



The Vegan Society response to the School Food Stakeholder Survey

What works well within the current school food system?

At its best, food provided by schools is appealing, nutritionally balanced and meets the needs of all the children and young people in their care. Hot school meals are an important part of the diet for many children and young people, and can help reduce waste too. The best school catering currently provides plant-based & vegan-friendly complete meal options on every menu every day.

What does NOT work well within the current school food system?

The UK's Eatwell Plate state that all children should be encouraged to have a meat-free day each week by eating a meal containing alternatives like beans, chickpeas, lentils, or foods made from these such as soya mince. However, thousands of schools are not achieving these goals. The [National Diet and Nutrition Survey](#) shows that most UK children are not eating enough fibre, nor enough vegetables and fruit.

It can be straightforward with vegan-friendly plant-based catering to produce tasty, appealing meals which are rich in vegetables and fruit, beans and pulses, and fibre.

A [2019 survey by Linda McCartney Foods](#) suggests that 70% of young people, and 80% of parents and guardians, want more healthy, tasty, sustainable plant-based meals on daily school menus. Despite the best efforts of most people involved in providing school food, most children and young people in school are eating food which is not environmentally sustainable, and not as nutritious as they need. Many are also from families who are finding food unaffordable: [charities are forecasting](#) that up to one in seven UK households (six million people) will be struggling with food insecurity in winter 2021. Many children and young people find that their food needs are not being met in school, including medical and belief-based dietary needs, as well as those who fall through the safety net of free school meals.

Veganism is within the scope of human rights provisions. Vegans in the UK are protected under human rights and equality laws. Schools must respect the rights of vegans to freedom of conscience, and – under the [Equality Act 2010](#) – avoid any discrimination on the grounds of veganism. Schools have legal duties to make reasonable changes to school catering to be inclusive of vegans.

What are some examples of good practice in the school food system you are aware of?

In 2020, [Leeds City Council](#) announced that 182 schools would serve vegan and 'meat-free' meals twice a week, in an effort to halve the region's carbon footprint.

The [ProVeg School Plates scheme](#) is working with hundreds of schools in 17 Local Authorities (over 10% of all England LEAs) to put tasty, attractive plant-based meals on their menus. ProVeg point out that over three quarters of local authorities in England (around 300) have now declared a climate emergency. Healthy, sustainable plant-based school food is a key part of meaningful local action on climate.



What sources do you access for information available regarding good practice?

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With the large majority of children, young people, parents and guardians wanting more healthy, tasty, sustainable plant-based meals on daily school menus, vegan-friendly catering should be a core dietary and cultural consideration for every single school menu.

The [Food for Life Schools Award](#) requires at every level, starting with their Bronze Award, that menus provide for all dietary and cultural needs. This requirement includes the protected philosophical belief of veganism, which means vegan people need plant-based vegan catering. <https://www.foodforlife.org.uk/schools>

[Catering for Everyone](#), The Vegan Society: It's important for public institutions like schools to cater for vegan pupils. But vegan-friendly food can be enjoyed by most people. So more great vegan food on school menus can promote inclusivity, sustainability and good nutrition.

What are the major challenges you or others face when it comes to the school food system?

The number one challenge is cost and funding. Most schools are not being funded sufficiently to empower them to transform their food provision to provide healthy, tasty, environmentally sustainable food for all, every meal.

Another major challenge, which could be addressed with better funding, is better staff training. Caterers, educators and school students alike all need to know more about well-planned plant-based and vegan-friendly nutrition and catering. This will enable schools to make better choices for their people and for our planet.

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Schools, school catering suppliers and Local Authorities are also not fulfilling their legal obligations to those with belief-based dietary needs. Every child and young person, and their parents, guardians and families, have extensive rights to freedom of belief and to practice those beliefs including belief-based diets. In particular, vegans in schools have the right to request, and to be provided with, vegan-friendly nutritious food of the same quality as non-vegans enjoy.

The Vegan Society [rights advocacy service](#) is still regularly having to support vegans in school to achieve fair and reasonable outcomes including around school food.

What do you consider as priority areas for change within the school food system?

As with our whole food system, school food has become a highly complex set of interlocking parts. This means that everyone involved in school food – students, families, educators, on-site caterers, funders, politicians, distributors, off-site caterers, farmers and more - will all need to collaborate closely to make positive changes. The number one priority should be that every single person in



schools is able to eat a healthy, nutritious, environmentally sustainable meal which meets all their medical, belief-based and cultural needs, at every meal-time.

Local and National Government must commit to investing the real cost of sustainable, healthy school food, including the conversion costs from the current system. In the long term, returning to on-site school kitchens is likely to help meet demand from students, families and educators for more plant-based, locally sourced sustainable healthy meals.

Catering supply contracts need to be more straightforward, flexible and transparent. This will enable more local vegetables and fruit suppliers to quickly start supplying local schools. Such contracts also will empower school caterers to source specific plant-based foods such as vegan-friendly bean-burgers or pea protein sausages which people want on their menus.

Educators know that well-fed students learn better. Educators need to be working with students, to develop together a better understanding of how students can make healthier and more sustainable food choices.

In particular, [school vegetable and fruit gardens](#) can help everyone to understand the challenges and delights of growing food. Children are significantly more likely to choose to eat five portions of vegetables and fruits daily, if they or their families are directly involved in [growing their own](#) produce. This suggests that having schools link up with local horticulture, in such a way that students can visit the farms which grow their vegetables and fruits, will also create demand for healthier, more sustainable school food.

Of these, what is the greatest priority area?

Helping schools to increase supply and demand for healthy, sustainable plant-based meals, which will help students be part of the solution to crises of public health, animal well-being, environmental degradation, and climate change.

What specific questions, areas of challenge or opportunity, or topics around the school food system do you think research could help answer or explore?

There is already an extensive patchwork of knowledge about school food systems change, held variously within schools, LEAs, school catering businesses, and third sector organisations. There is also a huge body of research assembled in the Dimpleby National Food Strategy for England Part 1 & 2 reports.

What is needed most, is action research in school food – for example, where a study is done on a whole Local Education Authority which is supported to start transformative change. As the LEA acts on the best practice already available, action-researchers monitor successes and challenges, evaluate potential solutions, and thus advise on practical improvements.

We know that healthy, sustainable food systems are built on plant-based ingredients, sourced and processed as close as possible to where they will be eaten. The main challenges are the human challenges – the practicalities of complex change management, and also, building the collective will to complete the changes needed.



What would an ideal school food system look like from your perspective?

An ideal school food system would be fair, healthy, environmentally sustainable, equitable, involving the community beyond the school students to their families and neighbours, and the educators too. This would help empower whole communities to put into practice the beliefs which they already hold – that it is wrong to do harm unnecessarily, and that school menus should feature healthy, tasty, sustainable plant-based meals every day.

On a scale of 1-10 where 1 is not at all important and 10 is very important, how would you rate the importance of school food to pupil's learning and health?

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