

Cake out, lentils in: What schools need to know about food standards overhaul

Government is planning an 'ambitious' revamp of school food standards. But what exactly is being proposed?

Ministers are proposing “the most ambitious overhaul in a generation” of school food standards, with a raft of changes that will limit foods high in fat, salt and sugar. Government is consulting on changes to the legislative framework covering all state schools, to offer “fresher, healthier” options and tackle concerns around rising childhood obesity and tooth decay.

If approved, the new standards would apply in full to primary schools from September 2027, with a phased rollout in secondaries.

But what exactly is being proposed? Here are the key points...

1. Cake limited to once a week

Only one portion of “sweetened baked products or desserts” would be allowed weekly. That includes cakes, doughnuts, flapjack and ice cream.

Those served must contain “at least 50 per cent fruit or vegetables, and no confectionery or chocolate”.

2. Fibre drive

The proposals also push for higher fibre across the board.

The consultation cites a National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS), which found just 14 per cent of primary and four per cent of secondary pupils meet the recommended fibre intake – as well as links between higher fibre intake and lower risk of certain diseases.

It proposes at least half of pasta and rice served should be brown, wholewheat or fibre-enriched.

All bread should contain at least 3g of fibre per 100g, with no added fat. This would include wholemeal, seeded and 50/50 varieties.

3. Chips allowed, but limited

Deep-fried food is banned outright under the proposed standards.

Starchy foods cooked in oil – such as chips, wedges, and hash browns – will still be allowed, but no more than twice a week and only as part of a meal.

Only one processed meat item – such as sausages, ham, bacon, and burgers – or food that is battered, breadcrumbed, or includes pastry, can be served per week.

4. Vegetables with every meal

Under the reforms, every main meal must include a portion of vegetables or salad.

This includes all grab-and-go items such as sandwiches, baked potatoes and pizza.

Baked beans, pureed vegetables and potatoes would not count as vegetables.

5. Universal fruit

Meanwhile fruit and vegetables “must be available in all school food service points”, with at least three options weekly.

All desserts must come with or contain a portion of fruit, and schools should offer at least three different varieties weekly. Smoothies, fruit purees, and canned fruit in syrup do not count.

In primary schools, fruit should be the only dessert once a week.

6. No more juice

Fruit juice would also no longer be allowed under the reforms, due to its high sugar content. Only water, or unsweetened milk or plant-based milk would be allowed in primaries.

7. Cheese limited

Serving food where cheese is a main ingredient – including pizza and panini – would also be capped at twice a week.

The DfE cites NDNS findings that only around 15 per cent of children are meeting recommended limits on saturated fats.

Meanwhile dairy options including low-sugar yoghurts must be offered every day. Milk must be available daily.

8. Pulses a protein source

Schools must currently serve meat or poultry three days a week minimum. Under the proposals, pulses such as beans, chickpeas, lentils would also count as a main protein source.

At least once a week, pulses should also be added to all menu options.

9. Phased roll-out for secondaries

The DfE says testing showed secondary schools “faced more challenges than primary schools because of their reliance on a ‘grab and go’ food culture”.

Because of this, secondaries will be given an extra year to meet certain standards. This includes adding pulses, limiting cheese-based mains, restricting cakes and desserts and introducing a healthier drinks list.

10. Nuts removed over allergy fears

Nuts will be removed from the list of snacks permitted outside meal times due to allergy concerns and replaced with crackers and breadsticks without added salt, sugar or fat.

11. New breakfast standards

Breakfasts served at schools would also be covered by the school food standards for the first time.

Low-sugar cereals and “plain unflavoured porridge” will be allowed, while certain items such as pastries, fried potato products, processed meats, honeys and syrups will not.

12. Mandatory online menus?

The DfE proposes schools should appoint a lead governor to have designated responsibility for school food. It also proposes all schools should be required to publish their food policies and menus online, to “strengthen accountability and improve compliance”.

The government is yet to confirm if this would be mandatory, and if so, how it would be enforced.

13. Food standards streamlined for nurseries

Currently, a reduced version of the school food standards applies to lunches at maintained nurseries.

Under the proposals this would be removed, meaning nurseries must only follow early years foundation stage (EYFS) nutrition guidance.