Agenda Item	4
Report No	RDB-09-25

The Highland Council

Committee: **Redesign Board**

Date: **20 November 2025**

Report Title: **Food in Schools Project - Progress report**

Report By: **Assistant Chief Executive – Corporate**

1.   Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1   Following the meeting of the Redesign Board workshop on 28 August 2025 Officers implemented feedback received from Elected Members when considering how best to address the issues raised as emerging themes from the Food in Schools stakeholder surveys conducted during June 2025.

1.2   This report provides an update on the high-level action plan derived from that workshop, together with a series of detailed reports based on the stakeholder survey results.

2.   Recommendations

2.1   Members are asked to:

        i.   **Consider** the progress to date.
        ii.   **Note** the survey reports.
        iii.   **Scrutinise** the 10 point action plan.

3.   Implications

3.1   **Resource:** There are no resource implications arising as a direct consequence of this report.

3.2   **Legal:** There are no legal implications arising as a direct consequence of this report.

3.3   **Risk:** There are no risks arising as a direct result of this report. Project/Programme risks are identified via the council risk management process and monitored through the Portfolio Boards and are reported by exception only.

3.4   **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people):** There are no immediate health and safety implications arising from this report.

3.5   **Gaelic**: There are no implications arising as a direct result of this report.

4.   Impacts

4.1   In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2   Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.3   This is an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required. When further action plans are developed these will be assessed for impacts accordingly.

5.   Food in Schools – Delivering Sustainability

5.1   The project has a RAG status of Green with activity on track.

5.2   Survey results have now been analysed and reports from each stakeholder group developed. In addition, an overarching report has been written to provide insight into the cross-cutting themes from each of the individual surveys. These reports are included in Appendix 1.

5.3   The key findings of the surveys were:

- There is broad support for the principles of healthy eating and universal meal provision.
- Clear strengths emerged regarding the friendliness of catering services staff and the importance of that to enhancing the dining experience, particularly for younger pupils.
- A strong desire for simpler, more traditional meals.
- Concerns about portion sizes, especially for older pupils.
- Operational considerations such as resource deployment and managing supply chains.
- The need for better communication with families and more pupil involvement in menu design.
- A shared recognition that improving the dining environment could enhance uptake and reduce waste.

5.4   At the Redesign Board Workshop on 28th August 2025 Members discussed the key theses emerging from initial survey analysis. These themes are:
- Improve menu choices

- Deliver a quality product consistently
- Offer a superior dining experience

Members provided Officers with guidance on high level actions for inclusion in an action plan to take forward activities that would help address the emerging themes from the stakeholder surveys.

5.5 A 10 point action plan has been developed based on Members' insights from the workshop. The action plan is shown in Appendix 2. The action plan details the actions required to address the emerging themes.

5.6 The action plan will deliver against the actions according to the indicative timescale offered.

6. **Next Steps**

Officers will begin implementing the action plan based on the timelines and milestone stages as detailed.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Corporate

Date: 20 November 2025

Authors: Sheila Armstrong, Chief Officer – Revenues & Commercialisation
            Steven Bone, Business Development Manager
            Lucy Lallah, Business Management Analyst

Appendix 1
Survey Reports

Appendix 2
High-level Action Plan

Catering Staff Survey: Food in Schools 2024/25

Summary

This report presents findings from a comprehensive survey of catering staff across Highland Council schools regarding the Food in Schools programme. A total of 140 responses were received, offering both quantitative insights and rich qualitative feedback.
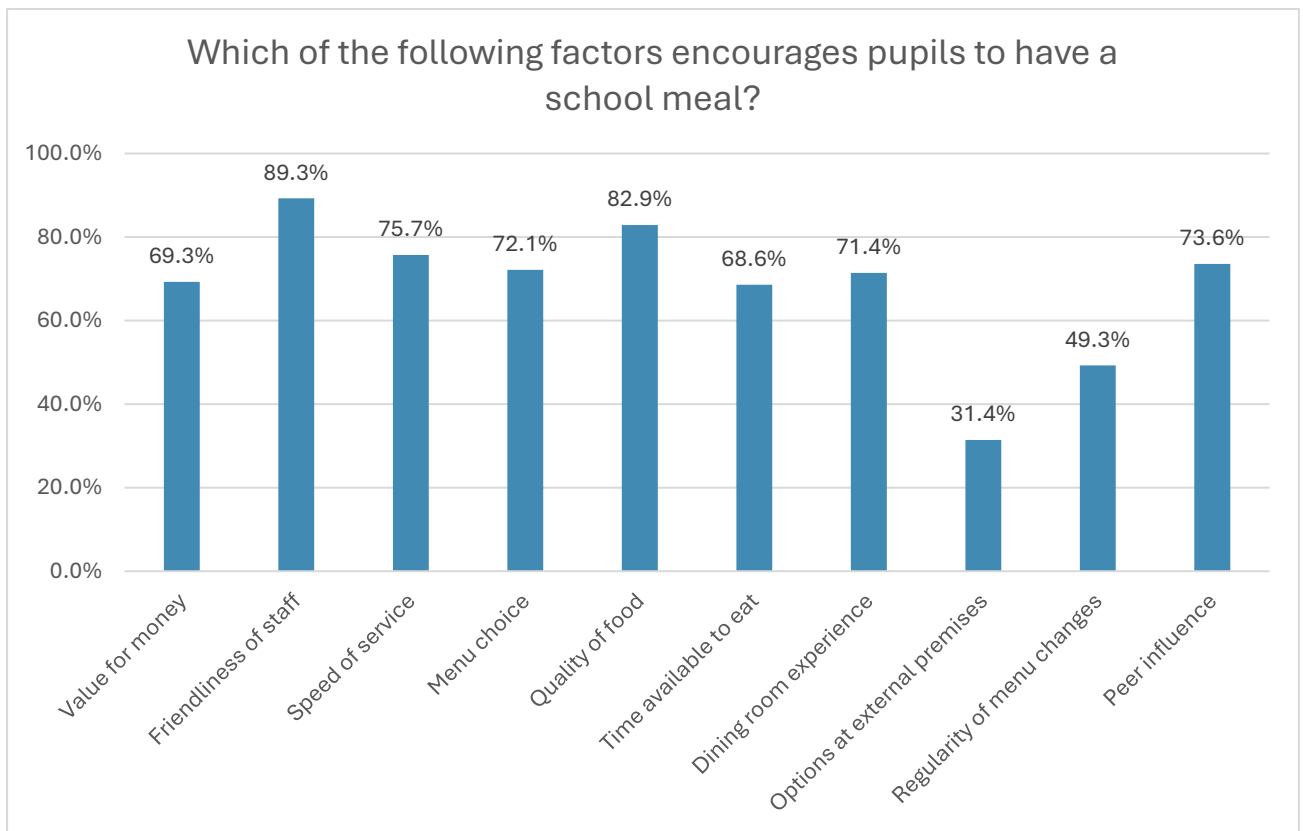
Key Findings:

- Health Perception: Most staff rated school meals as Fairly Healthy or Very Healthy. However, children's overall diets were viewed less positively.

- Nutrition Education: Over half of respondents believe school meals help pupils learn about nutrition.

- Meal Uptake Factors: Respondents felt that the most influential factors encouraging pupils to take school meals were:

> - Friendliness of staff
>
> - Quality of food
>
> - Menu choice

- Food Waste: A significant majority identified food waste as a problem, with many suggesting practical changes to reduce it.

- Dining Experience: Views were mixed, with just under half agreeing that the dining experience encourages healthy eating.

- Cost of Waste: Most staff estimated food waste costs the Council between £250,001 and £500,000 annually. (NB actual cost is estimated at £850,000

- Pupil Awareness: A large proportion felt pupils do not understand the implications of food waste.

- Communication of Guidance: There is strong support for improving communication of Scottish Government nutritional guidance.

- Policy Impact: Most respondents believe the Good Food Nation policy could positively impact pupils diets and health.
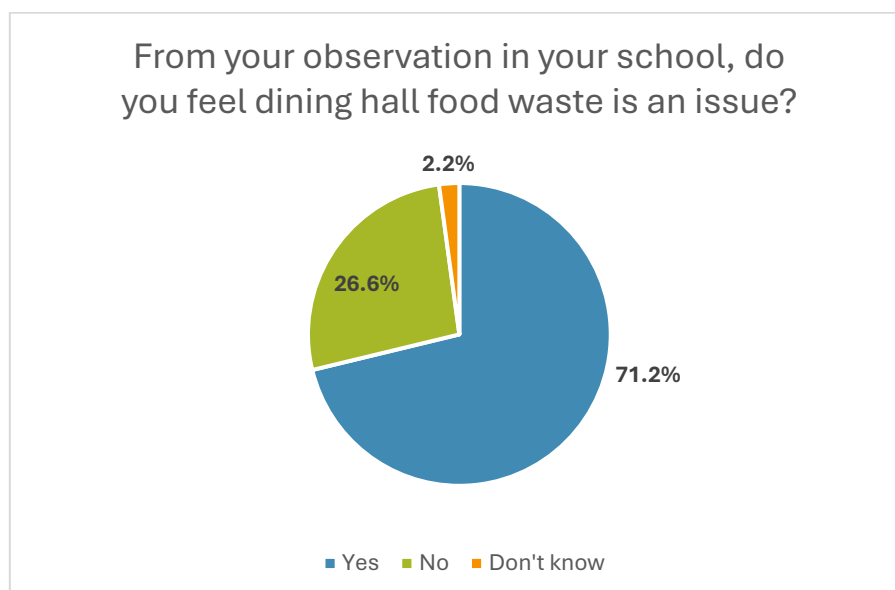
1. Factors Encouraging Meal Uptake

Respondents were asked to indicate what they felt were the key factors which would encourage pupils to have a school meal.

Which of the following factors encourages pupils to have a school meal?

Factor	Percentage
Value for money	69.3%
Friendliness of staff	89.3%
Speed of service	75.7%
Menu choice	72.1%
Quality of food	82.9%
Time available to eat	68.6%
Dining room experience	71.4%
Options at external premises	31.4%
Regularity of menu changes	49.3%
Peer influence	73.6%

- **Key Finding:** Friendliness of staff and quality of food were felt to be the most likely factors encouraging pupils to have a school meal with speed of service, peer influence and menu choice also being significant.

2. Food Waste: A Major Concern

From your observation in your school, do you feel dining hall food waste is an issue?

Response	Percentage
Yes	71.2%
No	26.6%
Don't know	2.2%

Waste as an Issue

- **Key Finding:** Over 70% of staff say dining hall food waste is an issue in their school.
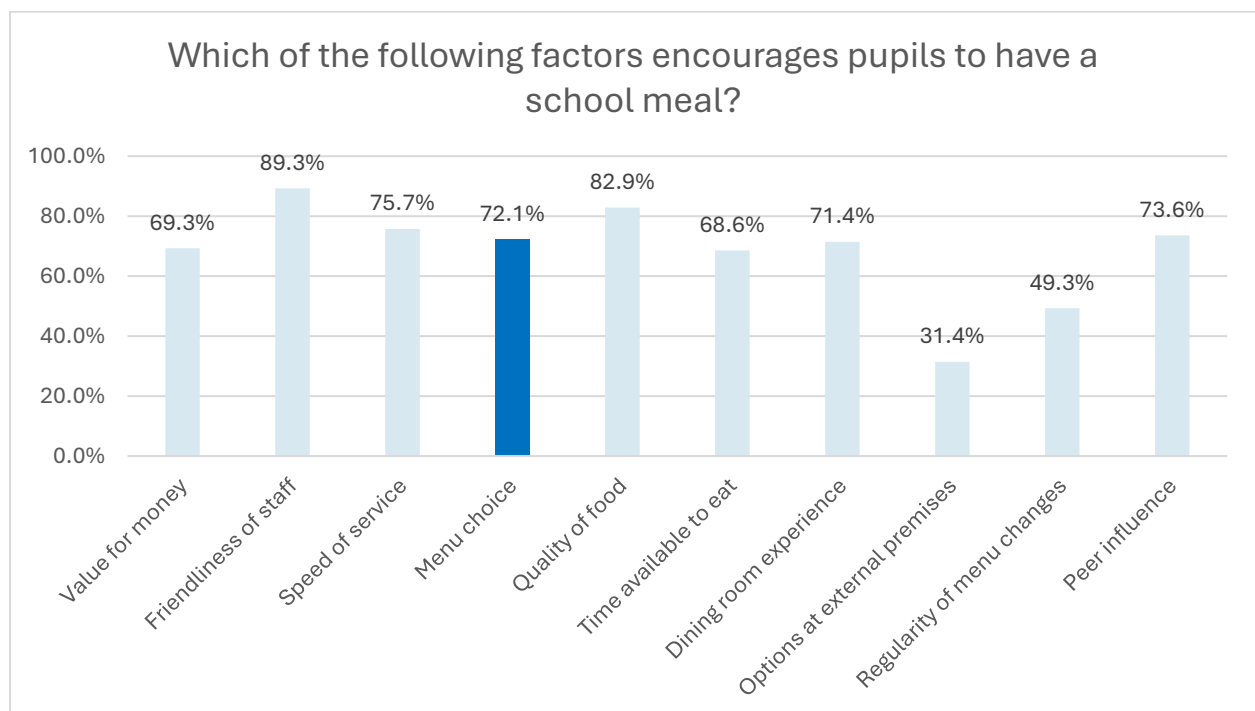
Quotes from staff provide a degree of depth to this statistic:

- "We put salad and veg on the plates when serving and it all goes in the bin. If we offer both, they most of the time don't want it."

- "The waste I have personally seen in schools is ridiculous. I see pupils literally ordering a meal and throwing it straight into the bin because they have to make a choice but don't like the option."

- "There's so much waste as the children are made to go by parents who just want to save money. Menu choices are sometimes a bit out there and not what smaller children like."

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3. Menu Suitability and Pupil Preferences

Chart: Staff Perception – Menu Choice Encourages Meal Uptake

Which of the following factors encourages pupils to have a school meal?

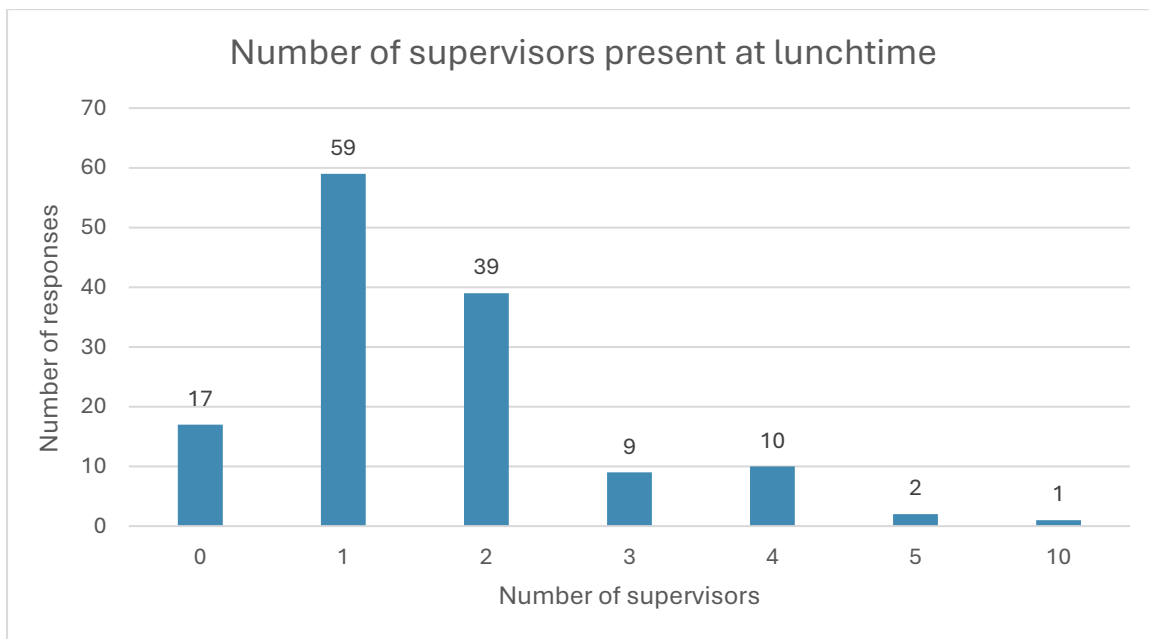| Factor	Percentage
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Time available to eat	68.6%
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Options at external premises	31.4%
Regularity of menu changes	49.3%
Peer influence	73.6%

- **Key Finding:** While 72% agree menu choice encourages uptake, many comments highlight that current menus are not child-friendly.

Again comments added by staff provide background to this perception:

- "A simpler menu for children would be so much better—basic traditional home cooking and so much less waste would be seen!"

- "Kids like normal old-fashioned food, steak pie, mince and tatties, macaroni, sausage with beans and chips, iced sponge, custard, apple crumble."

- "Too much focus on it being super healthy and kids just don't want that."

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4. Supervision and Dining Experience

Number of supervisors present at lunchtime

A bar chart titled "Number of supervisors present at lunchtime" with the y-axis labelled "Number of responses" (0 to 70) and the x-axis labelled "Number of supervisors". Values: 0 supervisors = 17, 1 = 59, 2 = 39, 3 = 9, 4 = 10, 5 = 2, 10 = 1.

- **Key Finding:** Many schools have only 1 or 2 supervisors, and some report no regular supervision at all. (It should be noted that the school identified as having 10 supervisors at lunchtime was Drummond School in Inverness (a special school))

Quotes:

- "We need to have supervisors who are allowed to encourage the pupils to eat their lunch. Not this 'we aren't allowed to say anything to the pupils'."

- "Because we have very little or no supervision in the dining hall, the children aren't encouraged to eat dinners and sometimes throw away full meals."

- "If there was more supervision in the dining rooms to encourage the children to eat more."

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5. Communication and Engagement

There was a fair degree of frustration expressed by catering staff that parents were often not aware of the reasons for some of the menu choices and that there was no mechanism for letting parents know what their child had for lunch.

Quotes:

- "Parents are not aware what is and is not allowed in school meals."

- "There needs to be more communication with parents telling them that their child is not eating lunch."

- "Staff, pupils & parents don't fully understand the reason for our menu choices & the guidance followed to bring together the weekly menus."

6. Operational and Supply Issues

Catering staff again expressed frustration with some of the operational and supply constraints which they felt they had to work within. In particular there were a number of comments made regarding the quality of ingredients provided by suppliers, especially in rural areas.

Quotes:

- "Many kitchens are understaffed, making it difficult to provide a varied menu or supervise dining rooms effectively."

- "Our numbers are not high enough for some of the 3rd options so we are storing a whole lot of 3rd option food to cater for 1 child - crazy."

- "Some suppliers seem expensive compared to what can be purchased locally."

7. External Competition and Meal Uptake

As noted in the chart in section 1, above, food options at external premises was highlighted as one factor influencing pupils' decisions to have a school meal. Catering staff expressed some views regarding this aspect.

Quotes:

- "Third year pupils are now allowed to leave school at lunchtime—I don't agree with this as it encourages them to go to the village and eat rubbish."

- "If you limit the availability to accessing the high street during lunch hours, they can choose unhealthy options elsewhere and there is no control of that."

Conclusion & Recommendations

The charts and staff voices highlight the need for:

- Simpler, more child-friendly menus.

- Better supervision and encouragement in dining rooms.

- Improved communication with parents and pupils.

- Addressing staffing and supply challenges.

- Reviewing the impact of free meals and external food options.
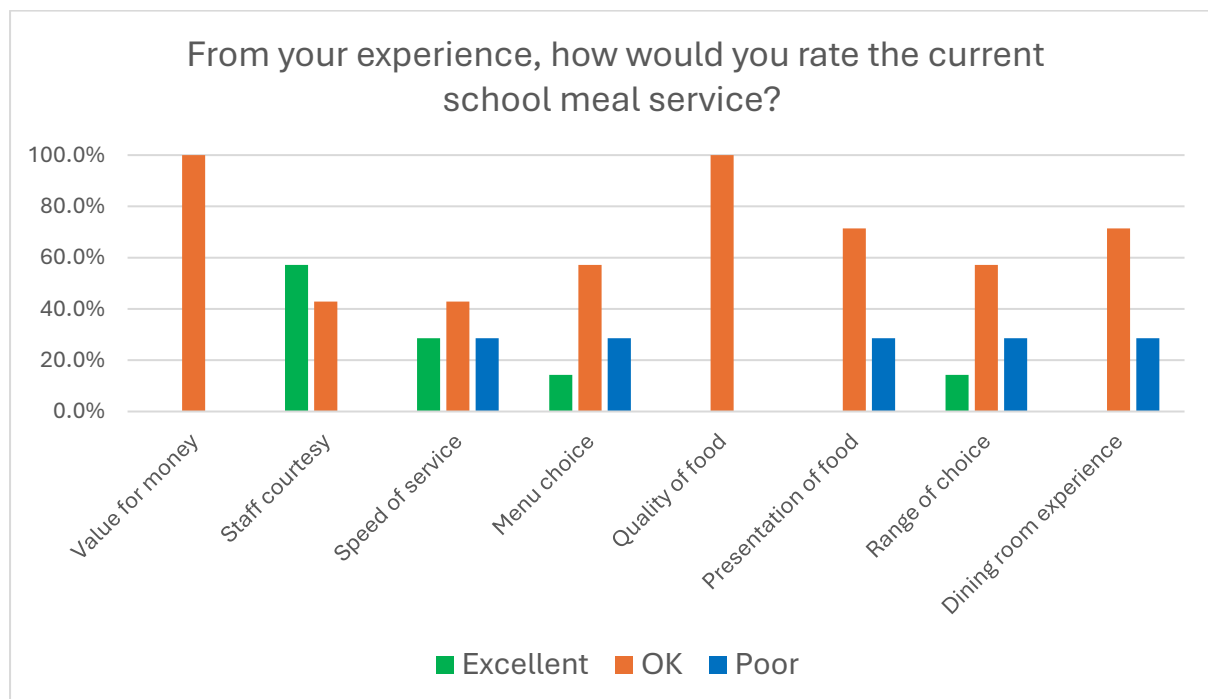
Summary Report: Members Survey – Food In Schools 2024/25

This report presents findings from the Members Survey on the school meal service across Highland schools. The survey aimed to gather elected members' perspectives on the quality, uptake, and healthiness of school meals, as well as factors influencing pupil participation. Overall, responses indicate moderate satisfaction with the service, concerns about food quality and dining environments, and strong support for improving pupil engagement through better menu design and dining experiences.

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1. Respondent Profile

Although only 8 members responded to the request for survey input, they presented a wide geographic spread across the Highland Council area. Members responding indicated that it was rare to receive correspondence relating to complaints, issues and queries regarding the school meals service however it was also rare to receive compliments regarding it.
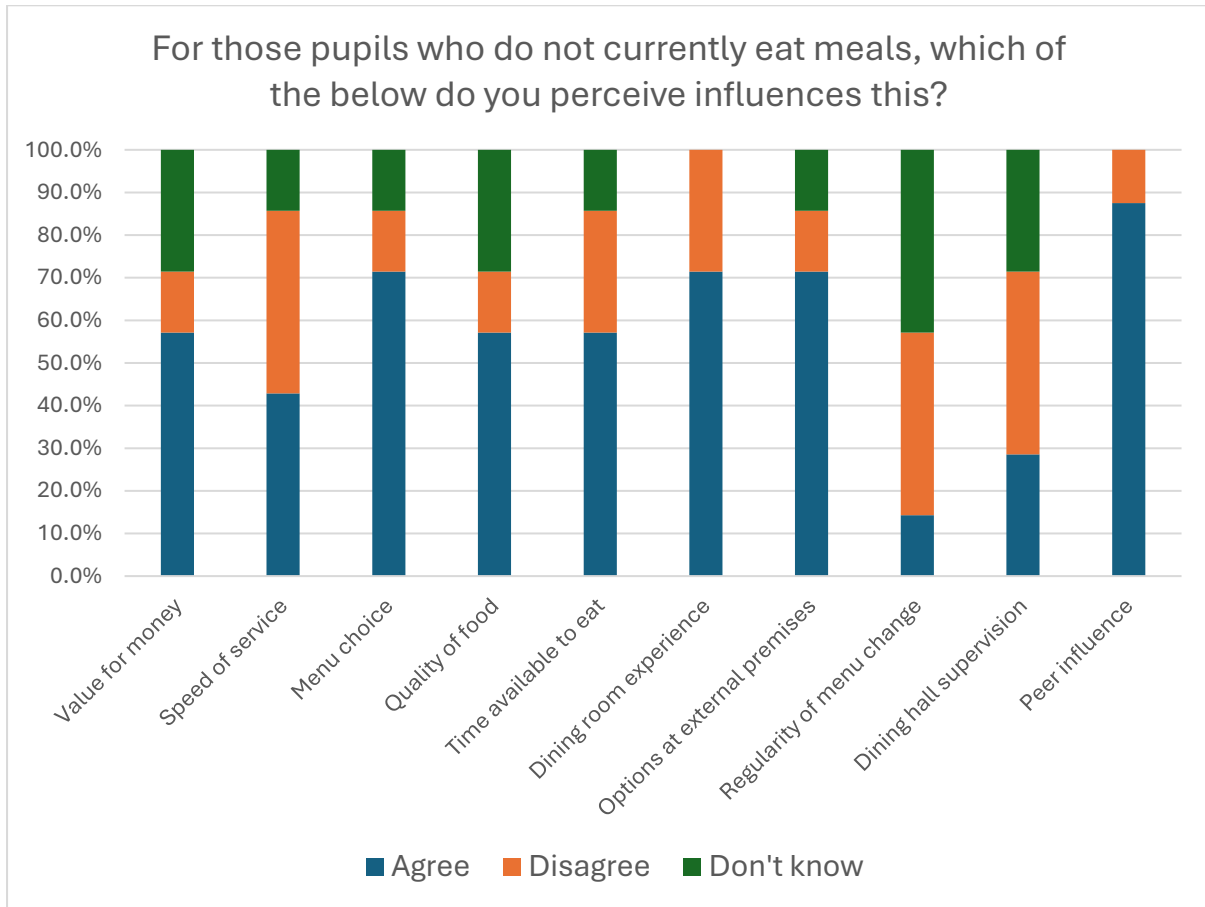
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2. School Meal Service Ratings

Members were asked to rate aspects of the school meal service on a scale of excellent to poor. The results were as follows:

From your experience, how would you rate the current school meal service?

Legend: Excellent, OK, Poor

3. Barriers to School Meal Uptake

Top perceived barriers (Agree responses):

For those pupils who do not currently eat meals, which of the below do you perceive influences this?

When members were asked to consider the factors that might be perceived as barriers preventing uptake of school meals, peer influence (88%), menu choice, dining room experience and options at external premises (all 71%) were considered most significant.

Comments made support these assertions:

"The time allocated for lunch break is too rushed and, in some schools, so late. Eating needs to be a relaxed and social experience. Teenagers need time to both eat AND then do whatever they wish afterwards."

"Cut down the noise. IHS smaller tables works"

"Vans parked at school gates should stop... at least if pupils are walking to shops they get some exercise."

4. Health Perceptions

Respondents were asked their opinions on the healthiness or otherwise of school meals and children's overall diets:

From your experience, how healthy do you feel the following are:

	Very healthy	Healthy	Slightly Unhealthy	Very Unheathy
School Meals	25.0%	62.5%	12.5%	0.0%
Children's general diets	0.0%	12.5%	75.0%	12.5%
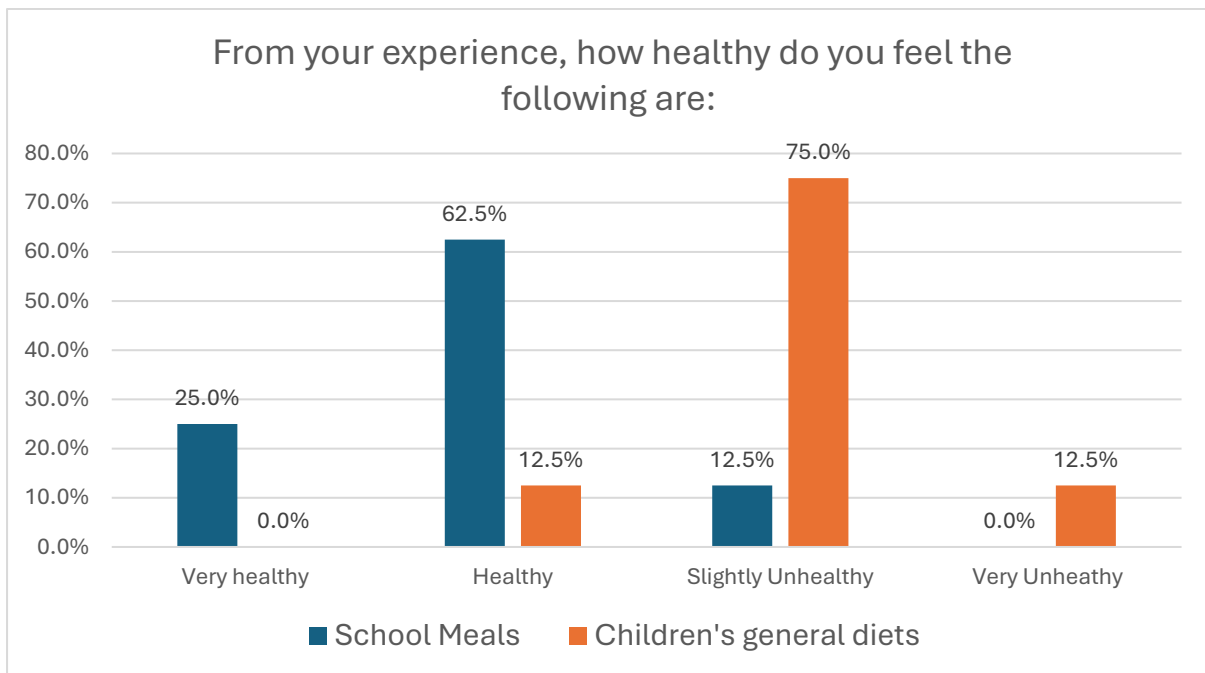
Most respondents felt that school meals were generally more healthy than children's overall diets.

7. Attitudes & Agreement

From your experience, to what extent do you agree with the below statements?
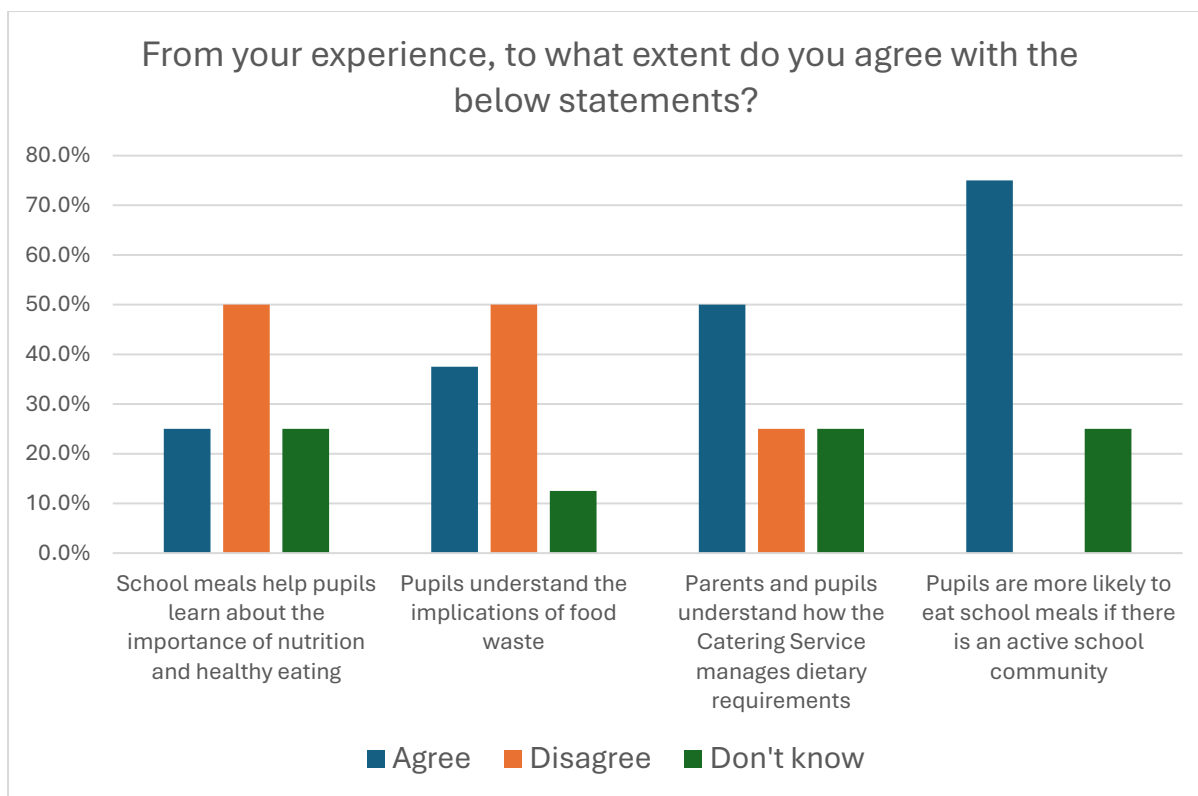
The responses to the statements indicate a sense that more needs to be done to integrate school meals into the school day in a more cohesive fashion. This is supported by comments such as:

"Look at the school day and where food fits into the mix for hunger, mood and behaviour. How the day is timetabled is important. We have to elevate the importance of having time to eat within the day - and eat well."

"Unless the opportunity to learn about food and cooking skills are on the curriculum and school meals are actually PART of the school education then the school meals won't embed the importance of nutrition and healthy eating for life."

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8. Dining Environment

- **100%** of members responding to the survey believe improving the dining environment will positively impact pupils' relationship to food.

Parent & Pupil Survey Report: Food in Schools 2024/25

1. Participation Overview

This survey included responses from both parents and pupils and was designed to allow opportunities for surveys to be completed jointly by parents together with their children.
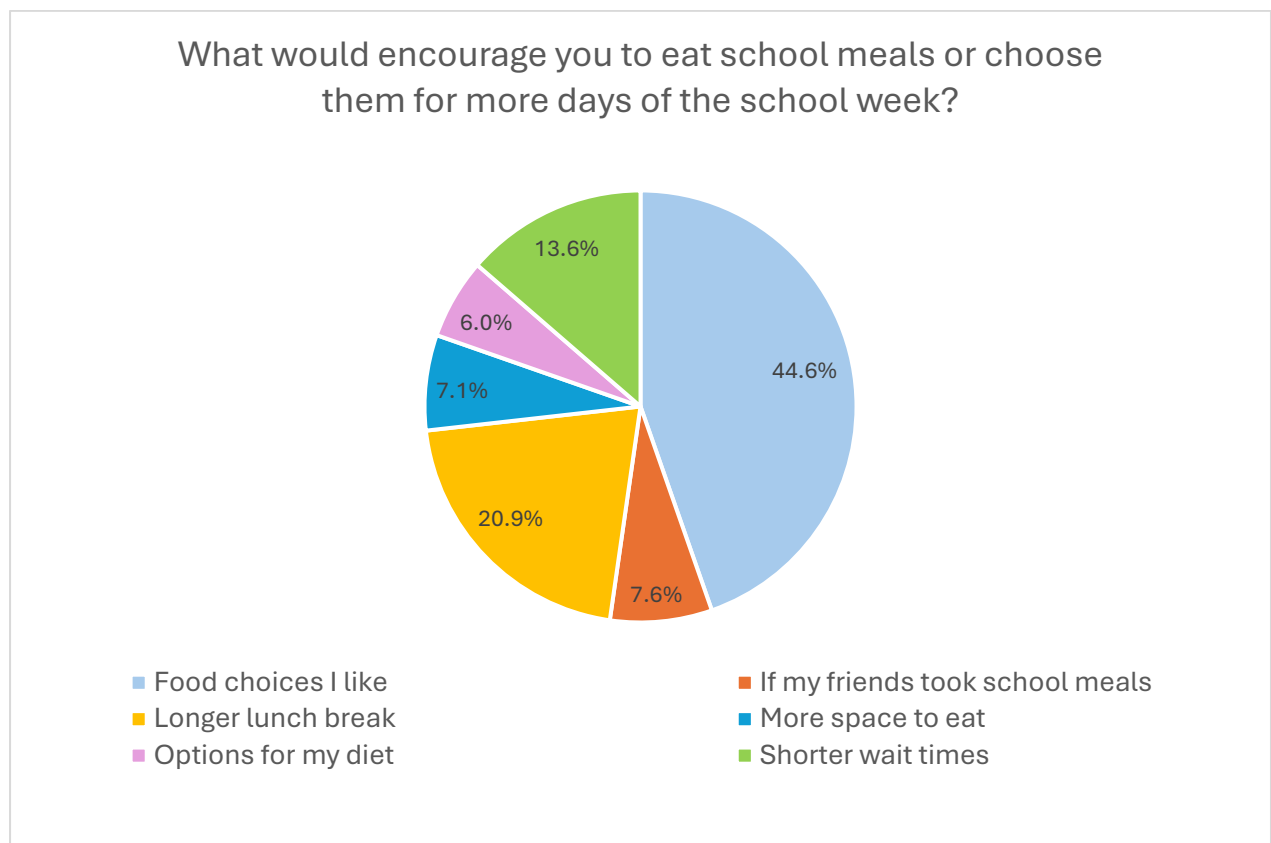
- **409 responses** from a wide range of Highland Council schools including 21 secondary schools, 2 special schools and 90 primary schools.

- Representation from **P1 to S6**, with respondents including both **pupils and parents/carers**.

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2. Key Findings & Issues

A. Menu Satisfaction & Food Preferences

Respondents were asked to indicate what would encourage them to eat school meals or choose them more often. A significant number (44.6%) indicated that if the menu included food choices they liked then they would eat school meals more often.

What would encourage you to eat school meals or choose them for more days of the school week?

- Food choices I like — 44.6%
- If my friends took school meals — 7.6%
- Longer lunch break — 20.9%
- More space to eat — 7.1%
- Options for my diet — 6.0%
- Shorter wait times — 13.6%

Although menu choice was a key barrier to increasing the uptake of school meals, overall there was **mixed satisfaction** with menu choices amongst those respondents who took school meals. The majority of respondents, **57.4%**, felt that menu choices
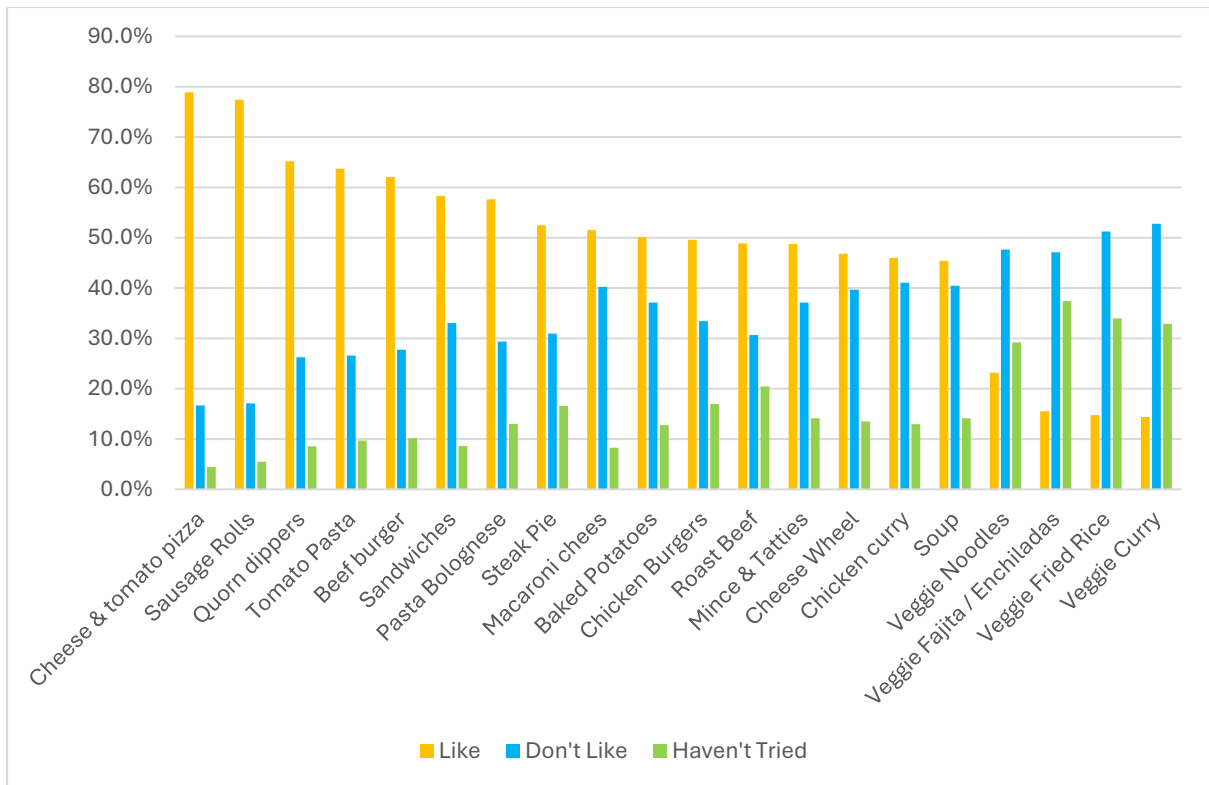
were either excellent or good however a significant minority considered them either fair or poor.

Please can you tell us what you think about the menu choices of school meals?

■ Excellent	13.1%
■ Good	44.3%
■ Fair	30.3%
■ Poor	12.3%
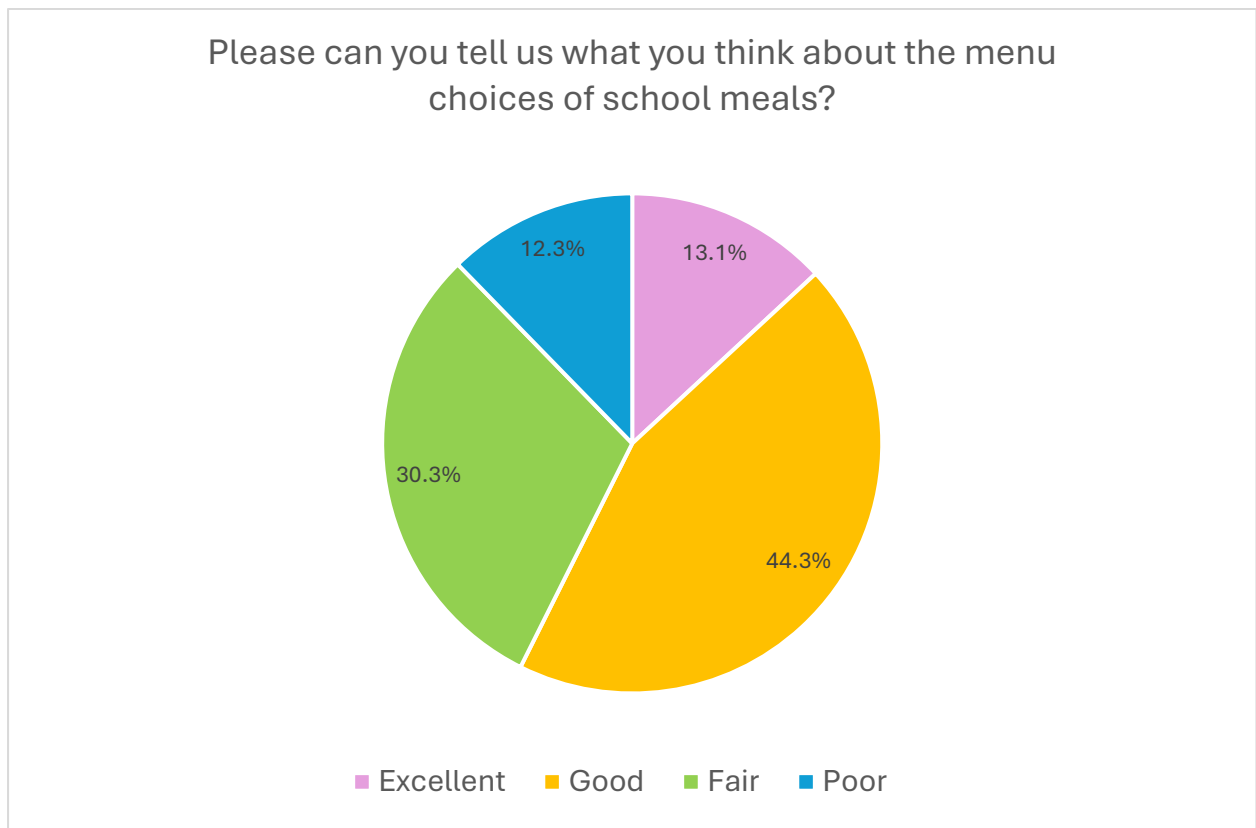
Comments within the survey indicated that many respondents want:

- **Simpler, more familiar meals** (e.g., sausages, pasta, chicken goujons).

- **Less processed food** and more **fresh/local ingredients**.

- **More sandwich options** and flexibility to select the parts of the meal they enjoy (e.g., sauces on the side).

Respondents were asked to indicate how much they either liked or disliked certain dishes. This showed a clear preference for foods such as pizza, pasta, burgers, sausage rolls and sandwiches, with ostensibly vegetarian dishes scoring less well.

A bar chart showing food preferences with three categories: Like (orange), Don't Like (blue), and Haven't Tried (green). The x-axis lists food items from Cheese & tomato pizza through Veggie Curry, and the y-axis ranges from 0.0% to 90.0%.

Quotes:

"Bring back square pizzas please. I don't like it when the food on the day doesn't match the food on the menu."
"Too much focus on healthy food that kids don't actually eat."

B. Food Quality & Taste

Please can you tell us what you think of the taste of school meals?
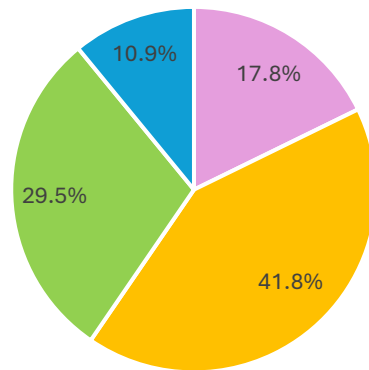
| | Excellent | Good | Fair | Poor |

Overall taste ratings indicated that 59.6% of respondents felt that the food they were served tasted Excellent or Good however this still left 40.4% who would consider the taste of food as being either Fair or Poor. Taste rating among respondents, as one would suspect, vary widely however there was a degree of consensus around some dishes (e.g. sausage rolls, pizza) being more popular than others (e.g. veggie curry, veggie fried rice).

Comments relating to taste talked about food being bland, dry, overcooked or cold.

Quotes:

"The food is bland and mushy. The cakes are dry too."
"My son says the food isn't hot and the meat has gristle."

C. Portion Sizes

Do you have enough to eat at lunchtime?

■ Always	■ Often	■ Sometimes	■ Rarely

33.3% — Always
32.8% — Often
25.7% — Sometimes
8.3% — Rarely
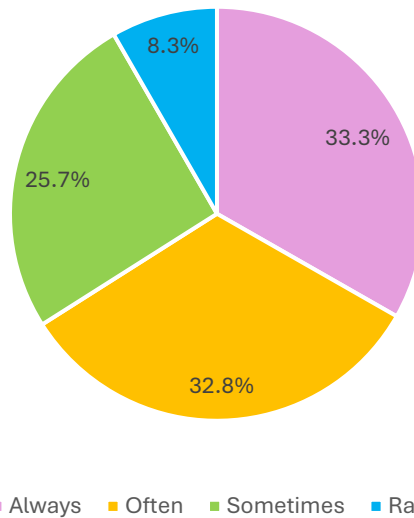
Pupils were asked to indicate if they had enough to eat at lunchtime. Worryingly over a third of pupils said they felt this was the case only sometimes, or rarely. This perspective appeared to be most prevalent in older pupils whereas many of the comments relating to food waste were from younger pupils and their parents indicating that often portions were too large for them.

Quotes:

"Biggest factor is that portions are too small for older children."
"Four pieces of orange doesn't constitute a fruit platter."

D. Dining Experience

- **Long queues**, **noisy dining rooms**, and **short lunch breaks** are major concerns.

- Pupils feel **rushed** and sometimes **don't finish meals**.

Quotes:

"We are kicked out before we finish. Only 40 minutes for lunch is not enough."
"It's very noisy and there's not enough space to eat."

E. Food Waste

41.5% of pupils stated that they only sometimes, or rarely, ate everything they were given. This suggests a high volume of waste created by those who do not eat everything

they are given. Opportunities exist to address the underlying reasons for this behaviour and help to reduce waste as a result.

Do you eat everything you are given?

■ Always	■ Often
■ Sometimes	■ Rarely

- Always: 15.9%
- Often: 42.5%
- Sometimes: 32.5%
- Rarely: 9.0%

When asked the reasons why they didn't eat everything they are given, pupils highlighted a number of issues, the most significant of which were:

- Disliking certain items on their plate
- Wanting to go out and play
- Being full from snacks

Quotes:

"I don't like chips and do not eat them. They are still served although I request no chips."
"Too much food is wasted because kids are forced to take things they don't like."

F. Communication & Special Diets

Parents commented on inconsistent communication about menus and dietary accommodations, with many parents unaware of how to access special diets or free school meals (FSM) information.

Quotes:

"I've asked for dietary info to be shared multiple times—still hasn't happened."
"We need better communication about what's actually being served."

Primary School Parent/Carer Survey – Food in Schools 2024/25:

Background

A total of 1067 responses were received from this survey group, representing 21.3% of all responses. There was a relatively even spread of parents with children in each year of primary school from P1 to P7.

How would you rate the current catering service?

The chart below shows how parents/carers rated different aspects of the school catering service:
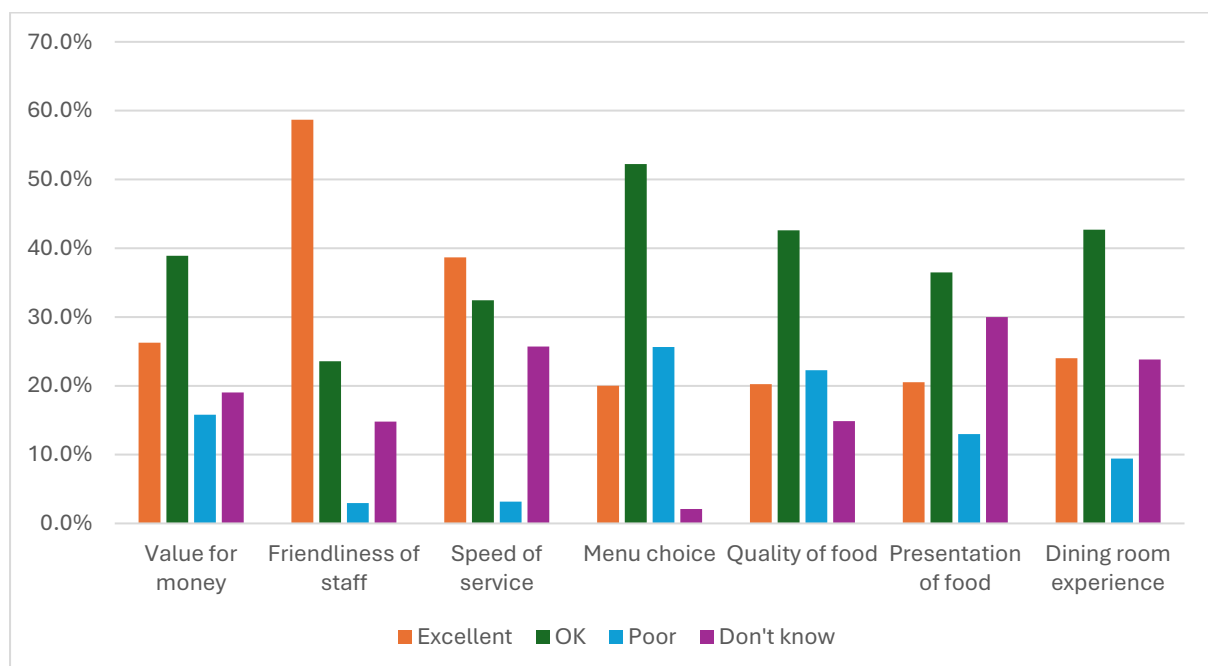
- **Friendliness of staff** and **Speed of service** received the most positive feedback.

- **Quality of food** and **Menu choice** had more mixed ratings, with a notable number of "Poor" responses.

- **Value for money** was one of the most polarizing categories, reflecting concerns about cost versus portion size and food quality.

Comments received supported the statistical evidence and included:

- "The choice of meals is a bit erratic, I think it would help to have some kind of "safe"/unadventurous option."
- "If meals were free, my eldest would have school meals daily"
- "From my child's experience, they like the idea of what is on the menu but sometimes the way it's executed doesn't match its description."

Top Reasons for Not Taking School Meals Regularly

Parents were asked to indicate what affects the choice not to take school meals, or take them less often. The most common reasons cited were:
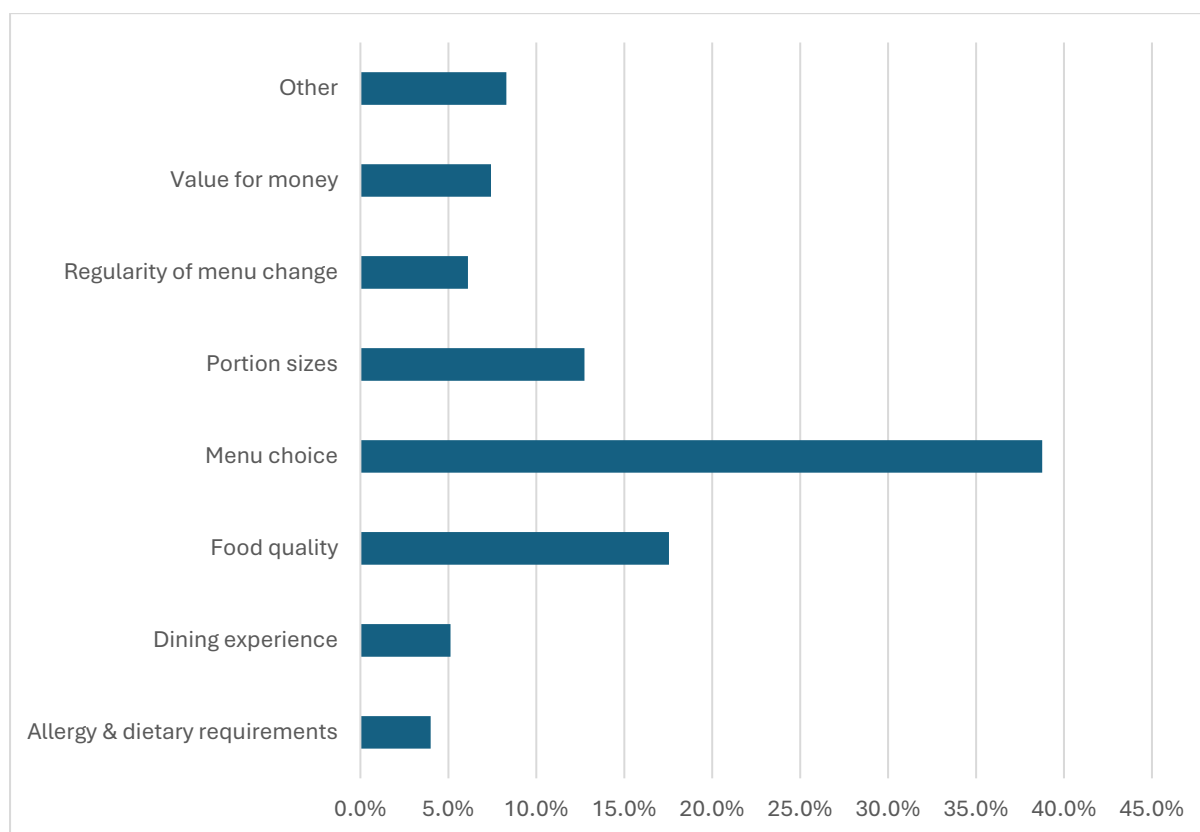
Through analysis of the open text area of the survey the following reasons provided context to the above statistics. The themes emerging were as follows:

1. **Menu choice** – Lack of appealing or suitable options.

2. **Food quality** – Complaints about taste, freshness, and presentation.

3. **Portion sizes** – Meals perceived as too small, especially for older children.

4. **Value for money** – Perception that packed lunches offer better value.

5. **Dining experience** – Issues with noise, rushed eating, and staff interactions.

6. **Regularity of menu change** – Repetitive options leading to boredom.

7. **Allergy and dietary requirements** – Limited options for children with specific needs.

8. **Sensory needs** – Especially among neurodivergent children.

9. **Payment system** – Frustrations with online payment.

10. **Fussy eating** – Children preferring packed lunches due to personal preferences.

Waste

Parents were asked whether they had spoken to their children about waste and sustainability of food at home. 84.6% of respondents said that they had done this.

When asked to estimate the cost of school waste to The Highland Council, most respondents under-estimated the cost, with only 14.2% of parents choosing the correct option of £500,000 - £850,000.

The Council has to collect and dispose of food waste in an environmentally sustainable way. How much do you think waste in schools cost the Council per annum?

14.2%

36.3%

49.4%
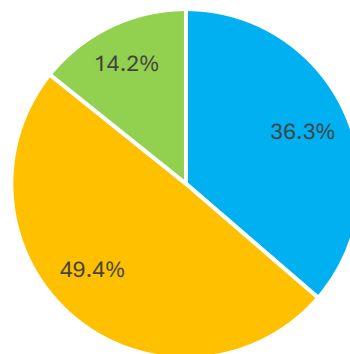
■ £0 - £250,000   ■ £250,000 - £500,000   ■ £500,000 - £850,000

Primary School Pupil Survey: Food In Schools 2024/25

There were 1713 responses from primary school pupils in the survey. This represented the largest cohort of survey responses from a single stakeholder group and was 34% of the total number of responses.

1. Most pupils liked school meals

Most (68.8%) pupils felt that the menu choices for school meals were either Excellent or Good, with 63.5 % of pupils also stating that the taste of school meals was either Good or Excellent. This is a positive endorsement of the schools meals offering for a large number of pupils however there were still over 30% of pupils for whom things were not so positive.
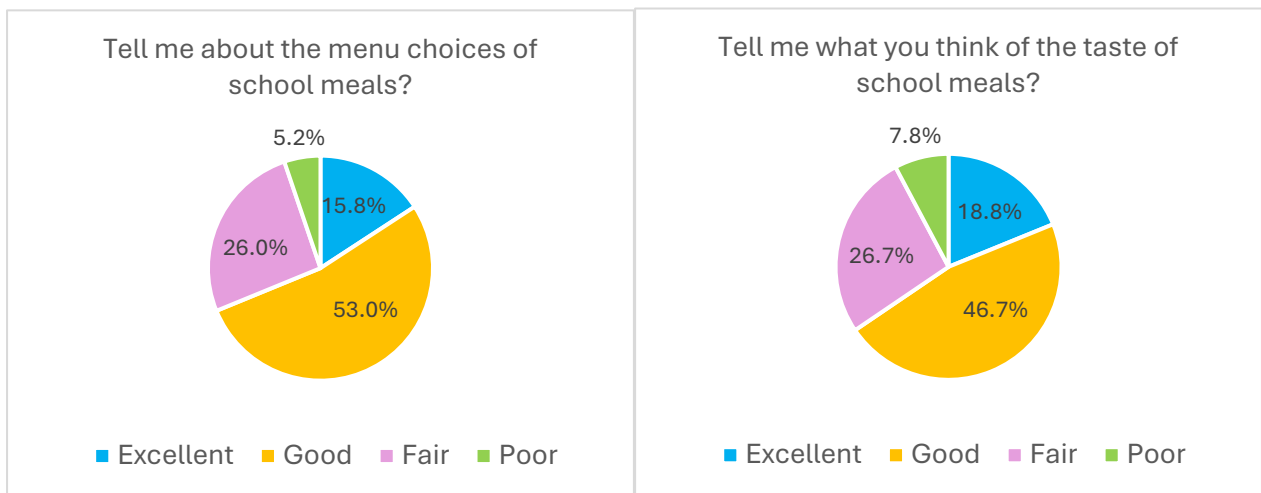
Pupils were asked to indicate whether they felt they had enough to eat at lunchtime, and although the vast majority (76.4%) stated that they Always, or Often had enough to eat at lunchtime, almost a quarter of pupils did not feel this way and stated that they had enough to eat only Sometimes or even Rarely. This could be due to portion sizes, poor menu choices being made by pupils or issues to do with taste of meals.

2. Frequency of School Meal Consumption
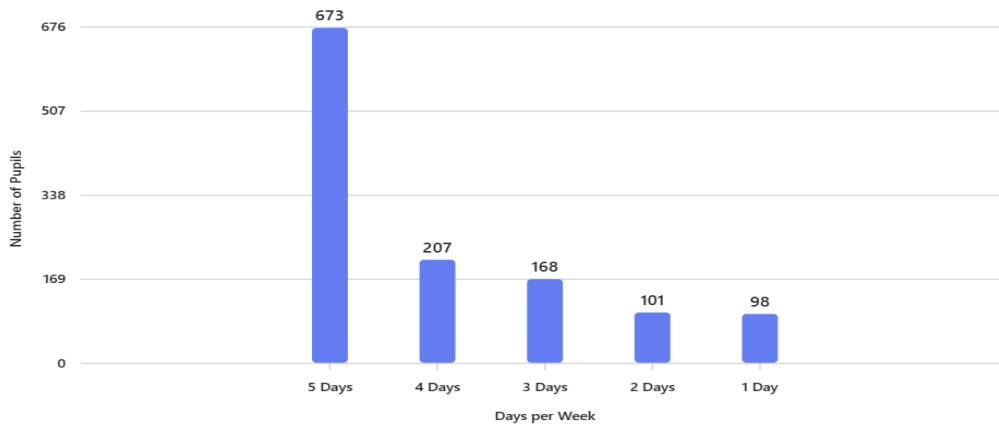
Key Insights:

- The majority of pupils eat school meals multiple times per week.

- There is a significant group who eat school meals every day, but also a notable number who only eat them 1-2 days per week, suggesting room for increased uptake.

3. Availability of menu choices

88.8% of pupils responding stated that they Always or Often get what they have ordered for school lunch. While this is extremely positive, there is a concern that what they are ordering is not always what they want.
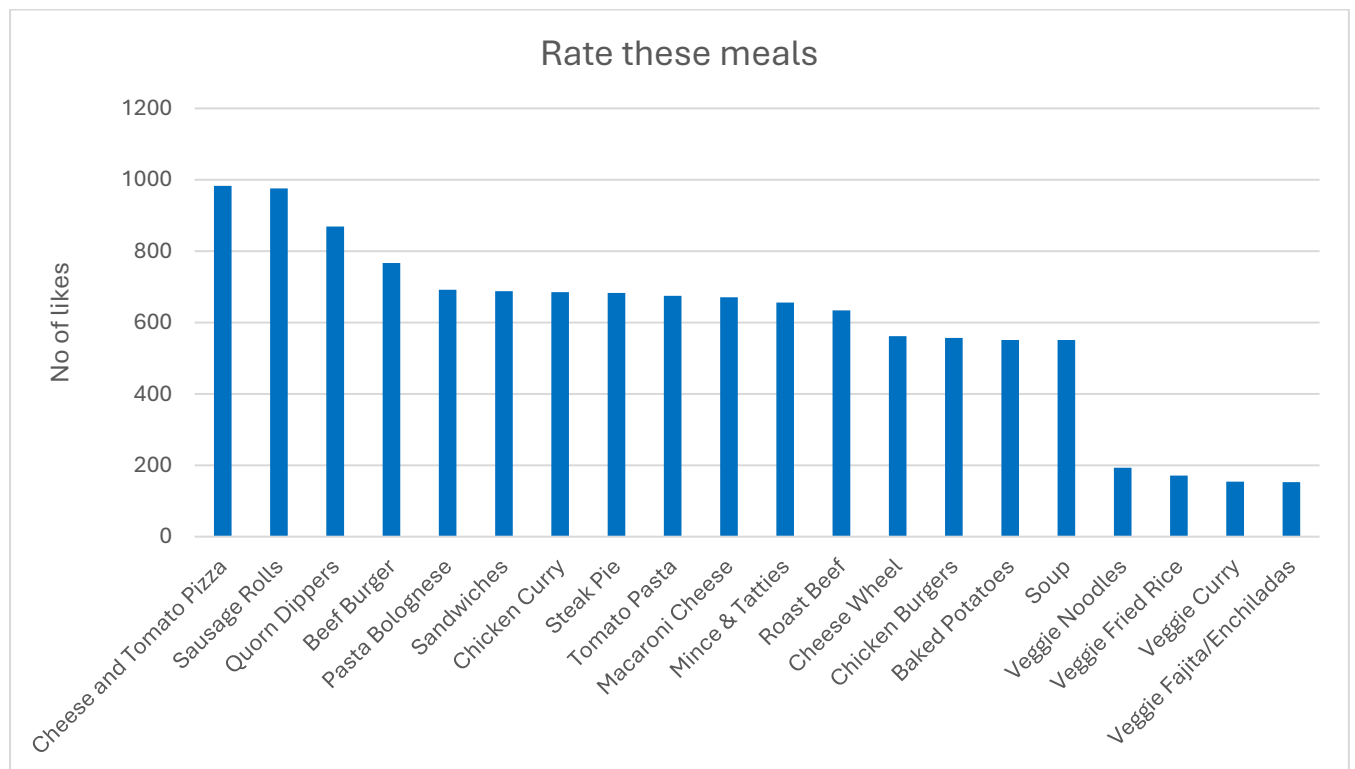
When asked to indicate which of a range of school meals they liked, pupils gave a very clear indication that their preferences tended towards pizza, sausage rolls, Quorn dippers and beef burgers and very much away from dishes with a vegetarian type description.

Respondents were also asked what might influence their decision to either begin taking school meals, or increase the number of times they took school meals. 34.7% of pupils indicated that improved menu choices would positively influence their decision. This appears to support the above statement that what pupils order for lunch and what they actually want may be slightly different.

4. Top Suggestions for Improving School Meals

As stated, pupils were asked what might influence their decision to start taking school meals, or increase the number of times they take them. The results were as follows:

What would encourage you to eat school meals or choose them for more days of the school week?
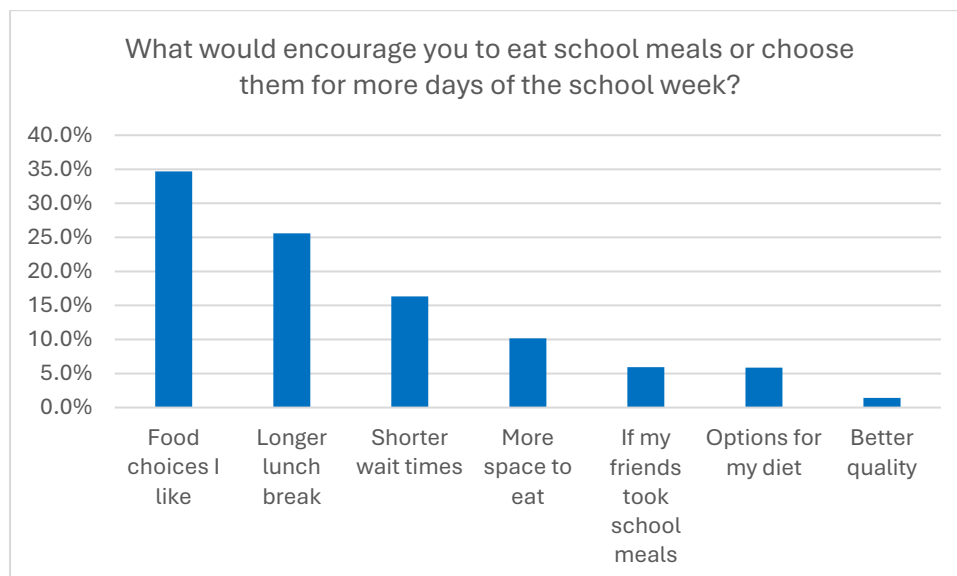
Key Insights:

- The most common suggestions for encouraging more pupils to eat school meals include:

    o More food choices pupils like

    o Longer lunch breaks

    o Shorter wait times

    o More space to eat

    o Options for specific diets

- These suggestions point to both menu and logistical improvements that could boost satisfaction and participation.

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5. Waste

Pupils were asked whether they always ate everything on their plate with 61.7% of respondents saying that they either Always or Often ate everything. This still leaves a significant minority for whom this is not a regular occurrence. When further questioned as to why they left food on their plate, 48.1% of pupils stated it was because there were bits on the plate that they didn't like, again adding to the thought that menu choices are not always favourable.

Exacerbating this problem of dining room waste is the evidence that on 29.4% of pupils stated that someone had spoken to them about leaving food at the end of a meal.

6. Conclusion

- **Meal Preferences:** Pupils have strong preferences for certain meals, which can guide future menu planning.

- **Participation:** While many pupils eat school meals regularly, there is potential to increase uptake by addressing the main barriers.

- **Taste:** Improving the taste and quality of meals could have a positive impact on both satisfaction and participation.

- **Improvements:** Addressing the top suggestions—especially around choice, time, and dining environment—could make school meals more appealing.

**Secondary School Parent/Carer Survey: Food In Schools 2024/25**

Overall there were 415 responses from parents of secondary school aged pupils in this survey.

1. Overall Satisfaction with School Catering

Parents were asked to consider a variety of aspects of the school catering service and provide their rating of these different aspects.

- **Friendliness of staff** and **speed of service** are the most positively rated aspects.

- **Value for money**, **menu choice**, and especially **quality of food** and **dining room experience** receive more mixed or negative ratings.

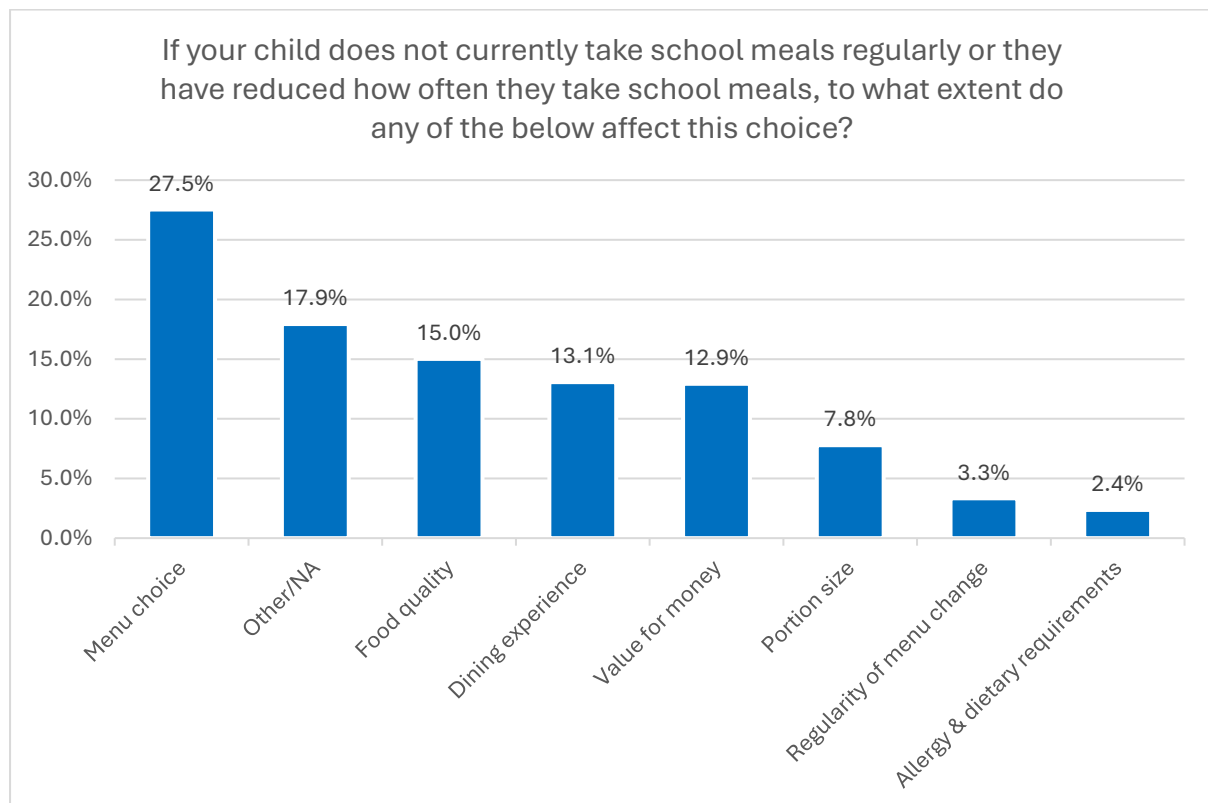- **Presentation of food** and **portion sizes** are also frequently mentioned as areas for improvement.

How would you rate the current catering service?
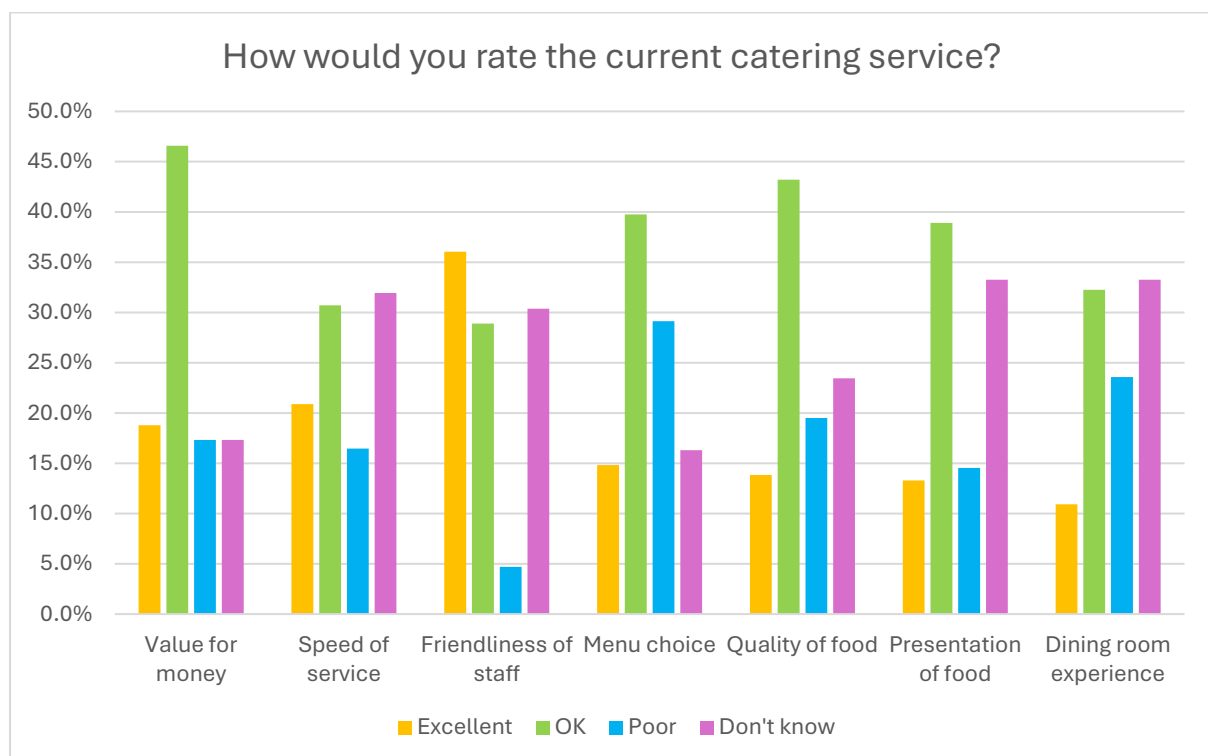
2. Main Reasons for Not Using School Meals Regularly

Parents/carers were asked what prevented their children from taking school meals regularly. Menu choice was the most regularly cited of the reasons provided however a significant number of parents chose the option "Other" which enabled them to write a short comment. Among the comments received were:

"Not enough time at lunch to eat never mind waiting in a massive queue"

"Queues are too long and I was told there was never any hot food left so he no longer uses the service and takes packed lunches."

"No contactless debit payments"

If your child does not currently take school meals regularly or they have reduced how often they take school meals, to what extent do any of the below affect this choice?

Category	Percentage
Menu choice	27.5%
Other/NA	17.9%
Food quality	15.0%
Dining experience	13.1%
Value for money	12.9%
Portion size	7.8%
Regularity of menu change	3.3%
Allergy & dietary requirements	2.4%

3. Most Common Suggestions for Improvement

The most frequent suggestions from parents/carers are:

- **More choice/variety** in the menu
- **Larger portions**
- **Improved food quality** (including healthier, fresher, and more appealing options)
- **Better pricing** (lower cost, better value for money)
- **Shorter queues and improved speed of service**

- **More allergy-friendly and healthy options**

- **Better communication about menus and prices**

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4. Percentage of Children Entitled to Free School Meals

- **About 13%** of respondents reported their children are entitled to free school meals (either income-related or universal provision).

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5. How Parents Access Menu Information

The most common sources for menu information used by parents are:

- **Internet**

- **Council website**

- **Information sent home by school**

However over 40% of respondents stated that they did not know how to access information.

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6. Supporting Quotes from Parents/Carers

Main reasons for not using school meals:

- *Menu*:

"Food choices in town are more varied and interesting to teens, plus they get out of the school building. I don't think there is anything you can really do to increase the days unless maybe if you introduce something like a meal deal like Tesco, etc. have. Feedback from my teen about the food choices at school is not positive."

- *Value*:

"At the moment my child prefers to either eat at home or buy from elsewhere as the cost of school meals in relation to quantity and quality is unfortunately quite poor. The dining area is also small and quite an intimidating environment for an S1 to be in."

- *Quality*:

"My child tried school meals but found them of poor quality. She now takes packed lunches as she can guarantee the quality of ingredients. She has described some of the options available and while the description sounds nice though the reality seems to be very different."

- *Portion*:

"Increase the meal deal portion size, so that they can fill up their stomach properly before continue with the rest of the day. Current portion size is too small, the take away main course is like kid size meal portion, especially the soup is just a wee cup which is not suffice for teenager at this growing up stage."

- *Dining*:

"There is no where for children to sit and eat properly. Sitting in a dirty stairwell does not help to promote a healthy eating experience. Time spent waiting in line especially for the younger students means they have little time to eat."

- *Allergy*:

"My son has an allergy to soya and pea products (e.g. pea flour, soya flour, gram flour, chickpeas etc) so this is difficult to know whether they are in school dinners as it's not a common allergen for most people but they are in a lot of foodstuffs."

Suggestions for improvement:

- *Choice*:

"Have more basic hot food options available every day. Like chicken burger or fish and chips. Teenagers don't need lots of choice but they do need to know they can get something edible each day, a basic menu is better than a fancy menu if means they can eat the food."

- *Variety*:

"Change menu more often e.g. each term."

- *Portion*:

"Larger portions, better quality meals. My son says he would eat school meals if his friends did. He buys panini at break times but never buys full sit down meal."

- *Quality*:

"Improve the food. Meals are awful."

- *Queue*:

"Queue takes too long, not enough time to eat lunch."

- *Allergy*:

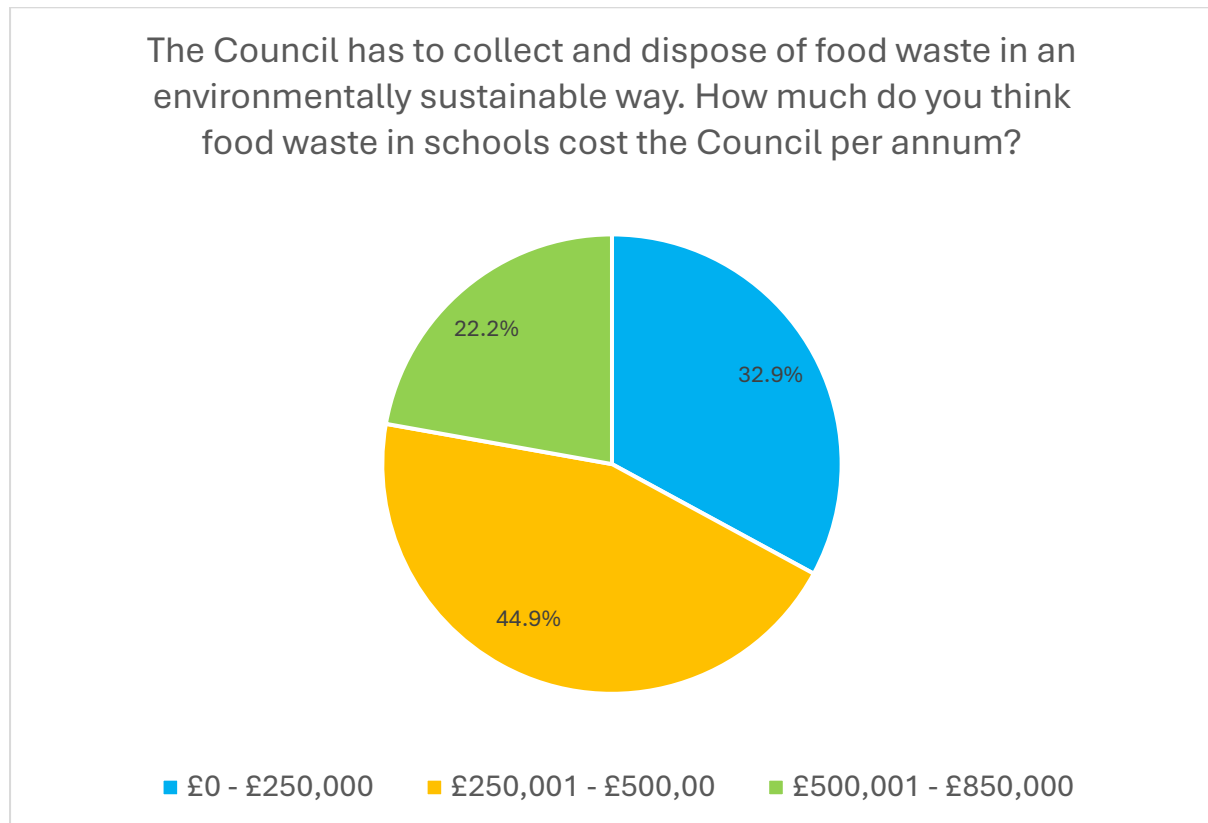"Provide more options to cater for allergens. The staff are absolutely excellent but the choice is limited."

- *Healthy*:

"Healthier and more vegetarian options."

Waste

The vast majority of parents (83.3%) stated that they have spoken to their children about waste and food sustainability.

When asked to estimate the cost to The Highland Council of waste in school most parents underestimated this, with only 22.2% estimating correctly in the £500,000 - £850,000 band.

The Council has to collect and dispose of food waste in an environmentally sustainable way. How much do you think food waste in schools cost the Council per annum?

- 32.9% — £0 - £250,000
- 44.9% — £250,001 - £500,00
- 22.2% — £500,001 - £850,000

**Secondary School Pupil Survey – Food in Schools 2024/25**

A total of 843 responses were received from this survey group covering 23 of the 29 secondary schools across the Highland Council area. Responses were received from all year groups, S1 – S6.

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1. Catering Service Satisfaction

Pupils were asked to rate the catering service on several aspects:

- **Friendliness of staff**

- **Speed of service**

- **Menu choice**

- **Quality of food**

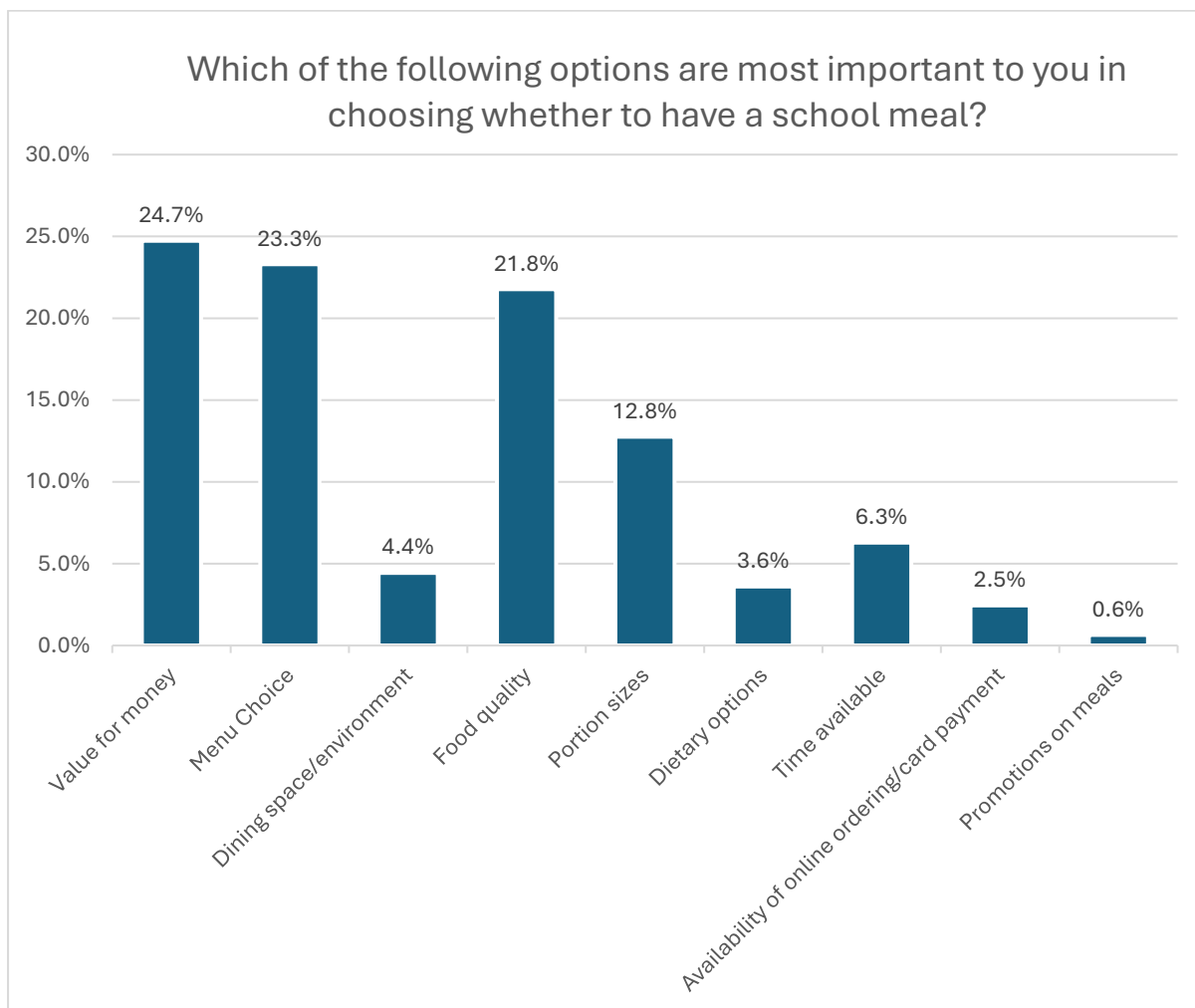- **Presentation of food**

- **Dining room experience**
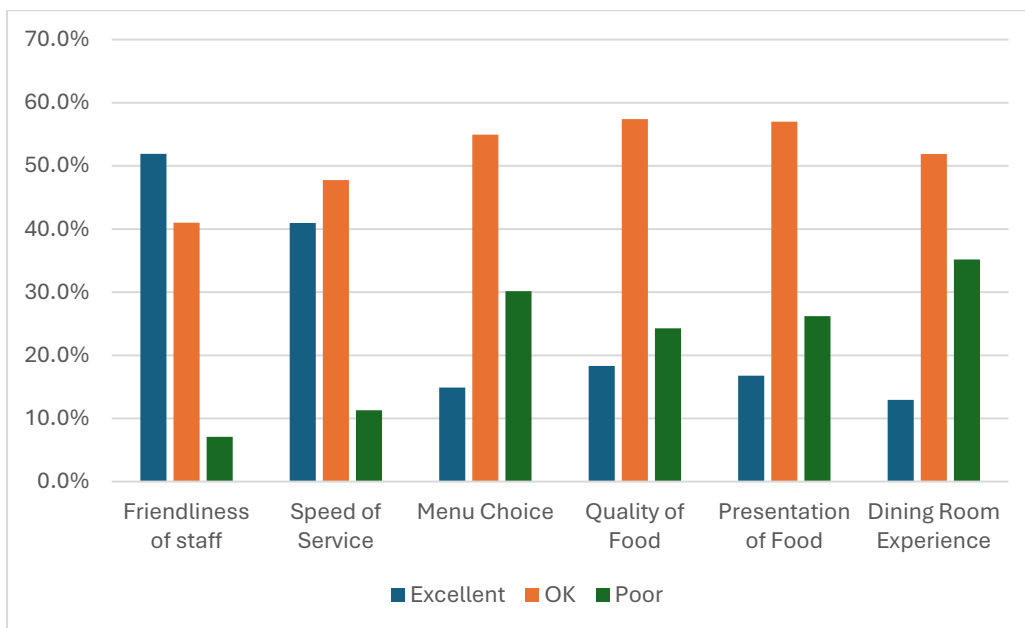
Friendliness of staff and speed of service both received positive views however there was a more mixed response around menu choice, quality of food, presentation of food and dining room experience.

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2. Factors in choosing school meals

Pupils were asked what factors influenced their decision to have a school meal. Value for money, food quality and menu choices were the main reasons offered.

Which of the following options are most important to you in choosing whether to have a school meal?

Value for money: 24.7%
Menu Choice: 23.3%
Dining space/environment: 4.4%
Food quality: 21.8%
Portion sizes: 12.8%
Dietary options: 3.6%
Time available: 6.3%
Availability of online ordering/card payment: 2.5%
Promotions on meals: 0.6%

When considering value for money, 51.9% of respondents felt that the current £2.65 meal deal of 2 courses, vegetables, fruit and drink did represent value for money.

3. Menu Preferences

Pupils indicated which menu items they would like to see more often, including:

- Indian, Asian, and Mexican dishes

- Plant-based and salad bar options

- Processed vs. homemade options

- Variety in hot & cold snacks

- Theme days

Which items below would you like to see on the school menus?
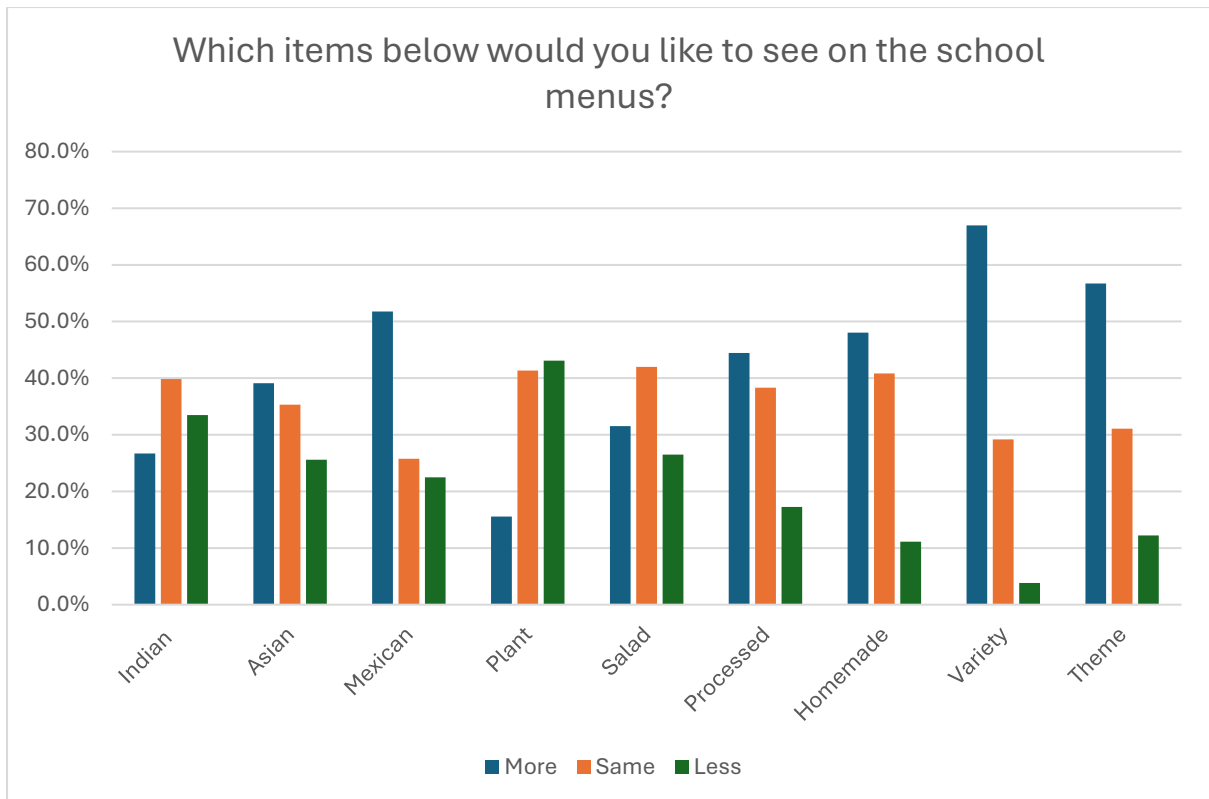
It was clear that while there is some desire to see a more culturally diverse menu, there was still strong support for more traditional fare. There was a strong inclination towards pupils looking for more variety on the menu choices, including options to consider themed menus from time to time.
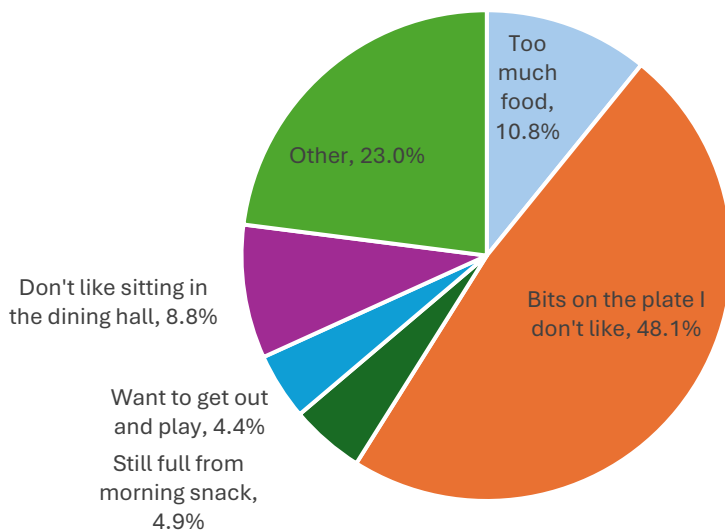
When considering their choices during meal service in school, most respondents either did not use, or did not know about the published menu choices in order to make their choice.

3. Reasons for Leaving Food

Respondents were asked to indicate the reasons for leaving food on their plate. The most common reasons for leaving food were:

- "Bits on the plate you do not like"
- "Too much food"
- "Don't like sitting in the dining hall"
- "Not enough time"

If you leave any food, what is the reason?

- Too much food, 10.8%
- Other, 23.0%
- Don't like sitting in the dining hall, 8.8%
- Want to get out and play, 4.4%
- Still full from morning snack, 4.9%
- Bits on the plate I don't like, 48.1%

4. Food Waste and Sustainability Discussion

Pupils were asked if they had discussed food waste and sustainability, and with whom. A large majority (73.4%) of respondents had discussed the issue of food waste and sustainability which provides a solid base for further discussion and possible integration into curricular areas.


- 29.2%
- 34.7%
- 9.5%
- 26.6%
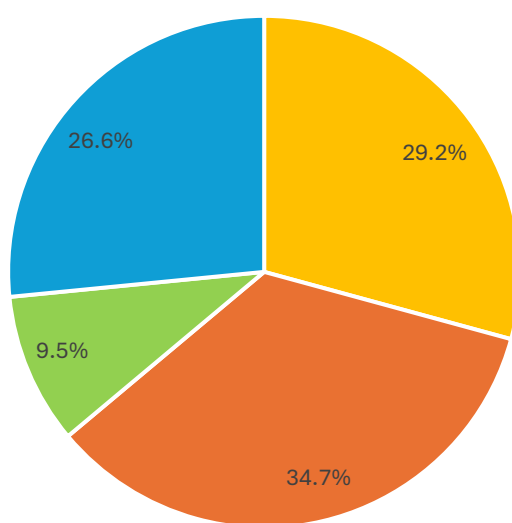
■ At home   ■ In school   ■ With Friends   ■ Never discussed

Teachers and School Staff Survey – Food in Schools 2024/25

Teachers and other school staff were asked for their views on food in schools. A total of 408 responses were received, 122 from secondary school staff, 286 from primary schools and 7 from special schools.

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1. Catering Service Ratings

Staff were asked to rate various aspects of the catering service. The most positively rated areas were **Friendliness of Staff** and **Dining Room Experience**, while **Value for Money** and **Menu Choice** received more mixed feedback.
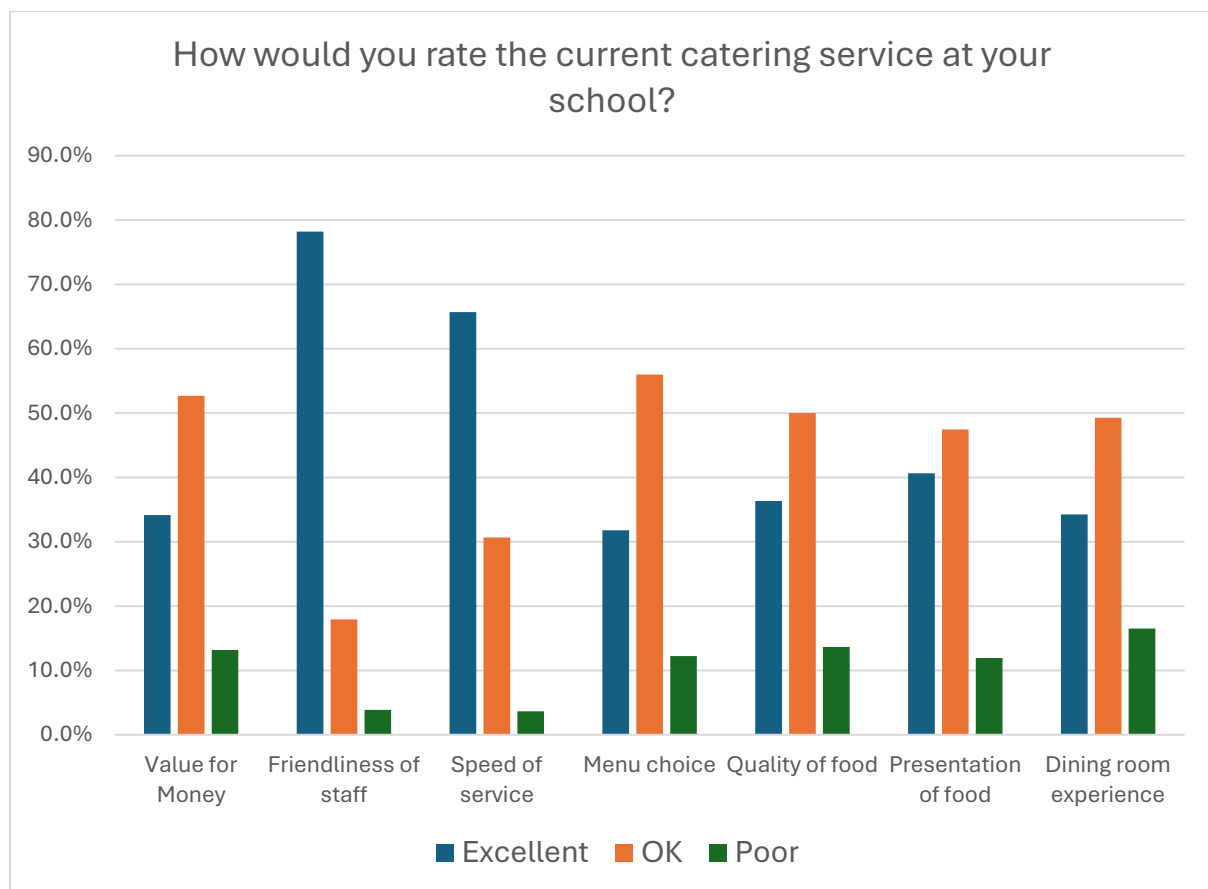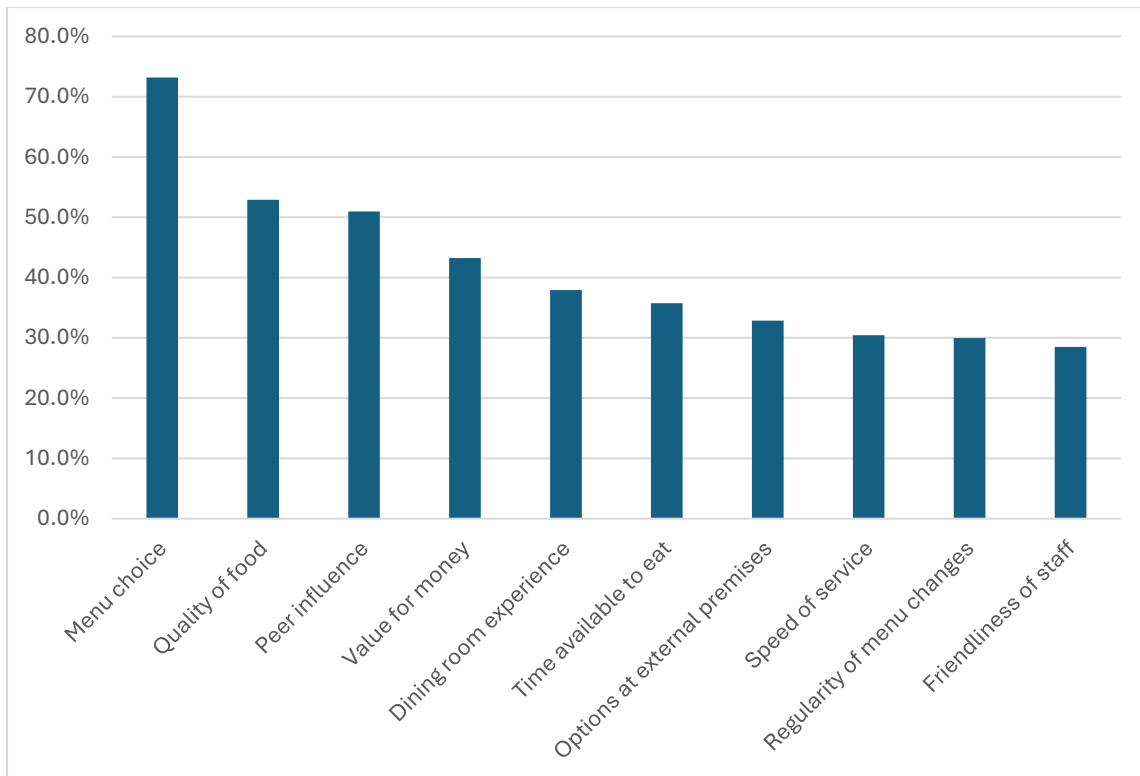

Key Observations:

- "Excellent" ratings were most frequent for staff friendliness.
- "OK" and "Poor" ratings were more common for value for money, menu choice and quality of food.

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2. Factors Influencing Pupils Not Eating School Meals

Staff identified what they believe discourages pupils from choosing school meals.

Top Influencing Factors :

- **Menu Choice**

- **Quality of Food**

- **Peer Influence**

Less influential factors included **Friendliness of Staff** and **Speed of Service**, indicating operational aspects are less of a barrier than food quality and social dynamics.

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3. Views on Food Waste in Schools

Staff were asked whether they believe food waste is an issue in their school.

From your observation in the dining hall in your school, do you feel food waste is an issue?

Legend: ■ Yes ■ No ■ Don' know

Values shown: 61, 64, 288
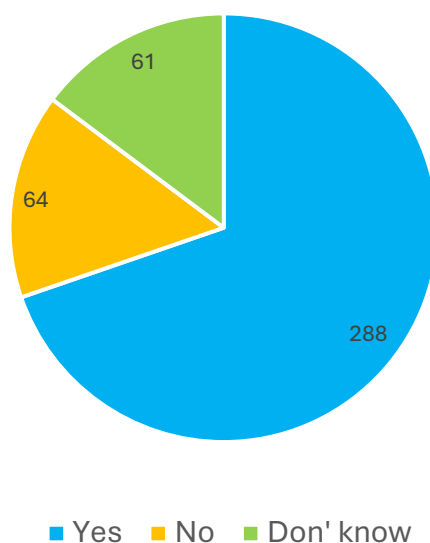
Key Insight:

- A **majority of respondents** believe food waste **is a significant issue**, reinforcing the need for better portion control, menu appeal, and pupil engagement.
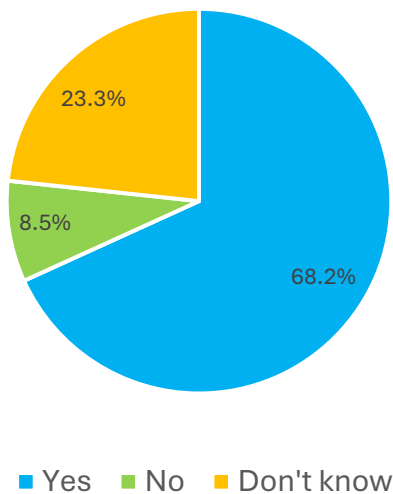
When asked whether they felt that pupils understand the implications of food waste, an overwhelming majority of respondents felt that they did not. This would suggest that there are opportunities to increase the level of awareness raising and perhaps tuition in food sustainability and waste prevention.

Food waste is a major issue both for schools and society as a whole, do you feel pupils understand the implications of food waste?

- Don't know — 8.2%
- No — 82.4%
- Yes — 9.4%
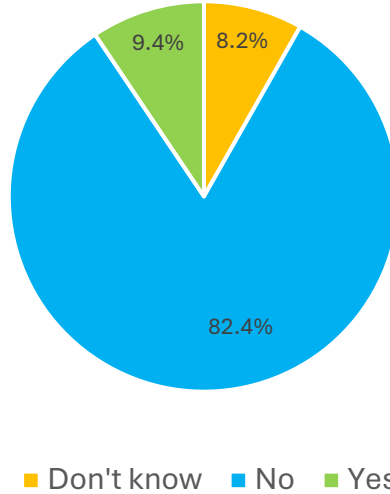
This latter element was reinforced by school staff saying that they would be open to using the school menu to help teach Learning for Sustainability and Health and Wellbeing to pupils.

Would you be open to using the school menu to help teach Learning for Sustainability and Health and Wellbeing to pupils?

- Yes — 68.2%
- No — 8.5%
- Don't know — 23.3%

Food in Schools High Level Action Plan

	Action	Outcome(s)	Responsible Service	Est. Timeline	Theme(s)
1	Undertake a comprehensive menu review	Increase pupil satisfaction levels, Reduce waste, Increase uptake	Catering/Education	June 2026	Take up rates (FSM)
2	Review nutritional guidelines to identify opportunities and barriers to matching local preferences	Increase pupil satisfaction levels, Reduce waste, Increase uptake	Catering	June 2026	Take up rates (FSM)
3	Improve integration/collaboration between Catering and Education Services	Improve nutritional and waste understanding for all pupils, Reduce waste, Increase uptake	Catering/Education	December 2026	Take up rates (FSM), Income generation

4	Develop and implement a strategic framework for enhancing school catering services.	Improved quality and consistency, Increased uptake, Enhanced dining experience for pupils, Reduce waste, More efficient and sustainable operating models.	Catering/Revenues	March 2027	Income generation, Operating model, Cost of food
5	Develop a "Food in Schools" parental engagement strategy.	Engage key stakeholder group, Increase Uptake, Reduce Waste	Catering/Education/ Communications	June 2026	Take up rates (FSM) Operating model, Cost of food
6	Review and action quality assurance arrangements.	Improve quality and consistency, Increase uptake, Reduce waste	Catering	June 2026	Take up rates (FSM), Operating model, Cost of food

7	Review current supplier contracts and explore opportunities for mixed procurement models balancing central cost savings versus local flexibility.	Diversify supply chain, Improve quality, Reduce waste	Catering/Procurement	June 2026	Take up rates (FSM), Operating model, Cost of food
8	Establish a waste tracking process for school meals	Reduce waste	Catering/Waste	December 2026	Cost of food
9	Research and assess opportunities for in-house distribution model	Diversify supply chain, Improve quality, Reduce waste	Catering/Fleet/Logistics	March 2027	Operating model, Cost of food
10	Explore opportunities for enhancing overall dining experience.	Increase uptake, Reduce waste	Catering/Properties	March 2027	Operating model, Cost of food