

Trafford Health and Wellbeing Board | School Catering Review Project Update

7th November 2024

This briefing provides an interim update on the school food review and audit commissioned to Bremner & Co by the Trafford Public Health team, ahead of the next Health and Wellbeing Board (HWBB) on the 15th of November 2024. It summarises the background to the research, what the research aimed to achieve, how the research was conducted, and the emerging findings.

Background to the project

Trafford Healthy Weight

It is estimated that children consume approximately 30% of their total calories at school¹, meaning that school food is a key potential intervention point in improving diet. Whilst inequalities in excess weight between our most and least deprived children at the start of primary school are now negligible, there are still significant inequalities by year 6 (end of primary school). School food was recognised as one of four healthy weight priorities during the November 2023 HWBB. An action was agreed to commission an external organisation to undertake a review and feasibility study of this priority, to provide specialist technical support and nutritional analysis and provide recommendations and drafting enhanced school food standards for Trafford. Bremner & Co were selected as the external organisation and have been working with the Trafford Public Health team and wider school food system stakeholders to conduct this research since April 2024. During the next HWBB on 15th November 2024, an update on the progress of this research and initial recommendations will be presented.

The Trafford school food system

School catering is a significant investment in Trafford's local economy and an essential service for Trafford's children and families. In 2023, 6,701 children were receiving benefit-related free school meals, with eligibility rates consistently rising year on year (from 9.4% in 2015/16 to 16.2% in 2023/24)². Trafford employs 297 permanent and 69 casual catering staff, primarily recruited locally³. The catering team includes a mix of 196 Catering Assistants, 63 Cook Supervisors, and 48 Assistant Cook Supervisors³. Staff sickness remains a challenge, with up to 20% of staff off sick at any time³. Despite rising costs from factors like minimum wage increases and food price inflation, Trafford has kept meal prices stable at £2.65 per meal, close to the Department for Education's recommended £2.53 rate. Schools charging above £2.53 per meal have seen a decline in daily meal uptake, while those charging at or below this rate have maintained stable participation.

Aims and objectives

- Review school food provision to assess the menu against national School Food Standards and determine the difference between the planned menu and actual meal take-up, including school-specific menu changes.
- Examine the current landscape of food provision in Trafford, including rising costs and the economic, environmental, and social challenges faced by school and kitchen operations.
- Gather children's perspectives on school food, covering their eating experiences, food quality, variety, portion sizes, health benefits, and choice options.

¹ Parnham et al. School Meals in the UK: ultra-processed, unequal and inadequate. *Public Health Nutrition*: 26(1), 297-301

² Department of Education (2024) Schools, pupils and their characteristics. Available at: [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics). Available at: [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics), Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

³ Trafford catering team data

- Identify areas for improvement in the school food service.

Approach and deliverables

Based on time and resources available, a four-stage approach was defined:

- **Stakeholder Interviews:** interviews with key players from across the Trafford school food system, including headteachers, parents, cooks and catering staff.
- **School Visits:** review food provision 'on the ground' and gain insight from pupils' perspectives during lunch observations and pupil workshops.
- **Nutrition Review:** determine adherence with the School Food Standards and opportunities to enhance nutritional value of Trafford school food.
- Reference findings against **existing Trafford data** (e.g. Environmental Health Dissertation Report) and national data from School Food Review.

Interim findings

Interviews and school visit findings

- **Value for Money:** Meal prices were generally acceptable, but some stakeholders felt that the quality of ingredients could be improved to offer better value.
- **Flexibility and Agency:** Cooks and school leaders expressed a desire for greater flexibility to adapt menus and suppliers to better meet school-specific needs.
- **Feedback and Collaboration:** Stakeholders would welcome improved feedback channels and support for stronger collaboration between catering teams and school leadership.
- **Leadership on Health and Food:** Schools with strong leadership around health had clearer food guidance, highlighting the need for equitable standards, and support across all schools.
- **Tailoring to School Characteristics:** While national standards are mostly met, there may be opportunities to better reflect cultural dietary needs and increase variety to enhance uptake.

Nutrition review findings

- **Non-Compliance with School Food Standards:** The menu falls short in some areas of the School Food Standards. For instance, it lacks fruit-based desserts at the required frequency, does not offer daily protein options in all meals, and has insufficient variety in oily fish offerings.
- **High Levels of Processed and HFSS Foods:** A substantial portion of menu items are processed and high in fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS), including items like pastries, meatballs, and processed desserts, which are concerning for primary-aged children.
- **Menu Imbalance for Vegetarians and Vegans:** Vegetarian and vegan options are heavily reliant on processed products, often containing high levels of salt and fat.
- **Issues with Ingredient and Recipe Choices:** Some ingredients used add unnecessary fat, saturated fat, salt, and sugars to meals. Additionally, repeated menu items like Quorn products limit variety and may contribute to nutritional imbalance.
- **Challenges with Procurement and Staff Skills:** Constraints on supplier options have limited access to healthier alternatives. Inconsistent skill levels among cooks have also led to reliance on less nutritious ready-made options for complex dishes.

Next steps

Based on these findings, Bremner & Co will be presenting initial recommendations at the November 15th HWB meeting, inviting feedback and discussion to help shape the final report.