

# Are you staying for your lunch?

## Secondary School Pupils 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 'The Act' 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 e.g. processed meats, pastries, crisps, confectionary and fizzy drinks.

There are approximately 15 000 pupils in the 29 secondary schools in Highland (2009-10). In 2007-8 the average meals consumed per day was 8187). Highland was fully compliant with the Act in January 2009 and uptake figures for subsequent years has fallen (Table 1). In order to improve uptake it was important to determine pupils' views of the current school meal service.

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

Year	Total pupil numbers	Secondary School meal uptake	
		meals per day	percentage
2007-8	14942	8187	55%
2008-9	14768	7134	48%
2009-10	14767	6878	46%

## Methods

A questionnaire was designed which aimed to determine:

- the reasons why pupils choose a school lunch or not.
- what would encourage pupils to choose a school lunch more often
- pupils understanding of 'The Act'.

The questions were based on those used in the Free School Meal Needs assessment (Morrison and Clarke 2006; Highland Council & NHS Highland). A paper leaflet of 10 questions was produced (Appendix 1). During January 2010 all 29 secondary schools in Highland received sufficient questionnaires for their school roll. Head teachers were asked to arrange their distribution to all pupils. A collection box for returns was placed in the school dining room for 3 weeks. All questionnaire responses were kept confidential. Completed forms were entered into a draw with one pupil per school receiving a £20 High Street Voucher. The completed questionnaires were returned to the centre where one individual manually imputed the data into an excel spreadsheet.

## Results

*Question 1: which school do you attend?*

There are 14,767 secondary pupils in Highland and 3983 completed questionnaires were received, a response rate of 27%.

All schools returned questionnaires although the response rate ranged from 2% - 91% of the school roll.

*Question 2: How often do you have a school lunch?*

Of those who responded, 2155 (54%) frequently (more than twice a week) choose a school lunch (Table 2).

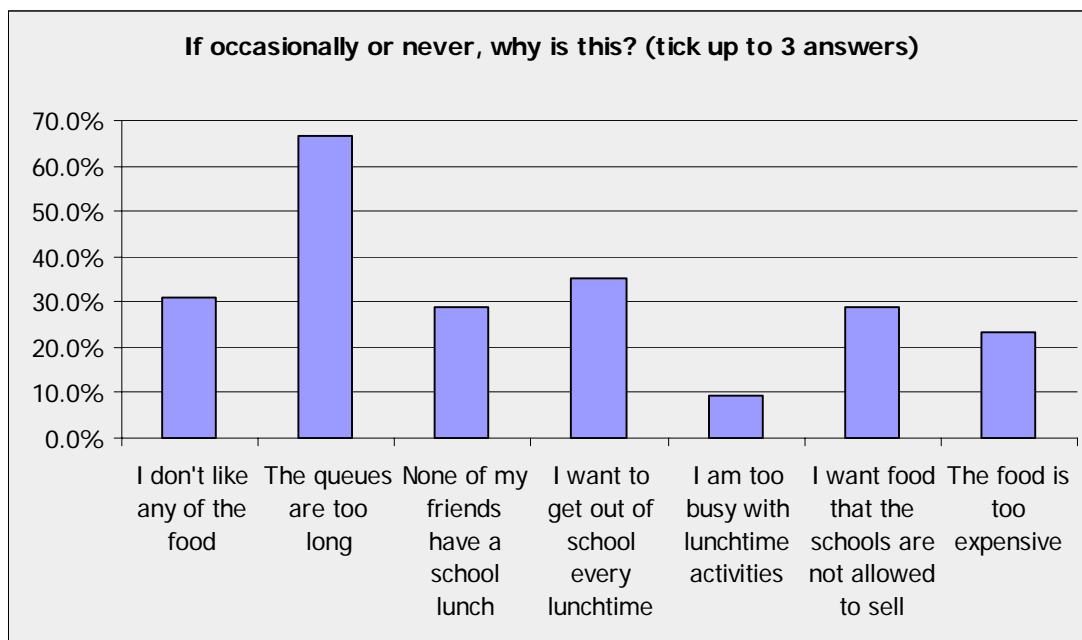
*Table 2: Frequency of School Lunch uptake*

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
4 or 5 times a week	41.3%	1641
2 or 3 times a week	12.9%	514
once a week	4.0%	158
Occasionally	18.4%	732
Never	23.3%	925
	<b><i>answered question</i></b>	<b>3970 (97%)</b>
	<b><i>skipped question</i></b>	<b>13</b>

*Question 3: If occasionally or never, why is this?*

Long queues were the main reason why pupils (1393 out of 2097 responses) do not regularly come for a school lunch (Figure 1). Participation in lunch time activities was not an important factor in attendance (192 out of 2097 responses).

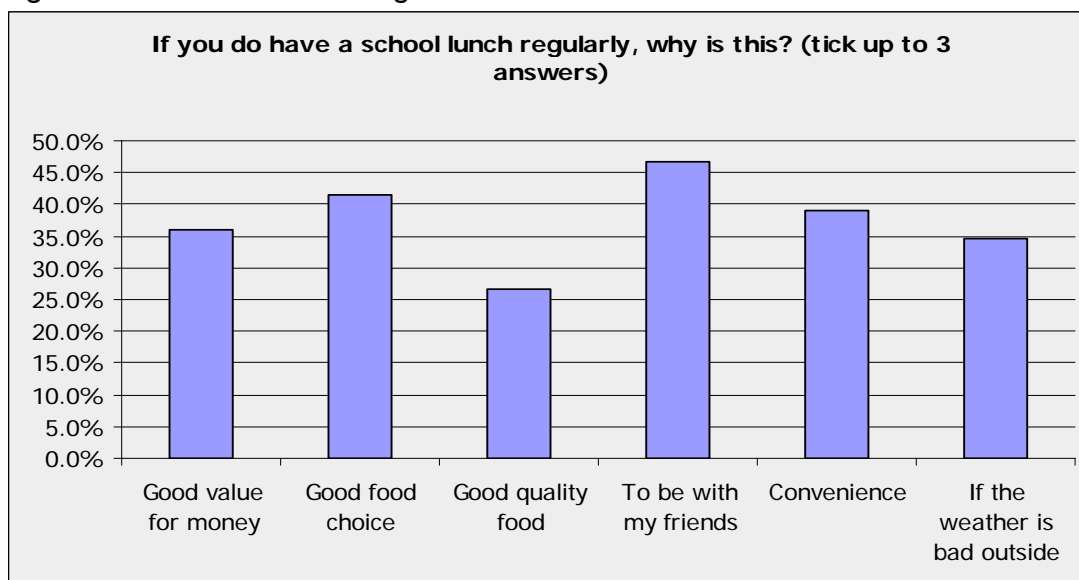
Figure 1: Reasons for not having a school lunch



Question 4: If you do have a school lunch regularly, why is this?

There was a variety of reasons why those pupils who regularly have a school lunch (n =2517) do so (Figure 2); pupils see school lunches as social, convenient and they like the choice of food.

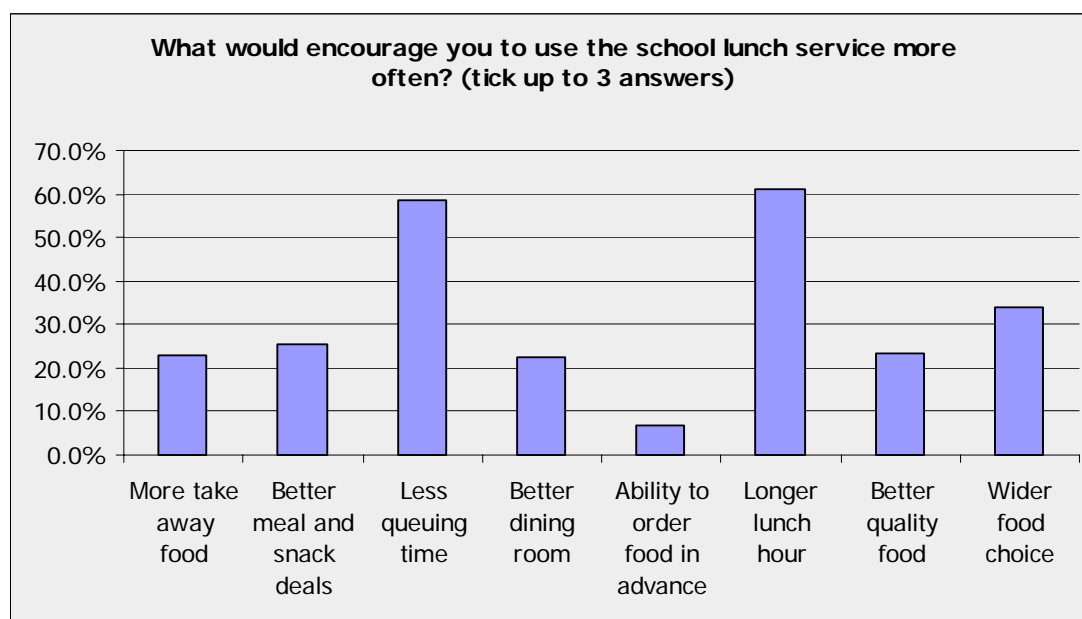
Figure 2: Reasons for having a school lunch



Question 5: what would encourage you to use the school lunch service more often?

The majority of pupils (96%) answered this question and a longer lunch hour and shorter queues were the preferred choices for most pupils (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Changes that would encourage school lunch uptake



Question 6: what new dishes would you like to see on the menu?

Pupils were asked to suggest what new dishes they would like to see on the menus,. There was a wide variety of suggestions from 2339 (59%) pupils, which were grouped into 4 main themes:

- Current dishes – 562 suggestions (43%) e.g. spaghetti bolognaise, macaroni cheese, fish & chips, vegetarian choices, sandwiches, baguettes etc
- International main meals - 367 suggestions (28%) e. g. Indian, Chinese and Mexican dishes
- Foods which are prohibited by the Act - 130 suggestions (10%) e.g. confectionary, fizzy drinks, chips as an individual item
- Foods that are limited by a high fat and salt content 262 suggestions (20%) e. g. hot dogs, chicken nuggets, pies, sausage rolls

Question 7: how would you describe a Meal Deal?

Meal Deals are used to promote sales of a 2 course balanced meal. 809 (21%) of respondents were aware of the correct content of the Meal Deal (Table 3).

Table 3: Content of a Meal Deal

How would you describe a meal Deal?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Soup and a main course with a free pudding	13.6%	521
Two courses with a free drink	21.2%	809
A main course with a drink with a free soup or pudding	29.0%	1110
Soup and a sandwich with a free drink	10.6%	404
Don't know	25.6%	979
	<b>answered question</b>	<b>3823</b>
	<b>skipped question</b>	<b>160</b>

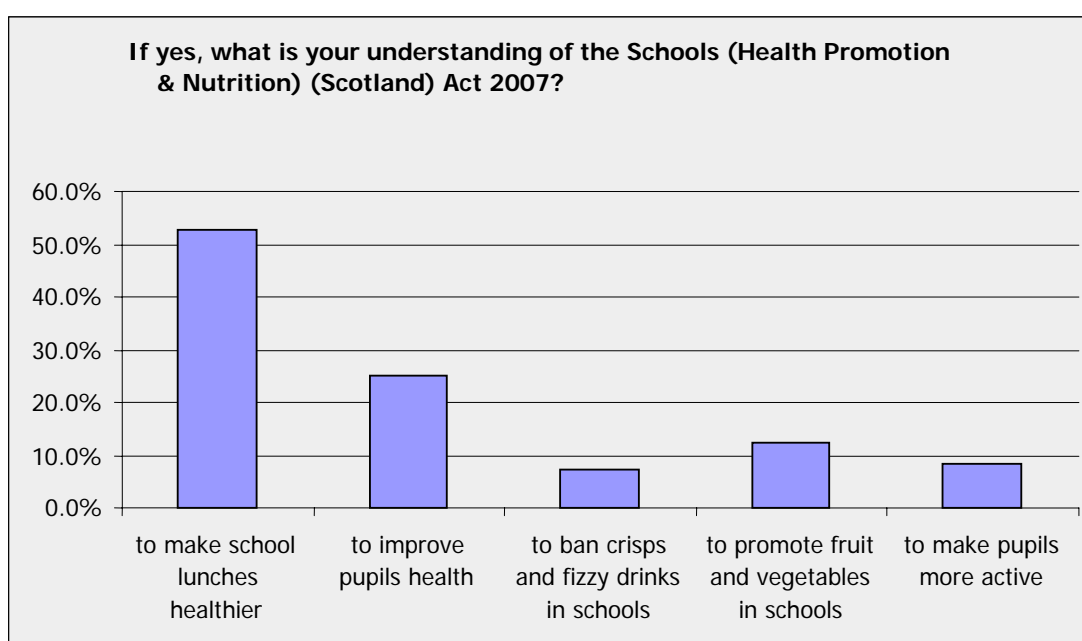
*Question 8: have you heard of the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007?*

Most pupils (n = 2539 (64%)) were not aware of this Act compared to those who were (n = 1326 (33%)). 118 (3%) did not answer this question.

*Question 9: if yes, what is your understanding of this Act?*

This question was answered by 1626 (41%) pupils and includes those who were aware and unaware of 'the Act'. Respondents thought that the main intention of 'the Act' was to make school lunches healthier (Figure 4). Although all statements were correct, the main aim was to improve pupil's health.

*Figure 4: Understanding of the Act*



## Discussion

A survey of Highland secondary 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. Questionnaires were distributed to all 29 secondary schools and 3983 (25%) pupils returned a completed questionnaire.

The average secondary school daily meal uptake is 46%. The results from this questionnaire suggest that 77% of pupils use the meal service even if only occasionally (18%) and 54% take a school lunch frequently (more than twice a week).

We understand that some pupils will be very unlikely to use the service because of the restricted food choice and therefore our focus is to get pupils who already use the service to come more often. The results from this survey suggest that those who do come for lunch appreciate the social and convenient service, with a good food choice and value for money. We should continue to build on these values.

Schools currently use a variety of methods to provide a convenient and social service, and these include pre-ordering, deli bar, pasta bar, grab and go, theme days and special promotions. However, there was a lack of awareness of the Meal Deal (21%), which does offer good value for money – a two course main meal with a free drink for £1.90. We need to look at the Meal Deal options and promotion of this choice.

Most pupils are not aware of the Act (64%), but there is recognition of the changes that have occurred to make school food healthier (41%) and this is reflected by the suggestions given for new dishes on the menu. Only 10% of suggestions were for foods that are prohibited by 'the Act' e.g. confectionary, fizzy drinks and chips sold as a single item. Many of the proposed dishes are currently on the menu (43%) but improvements could be made in the range of international and contemporary choices.

Most respondents (96%) answered the question 'what would encourage you to use the service more often' and so includes those who never have a lunch. The two main factors in encouraging more frequent usage would be for pupils to have a longer lunch hour (61%) and reduced queuing time (59%). Addressing these factors requires a whole school approach, as there are implications for timetabling and management of the lunch period. However, if these changes resulted in more pupils taking a school lunch then there would be benefits to both the individual and the school. There is emerging evidence of the beneficial impact of a healthy lunch on academic performance. It is also well established that a healthy diet is important for short and long term health.

Fiona Clarke – Consultant Dietitian

Sharon Cameron – Food Services Co-ordinator, Highland Council

## Appendix 1

### Win £20 High Street Shopping Voucher

You are one of our customers or potential customers and we are keen to get your views on school lunches. Please help us by filling out this questionnaire and return it to the box provided in your school dining room by **Friday 29<sup>th</sup> January**.

All completed questionnaires will be entered into a prize draw for the chance to **win £20 of High Street Shopping Vouchers!** (1 voucher per school)

1. Which school do you attend? \_\_\_\_\_

2. How often do you have a school lunch (tick 1 answer only)

- 4 or 5 times a week
- 2 or 3 times a week
- Once a week
- Occasionally
- Never

3. If occasionally or never, why is this? (tick 3 answers only)

- I don't like any of the food
- The queues are too long
- None of my friends have a school lunch
- I want to get out of school every lunch time
- I'm too busy with lunch time activities
- I want food that the schools are not allowed to sell
- The food is too expensive
- 

4. If you do have a school lunch regularly, why is this? (tick 3 answers only)

- good value for money
- good food choice
- good quality food
- to be with my friends
- convenience
- if the weather is bad outside

5. What would encourage you to use the school lunch service more often? (tick 3 answers only)

- more take away food
- better meal and snack deals
- less queuing time
- better dining room
- to be able to order food in advance
- longer lunch hour
- better quality food
- better food choice

6. What new dishes would you like to see on the menus

\_\_\_\_\_

7. How would you describe a Meal Deal? (tick 1 answer only)

- Soup and a main course with a free pudding
- 2 courses with a free drink
- a main course and a drink with a free soup or pudding
- soup and a sandwich with a free drink
- Don't know

8. Have you heard of the Schools (health promotion & nutrition)(Scotland) Act 2007

- Y
- N

9. If yes, what is your understanding of this Act (tick 1 answer only)

- to make school lunches healthier
- to improve pupils health
- to ban crisps & fizzy drinks in schools
- to promote fruit and vegetables in schools
- to make pupils more active

10. If you would like to be entered into the prize draw , please enter you details

**Thank you for completing this survey**

All questionnaire responses will be kept confidential, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998