# Welsh Government proposes strict new school dinner rules to tackle childhood obesity



A significant overhaul of primary school menus in Wales has been proposed by the Welsh Government, aiming to enhance children’s nutrition and combat rising obesity rates among young people. The planned alterations, stemming from heightened health concerns, set to take effect in the 2026-27 academic year, include prohibiting white bread, sugary cereals, and certain processed meats in an effort to promote healthier eating within schools.

The Welsh Government’s consultation recently unveiled these comprehensive changes, which include stringent limitations on the types of food and drinks served. For instance, fruit juice and sugary puddings would no longer be permitted, while fried chips would be restricted to being served just once a week. The initiative underscores a commitment to ensuring that all children receive the recommended five portions of fruits and vegetables daily, addressing a troubling trend where approximately a quarter of children aged four and five in Wales are already classified as overweight or obese.

In light of existing regulatory gaps, the proposed changes would enforce minimum daily serving requirements: two portions of vegetables (excluding potatoes) and at least one portion of fruit must be provided each day. The introduction of wholegrain options is also a focal point; bread, pasta, and noodles will have to comprise at least 50% wholegrain to better align with health guidelines.

The push to promote healthful eating is further supported by various initiatives across Wales. For example, Flintshire Council plans to implement a 'meat-free' day in primary schools beginning in May 2024, encouraging a shift towards plant-based meals. This has ignited discussions among local farmers and councillors, reflecting ongoing debates about how best to balance students' dietary needs with local agricultural support.

Moreover, educational efforts targeting parents are being introduced to ensure that home-packed lunches meet nutritional standards. Recent studies reveal that only a small fraction—1.6%—of packed lunches are sufficiently nutritious, underscoring the critical role of parents and caregivers in fostering healthy eating habits amongst children.

While these initiatives aim to enforce healthier school food environments, there are ongoing concerns regarding processed foods and their impact on children’s health. A report highlighted that many Welsh children still access school meals containing nitrites, chemicals present in processed meats linked to cancer risks. This has spurred calls for regulatory reforms to eliminate such harmful substances from school menus.

The Welsh Government’s changes align with broader nutritional research which indicates that ultra-processed foods constitute an alarming 64% of calories consumed in UK school lunches. This excessive reliance on processed options has been implicated in the escalating rates of childhood obesity, positioning the proposed menu changes as a potential turning point in addressing public health.

Nonetheless, challenges persist. Some councils report that nearly a quarter of children eligible for free school meals are opting for unhealthy processed alternatives, suggesting a disconnect between the availability of nutritious options and children's preferences. The government’s strategy to introduce varied portion sizes for juniors and infants aims to mitigate waste and better meet the dietary needs of diverse age groups.

As the consultation period unfolds, Education Secretary Lynne Neagle has emphasised the necessity of stakeholder engagement: "We want to hear from parents, teachers, suppliers, and young people," she stated. This collaborative approach aims to refine school food standards, ensuring they support not only immediate health goals but also the long-term well-being of children in Wales. By fostering an environment where healthier menu choices are the norm, the Welsh Government hopes to lay the groundwork for a generation of healthier eaters, ultimately safeguarding the future of the National Health Service as well.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6: [[1]](https://www.thesun.co.uk/money/35031563/school-dinner-changes-ban-staples/)
2. Paragraph 7: [[2]](https://www.herald.wales/north-wales/flintshire/flintshire-council-to-introduce-meat-free-meal-as-part-of-school-dinner-menu-revamp/)
3. Paragraph 8: [[3]](https://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/parents-taught-how-make-healthier-23927464)
4. Paragraph 9: [[4]](https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/health/cancer-school-dinners-wales-children-16687550)
5. Paragraph 10: [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-58664747)
6. Paragraph 11: [[6]](https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/238436/ultraprocessed-foods-make-almost-two-thirds-britains/)
7. Paragraph 12: [[7]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-68794273)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/money/35031563/school-dinner-changes-ban-staples/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.herald.wales/north-wales/flintshire/flintshire-council-to-introduce-meat-free-meal-as-part-of-school-dinner-menu-revamp/> - Flintshire Council in Wales plans to introduce a 'meat-free' day in primary schools as part of a menu revamp. The initiative aims to promote plant-based meals and is part of a broader effort to improve school catering and encourage healthier eating habits among students. The council is collaborating with local schools and catering providers to implement this change, with the 'meat-free' day scheduled for May 2024. The move has sparked discussions among local councillors and farming unions, highlighting the balance between promoting healthy eating and supporting local agriculture.
3. <https://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/parents-taught-how-make-healthier-23927464> - A new initiative in Wales is teaching parents how to prepare healthier packed lunches for their children. Workshops are being organized in over 100 schools to address concerns that many homemade lunches are not meeting nutritional standards. A study found that only 1.6% of packed lunches were nutritious enough for children. The program aims to support parents in providing balanced meals, emphasizing the importance of nutrition in children's diets and the role of parents in promoting healthy eating habits.
4. <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/health/cancer-school-dinners-wales-children-16687550> - A report reveals that thousands of Welsh children are consuming school meals containing nitrites, chemicals found in processed meats that can produce cancer-causing substances. A Freedom of Information request showed that 20 out of 22 local authorities in Wales serve meat containing nitrites to pupils. The findings have prompted calls for the Welsh Government and local councils to remove nitrites from school menus and seek safer alternatives, highlighting concerns over children's health and the need for regulatory changes.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-58664747> - Primary schools on Anglesey, Wales, have implemented a 'meat-free' Monday menu as part of a new £8 million contract. The initiative aims to promote plant-based meals among students. However, the decision has faced criticism from local councillors and farming unions, who question the sourcing of meat and the emphasis on a meat-free day. The council asserts that the menu changes are based on feedback from children and parents and are part of a broader effort to improve school catering.
6. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/238436/ultraprocessed-foods-make-almost-two-thirds-britains/> - A study led by researchers at Imperial College London found that 64% of the calories in UK school lunches come from ultra-processed foods, including bread, snacks, puddings, and sugary drinks. This high consumption of processed foods contributes to poor health among children and increases the risk of obesity. The study emphasizes the need for policy changes to improve the nutritional quality of school lunches and promote healthier eating habits among students.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-68794273> - A council in Wales reports that nearly a quarter of children are not accepting free school meals, possibly due to a preference for processed foods. The council also notes that the Welsh government's requirement for uniform portion sizes across all primary school pupils may contribute to food waste. The Welsh government is reviewing child nutrition rules and working with local authorities, schools, and pupils to address these issues and improve the uptake of healthy school meals.