

School Food Standards FAQ

May 2024

This document relates to the School Food Standards (SFS) as described in the Requirements for School Food Regulations 2014, and to the Food Standards Agency SFS Pilot that ran across England, in 2023.

The Regulations and Standards

Q1. Are the Standards/Regulations legal responsibilities, or just guidance?

Food served in **all maintained schools and academies** in England **must** meet school food standards so that children have healthy, balanced diets.

Q2. Who is legally responsible for making sure the Regulations are applied in schools?

Governing bodies must ensure that the lunches and other food and drink provided meets the school food standards.

Q3. What are the school food standards and who is responsible for enforcing them?

The SFS are designed to help children develop healthy eating habits and ensure that they have the energy and nutrition they need to get the most from their whole school day. They severely restrict foods high in fat, salt, and sugar, as well as low quality reformed or reconstituted foods. The food-based standards specify which types of food should be served at school and how often.

Currently, there is no designated enforcement authority.

Q4. Do all school lunches have to include hot food?

Although there is no requirement that lunches must be hot meals, hot lunches should be provided wherever possible to ensure that all pupils are able to eat at least one hot meal every day.

Q5. What is the whole school day approach to school food?

The SFS apply to all food and drink available at school, across the whole school day, including breakfasts, morning breaks, tuck shops and after school clubs – until 6PM. The entire, combined, school menu must comply – not just each meal.

Q6. Are any children or meals exempt? E.G., children with ARFID

The SFS cover what the school offers on its menus throughout the school day. If alternative provision is made for a child with an eating disorder, it will not bring the mainstream school menu into non-compliance.

Q7. What about children who come through for a school dinner yet eat very little. Parents may be assuming they have had a full cooked meal and then feel they only need to provide a small tea or even a sandwich? Should schools be doing more to provide feedback to parents or is it considered a parents responsibility to be checking the menu? This is a concern for many of our young people.

Some ideas:

- Peer mentors on tables – having children who are good eaters sitting on tables with children who struggle to eat, they can provide good role modelling.
- Lunchtime supervisors – Upskill your lunchtime supervisors to support and encourage children to try new foods. A sticker system could be used for this
- Communication with parents – Is there a way to use your parent app or school newsletter to highlight to parents that not all children are eating a full meal at lunch and that they may be hungry at home.

For further ideas take a look at our blog on this topic:

<https://healthytelford.com/2024/02/23/making-lunchtimes-easier/>

Q8. Do the regulations apply to vending machines and tuck shops on site (even if independently operated)?

Yes, many of the School Food Standards apply to food served throughout the school day, including breakfast, midmorning break and afterschool clubs, as well as from vending machines and tuck shops.

Q9. Do the Regulations apply if we are open less than 5 days a week?

Yes, where a school is open for fewer than five days in any week the requirements which refer to the number of times food must or must not be provided by reference to a week apply as if the school were open for the whole of that week.

Q10. Do the Regulations apply if we don't provide lunch? (e.g. breakfast club)

Yes, all food provided in the school day must comply. There are separate food requirements for food provided outside of lunch – but all the food provided must comply with the Whole Day requirements.

Q11. Do the regulations apply to Forest Schools and other holiday provision without access to formal kitchens?

At Forest School (and similar) lunch is exempt from compliance with Regulations **if it's a teacher led educational activity** – all other meals/food provided is covered by the regulations e.g. cakes baked at lunchtime would not be allowed in other meals or snacks during the day. If lunch is not an educational activity, it is covered by the Regulations.

Q12. Do the Regulations apply to Nursery schools?

Yes, school lunches provided in maintained nursery schools and nursery units within primary schools must comply with the requirements in Schedule 5 of the Regulations. Schedule 5 is a more limited list of food requirements than the usual school list. However, if the Nursery decides to provide the children with the same food as the older children in the school, all the food must meet the main requirements of the Regulations.

Q13. Do the Regulations apply to food given for parties or other special occasions such as pantomime visits?

Specific exclusions are detailed in the regulations

- Teaching food prep and cooking skills – including if food is served to pupils as part of lunch
- Fundraising events
- On an occasional basis by parents or pupils
- All parties or celebrations to mark religious or cultural occasions
- Rewards for achievement, good behaviour or effort

As part of Telford and Wrekin's healthy weight strategy there is a movement to remove the food for reward culture that is a contributing factor to the childhood obesity epidemic. Get the children involved in coming up with ideas for alternative rewards that aren't food. Please get in contact with us if this is something you would like some ideas on a further discussion.

Q14. Is the school still responsible for meeting SFS if we put it into the contract with our food providers (and pay them to do it) – Isn't it their responsibility

The governing body of the school is legally responsible for meeting SFS. It's like Health & Safety on school property, you may put H&S into contractor contracts, but the school is still responsible for the H&S of pupils onsite.

The Food Standards Agency Pilot

Q15. What was the Food Standards Agency (FSA) Pilot?

The pilot designed and tested a new approach to helping schools comply with the Regulations, to help develop healthy eating habits and ensure children get the energy and nutrition required across the whole school day. It incorporated 18 local authorities, including Telford & Wrekin Council.

Food, Health & Safety team members were asked to test whether they could check that school menus met the SFS, during regular Food Hygiene inspections.

In T&W this was possible and the results of the SFS checks were shared with the schools inspected.

Q16. What is the difference between the pilot and the SFS?

The pilot was to test if SFS can be reviewed during the food hygiene inspection – NOT if schools fully complied with the SFS.

Only 6 questions were asked in the T&W pilot (18 questions across all the local authorities in the pilot). The SFS are broader than those questions.

It is possible to comply with the 6 questions and still not be compliant in other parts of the SFS.

Q17. Is the pilot over?

Nationally, the pilot is complete. We await the outcome. T&W will continue to check SFS compliance in all school food hygiene inspections, to ensure schools are aware of their compliance status.

Food Providers

Q18. Our food service gives us the menus – we don't have a choice.

As a first step, inform your food provider of your intent to check compliance with SFS and ask for the full menus that they serve in your school. Then check menu compliance. The health improvement team can assist with menu adjustments, but your food provider should be working with the school on compliant choices and your SLT may need to reinforce that with all food providers, if changes are needed.

Q19. When we asked our food service for all the menu information, they say that we don't need it and that we do comply with SFS. Should we assume that's correct?

The responsibility to comply does not rest with the food provider, it rests with the governing body, which usually includes at least the head teacher from the SLT. It is appropriate due diligence to check if the school menu is compliant. The appropriate SLT member(s) should be informed of any issues in checking compliance.

Q20. We receive free/subsidised breakfast food from a local/national programme. I am not sure if it complies with SFS, what can I do?

It is reasonable to ask for the menu that they are supplying and check it against the SFS requirements – remembering that all the food served in a day counts toward the daily SFS. If there are any issues that need the breakfast food to change to resolve, reach out to your provider, explain the issue, and ask if they have other items that could be supplied instead. E.g. chocolate pastries are not compliant, but bagels are compliant and are unlimited in the SFS.

Specific Foods/Meals

Q21. Our secondary school pupils have a very short lunch time and there is not enough seating for them all to sit and have a standard lunch meal. Many of them grab and go with their lunch from a snack/break menu. Is this compliant?

The length of time given for school lunches is not mentioned in the SFS. However, the environment and time children have to sit, eat and access physical activity is as important as the quality of food provided. If children do not have time to eat, they may make choices that are unhealthy and that do not fuel their bodies or brain, affecting memory and learning.

Q22. Is there anything in the regulations about the quality of food rather than just the type or amount of food?

There are a few specifics e.g. no economy burgers can be served in schools. However, in general, the regulations specify food that is fit for human consumption and then focus on types and amounts of food provided across the whole school day. Nutritional content is discussed in the school food standards practical guide – a DfE publication that was updated in February 2023 ([School food standards practical guide - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-food-standards-practical-guide)) Additional guidance on meat product quality is contained in [The Products Containing Meat etc. \(England\) Regulations 2014 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/1251/contents/matter)

Q23. Sausage rolls are very popular at break and lunch – so are other pastry items – are they covered by SFS?

Sausage rolls and other pastry items are ok to serve if they are limited, as in the SFS. Pastry items are limited twice per week and sausages are limited to once per week in primary schools and twice per week in secondary schools across the entire school day.

Q24. Can schools serve squash/cordial?

Although most squash is limited in sugar now, water should be the default drink for every child. Sugary or sweetened drinks often have no nutritional value, contribute to weight gain, and can cause tooth decay. Free, fresh drinking water must be always available.

Q25. Can schools provide Whole milk?

Whole milk can be provided for pupils up to the end of the school year in which they reach age 5, after that milk must be lower fat or lactose reduced.

Q26. Can schools provide fruit juice?

Provided fresh fruit juice should only be 150ml, no self-pour.

Q27. What if the children do not like oily fish?

The provision of oily fish once every three weeks is a requirement. Oily fish includes fresh, tinned, or frozen salmon, sardines, pilchards, mackerel, herring, and fresh or frozen tuna. **Tuna only counts as an oily fish when it is fresh or frozen** because the omega-3 fatty

acids are destroyed during the canning process. However, it does not have to be served as fish on its own. Try incorporating oily fish into food that is more popular with the children:

- Salmon fish cakes
- Salmon fish fingers
- Salmon pasta bake
- Salmon risotto
- Salmon goujons
- Salmon & salad sandwiches

Q28. Can we serve snacks in-between meals?

The SFS define “snacks” as pre-packaged items other than confectionery, sandwiches, cakes or biscuits which are ready to eat without further preparation and which consist of or include as a basic ingredient: potato, cereals, soya, nuts, seeds, fruit or vegetables.

Snacks should be **only fruit, nuts, seeds and veg.**

However, the provision of meals outside of the usual meal cycle does not have to be snacks. It can be other, healthy options that meet the SFS limits.

Q29. Are breadsticks allowed?

The Regulations are very specific on a few items and breadsticks/savoury crackers can be provided at lunch, must not be provided outside of lunch. They are considered a food in high fat, sugar and/or salt

Q30. What can we serve for meals outside of lunch, e.g., breakfast or after school club?

Porridge is a great breakfast food. Use fruit to sweeten if necessary. Otherwise, choose fortified breakfast cereals with higher fibre and low or medium sugar content. Avoid cereals with lots of added sugar and salt.

Be aware that pre prepared waffles and pancakes can contain high levels of oil.

Other permitted foods are:

- Bagels– wholemeal and low-fat bagels are even better.
- toast,
- malt loaf,
- fruit bread,
- fruit and/or

- vegetable sticks,
- yoghurt or fruit-based desserts containing at least 50% fruit,
- boiled eggs.

Care should be taken in providing toppings:

- Condiments such as jam, lemon curd, honey etc. are limited to sachets or portions of no more than 10 grams or one teaspoonful (applies across the whole school day).
- Do not serve baked beans more than once a week across the whole school day and choose low-sugar and low-salt varieties of baked beans when you do use them.

Other meals ideas include:

- Sandwiches – toasted or fresh
- Wraps – meat or vegetable
- Jacket potatoes
- Toast with eggs or baked beans (once a week)
- Pasta with low sugar sauce

Q31. Are there alternative suggestions for children who have plant-based diets?

Pulses count as vegetables. However, if you are serving pulses as a non-dairy protein for vegetarians, you will need a separate vegetable serving as well. Plant-based meat and cheese substitutes can be ultra-processed, and care should be taken when putting them on the menu.

Baked beans in tomato sauce are not allowed as the main protein source for vegetarians, they are a side dish and should not be provided more than once a week

Check with your catering provider what options they can provide for children who have cultural, allergy or preference requirements.

Q32. Can we use salt?

Salt must not be provided to add to food after it has been cooked (applies across the whole school day). Also, avoid adding salt to water when cooking pasta, rice and other starchy foods. Instead, add flavour to the main dish by using herbs, spices, garlic and vegetables.

Q33. Why are Ultra Processed Foods (UPFs) of concern on school menus?

Processing food is not necessarily a bad thing. Fermenting, pickling, tinning, and chopping are all forms of processing. What makes ultra-processed foods distinctive is that they have gone through industrial processes that have changed the nature of the original ingredients, leaving little, if any, of the original whole food behind.

UPFs are typically ready-to-consume or heat up, and are fatty, salty or sugary and depleted in dietary fibre, offering little to no nutritional value. They should be limited as far as possible in school menus. More information on UPFs is available at [SACN statement on processed foods and health - summary report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6530/sacn_statement_on_processed_foods_and_health_-_summary_report.pdf)

Next steps

Q34. I'm not sure if our school food provision meets SFS – what do I do next?

The easiest way forward is to use the SFS checklists provided by T&W at:

https://www.telford.gov.uk/info/21821/health_and_wellbeing_toolkit/6530/food_and_nutrition

They are easy to use and will give you an overview of how your menus meet the SFS. If you see that your menus need adjustment, the health improvement team can support individual schools with advice on menu changes.

Q35. How do we find out if our school is compliant?

If your school has had a food hygiene inspection since June 2023, it's likely that SFS compliance was checked at the same time. A report on what was found should be with the kitchen manager and/or the school head.

If an inspection is still pending, use the online resources mentioned above

Q36. What can we do to support SFS compliance?

A good place to start is to nominate a governor as lead for this topic and then map food provision, what the school already do and where changes need to be made. Speak to all food providers/leads to get a view of all food provided during the whole school day.

Q37. What if we don't have governors?

Designate a Health & Wellbeing Lead- the main thing is to have someone leading the changes that are needed.

Q38. Is there any information that could be shared with parents regarding the food standards? I noticed that there were DfE links for governors and staff

We do not currently have resources for parents but recognise this is a gap and are currently developing something similar to the Top Tips poster that can be shared with parents.

Q39. Are there any pupil-focused resources that could be used throughout school?

Yes, on the [Health and Wellbeing Toolkit](#) there are lots of resources that can be used with pupils. Food, A Fact of Life has some brilliant curriculum-based lesson plans for all year groups, recipes for cooking sessions and much more.

For more resources please visit the Health & Wellbeing Toolkit:

https://www.telford.gov.uk/info/21821/health_and_wellbeing_toolkit/6530/food_and_nutrition

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