

# Is your child having a school lunch?

## Primary School Parents Views on School Lunches in Highland

### Introduction

For the past 7 years Highland Council school meal service has taken steps to improve the nutritional quality of school meals. This has been influenced by Hungry for Success (A Whole School Approach to School Meals in Scotland (2003): Scottish Executive) and The Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007 which:

- Places health promotion at the heart of a schools' activities
- Ensures that food and drink served in schools meets nutritional requirements
- Ensures local authorities promote the uptake and benefits of school meals and, in particular, free school meals
- Reduces the stigma associated with free school meals by requiring local authorities to protect the identity of those eligible for free school meals
- Gives local authorities the power to provide pupils with healthy snacks and drinks, either at a cost or free of charge
- Requires local authorities to consider sustainable development guidance when they provide food or drink in schools

The main implications for the school meal service were to meet:

- Nutrient standards - an average day's school lunch should provide a third of the daily nutrients for pupils
- Food and drink standards - define the types of food and drinks that should be offered

This has resulted in a service which provides and promotes healthy food choices with a restriction of certain foods high in fat, salt and sugar.

The primary meal service is based on a 2 course lunch with a choice of a main meal plus bread and a drink.

There are approximately 16,500 pupils in the 170 primary schools that have a meal service in Highland (2009-10); in (2007-8) the average meals consumed per day was 8163 (48%). Highland was fully compliant with the Act in August 2008 and uptake figures for subsequent years has increased (Table 1).

*Table 1: Average School Meal Uptake in Highland Primary Schools*

Year	Total pupil numbers	Primary School meal uptake	
		meals per day	percentage
2007-8	17059	8163	48%
2008-9	16954	8233	49%
2009-10	16821	8703	52%

In primary schools, parents have a key role in influencing whether or not their child/children takes a school lunch, and therefore it is important to gain an

understanding of their views of the service to continue to improve on uptake, and inform future developments.

## Methods

A questionnaire was designed to determine:

- Parents views on the school meal service.
- Preferred payment methods
- Understanding of the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007.

A paper leaflet of 17 questions was produced (Appendix 1) and distributed to schools with the 2010 Spring/Summer menu flyer. Schools received sufficient questionnaires for their complete school roll. Head teachers were asked to arrange distribution to all pupils.

Parents were requested to either complete the paper questionnaire or an online version. The paper questionnaire was returned to the school cook or posted into the central office. All questionnaire responses were kept confidential.

All the completed questionnaires were collated by one individual who manually imputed the data into an excel spreadsheet.

## Results

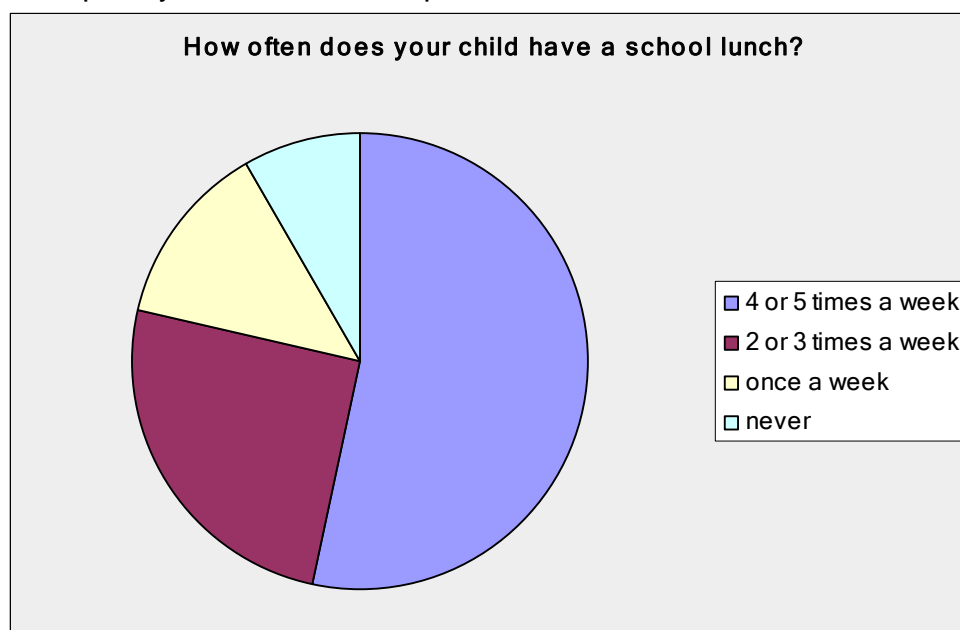
*Question 1: which school does your child attend?*

Completed questionnaires were received from parents whose children attend 141 schools out of 170 in Highland, with a total of 1716 responses (10% of the total school roll).

*Question 2: how often does your child have a school lunch?*

Of those that responded 1333 (79%) frequently (more than twice a week) chose a school lunch (Figure 1)

*Figure 1: Frequency of school lunch uptake*



*Question 3: would you like your child to have a school lunch more often?*

715 (42%) parents responded that they would like their children to have a school lunch more often compared to 790 (46%) who would not; of the 212 (12%) who did not answer the question some indicated that their child already had lunch everyday.

*Question 4: what would encourage your child to take school lunches regularly?*

Parents felt that the main way to encourage pupils to attend school lunches regularly was to provide food that they like, (n = 1080) (75%) (Figure 2).

*Figure 2: options to encourage uptake of school lunch*



*Question 5: if a single choice only menu was available what effect would this have on your child taking a school lunch?*

Parents indicated that a single choice would have a big impact on uptake with 69% (n=1184) responding that their child would come to lunch less often and 16% (n = 283) would stop coming to lunch altogether.

*Question 6: have you had the opportunity to have a school lunch?*

30% (n= 523) of parents have had the opportunity to have a school lunch compared to 69% (n= 1179) who had not; 14 chose not to answer the question.

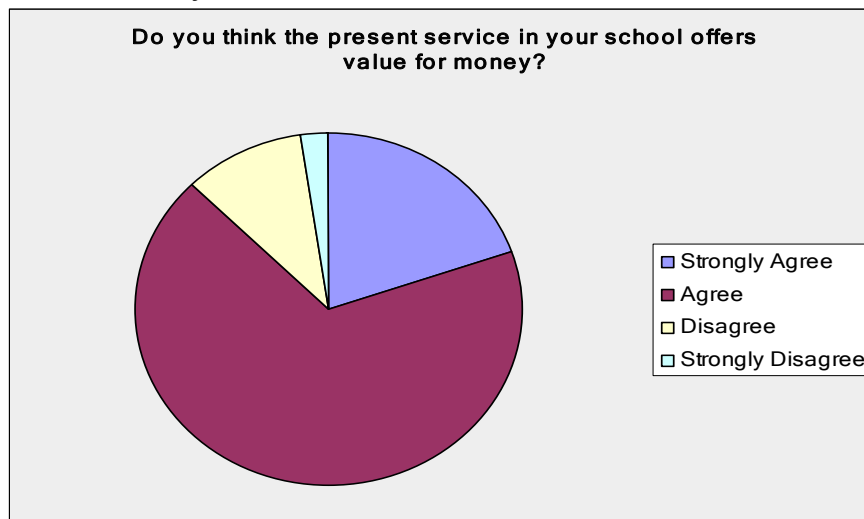
*Question 7: if yes, did you enjoy the experience?*

Of those parents who had experienced a school lunch 86% (n=450) enjoyed it; 12% (n=62) did not

*Question 8: do you think that the present service in your school offers value for money?*

The majority of parents 84% (n= 1433) thought that the school meal service offered value for money (Figure 3)

*Figure 3: Value for money*



*Question 9: would you be willing to pay more to keep the same level of meal choice?*

Although most parents thought the school meal was currently good value for money, 57% (n= 976) would not be willing to pay more, 36% (n= 622) would pay more and 7% (119) did not answer.

*Question 10: At present you can only pay for lunch by cash or cheque. Would you prefer to use another method?*

55% (n=952) of parents were happy paying by cash or cheque; 32% (n =553) said they would prefer to pay by another method; 3% (n=51) did not answer. This question was not applicable to 10% (n=161).

*Question 11: if yes, (i.e. to use another payment method), would you prefer a) online payment b) credit/debit card c) direct debit?*

Of the 32% (n=553) of parents who would like to pay by another method, online payment was the preferred choice (n= 453 (82%); credit/debit card 44% (n= 244); direct debit 37% (n=204). More than one option could be chosen.

*Question 12: would an incentive encourage you to change your payment method?*

16% (n=279) of parents said that an incentive would encourage them to change the way they pay for school meals; 32% (n = 527) would change anyway and 38% (n= 660) preferred to pay by cash or cheque.

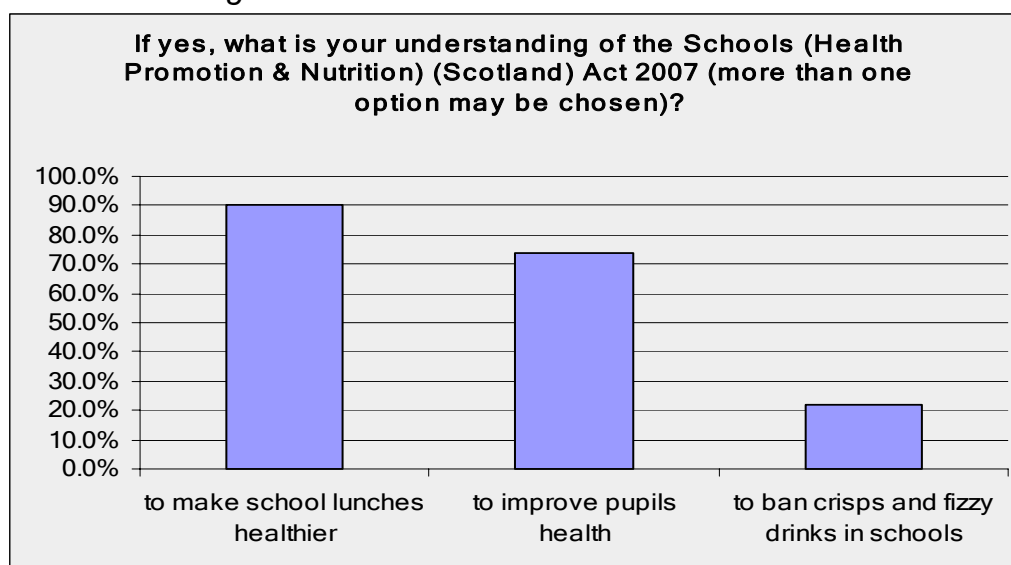
*Question 13: are you aware of the Schools (Health Promotion & Nutrition)(Scotland) Act 2007 'the Act'?*

Most parents 72% (n= 1234) were aware of this legislation compared to those who were not 27% (n=470).

*Question 14: if yes, what is your understanding of 'the Act'?*

This question was answered by 1260 (73%) parents. Respondents thought the main intention of 'the Act' was to make school lunches healthier. Although all statements were correct, the main aim was to improve pupils' health. (Figure 4)

*Figure4: understanding of 'the Act'*



*Question 15: would you like to know more about 'the Act'?*

Out of 97% (n= 1667) of parents who responded, 34% (n=567) would like to know more about 'the Act'.

*Question 16: does your child have free school meals?*

10% (n= 175) of parents who responded had a child/children in receipt of free school meals.

*Question 17: do you know who to contact if you have any queries on school meals?*

The majority of parents (n= 997 (59%)) knew who to contact about school meals compared to 41% (n=699) who did not.

## **Discussion**

A survey of parents of Highland primary school pupils was undertaken in order to determine their views of the school meal service following the implementation of the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007.

16,500 questionnaires were distributed to parents via the 2010 Spring/Summer menu flyer which is given out to all pupils through the schools.

A small sample (1716 (10% of total primary school roll)) of parents completed and returned the questionnaires. 10% (n=175) of respondents have children in receipt of free school meals which is lower than overall figures for Highland (15%); there is a 73% uptake (11%) of free school meals. It may be the sample over represents those who take school meals but it is not possible to determine whether this a representative sample, so given the small sample size, the results to need to be interpreted with caution.

52% of primary school children have a school meal on any given day, on average. The results from this questionnaire suggest that 91% of pupils use the meal service, even if only once a week. This is could be a very encouraging statistic and one on which the service can build.

We realise that parents do not send their children for a school lunch for a variety of reasons e.g. they go home for lunch, they prefer a packed lunch, they require a special diet that cannot be accommodated by the catering service, and parents who have 2 or 3 children at school found may find it expensive to use the lunch service on a daily basis.

However, just over 40% of respondents stated they would like their children to have a school lunch more often. Food that pupils like and cheaper lunches were the main reasons given as options to encourage a more regular uptake. The catering service continues to consult pupils, parents, cooks and teaching staff through School Nutrition Action Groups and Pupil Councils in order to establish the food and meals that are popular with children. Those foods which make a regular appearance on these surveys (sausages, hot dogs, macaroni, and chips) are often high in fat and/or salt. We do procure healthier versions of these options but they still need to be limited in order to comply with the nutritional analysis. This illustrates the difficult tensions between cost, value and quality.

Nonetheless, the majority of parents (84%) thought that the school meal service offered value for money but over half of respondents (57%) said they would not be willing to pay more to keep the same level of choice. This perhaps, is unsurprising, given the choice, who would pay more for a service they currently viewed as good value? It does indicate that parents feel the current pricing is about right. It is budget committees within the Highland Council that set meal prices rather than the catering service.

Parents have always paid for school lunches by cash or cheque directly to the school on a daily/weekly/monthly basis.

Just over half of parents (55%) were happy to continue to pay for a school lunch by cash or cheque. Of the 32% who would prefer another method, on line payment was the preferred option but this only represents 27% of all respondents.

The catering service currently uses a variety of methods to promote the benefits that a healthy school lunch can bring e. g. menu flyers sent home, local radio, outside events. Another good example is to invite parents, especially of new primary 1 pupils, to have a school lunch. However, survey figures show that only 31% of parents have

been given this opportunity so further work, in conjunction with schools, requires to be done to increase this figure.

Over the last 4 years, information about Hungry for Success and the current legislation has been conveyed to parents through the seasonal menu flyers. This is reflected in the fact that most parents (72%) were aware of 'the Act' and the majority of these (90%) thought that this legislation was to make school lunches healthier. 34% (n=562) parents were keen to know more about 'the Act'.

It was encouraging to know that 60% of respondents knew who to contact with school meal enquiries and would also be prepared to participate and comment on school meal issues.

Since the introduction of legislation to improve the nutritional quality of meals, the uptake of school meals in primary schools in Highland has shown a steady increase (+12.2%) over the last 3 years. This compares favourably to Scottish figures (+1.6%) Parents, when surveyed indicated general support for school meals. They are keen that their children attend school meals more frequently and they think they are good value for money. This is encouraging given the importance of nutrition in the early years, and underlines the importance of the school meals service to the whole school approach to health, wellbeing and education. The catering service needs to continue to develop, using the partnership approach it currently employs, to promote further pupil and parent engagement and uptake of school meals.

Fiona Clarke – Consultant Dietitian

Sharon Cameron – Food Services Co-ordinator

## Parents Questionnaire

1. What school does your child attend \_\_\_\_\_
2. How often does your child have a school lunch
  - 4 or 5 times a week
  - 2 or 3 times a week
  - Once a week
  - Never
3. Would you like your child to have a school lunch more often
  - Y
  - N
4. What would encourage your child to take school meals regularly
  - Cheaper
  - Food they like
  - Better dining room
  - Better supervision
  - Better quality
5. If a single choice only menu was available, what effect would this have on your child taking a school lunch
  - would always come for lunch
  - would come more often
  - would come to lunch less often
  - would stop coming for lunch
6. Have you had the opportunity to have a school lunch
  - Y
  - N
7. If yes, did you enjoy your experience
  - Y
  - N
8. Do you think that the present service in your school offers value for money?
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
  -
9. Would you be willing to pay more to keep the same level of meal choice
  - Y
  - N
10. At present you can only pay for lunch by cash or cheque. Would you prefer to use another method
  - Y
  - N (go to Q 12)
  - Not applicable (go to Q 13 )
11. If yes, would you prefer any of the following? (more than 1 option may be chosen)



- Online payment
- Credit/debit card
- Direct debit
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12. Would an incentive encourage you to change your payment method

- Y
- No, I don't need an incentive, I would change anyway
- No, I don't need an incentive, I'd prefer to pay by cash or cheque

13. Are you aware of the Schools (Health Promotion & Nutrition)(Scotland) Act 2007

- Y
- N

14. If yes, what is your understanding of the schools (health promotion & nutrition)(Scotland) act 2007 (more than 1 option may be chosen)

- to make school lunches healthier
- to improve pupils health
- to ban crisps & fizzy drinks in schools
- other, please specify

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15. Would you like to know more about the Nutrition Act

- Y
- N

16. Does your child have free school meals

- Y
- N

17. Do you know who to contact if you have any queries on school meals

- Y
- N

18. We need regular feedback from our customers. Would you be prepared to participate and comment on school meal issues if asked?

- Y
- N

19. If yes please provide contact details

e-mail
And/or telephone number

We would like to thank you for participating in our survey.

This survey is completely anonymous. A summary of all the responses will be put on your school website.

Please return your completed questionnaire to: - Highland Council Catering, Ness House, Drummond Road,  
Inverness IV2 5BH

**Or** hand into your school cook.

You may prefer to complete this survey on line

<http://www.highland.gov.uk/learninghere/schools/schoolmeals.htm>