getting a decent meal.

Young people are the ones who really know what's going on with school food – they eat it every day! And yet theirs is a seldom heard voice in conversations about school food. At Bite Back 2030, we're working to change that: this report brings to the fore young people's big ideas and hopes for school food.

Over summer 2021, through ten panel discussions that brought together young people aged 13-18 from across England, we heard about what the school food experience can really be like. The findings are worrying; although this report may seem to be overwhelmingly negative, it is a true reflection of what was said.

"The change I want to see at my school is for students to have equal access to a good amount of food that is affordable; both students who do and don't receive free school meals."

Youth panellist, 16

A number of insights suggest that **the School Food Standards are routinely not being upheld**, with participants talking about Skittles and other confectionery on offer, and fried foods and processed meats being served more than twice a week. Participants also said that **healthier options typically cost more**; and these are often excluded from promotions such as meal deals. **Pupils who receive free school meals often experience great injustice**, as their allocation might mean they can only afford the cheapest option, or they are served a smaller portion.

A stand-out finding from these panels is the sheer variety of experiences secondary school pupils have when it comes to school food. **Young people's**

experiences are vastly different from school to school.

Some lucky students have ended up at schools that prioritise nutrition, while others are stuck in canteen systems that are not equipped to put the health of pupils front and centre. Listening to the voices of young people, the need for reform couldn't be clearer. We therefore make several recommendations to schools, caterers, and the government. But there is one clear priority:

Schools and caterers should follow the School Food Standards, and the UK government should put in place an effective accountability mechanism to ensure that the quality of food served in school is actively monitored.

"It would be nice for my school to do a review in general, to sit down and think about what's going wrong and what's going right."

Youth panellist, 13

Read on for the complete collection of youth insights and Bite Back 2030's recommendations.



Introduction

The state of school food

Young people spend 190 days of the year in school, and what they eat there is incredibly important. Research and insightful reports from organisations including Food for Life, Peas Please, and Impact on Urban Health have evaluated the quality and experience of school food and its wide-ranging impact on pupils. For example, we know that school meals significantly improve educational outcomes and that they provide access to nutritious meals for the millions of children experiencing food insecurity.⁴⁵⁶

An important but seldom heard voice in these conversations is that of young people. At Bite Back 2030, we're working to change that: this report brings to the fore young people's big ideas and hopes for school food. Emerging from the pandemic we have an opportunity to build back healthier and put the well-being of the next generation at the heart of future policy making.

School food and the youth voice

Young people are the ones who really know what's going on with school food - they eat it every day! Every young person in the country should have equal opportunity to enjoy healthy, appealing and affordable food at school; and a safe, judgement-free environment in which to eat it. School is the ONLY place where we can make absolutely certain all children, no matter where they live, are getting a decent meal. But as these insights show, right now all school food isn't equal.

To plug this gap and help solve the inequality, we invited young people from around England to share their experiences and hopes for change.

Between June and September 2021, Bite Back's Youth Board convened ten panel discussions, bringing together young people aged 13-18, living in towns and cities around England including London, Birmingham, Newcastle, Leicester, Leatherhead, Edgbaston and Leeds.

26 of the 33 participants filled out the voluntary anonymous form giving us more information on their personal background. Among this subset two thirds were female; two thirds of participants were from non-white backgrounds and 15% of participants were eligible for free school meals.

Methodology

Each panel was facilitated by a Bite Back Youth Board member; nine were conducted over Zoom and recorded; one panel was filmed live. Members of the Bite Back team were present for safeguarding and technical support.

Participants were asked a range of questions about school food, the eating environment, and broader questions about sustainability and the opportunity to give feedback. They also had the opportunity to discuss any additional topics.

For this report, we have pulled out the key themes and included anonymised quotes from the participants, as it is through their words that we can get a genuine understanding of young people's experience of school food.



Part 1

A broken system

"WHEN YOU TAKE CHOICES AWAY, THE FUN OF FOOD LEAVES AND IT BECOMES A CHORE RATHER THAN AN ENJOYABLE EXPERIENCE. FOOD SHOULD BE SOMETHING THAT'S ENJOYED AND NOT FEARED BEFORE LUNCH."

Youth panellist, 16

Participants discussed multiple systemic barriers that make it harder for them to be healthy while eating at school, including **availability, price** and **presentation**.

They spoke of how difficult the structure of the canteen made it to be healthy. Not only are healthy options harder to come by, there are often additional barriers to those options that are available. The result is a school food ecosystem that is flooded with unhealthy food and that pushes students towards unbalanced diets.

"I'm racking my brain because I don't think my school does a single healthy option, which is very concerning now that I think about it. So obviously they need to change that."

Youth panellist, 16

Availability

A desire for greater availability of healthy options was echoed across all panels, with the need for more vegan and vegetarian choices emerging as a particularly strong theme.



Go to www.biteback2030.com/spill-the-beans to watch the full video



"The vegetarian options are quite limited and they finish quite quickly, so if you're at the back of the queue you might not get there in time for the vegetarian option."

Youth panellist, 17

Several participants were vegan or vegetarian themselves, and many also spoke on behalf of their peers. A vegetarian panellist mentioned he'd had to skip lunch on occasion as there were no options he could eat, while another noted that when she had to eat a school meal she couldn't find a main meal to suit her needs.

"AT MY SCHOOL THEY REALLY DON'T HAVE A LOT. BECAUSE I'M VEGETARIAN THEY DON'T HAVE A LOT OF GOOD VEGETARIAN OPTIONS. IT'S KIND OF JUST LIKE BOILED BROCCOLI AND STUFF LIKE THAT. WHICH IS NOT PARTICULARLY APPEALING... PRETTY MUCH EVERY SINGLE DAY IT WOULD BE PASTA AND TOMATO SAUCE AND THAT WOULD BE EVERY SINGLE DAY OF THE WEEK. NO DIFFERENT CHANGES AND IT JUST WASN'T THE BEST."

Youth panellist, 14

This student's experience reflects the need for canteens to take a considered approach to providing full and balanced vegetarian meals. Half-hearted vegetarian offerings are not enough, particularly if these options are less filling resulting in pupils feeling hungry in class.

"Vegan and veggie options are good, but it also needs to be something that fills the students up. In lessons it's easy to get hungry and the food they offer doesn't really fill us up."

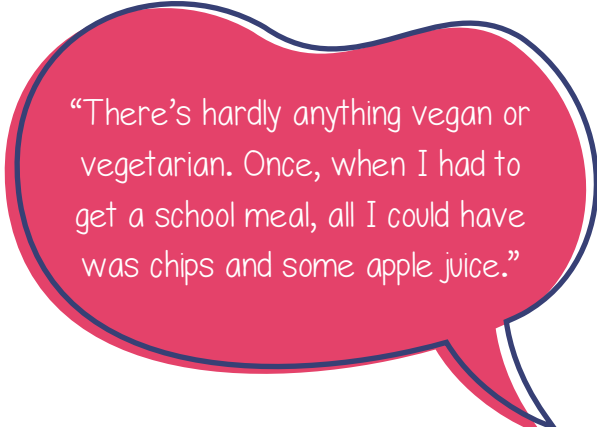
Youth panellist, 16

A couple of participants said their schools have in fact introduced healthier options such as fruit pots and salad bowls or bars in the past, only for these to then disappear with no explanation.

"There aren't any healthy options, to be fair. My school used to do salad bowls and fruit bowls but they've stopped doing it now so it's literally all junk food and that's about it."

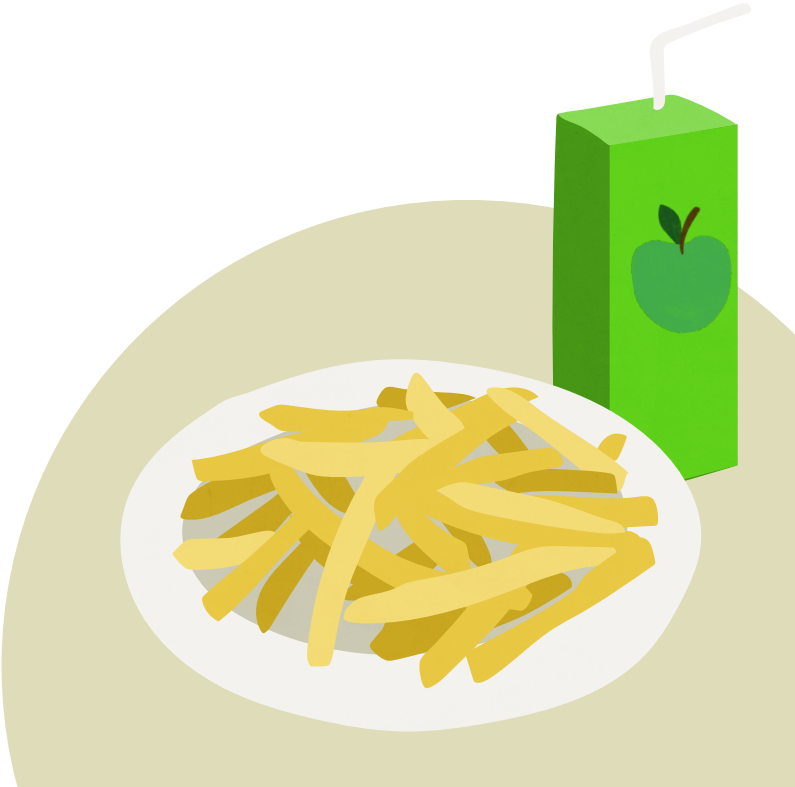
Youth panellist, 16

On a more positive note, one student said the best thing about his school was that they always make enough, so no one goes hungry. Other students reported that their schools have made concerted efforts to offer vegetarian options. They cited this as something their schools deserved credit for doing, and that other schools could learn from them.



"There's hardly anything vegan or vegetarian. Once, when I had to get a school meal, all I could have was chips and some apple juice."

Youth panellist, 15





Go to www.biteback2030.com/spill-the-beans to watch the full video

Price

"The thing about my school is that they don't put prices up so you don't know how much you pay until the end of the week or term... so I don't know if the food is good value for money... The main thing I'd like to see is prices on food and being more transparent."

Youth panellist, 15

Young people are price sensitive, both in and out of school. Our participants told a range of stories about the affordability of their school food, and there was a general consensus around healthier options being more expensive.

"My school food has become a lot healthier since we got a new chef. But the healthy food is pricier than the junk food. People are more likely to get the pizzas because the healthy food doesn't look appetising and the pizzas are cheaper."

Youth panellist, 16

"I'll choose the unhealthy option because it will fill me up more, or because it's cheaper to buy so I can buy more of it. Recently the school started selling Skittles and Smarties and people are hoarding them because you can buy lots."

Youth panellist, 17

Canteen price structures appear to be rigged against health in other baffling ways as well. One participant shared that her school has a minimum spend for card payments, meaning she needs to purchase a muffin or cookie that she does not want alongside her healthier wrap choice simply in order to pay. After further follow-up, this participant clarified that there is a fingerprint system which allows students to spend as much or little as they like. However, if students have forgotten to top that account up they turn to the card system which requires minimum payments. Her concern was that some schools may have the minimum payment system without the fingerprint option, forcing students there to spend a minimum regularly, as happens occasionally at her school. Another student mentioned meal deals and queried why healthy options were excluded from these promotions.



"Our school has wraps but they don't come into the meal deal criteria, so you're always paying more for it."

Youth panellist, 16

Among the more positive reflections, one participant spoke of their school's efforts to help students who may struggle to pay for lunch, for example by allowing pupils to pay another day if needed. Another mentioned the cashless system is a welcome replacement for the coloured tickets pupils used to have to show in the past to collect free school meals, as it protects from stigma.

Regardless of these small positives, the price structures of the canteen still unfairly burden the pupils who need support the most. We heard that unhealthy food is the cheapest, but a student on free school meals also told us that the allotted £2.35 meant they could only afford the cheapest meal options and did not cover a drink alongside it. This is a really poignant example of the unfairness that pupils receiving free school meals experience, and on a daily basis!

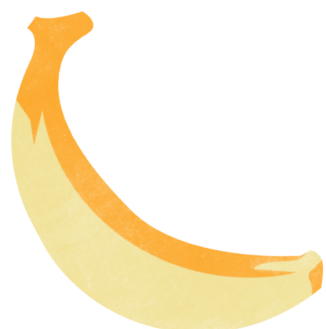
"For me it's mainly about the price. If it's cheaper I can get something else along with it, so then I end up being more full and that helps with my learning, but then everything else is just so expensive that I can't get it."

Youth panellist who receives free school meals

Schools also face competition from retailers and food businesses. Several participants spoke about picking up a meal deal or other products from the supermarket on the way to school.

"We have fruit but they're so expensive - it's £1 for a banana when you can buy it for less in a supermarket."

Youth panellist, 14



Presentation

"If food was presented in a more visually stimulating way, that would really appeal to us. Now, more than ever, it's important to put healthier food in the spotlight, and presentation is a huge deal."

Youth panellist, 17

"Our school has now made a healthier version of the chicken and it's the only time they've put effort into how they've presented it."

Youth panellist, 17

"I don't think it's intentional, but it's usually the unhealthy options that tend to look the best... so they need to work on making the people want the healthier option."

Youth panellist, 17

Participants discussed the importance of putting in effort to make healthy options appealing. Presentation isn't always considered, so healthier options tend to look less appetising than other meals. They also mentioned that healthy options are often pushed into a corner or the back of the canteen behind less healthy offerings, and biscuits are temptingly placed next to the fruit bowl.

"All the unhealthy food is spaced so as soon as you walk in to the canteen you see the unhealthy food and the healthy food is further away."

Youth panellist, 16

"I don't think my school even sells fresh fruit. They just have a little box of grapes or fruit but no one wants to have it. It's been there for days and nobody touches it."

Youth panellist, 17

The sheer volume of unhealthy options was also raised. One participant told us he decided to count the unhealthy options he saw in the canteen one day and was shocked by the result.

"I saw 11 different types of desserts available: jellies, cakes, biscuits, flapjacks. Whatever you name it would have been there. Eleven different types of unhealthy cakes and desserts all in one day which is just ridiculous."

Youth panellist, 17

Students aren't getting enough variety – and this has impacts on mental as well as physical health.

Almost every participant called for a greater variety of school food, with particular emphasis on dishes from different cultures. Some students raised this as an equity issue, stating that it's integral to creating a more inclusive school food environment where the well-being of all students is considered.

"MY SCHOOL, FOR EXAMPLE, IS LIKE 90% AFRICAN AND ASIAN. SO IF YOU'RE NOT OFFERING CULTURAL FOOD THAT THEY'RE FAMILIAR WITH THEY'RE MORE LIKELY TO JUST NOT EAT AT SCHOOL AT ALL MAYBE BECAUSE THEY DON'T FEEL COMFORTABLE."

Youth panellist, 16

"In primary school when I would bring a packed lunch and cultural food a lot of them made fun of me for the food I ate. You know, racist stereotypes and stuff. So it just kind of shows how uneducated they were about the whole thing. So I feel like educating kids on food from different cultures and cultural cuisines would be beneficial not only for our physical health, but also for our mental health, especially for BAME students."

Youth panellist, 17

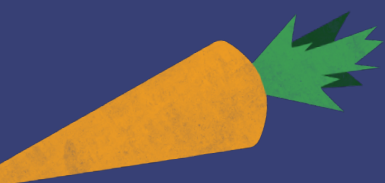
Participants also linked variety and choice to enjoyment. For example, one participant shared her excitement over being introduced to new things such as pakoras, and another noted lunch lines at her school were noticeably longer when the school put on special days featuring Lebanese and Jamaican food. Some schools have rotating menus of the same offerings that quickly become boring and unappealing to students. Friday fish and chips came up a lot and even caused some controversy: some pupils don't bring a packed lunch on Fridays for the chips (although the fish had poor reviews); others cited Fishy Fridays as a key reason to opt for a packed lunch!

"More variety because I don't feel like there needs to be the same brown pizza every single day or the same burgers. If at least the menu was more varied then it would make more people want to eat the food."

Youth panellist, 17

"One of the reasons I moved to packed lunches is that I dreaded Fishy Fridays. The ratio of batter to fish – my estimate is that it's something like 10,000 to 1 – and then just a bunch of greasy chips."

Youth panellist, 14





Young people believe what they eat matters, and correlate it with how they feel and perform in school.

"On days when I've had a good lunch and feel full, I do actually look forward to my lessons more, and I'm able to focus much better."

Youth panellist, 15

For example, they linked eating nutritious food with feeling more positive and conversely, eating a brownie or cake with feeling tired later on in the day. One participant also recognised the importance of eating well at school given that young people visit takeaways after school.

"At my school they sell a lot of different sugary desserts: doughnuts, biscuits, all of that... they sell it in the morning break and at lunchtime. So I feel like if you eat something like that you're going to get a lot of energy off it, you're going to get a sugar rush, and by the time you have to go in after lunch you feel a crash and you'll be tired in your last lessons."

Youth panellist, 17

"If the school food wasn't enough, I'd go to McDonald's after school and start eating much more junk food. So I feel like bad school food has a ripple effect on health."

Youth panellist, 17

"If I don't feel like I've had good nutritious food I would just feel down and my energy just gets drained quite a lot. When I do eat a lot of healthy food I feel better about myself and that has an impact on my well-being in school."

Youth panellist, 16

Key finding

Our panels suggest that schools are breaching the School Food Standards

The School Food Standards exist to ensure children get the energy and nutrition they need across the whole school day. The standards apply to all food served at school – including at breakfast and break-time.

Frustratingly, the standards are not robustly monitored and there is worrying evidence that the standards are routinely not being upheld. In 2019 the Soil Association found that an estimated 60% of secondary schools in England are non-compliant⁷. That same year, a study by the Guy's and St Thomas' Charity in the London borough of Southwark found that, even where school lunch menus are theoretically compliant, the foods

pupils actually choose to eat are often the less healthy options, which sit next to the healthier options.⁸

A number of insights from the panels corroborated these studies.

For example, the standards should limit how much food high in salt, fat and sugar pupils get every week. This includes having no more than two portions of deep-fried food a week, no chocolate or confectionery, and processed meat products (e.g. sausages) no more than twice a week.

Contrary to the School Food Standards, participants talked about sweets on offer:

"Recently the school started selling Skittles and Smarties and people are hoarding them because you can buy lots."

Youth panellist, 17

"We have sweets in school."

Youth panellist, 13

The standards also state that pupils should only have fruit, veg, seeds or nuts as a snack at school. And yet...

"At my school they sell a lot of different sugary desserts: doughnuts, biscuits, all of that... they sell it in the morning break and lunchtime."

Youth panellist, 17

"Break time food is unhealthy fried foods."

Youth panellist, 17

Further comments suggested additional ways in which schools are not meeting the legal standard, for example by serving fried foods and processed meats more than twice a week, and failing to serve a dessert containing 50% fruit twice a week.

"OUR SCHOOL DOES A BREAK SERVICE AND ALL OF IT IS LIKE PIZZA OR SAUSAGE ROLLS OR PASTIES, STUFF LIKE THAT. JUST DILY FRIED FOODS, CHICKEN WINGS EVEN."

Youth panellist, 17

"There was one day at school I went and counted how many different unhealthy foods I saw. I saw 11 different types of desserts available: jellies, cakes, biscuits, flapjacks. Whatever you name it would have been there."

Youth panellist, 17

"Years 9, 10, 11 have a later lunch and there's nothing left, only the junk is left like cookies and doughnuts."

Youth panellist, 13

"The main issue with healthy eating is that there's no limit e.g. on cake. The fruit basket is always next to the biscuits so there's a temptation."


Youth panellist, 15

"Everyone goes outside, barely anyone sits in the canteen because we don't have that much hot food, most of it is pick-up-and-go. They have loads of canned and bottled fizzy drinks, and subs and cookies and all of those things."

Youth panellist, 13

Part 2

The eating environment



"I would sit down with my friends every day and it was a nice occasion. Even if the food wasn't great I always enjoyed lunchtime because I was sitting with my friends."

Youth panellist, 16

Where students can eat their lunch is almost as important to their school food experience as what they can eat.

One student spoke about lovely canteen staff who are very responsive to students' preferences and feedback. Another really likes her school's eating environment and praised her teachers for going above and beyond to help students, even when they are unable to afford a meal.

However, inadequate space was an issue that came up repeatedly. Many participants said they eat their meals outside because the canteen is too cramped (this was also the case pre-COVID) and some students even prefer to go without lunch than to eat standing up.

"My friends and I didn't sit down when we had lunch. Our year group didn't have much space so we all stood up but we didn't really want to stand up and eat, so sometimes we'd just go without eating."

Youth Panellist, 16

Rushed meal times and long queues were cited as creating an unenjoyable lunchtime environment and hindering healthy eating.

Time was a huge topic for our participants, and two main themes emerged. First, not having enough time at lunch due to extracurricular and other activities; and second, lunchtime being eaten up by long queues (this was also more pronounced during the pandemic). There seems to be a strong link between time and the options students go for: faster, 'grab-n-go' options are the preferred choice for time-poor students, but these also tend to be less healthy.

"It's just easier to gravitate to the unhealthy options because they're faster and the healthy options get sold out more quickly."

Youth panellist, 16

"I think that... the way we eat together... is good. I think they might be changing up something with school food this year, they said, so I know it's going to get a lot better. I think the whole eating together and sitting down with your friends is a really positive thing."

Youth panellist, 14

"I feel like a lot of people like choosing the food that's quickest to eat and a lot of times the healthier options require you to get a plate, a knife and fork and be sitting down at the table. But a lot of times the healthier options you can just pick up and go."

Youth panellist, 17

"From what I'm hearing there are so many people who have ridiculous lunchtimes. Isn't there some kind of government requirement to have a longer lunchtime than that? Or do you think there's a way we can petition for that kind of thing?"

Youth panellist, 18

Long queues can also determine the options students have available to them. We heard that healthy options often go first, so students who arrive later to lunch have no choice but to eat an unhealthy meal.





“The vegetarian options are quite limited and they finish quite quickly, so if you’re at the back of the queue you might not get there in time for the vegetarian option.”

Youth panellist, 15

The environment just outside the school gates has a huge impact on what students eat and this can have serious consequences if the area is flooded with unhealthy options.

“I usually walk to wherever, it varies. So there’s a restaurant near us... there’s a Tesco Express... there’s also about three fast food stores spotted all around that are actually the quickest walk, so sometimes I’ll get McDonald’s or something.”

Youth Panellist, 18

Participants recognised the lure of the high street and the proliferation of fast food outlets just outside the school gates.

“One of my friends from another school, they’re literally right opposite a high street where literally all the fast food shops are there. So they have like so many options to go buy any fast food they want, any Subway, McDonald’s, they can just get it because it’s like a two-minute walk.”

Youth Panellist, 17

Supermarket meal deals also came up repeatedly as a cost-effective and more appealing alternative to school meals. Some schools have taken measures to stop students eating lunch off campus, but many participants reported that students, particularly those in Sixth Form, are allowed off-site during the school day.

“One thing my school does really well is that all the shops in the vicinity are off-limits for pupils.”

Youth Panellist, 16

“I just completely stopped buying school food and just made it at home then brought it in. If I didn’t do that, I’d go to Tesco or like, get a meal deal or something, because that was what was available, it was just down the street. It was more efficient or faster; I didn’t want to be late.”

Youth panellist, 16

The impact of having fast food outlets in close proximity to schools cannot be ignored. Schools and local authorities must work together to create an environment that prioritises student well-being by providing affordable healthy food on campus and stemming the flood of unhealthy outlets in the vicinity. There is also ample opportunity to work with retailers to ensure their meal deals put healthy options in the spotlight.

Participants reported varying levels of school focus on sustainability and, interestingly, gravitated towards discussions of more traditional measures of canteen climate efforts such as reducing single-use plastics, rather than the food itself.

“I don’t think school food is in our regular conversations. We do have a school council and an eco panel and they talk about ways to be more sustainable.”

Youth panellist, 15

Participants discussed sustainability mostly through the lens of packaging, rubbish and food waste; but not the meals themselves, with the exception of Meat-Free Mondays. Lack of availability of vegetarian meals and fruit and vegetables were raised repeatedly in reference to the need for more variety, choice and healthy options; but the additional climate benefits of these foods did not appear to be front of mind. There is an opportunity to drive both health and climate improvements in the canteen by connecting whole foods, meat reduction and balanced meals more clearly to their dual benefits. This message could create increased demand from students and motivation from schools that are trying to address the climate concerns of students.



Positive actions taken by schools include encouraging water consumption, using glass straws, and eliminating plastic packaging and cutlery (with the caveat that plastic made a return during the pandemic). Some students reported that their schools have hosted assemblies on the climate steps they've taken and why. They appreciated this level of transparency and student involvement.

"They do have the bins, for like all the purposes like recycling and main waste, and they are starting to stop using single-use plastic on water bottles. They're also using wooden forks and stuff. Also, during tutor times, they have different tutor groups each week doing litter picking around school."

Youth Panellist, 14

Several students, however, wanted their school to do more; the two biggest concerns were plastic packaging and food waste.

"The main thing I'd want to see change is food waste... it's something I think about a lot... if it's not eaten by the end of the day it just gets binned."

Youth panellist, 17

Part 3

Fairness

"I thought school lunches were the same all around but that's not the case at all. It's not equal and I don't think it's something that is spoken about, in terms of the gap between other schools."

Youth panellist, 17

Our panels showcased how inconsistent school food provision is across different schools and local areas, which students find incredibly unfair.

During the course of each panel, participants were surprised to note just how much experiences of school food can vary.

“The change I want to see at my school is for students to have equal access to a good amount of food that is affordable; both students who do and don’t receive free school meals.”

Youth panellist, 16

Students do discuss school food with their peers and friends who attend different schools. Participants shared the opinion that most schools could do better when it comes to the food on offer, although they were able to share one or two positive case studies. They compared the healthiness of food, availability of water, approach to sustainability in the canteen, and pupils’ overall enjoyment of school food. They also spoke of the differences between options available to sixth-form students, who are often able to leave the school premises at lunchtime; some even have access to a café or restaurant like Starbucks at school!

Participants offered several reasons as to why food might differ across schools. One participant feels that the catering company is a crucial stakeholder with the power to action or block requests students make of the school. Another participant said her school food had become healthier since the new chef joined. Participants also observed how the food environments in and around different schools varied, noting that some students are at an increased disadvantage due to fast food restaurants closer to campus or in some instances even on school grounds. Levels of commitment from the schools themselves was also discussed with students noting huge differences between those that discuss and prioritise school food versus those that treat it as a box-ticking exercise.

I count myself lucky: not because my school food is so great but because my school food is not so bad. I know for some students living in my area eating at school just isn’t an option for them... they starve themselves because it’s too expensive.

Youth panellist, 17

“In most schools of my friends who aren’t in my school healthy food is again more expensive than unhealthy food. But also another thing I’ve noticed is loads of unhealthy shops like chicken shops are usually opposite a school or something so people can go at lunchtime or after school and get chips or something like that. So I don’t think it’s fair.”

Youth panellist, 14

“I have a friend who goes to a massive academy school and I think there’s a Starbucks in there, inside the school. And I feel like schools really need to commit to trying to get their students to eat healthier. I think having a Starbucks in your school... you know, sponsor or not, you could have something else in there.”

Youth panellist, 18

Free drinking water is still not available and constantly accessible across all schools.

There was great variation when it came to the availability of free drinking water at school. Several participants were happy to note that most peers bring a water bottle (which is sometimes supplied by the school), and that the school makes it easy for pupils to refill them; participants recognised the environmental benefits of this approach. One school also has a water-only policy.

"AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR THEY GIVE US SCHOOL-BRANDED WATER BOTTLES SO THAT'S GOOD AND IT ENCOURAGES EVERYONE TO DRINK MORE WATER. WE ALSO HAVE WATER DISPENSERS AROUND THE SCHOOL AND WATER FOUNTAINS OUTSIDE."

Youth panellist, 17

"Most people in my school have those metal reusable water bottles and we also have a couple of refilling stations... I think our school is pretty good with water."

Youth panellist, 15



But this is not the case for everyone. Several participants said their schools don't have water dispensers or don't sell bottled water. Instead, their schools only sell flavoured water, juice or milkshakes. One of the reasons for not selling bottled water is sustainability, although this means the onus is on pupils to bring in their own water bottles; otherwise the only alternatives are the flavoured water, juice or milkshakes.

"They got rid of the water dispensers because people were being immature with them. So now, if you don't bring your own water bottle to school the only drink you can get is like a fizzy pop. Obviously that's not the best thing to have at school, especially when you've just come out of PE, all you want is a mouthful of water. I think this is the worst thing our school does."

Youth panellist, 15

Several participants said that at their schools, pupils are only allowed to fill their water bottles during breaks in between lessons, which they thought can be problematic.

"In my school we had a lot of taps and then they started turning them off during lesson time. So you can only go before school, break, lunch or after school."

Youth panellist, 17

"I feel like when you finish your water you finish your water. Me personally, I get really dehydrated really easily so if I finish my water bottle at the start of a lesson and if I have a lesson after that I may not be able to fill up my water bottle for another two hours. So I feel like we should be allowed to fill our water bottles up at any time, I feel like they should be a human right, essentially."

Youth panellist, 17

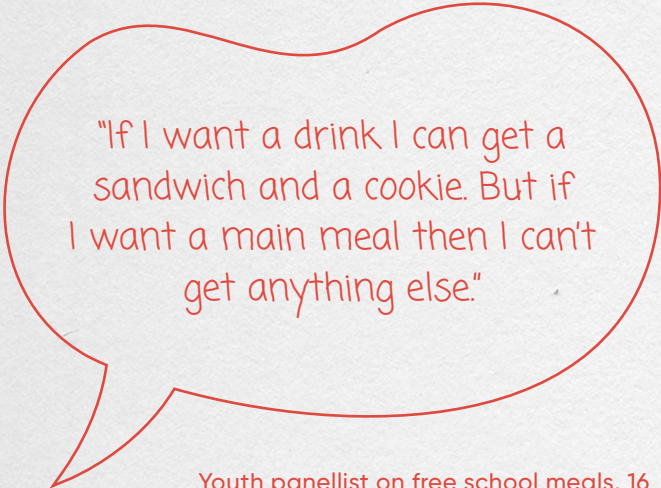
Key finding

Free school meals

Several youth panellists receive or have received free school meals themselves, and shared their experiences. They spoke of having more limited choices compared to peers, in terms of the options available to them and being limited to a main meal only, compared to their peers who can also have a drink and snacks during the day. One participant has heard from friends who receive free school meals that they don't get standard portion sizes.

"With free school meals it's really bad because you can only get a main meal which is a plate of barely anything... that's the only thing you're allowed... you can't even get a drink"

Youth panellist, 13



"If I want a drink I can get a sandwich and a cookie. But if I want a main meal then I can't get anything else."

Youth panellist on free school meals, 16

"I HAVE A FRIEND WHO'S ON FREE SCHOOL MEALS. BECAUSE THE HEALTHY FOOD IS SO EXPENSIVE. BUT THE SNACKS ARE SO CHEAP. SOMETIMES SHE'LL BUY A SNACK AT BREAK-TIME AND BY LUNCHTIME SHE CAN'T EVEN GET A MAIN MEAL BECAUSE THE ALLOWANCE IS SO SHORT."

Youth panellist, 14

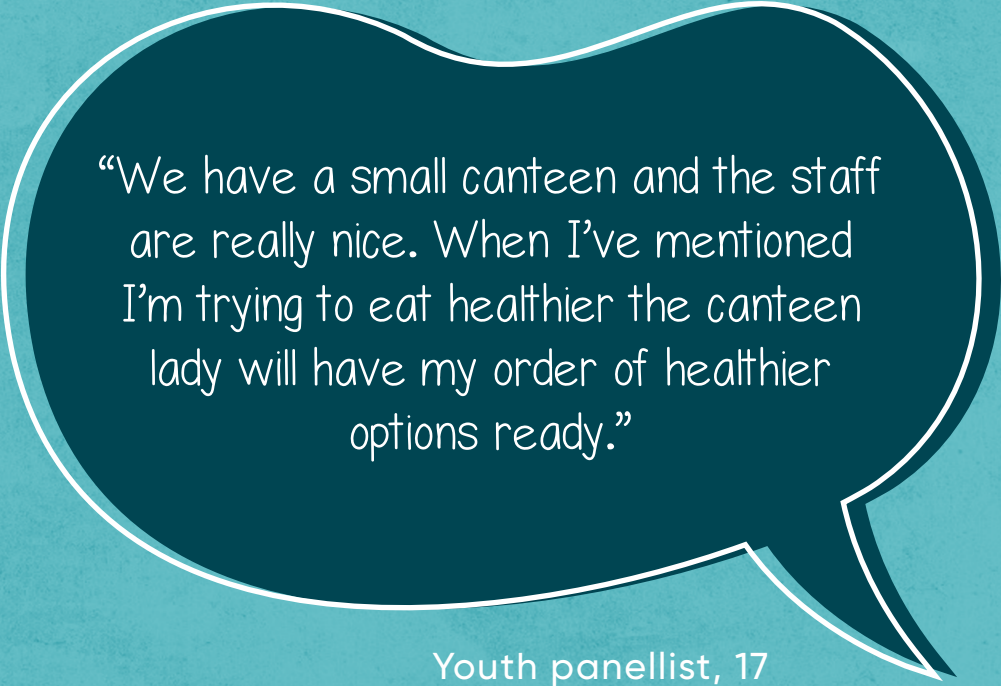
"I want all schools to be more inclusive. Pupils who receive free school meals aren't treated equally."

Youth panellist, 16

Participants also discussed the varying levels of stigma attached to free school meals. Encouragingly, panellists feel people are becoming more open and talking about inequalities more freely.

Part 4

Pupils having a say in food



“We have a small canteen and the staff are really nice. When I’ve mentioned I’m trying to eat healthier the canteen lady will have my order of healthier options ready.”

Youth panellist, 17



Go to www.biteback2030.com/spill-the-beans to watch the full video

Participants strongly agreed that pupils should have more of a say in school food, although there was variation in how much they have engaged with staff on this topic. The way in which a dialogue is facilitated is clearly crucial, given the power imbalance between staff and pupils. Pupils don't want the onus to improve school food to fall entirely on their young shoulders; they want to feel empowered and supported by their teachers and catering staff.

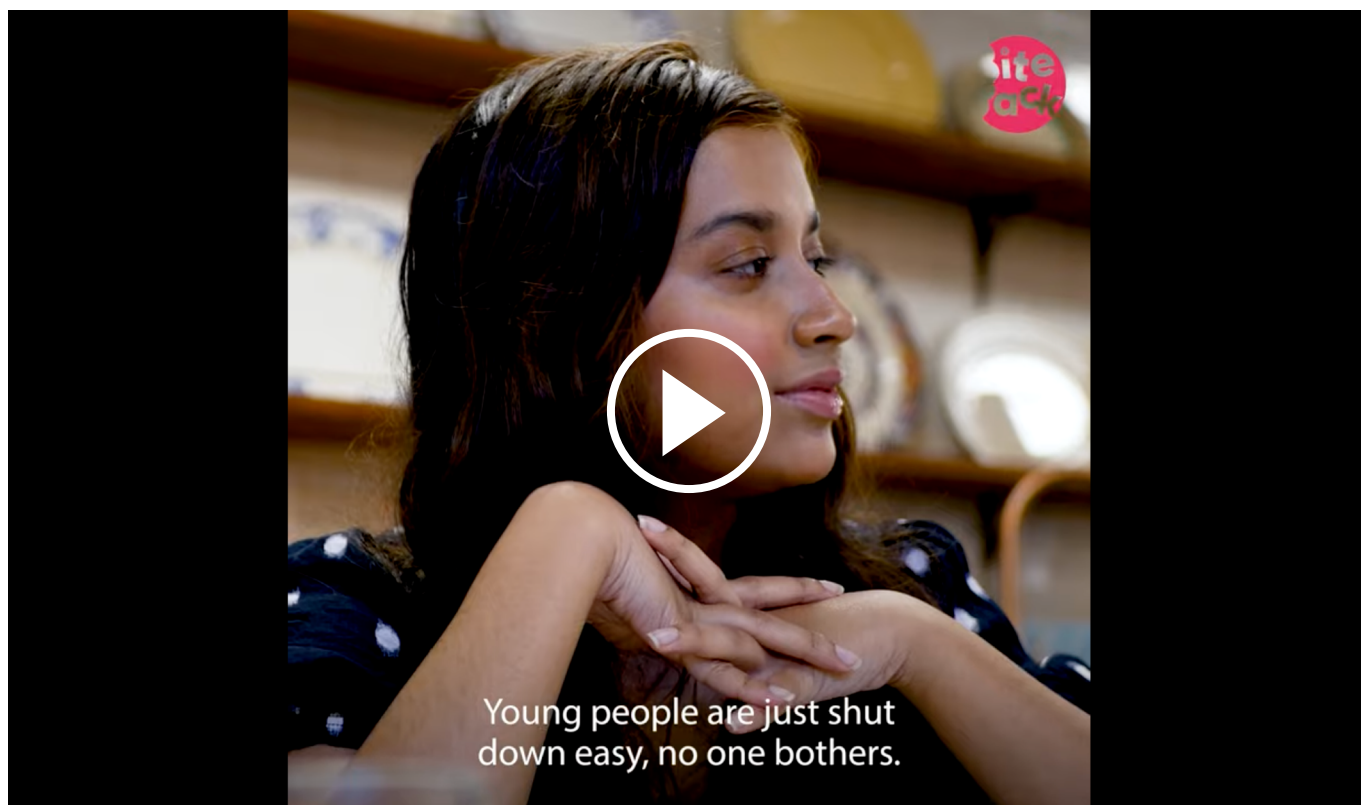
"I feel like teachers, head teachers and catering staff should take an interest too... because we find it quite daunting to go up to staff. They should encourage dialogues."

Youth panellist, 17

"You get fizzy drinks, sandwiches, doughnuts and cookies... a lot of people don't seem to complain about that. So even if someone does speak up about it, it immediately gets voted down. There's nothing from the school to say what is healthy and what's not, they're really hands-off, and there's no real opportunity to speak out."

Youth panellist, 13

Overall the sentiment was that given the lack of precedent for pupils engaging on this topic, students don't feel comfortable approaching staff or making requests; there is also a lack of a clear feedback mechanism, whether that might be through an anonymous comments box in the canteen or through the school council. In some cases even when schools have asked for feedback, it appears that no action was taken, which consequently fosters sentiments of distrust among pupils.



Go to www.biteback2030.com/spill-the-beans to watch the full video

"I think at my school they don't listen to what we say about school food, I think they see it more as a cheap, budget way of eating rather than a more enjoyable experience."

Youth panellist, 16

"WE HAVE SURVEYS EVERY YEAR AND WE TALK ABOUT IT WITH OUR FRIENDS. BUT I HAVEN'T REALLY SEEN ANY LONG-TERM CHANGES. FOR A WHILE WE TRIED MEAT-FREE MONDAY. BUT THEN IT JUST DIED OUT."

Youth panellist, 15

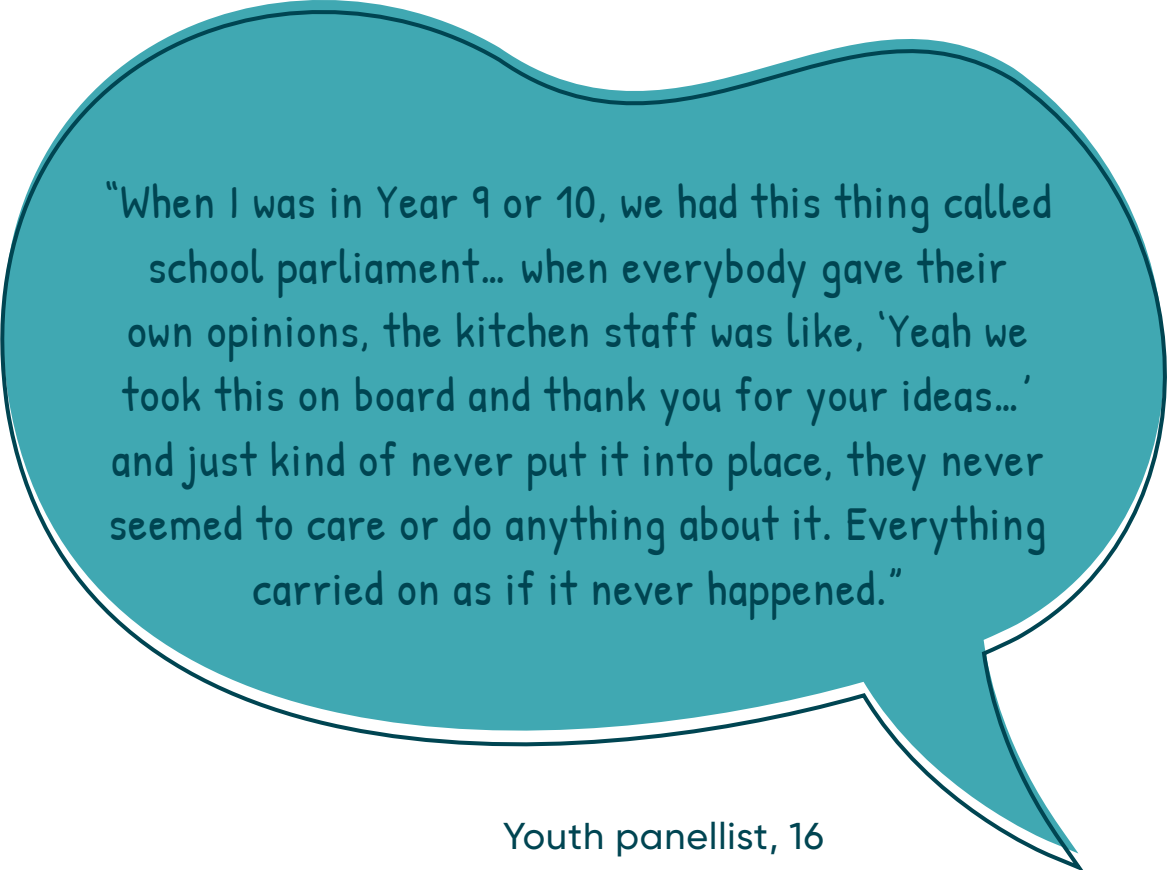
"I suggested halal food, which I've done for quite a few years, but honestly I think it's the catering companies that choose the food because I've never seen a change and I've been asking since year 7."

Youth panellist, 14

"We've told our student reps we want more healthy food or different stuff but it's kind of never got done, so we just don't bother any more because it doesn't get done."

Youth panellist, 17

Participants did discuss ways for pupils to give feedback. One idea was for teachers to hand out paper for students to note two things they like and two things they don't like about the dining hall. Participants were unsure about whether a dedicated School Food Council would work; they thought that older students would find the idea 'uncool'!

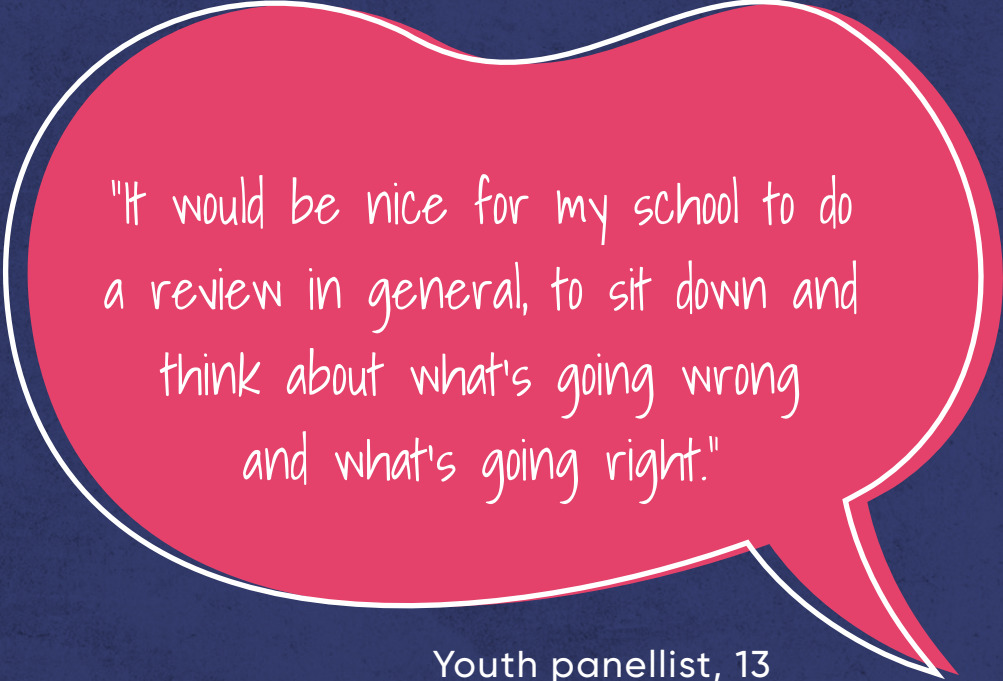


“When I was in Year 9 or 10, we had this thing called school parliament... when everybody gave their own opinions, the kitchen staff was like, ‘Yeah we took this on board and thank you for your ideas...’ and just kind of never put it into place, they never seemed to care or do anything about it. Everything carried on as if it never happened.”

Youth panellist, 16

Part 5

Conclusion and recommendations



"It would be nice for my school to do a review in general, to sit down and think about what's going wrong and what's going right."

Youth panellist, 13

A stand-out finding from these youth panels is the sheer variety of experiences secondary school pupils have when it comes to school food. Pupils know very well that some have it better; others have it worse. Inevitably, there is therefore a strong sense of inequality and unfairness.

Pupils are quick to point out the positive aspects of their school food. It is evident that they are open and keen to work closely with their peers, teachers and catering staff to implement changes and improvements. They recognise the impact the school food experience has on them and their friends, on a daily basis.

Numerous organisations are already calling for school food reform. We currently face a critical opportunity to reset school food and set the stage for health for the next generation, as the government considers its response to the National Food Strategy in its forthcoming White Paper on our food system.

Listening to the voices of young people, the need for reform couldn't be clearer. Schools, caterers and local and national government all have an important role to play to ensure it is easy to be healthy in schools.

We believe that schools and caterers should prioritise:

- ✓ **Following the School Food Standards** and taking steps to go further, by registering for the Food for Life Schools Award⁹ and signing the Chefs in Schools Charter¹⁰
- ✓ **Consulting with pupils** about the food that is served and taking their views into account
- ✓ **Going vegetarian/plant-based for the whole school at least twice a week** while also ensuring the options provided are made of healthy, whole foods rather than processed substitutes¹¹
- ✓ **Investing in dining infrastructure** and ensuring that where students eat is comfortable and a nice place to be. Also making sure there is adequate time for meal breaks¹²
- ✓ **Ensuring there is at least one vegetarian option at every lunchtime** and that it is as affordable as the meat alternative¹³
- ✓ **Reorganising the canteen to put healthy options in the spotlight**, and ensuring enough healthy options are provided
- ✓ **Supporting caterers with training and development** to provide tasty and appealing veg and veg-based meals¹⁴
- ✓ **Following the example of the other devolved nations by providing two portions of vegetables each day with lunch**
- ✓ **Adopting measures to encourage students to stay in school over breaks** and to opt for a school meal¹⁵
- ✓ **Ensuring free drinking water is available** throughout the school at all times
- ✓ **Publishing their menus with pricing information on the school website**
- ✓ **Establishing a crisis-response process** to ensure that in future, the quality of food isn't undermined as it was during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially given the links between nutrition, physical and mental health and academic attainment.

We believe government should prioritise:

The national government should support and underpin school and local-level reforms by making the following changes at the system level, starting with enforcing the School Food Standards:

- ✓ **Putting in place an effective accountability mechanism** to ensure that the quality of food served in school is actively monitored
- ✓ **Widening entitlement**, to ensure every young person that needs a free school meal is eligible for one
- ✓ **Improving the quality of food that schools procure**, to ensure nutritious, sustainable and enjoyable food is the rule, not the exception, for every child
- ✓ **Increasing uptake**, by making it easy and stigma-free to access school food
- ✓ **Improving the school food funding system** so that it is easy for schools to put health first

Local authorities should work with schools to implement:

- ✓ **A School Superzone** i.e. placing a 400-metre zone around the school to reduce harmful exposures and increase health-promoting ones. This could include working with retailers and food outlets to provide healthier options.

Bite Back 2030 also pledges to be an active part of the solution.

We have launched **School Food Champions** to empower teams of young people to lead social action projects, who seek to improve the provision and culture of food in their schools and local communities.

Powered by iWill, Tesco, and a group of generous match funders, Bite Back School Food Champions will work with 2,000 young people in 150 schools across England over two years. The #iwill Fund is made possible thanks to £54 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action opportunities. School Food Champions is an extracurricular social action programme for KS3.



We are designing a **School Food Governors** programme which will equip governors with the knowledge, skills and support that they need to boost the health of their school food offer.

Visit our website to learn more and register your interest for both these programmes.



Thank you for your time and support.

For more information on our school food campaign please visit www.biteback2030.com/spill-the-beans

Appendix

List of panel questions

Theme 1 - General

Question 1 - Do you buy food in school? If not, where do you buy it and what kind of food do you buy?

Question 2 - If you do have school food, what are the best and worst things about it? And if you don't, what changes might make you want to have it?

Question 3 - What are the main things you think about when you decide what snacks or meals to have at school?

Theme 3 - The eating environment, including water and plastic

Question 1 - Do you sit down to eat lunch most days? Is lunchtime fun?

Question 2 - Does your lunch room talk about the ways it is trying to be sustainable? Are there any things you'd like to see them doing to be more environmentally conscious?

Question 3 - Do you and your friends bring water bottles to school?

Question 4 - Do your friends at other schools have similar school food experiences to you? Do you feel like school food and the lunchtime experience is similar and fair for all young people across the country?

Anything else?

Ten minutes at the end for participants to raise any other issues we may have missed.

Theme 2 - Healthy, tasty and affordable school food

Question 1 - Do you think there are enough healthy options available? Are they tasty so people want to eat them and affordable so everybody can access them?

Question 2 - Are there any foods you'd like to try at school or options you'd like to see more of?

Question 3 - Do you think that what you eat during the school day has an impact on how you feel or how well you do at school?

Theme 4 - Young people having a say in school food

Question 1 - Have you ever discussed what you like or don't like about school food with your friends or any of the staff (teachers, kitchen staff)? Does the school take your ideas on board?

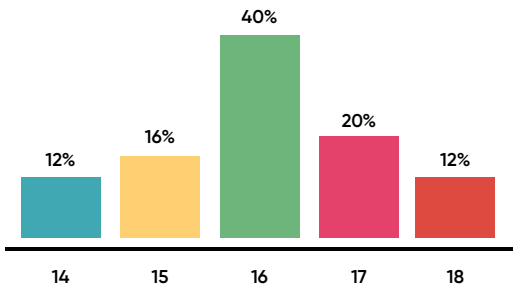
Question 2 - Are there any opportunities you wish your school had for students to be more involved in school food? For example, would something like having a dedicated School Food Council be appealing?

Question 3 - Is there anything your school is doing really well with school food that you think other schools could learn from?

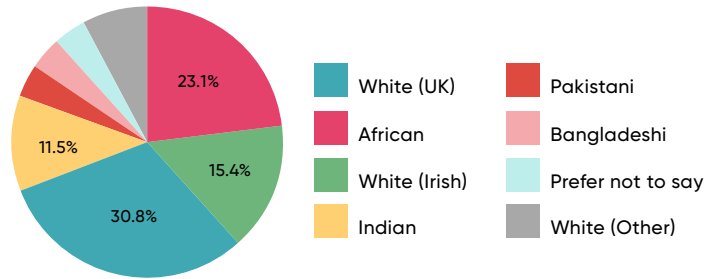
Panellist demographics

* For the 26 of the 33 participants who filled out the voluntary anonymous personal information form

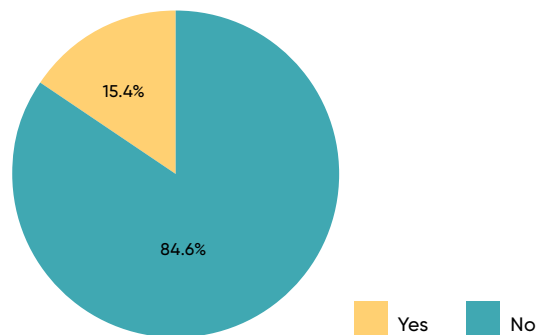
What is your age?



What ethnicity do you identify as?



Do you receive free school meals?



References

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- 3 <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Peas-Please-School-Food-Report-2021.pdf>
- 4 Healthy School Meals and Educational Outcomes: Institute for Social and Economic Research: January 2009 <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2009-01.pdf>
- 5 <https://www.schoolfoodmatters.org/why-school-food-matters/why-fresh-and-healthy-school-meals#:~:text=The%20research%20showed%20that%20healthy,in%20absenteeism%20due%20to%20sickness.>
- 6 <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Peas-Please-School-Food-Report-2021.pdf>
- 7 Soil Association 2019 State of the Nation: Children's Food in England 2019 https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/~/_media/files/sotn/sotn_2019.pdf
- 8 Guy's and St Thomas' Charity Serving Up Children's Health: Opportunities and Barriers in the School Food System to Prioritise Nutritious Food for our Young People <https://www.gsttcharity.org.uk/sites/default/files/30-GSTC-%20Schools-min.pdf>
- 9 <https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/schools>
- 10 <https://chefsinschools.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/THE-SCHOOL-FOOD-CHARTER.pdf>
- 11 <https://chefsinschools.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/THE-SCHOOL-FOOD-CHARTER.pdf>
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